What we talk about when we talk about bronies

Anne Gilbert

University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas

[0.1] Abstract—Bronies, adult men who are avid fans of the girls' cartoon *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, have become a popular culture curiosity in recent years. Rather than concentrate on an ethnographic-style parsing of bronies from within the community, I take as my focus the attention paid to the brony phenomenon by those outside of it. Attempts to describe, explain, justify, and denigrate bronies have been the subject of considerable outside coverage, including newspaper articles and magazine features, feature-length documentary films, and comment sections and invective-laced blog posts. The language used to describe bronies, even if meant to be sympathetic and ultimately positive, nevertheless reveals a pervasive discomfort with men who embrace a position of nonnormative masculinity and sexuality, as well as a tendency to pathologize fandom broadly and bronies in particular. I argue that outsider coverage acknowledges and largely dismisses assumptions about bronies' potential threat as sexual predators and social misfits but falls short of affirming the genuine pleasures offered by a sparkly cartoon about ponies intended for little girls. Children's programming is highly gendered, and not taken up in the cultural conversation surrounding the brony phenomenon is the gap *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic* fills in the socialization and modeling of masculinity for its most enthusiastic fans.

[0.2] Keywords—Fandom; Masculinity; My Little Pony; Sexuality

Gilbert, Anne. 2015. "What We Talk about When We Talk about Bronies." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 20. http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2015.0666.

1. Introduction

[1.1] The notion of grown men who love, really love, a sweet, pastel-colored cartoon produced for young girls galvanizes public interest. Bronies are

incongruous and unexpected, and have therefore become the subject of news and culture features attempting to explain these fans to a mainstream readership. Fascination with bronies has focused outsider attention on them to a degree not commonly experienced by other fan communities, and thus the incredulity and discomfort that frame coverage of bronies speak to cultural efforts to construct an identity for bronies—and, implicitly, for fans—that can be contained as either acceptable or problematic.

[1.2] This article outlines major themes in conversations that take place about bronies outside of their fan community: how journalists, critics, bloggers, and pop culture commentators describe the fandom and its participants to a mainstream readership, and how articles and documentaries on bronies mediate self-identified members' articulation of their practices to outsiders. In academic discussions, bronies are one particular representation of fandom, and their practices demonstrate the interpersonal connections and productive possibilities of participation. In the popular press, however, bronies are a specific case that garners public interest, but the underlying message is that fandom in general is a fraught enterprise; how bronies are framed in mainstream news coverage indicates that popular appreciation for fandom is constrained in ways that limit fans' value as cultural producers to a narrow range of normative identities. Outsider coverage of bronies provides a case study of how implicit preconceptions of media consumption, sexuality, masculinity, and children's media contribute to privileging particular fan identities and containing any subversive potential of alternate modes of cultural participation.

[1.3] The sections that follow parse the rhetoric of newspaper, magazine, and online articles about bronies, indicating that though the coverage of bronies is largely positive, the descriptions frequently reinforce the discomfiting nature of the brony phenomenon. These articles reassure readers of bronies' heterosexuality and focus on community, affording them a type of nontraditional masculinity that is lacking in cultural capital but is also relatively harmless. The implications of this coverage, however, extend beyond bronies themselves: Preoccupation with male fans of My Little Pony reinscribes a longstanding marginalization of feminized fan practices, privileging male fans and erasing from the discussion women and girls who are fans of the show. 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 of these practices can be conditional. Though bronies profess to be 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 audiences are focused on sorting these fans into familiar categories of normalcy and deviance.

2. Covering bronydom

[2.1] "Brony" refers to an adult, generally aged 15 to 35, who is a fan of the *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic* (*FiM*) (2010–) television cartoon. The name, a portmanteau of "bro" and "pony" (note 1), originated on 4chan, a loosely regulated (and deeply masculinist) anonymous message board with a high profile in geek and Internet culture. The term was initially derisive, meant to distinguish *FiM* fans from those of animation or otaku, but bronies took over the moniker as one of self-identification. Bronies are largely male, single, and educated, and are either in or have completed college (Edwards and Redden, 2011–14). There are also adult female fans of the show (who refer to themselves as bronies, lady bronies, or pegasisters), as well as a sizeable audience of viewers within the show's demographic of three- to six-year-old girls (Johnson 2013). Interest in the brony phenomenon, however, focuses almost exclusively on adult male participants.

[2.2] While they are fans of the *Friendship Is Magic* series, bronies are not necessarily fans of earlier My Little Pony franchise efforts. Hasbro introduced My Little Pony programming in the 1980s for syndicated Saturday morning cartoons and direct-to-video features designed to sell branded merchandise to young girls. Such commercially driven, feminized ventures have been dismissed for decades "as the trashiest, most saccharine, most despicable products of the children's television industry" (Seiter 1995, 145), but when Hasbro wanted to revitalize sales of My Little Pony merchandise in the late 2000s, it launched a reboot of the cartoon for the fledgling children's cable network The Hub. *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic* premiered in 2010, and despite its visible commercial goals, it also exhibited markers of quality: the elevation of series creator Lauren Faust to an auteur figure (Johnson 2013, 146) and the pop culture–inspired jokes and attention to detail (Robertson 2014) meant that the show could claim crossover appeal for adults.

[2.3] *FiM* remains an aggressively feminized text. It tells the tale of Twilight Sparkle, sent to Ponyville by Princess Celestia to discover the importance of friendship, harmony, and loyalty. The pony friends work together to combat both quotidian challenges and occasional forces of darkness; their adventures are depicted in a vibrant color scheme of pinks, purples, and yellows and interspersed with perky songs and earnest conversations about hugs. *FiM* makes strides toward complex humor, multidimensional characters, and insightful stories in order to engage viewers at multiple levels, and is still overwhelmingly girly. This alone makes bronies a subject of interest, because grown men who create pastel pony art and passionately discuss characters with names like Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie are amusing, baffling, or worrying.

[2.4] In academic discussions, bronies are interesting, but not necessarily unique. Venetia Laura Delano Robertson (2014), for example, considers how bronies' interactions with the *FiM* text and with one another contribute to a sense of identity, one that challenges existing normative gender constructions. Derek

Johnson (2013) focuses on bronies as productive audiences whose practices contribute to the authorship of My Little Pony as a text and as a locus of participatory culture. Two psychology researchers launched the Brony Study (http://www.bronystudy.com) in 2011 to survey the brony community both online and at conventions, and have quantified brony demographics and coded bronies' personality types (Edwards and Redden, 2011–14). In scholarly conversations, bronies are fans first; their behaviors and community are fruitful fields of analysis not because they are odd, but because their particularities have widespread implications. As the subject of fan-focused academic research, bronies are recognizable and, in some ways, representative.

[2.5] On the other hand, in journalistic coverage, bronies have generated a great deal of public interest that focuses on their incongruity. In national magazines and newspapers (*Wired*, *Atlantic*, *New York Times*, *Guardian*), in online publications (*Gawker*, *Daily Beast*, *Jezebel*), in regional papers, and on blogs, bronies have become the subject of mainstream general-interest articles written by outsiders for outsiders, meant to describe bronies and address the bewilderment (and discomfort) their existence raises. This outsider coverage of bronies is the focus of this article, because the approach it takes has implications for cultural opinions of masculinity, sexuality, gendered media practices, and fandom broadly speaking.

[2.6] Fan identities are often constructed from the outside: industrial entities imagine an audience of engaged consumers, academic authors formulate arguments about the significance of fan practices, and nonfans construct narratives that situate fandom within familiar territory. Research commonly addresses these first two constructs, focusing on the cultural and economic impact of fans' identities, but here my interest is in the cultural conversation that takes place among general audiences. The bronies case study serves to illustrate pervasive uneasiness with fandom, gender, and media consumption that extends beyond its particularities. Participatory culture, including fandom but also produsage, cocreation, and other patterns of convergence, is lauded for its liberating potential, but can privilege young male users with disposable income and technological know-how—the perceived early adopters (Scott 2013; Johnson 2013). Fandom, too, is often a gendered proposition, with factions and hierarchies divided such that feminized practices and female fans are kept separate, less valued, or outright ridiculed (see, for example, Busse 2013; Click 2009; Johnson 2007). Despite cultural shifts that have moved fandom from the periphery to a place of prominence, the methods used to pathologize and normalize bronies indicate that interest in and acceptance of fans by the broader public is often tenuous, shallow, and contingent upon a very specific performance of fandom.

3. Bronies from beyond the herd

[3.1] "Each day, out-of-work computer programmer Luke Allen self-medicates by watching animated ponies have magical adventures," begins a magazine feature on

bronies (Watercutter 2011). This article, from *Wired*, is one of several published in mainstream venues in the United States, the UK, and Australia as bronies emerged as a burgeoning fan subculture. These features are not meant to give bronies a voice, but instead to introduce the brony fandom to a general audience. They are, perhaps surprisingly, largely positive: Articles paint bronies as "true rebels" (Angel 2012), and they explicitly attempt to reconcile bronies with the popular mainstream. The above quotes and the excerpts to follow, however, indicate that outsider coverage of bronies may be well-meaning and overtly benevolent, but it also incorporates language that reinforces separation between the brony fandom and acceptable notions of masculinity and media consumption.

[3.2] In addition to being unemployed self-medicators, bronies "claim to have no interest in dating" and are "purposefully delaying adulthood" (Vlahos 2014). Articles mention bronies seeking refuge from depression (Watercutter 2014) or still living at home (Peters 2013; Riess 2014). 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. These are selective characterizations, ones that highlight the dysfunction of bronies and emphasize their lack of cultural capital by implicitly reinforcing the stereotype of the fanboy who lives in his mother's basement. Not mentioned are statistics that show the average brony is a 21-year-old student (Edwards and Redden 2011–14), which could explain the lack of a job and an independent home better than could participation in the brony fandom.

[3.3] Regional news outlets also feature articles on bronies in conjunction with upcoming conventions to order to introduce readers to bronies in the local area. In these articles, reporters might attend a convention or interview a local brony and might be won over by the fandom. The articles often welcome bronies to the region, but again the language employed reveals a troubling image of grown men displaying affection for media content and products intended for young girls. As a result, descriptions are filled with stereotype: Bronies "are not what you think. They're not overly effeminate. Many aren't gay. They aren't predatory" (Fallon 2014). Compliments to bronies are decidedly backhanded, mentioning that bronies "have no bad intentions" (Collins 2012), that they are "harmless" (Fallon 2014) and "surprisingly" not creepy, and that bronies restrain themselves from "any deviant or perverted behavior" (Gregory 2014). Even in complimentary coverage, bronies receive dubious endorsements and assurances only that they do not present a direct threat.

[3.4] Articles published in fan-friendly outlets are not suffused by the same discomfort, but they do indicate that this discomfort is understandable. Stories circulate of a brony who was "essentially gay-bashed" at a gas station (Lambert 2013), of a man claiming to have been fired for his *FiM* fandom (Zimmerman 2013), of a boy bullied to the point of a suicide attempt over his brony passion (Chayka 2014). Violence toward bronies is deplorable but still recognizable, as the

presumed deviance of the fandom is presented as readily visible. Keeping a brony identity under wraps is a valid strategy, because "people who hear about bronies consider the group either ridiculous or creepy" (Angel 2012).

[3.5] Journalists also make frequent use of social scientific methods to rationalize the brony fandom. Psychologists and sociologists are brought in as experts who explain that bronies can be viewed as normal, contributing members of contemporary culture (Elder 2013; Peters 2013; Vlahos 2014). A *Grantland* article celebrates the "wonderful world" of bronies, but also summarizes numerous uncited social psychology findings that make bronies the victims of circumstance: "One study sees them as men-children, running from the realities of the recession and the post-9/11 world and taking flight in the fanciful world of the ponies, while another posits that they are men uncomfortable in the world of masculinity, who find validation in a sphere that promotes positive values like cooperation and emotional openness that may be typically seen as feminine" (Lambert 2013).

[3.6] Negative coverage of bronies makes explicit the criticism present in more sympathetic articles. Reactionary screeds, often on politically conservative opinion sites, castigate bronies and characterize the phenomenon as a sign of the demise of contemporary masculinity. Hate pieces call the fandom "terrifying" and "a freaking embarrassment" (Schlichter 2012) and screeds on the conservative Fox News network express disgust and horror (*Bronies* 2013). Articles on bronies, both positive and negative, that include comment sections carry responses from readers who denigrate bronies, questioning their masculinity, sexuality, and maturity, and speculating about their likely perversions. Though most articles written on bronies are not characterized by such vehemently antibrony perspectives, these few do illustrate the most instinctual and overt criticism, underpinnings of which are shared by more positive coverage as well.

4. We bronies are men

[4.1] The perspectives of nonfans explaining bronies to a general audience are augmented in outsider coverage by bronies' efforts to voice their own descriptions of the fandom and its appeal. Bronies articulate their position as interview subjects in news articles and documentaries, both intended for a wide, nonbrony audience. Their voices are mediated in these sources, but their methods of rationalizing and celebrating participation in the brony community represent a contrast to outsider perspectives. Bronies laud the quality of the show's production (in particular its animation and voice acting), the quality of its content (the storylines, complex characters, and catchy songs), and the pleasure of viewing a program that has no violence and transmits joy (*A Brony Tale* 2014; *Bronies* 2013), as well as the possibilities inherent in membership in the brony community. The narratives constructed within these sources from bronies' reflections on the fandom echo benevolent outsider perspectives, but reveal their own set of anxieties about the gender implications of the brony fandom.

[4.2] My Little Pony is shown as appealing to bronies partly because it enables membership in a community. This community is described by participants as enthusiastic, charitable, and welcoming, a safe haven in which "people who were not that popular" make friends (Elder 2013). The "big line" for the director of *A Brony Tale* (*A Brony Tale* 2014) is bronies who proclaim, "We came for the show but stayed for the community" (Fallon 2014). In *Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of "My Little Pony"* (*Bronies* 2013), participants express excitement at being "among friends," and their joy crystallizes at various brony conventions. At these events, bronies profess to find a nonjudgmental, safe environment full of people who understand. Benefits of membership in the brony community are, in many ways, the benefits of fan participation, in which a shared interest in a text provides entry to a subcultural, often close-knit community of like-minded individuals. Bronies, however, also describe their community as offering an opportunity to re-create, figuratively and literally, the world of My Little Pony by forming spaces "in which to practice the show's values of friendship, compassion, and harmony" (Watercutter 2014).

[4.3] Bronies often exhibit pride in challenging gender stereotypes (Peters 2013). Instead of ignoring cultural pushback, bronies profess to deliberately rewrite codes of masculine behavior that valorize competition and aggression (Watercutter 2014). Animosity toward bronies is incorporated into their collective identity—the brony motto, with some variation, is "I am going to love and tolerate the shit out of you." They take pride in not conforming to conservative expectations of masculinity (*Bronies* 2013), and respond to derision and attacks with tolerance and empathy. Yet a great deal of bronies' gender performance is rooted in normative masculinity. Bronies praise *FiM*'s similarities to Japanese anime, Dungeons & Dragons, *Doctor Who*, and *Star Wars* (Vlahos 2014), action films (Peters 2013), and programs like *Breaking Bad* (Riess 2104), implicitly appropriating—and legitimating—My Little Pony by likening it to artifacts from traditionally masculine geek culture. Bronies tell stories of coming to *FiM* through recommendations on boards like 4chan or the online gaming site Steam (Vlahos 2014), grounding appreciation for the show in arenas that have preexisting credibility among male consumers. The self-proclaimed "Manliest Brony in the World" balances his brony identity with his welding skills and mechanical know-how (*Bronies* 2013; Fallon 2014), and brony conventions feature military meet-ups, thus displaying ways in which markers of bronydom can be incorporated into masculinity rather than contradicting it.

[4.4] Though these mediated perspectives on bronies construct a narrative that explicitly claims to break down gender distinctions, the rhetoric attributed to bronies is masculinizing in a way that implicitly comes at the expense of the feminine. It is certainly the case that bronies occupy a privileged space in cultural, industrial, and academic conversations. Johnson notes that bronies are able to be understood as cocreative authors of *FiM*because, as an audience, they are already constructed in industrial imaginations as adult, heterosexual men, and therefore collaborative, powerful, and desirable viewers (2013, 143). That bronies warrant such public attention, too, and are able to sustain interest as the topic of news

articles, blogs, and documentaries speaks to their privileged role. Bronies are a focus because they are portrayed as a fandom comprising adult men—valuable audiences who already hold a great deal of cultural and industrial capital. Bronies who are given voice in features in order to speak about the fandom and their role within it are already part of this narrative that privileges a specific fan identity; the frames that they articulate, too, reinforce their masculinity in ways that maintain their structured privilege.

[4.5] Bronies' descriptions of their gender performance manifest as a practice of appropriating a feminized text into an otherwise traditional masculine identity, which can leave female fans in the cold. The feature-length documentary *Bronies,* for example, includes a two-minute segment reminding viewers that women are bronies, too. "Pegasister" is to some a "lame" term that carries the same gender baggage as "girl gamer" (Loving 2013). At brony conventions, which male participants laud as an ideal site of bonding, male attendees can outnumber female ones nearly two to one (Gregory 2014). Some female fans contend that bronies have ruined My Little Pony: "The problem…has nothing to [do with] grown men liking a children's cartoon and everything to do with their usurping of a safe space for young girls and distorting it into a hypersexual and toxic environment for these younger fans" (DeCarlo 2014). Bronies have, in many respects, constructed a fandom that conforms to their own needs and may not meet those of others. Though mediated representations of bronies highlight their empathy and progressiveness, their attentions are directed to other bronies, other men. They do not indicate that they are aware of the people or the practices pushed out by the focus on male fans. In effect, bronies claim to want a space in popular culture that includes room for a nonnormative approach to gender and media consumption, but they are not necessarily creating a space of inclusiveness.

5. Pony sex, brony sexuality

[5.1] The specter of nonnormative sexuality is a pervasive thread in brony coverage. Articles written by outsiders explicitly address bronies' desires, fetishes, and sexual preferences, implicitly illustrating a link between discomfort with the brony identity and presumptive associations with sex and sexuality. The most common assumption made about bronies is of homosexuality (wielded as "an accusation" [Angel 2012]), and coverage focuses on correcting this misconception. Brony Study surveys indicate that only 1.7 percent of 50,000 respondents self-identify as homosexual. While greater percentages identify as bi- or asexual, the overwhelming majority of bronies—84 percent—describe themselves as heterosexual (Edwards and Redden, 2011–14). Writers employ these and similar statistics to depict bronies as predominantly heterosexual, but doing so helps construct bronies as a paradox. One article notes, "One might be hard pressed, when seeing college-age guys wearing pink wigs and furry faux tails walking into a convention center…not to look for some LGBT connection" (Vlahos 2014), as

though bronies would be easily understandable if *FiM* were overtly queered and bronydom established as a signifier of homosexuality. Bronies are disruptive to those outside the community because they cannot be easily identified as homosexual and sorted into existing classifications of gender.

[5.2] Though assuring readers of bronies' predominant heterosexuality, writers perpetuate the assumption of homosexuality by describing bronies and their relationships with others using vocabulary borrowed from narratives of homosexuality in an intolerant landscape. Bronies attending a local convention are "out and proud" (Chen and Read 2012), and journalists ask whether bronies are "out" to family and friends (Angel 2012; Peters 2013); telling others about one's bronydom is semiseriously referred to as "coming out of the stable" (Gregory 2014). In a local paper, a brony convention organizer says that "his parents weren't exactly thrilled to learn that their son was into the show, but…he says they support his interest" (Riess 2014). Another article relates the challenges of a female brony in search of her community, who says she can't hold up a sign in public advertising for bronies and instead uses word-of-mouth transmissions, cues in clothing and accessories, and other coded strategies to identify fellow bronies without inviting public scrutiny (Loving 2013). These descriptions are largely sympathetic, outlining the lengths bronies go to in order to find a like-minded community, all while situating the brony fandom within narratives of coming out, passing, and cruising. The language employed emphasizes bronies' lack of mainstream acceptance, implying that they may be isolated and disenfranchised.

[5.3] Perhaps most troubling is the ease with which bronydom is equated with pedophilia. Bronies are attacked for having a sick "hidden agenda" (Gladnick 2014), and if they are dangerous, the threat has a decidedly sexual undertone: Bronies are "terrifying" and "predatory" in a manner that suggests they are pursuing a sexualized interest in extremely vulnerable populations (Schlichter 2012). Concerned mom bloggers are "disturbed" by grown men whose interests overlap with those of little girls (OOPH 2011; Vlahos 2014), thus illustrating that the brony identity, to some outsiders, is incompatible with healthy, normal sexuality. While pedophilia is only one way outsiders imply that bronies' interest in My Little Pony cannot be "real," interest in *FiM* is presumed to be a cover to lure in young children. 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. These are the assumptions that underscore discussions about bronies by outsiders.

[5.4] It is notable, too, that sexuality is so easily introduced to descriptions of bronies. Fan participation is not in itself a sexual enterprise, and little about the bronies' particular mode of practicing and displaying their fandom—conventions, cosplay, meme creation, fan art—points to an ulterior sexual motivation. As in all fandoms, there are those within the brony community who pursue sexual, violent,

or fetishistic readings of *FiM*, but this fringe is not central to or representative of the brony fandom. Yet sexuality and desire are raised often enough by nonbronies that they might appear to be key components of the fandom. In *Slate*, bronies are charged with wanting "nothing more than imagery of [the ponies] as humans to appeal to their less-than-innocent fantasies about really getting personal with their favorite toys" (Marcotte 2013). Again, bronies fetishizing the ponies is perhaps distasteful, but somehow understandable.

[5.5] The preoccupation with sex and sexuality in articles about bronies highlights the ways in which this mode of media consumption and this fandom are not easily categorized within mainstream conversations. The fact that outsider coverage continually discusses bronies' sexual tendencies speaks to a desire to compartmentalize these men's fascination with a little girls' cartoon as something familiar, if not desirable. The effect is that these fans' desires are positioned as deviant in some way: Though the particular aberrance is unnamed (they are not pedophiles, not fetishists, not plushies or furries [Buckley 2014]), bronies are suspected of somehow diverging from normative, understandable sexual pursuits. Bronies may be threatening because of their presumptive nonnormative sexuality, but they are objects of cultural fascination—and significance—for the same reason.

6. Incongruity is magic

[6.1] Even within a culture that has shifted fandom from the fringes to a more central position among forms of media consumption, bronies are a fan community that is perceived as anomalous. Though bronies may be used to illustrate emerging patterns of cocreative participation (Johnson 2013) or alternative approaches to masculinity (Watercutter 2014), they are also used to underscore ongoing reservations about fandom and to reinforce hierarchies of media production and consumption. Bronies are notable, newsworthy, and somewhat unsettling because they do not conform to notions about what masculine media consumers are meant to do with cultural texts.

[6.2] Children's media are highly gendered, and this gender divide is accompanied by implied value systems. In 1995, Ellen Seiter noted, "One of the axioms of motion picture and television production…is that the female audience will take an interest in stories about male adventurers…but the male audience will not take an interest in stories about the female adventurers" (147). In the intervening two decades, female characters in children's media have multiplied, and include multiple examples that actively challenge this industry axiom (Banet-Weiser 2004), but according to conventional wisdom, the masculine audience and male consumer remain the neutral default. Media for boys can be media for all children, whereas girls' media are just for them—a position that influences the perceived quality of, industrial investment in, and value attributed to those media. A cartoon only meant to appeal to girls ages three to six does not merit a large investment of care, complexity, or capital.

[6.3] Derek Johnson explicitly points to ways that *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic* was, from the moment it aired, perceived to lack legitimacy, because it made use of "cheap vector graphics of Flash animation…it was marked as commercially rather than aesthetically motivated…and it was gendered as hyper-feminine" (2013, 138). Seiter contends that the 1980s My Little Pony was successful because of its aggressively feminized content: Once toy and entertainment producers began to take an interest in little girls as a distinct, viable market, "little girls found themselves in a ghettoized culture that no self-respecting boy would take an interest in; but for once, girls were not required to cross over, to take on an ambiguous identification with a group of male characters" (1995, 158). *FiM*, in short, lacked early cultural legitimacy because it was a My Little Pony product, and it was therefore very girly and often poorly regarded but nevertheless able to be embraced within a feminized, child-friendly space.

[6.4] A young girl choosing to leave this girly, ghettoized sphere behind and choose a "boy's" show can therefore be seen to be trading up, choosing entertainment of higher quality or increased significance. The reverse, however, becomes problematic. A boy watching something not for boys, not for everyone, and choosing an aggressively feminized, presumably inferior, product can be understood to be 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. They also present the opportunity, addressed in more detail in the following section, to consider what it is that is offered by *FiM* that has struck a chord in them.

[6.5] Bronies are positioned as odd because of the issues their consumption practices raise for masculinity and sexuality, but the practices that are used to illustrate bronies' difference are often not unique to this fandom. One article implies that bronies are excessively active, that "to be a brony means dressing up as a brony. It means scouring the Internet for trivia about the show. It means joining online groups and in-person groups and connecting with other bronies and discussing the show's themes and singing the show's songs" (Riess 2014). Articles contend that "these men dissect plot points and bits of dialogue for meaning with the same rigor and enthusiasm as people do with episodes of *Mad Men* or *Game of Thrones*" (Fallon 2014), and writers note the "explosion of 'deviation art'" (Vlahos 2014) and the "absurd amount of fan music, videos, screenplays" as well as fan fiction; "[one brony is] currently reading one that is at least 300 pages long so far" (Moody 2011).

[6.6] These illustrations are brony-specific even though many of them are quite representative of broader fan practice. They read as implicit critiques of bronies, but in fact reveal broader biases against fandom in general. Bronies are, in effect, simply the latest case study of fan pathology. Writing in 1992, Joli Jenson argues that popular opinion characterizes fans as pathological and deviant: "Fandom is conceived of as a chronic attempt to compensate for a perceived personal lack of

autonomy, absence of community, incomplete identity, lack of power and lack of recognition" (17). Fans are "making up for some inherent lack" and pathologizing fans "implies that there is a thin line between 'normal' and excessive fandom" (18). In Jenson's writing, fans are perceived as moments away from a display of excess, violence, obsession, or another visible break with reality. In contemporary conversations, fans are afforded more cultural capital and associated less with fanaticism than with their desirable characteristics as cocreators and powerful consumers in convergence culture. Yet coverage of bronies indicates that not all fans enjoy such a privileged position. Bronies are perceived to be spending time and attention on frivolous entertainment, as though rigorous analysis of *Mad Men* has inherent value that enthusiastic discussions of and fan creativity for *FiM* lack. Bronies are devoted to a cartoon, made for young girls and short on cultural legitimacy, rather than to comic books, science fiction, computers, or other components of geek and fan culture that have gained social and economic capital. As a result, bronies remain on the edge of deviance and illustrate that fandom is still perceived as a pathological condition, even if only among particular groups.

[6.7] Fans also frequently police one another, constructing factions and hierarchies that reflect particular values of fandom subcultures (Murray 2004; Johnson 2007) and normalizing their own behavior by upholding stereotypes about "other" fans (Stanfill 2013). Kristina Busse (2013) notes that policing often occurs, and hierarchies are often constructed, along gender lines: feminized fan behaviors—from particular modes of creativity, such as fan fiction and vidding, to overtly emotional displays of attachment—are undervalued or dismissed, whereas masculine interest, particularly within a culture that celebrates the geek, is more readily valorized. Bronies' fan practices may be feminized in popular culture, relegating them to a low position in fan hierarchies and denying them the benefits afforded geeks. On the other hand, bronies are a significant fandom because of male involvement; even though their practices are not unique, bronies are granted the benefits of public interest because of the display of masculine interest.

7. The lure of the pony

[7.1] At the core of outsider coverage of bronies, the fandom, and the affective phenomenon surrounding a cartoon for very young girls is a desire to rationalize the particulars so that the discomfort bronies generate can be explained away. Whether deviant or normalized, bronies are made less dangerous by being safely categorized as something familiar. Brony coverage strives for some way to legitimize the phenomenon, and thus it ponders whether they are homosexuals, pathological fans, or examples of failed masculinity. Efforts to secure cultural and social legitimacy for bronies, however, implicitly reject the possibility that *FiM* might offer value to its viewers and glosses over the consequences of incorporating its pleasures into models of masculinity.

[7.2] There is an impulse, therefore, to dismiss bronies' interest as ironic. If bronies are hipsters (establishing an ironic distance in order to signify a countercultural sensibility) or camp enthusiasts (celebrating My Little Pony as so bad it becomes pleasurable), then their practices have a recognizable ulterior motive. To counteract this impulse, articles on bronies point out that their interest is driven not by irony (Elder 2013) but by earnestness—"They are truly fans. Like, big fans" (Fallon 2014). Bronies are disarmingly genuine, and the response to their sentimentality is telling. First, it illustrates the rarity of men openly displaying affection without cynicism or emotional distance. Secondly, it creates a need to treat *FiM* as a valid cultural object, and consider what it means that it generates such authentic devotion among its fans.

[7.3] Bronies are the first to sing the praises of the show text; "Hearing them rave about the quality of the *My Little Pony* series, you'd think they were talking about *Citizen Kane*" (Fallon 2014), remarks one article. Bronies explain their passion as motivated by the show's engaging quality, which they contend should be evident to anyone who has watched the show. For show creator Lauren Faust, the show's quality is rooted in its feminist perspective. In an editorial for *Ms. Magazine,* she contends that *FiM* was designed to counter female-centric shows with homogenized characters that are impossible to distinguish from one another, who have no flaws and giggle endlessly and cry in the face of villainy. Her program shows that "there are lots of different ways to be a girl…Girls are complex human beings, and they can be brave, strong, kind and independent—but they can also be uncertain, awkward, silly, arrogant or stubborn" (Faust 2010). The female characters face real conflict, make mistakes and forgive one another, depend on their friends, and make things happen. The program is, in some ways, conventionally feminine; content for women and young girls frequently borrows tropes from "women's genres" such as the melodrama and soap opera and focuses on emotional life (Seiter 1995) and elements of nurturing and caring (Buckingham and Sefton-Green 2003). *FiM* is feminized for adhering to these tropes, and for doing so with bright pastel colors and chipper voices talking about friendship, but it was deliberately created to be both girly and good.

[7.4] Bronies' praise, however, frequently separates *FiM* from its association with its feminist possibility and young, gendered target audience. They contend that the series "has a higher quality writing style than other children's shows, with varied themes, and the plot and characters develop over the seasons" (Angel 2012). Bronies discuss how they were not expecting to like and watch such a program. One recounts, "First we can't believe this show is so good. Then we can't believe we've become fans for life" (Watercutter 2011). Another notes, "If you asked me three years ago if I would be running pony stuff and watching My Little Pony, I would be like 'What? No, that's girl stuff'" (Peters 2013). The aspects of the show lauded by bronies, including its animation style and clever references to geek and pop culture, are associated with masculine genre and aesthetics, and their praise thus reframes it as something more suited to an adult male viewership.

[7.5] This is the missed opportunity in how bronies are situated in popular culture, both by bronies themselves and by the wealth of outsider coverage. *Friendship Is Magic* provides a form of sincere entertainment, free of cynicism and postmodern disdain. The show teaches that tolerance, empathy, and caring are admirable qualities. Perhaps even more of a rarity, the friendships on the show are not sexual, romantic, or, most importantly, competitive; the ponies do not pit themselves against one another in an effort to be the best. In short, *FiM* offers messages and behaviors that are not emphasized in media content aimed at men and boys. Yet when bronies describe the show and their fandom to a mainstream audience, these elements are deemphasized. *FiM* is incorporated into a traditional performance of masculinity, and the fandom effectively reinforces a privileging of men in fan practice. Outsider coverage attempts to locate the brony phenomenon in suppressed sexual expression, underlying deviance, or even the camaraderie of the community, thus implying that brony devotion is rooted in motives unrelated to the text or the opportunities for subversive gender performance it may present. Articles written on the brony phenomenon for a mainstream readership seek to smooth over the incongruity of the bronies, organizing them into categories, whether positive or negative, in familiar structures of social organization, rather than exploring the potential benefits of an unexpected approach to fandom and cultural participation.

8. Conclusion

[8.1] Bronies generate a great deal of public interest, and as a result, are the subject of a wide array of media coverage that is written by nonbronies in order to describe, explain, or critique bronies for a mainstream audience. Despite the fact that much of this coverage seems positive, the language it uses reveals a desire to dismiss bronies: They are discomfiting, incongruous, and baffling; they lack masculinity or cultural capital; they are closeted homosexuals or, worse, sexual deviants. Articles on bronies may explicitly counter these claims, but they implicitly reinforce that bronies confound popular preconceptions. Bronies are disconcerting because, as media consumers, they do not behave as expected. These grown men elect to consume media created for very young girls, to form a strong and effusive community around it, and to do so without irony. The questions asked by outsiders faced with these practices reveal persistent notions of fans as pathological, excessive consumers. Even if *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic* has stepped in to fill a gap in how masculinity is socialized and modeled, in particular in children's media, bronies do not follow through on the transgressive potential of their identity performance. Bronies remain a privileged group of male fans, with a narrow approach to inclusiveness in the brony identity, and their celebration of *FiM*'s quality is predicated on divorcing it from its identification as girly. Bronies contend that their position challenges gender norms while, at the same time, appropriating that alternate approach for a traditional version of masculinity.

[8.2] Coverage of bronies is focused on containing any possibility they may offer of subversion. Unfortunately, but perhaps unsurprisingly, coverage of the brony

phenomenon leaves largely untouched a more complicated conversation that considers shortcomings that arise from such a sharply distinguished performance of gender in existing media for young kids. What bronies have the potential to offer—and what outsider coverage has the potential, even if unrealized, to initiate and cultivate—is a conversation that begins to blur the boundaries of gendered media content. Instead, bronies illustrate that cultural perceptions have underlying and persistent reservations that do not match progressive assurances. In a culture that has moved to welcome fans into the mainstream, bronies reveal that this welcome extends only to a specific type of fan, while others remain odd at best, deviant at worst. Similarly, gender, sexuality, and masculinity are closely tied to media practice, and bronies illustrate the interest, discomfort, and resistance generated when individuals do not conform to expectations.

9. Note

1. Though "bro" + "pony" is by far the most common genealogy for the term, two recent articles contend that "brony" in fact references discussion of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic* on 4chan's /b/ message boards. However, this is a relatively new explanation, only appearing in the latter half of 2014, and attributed to individual bronies rather than collective memory, and therefore the earlier and more prevalent explanation is used here. Also, the "bro" and "pony" portmanteau appropriately accounts for the "r" in "brony."

10. Works cited

Angel, Rebecca. 2012. "Adult Male My Little Pony Fans? Bronies Are the True Rebels." *Guardian*, October 1. http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/oct/01/my-little-pony-bronies-rebels.

Banet-Weiser, Sarah. 2004. "Girls Rule! Gender, Feminism, and Nickelodeon." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 21 (2): 119–39. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0739318041000168803 8.

Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of "My Little Pony." 2013. Directed by Laurent Malaquais. Written by Nat Segaloff. BronyDoc, Inc.

A Brony Tale. 2014. Written and directed by Brent Hodge. Hodgee Films.

Buckingham, David, and Julian Sefton-Green. 2003. "Gotta Catch 'Em All: Structure, Agency, and Pedagogy in Children's Media Culture." *Media, Culture & Society* 25:379–99. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0163443703025003005.

Buckley, Cara. 2014. "Bronies: Now a Movie Genre." *New York Times,* April 23. http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/04/23/tribeca-film-festival-bronies-now-a-movie-genre/?_r=0.

Busse, Kristina. 2013. "Geek Hierarchies, Boundary Policing, and the Gendering of the Good Fan." *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 10 (1): 73–91.

Chayka, Kyle. 2014. "Eleven-Year-Old Attempts Suicide after Bullying over My Little Pony." *Gawker,* February 3. http://gawker.com/eleven-year-old-attempts-suicide-after-bullying-over-my-1515455915.

Chen, Adrian, and Max Read. 2012. "Here Are Some Adult *My Little Pony* Fanatics We Met at BronyCon." *Gawker,* January 8. http://gawker.com/5874047/here-are-some-my-little-pony-fanatics-we-meet-at-bronycon/.

Click, Melissa. 2009. "'Rabid,' 'Obsessed,' and 'Frenzied': Understanding Twilight Fangirls and the Gendered Politics of Fandom." *Flow* 11 (4). http://flowtv.org/2009/12/rabid-obsessed-and-frenzied-understanding-twilight-fangirls-and-the-gendered-politics-of-fandom-melissa-click-university-of-missouri/.

Collins, Dave. 2012. "Here Come the 'Bronies': Guys Who Like My Little Pony Gather at NJ Fest." *New York Post,* July 1. http://nypost.com/2012/07/01/here-come-the-bronies-guys-who-like-my-little-pony-gather-at-nj-fest/.

DeCarlo, Gianna. 2014. "The Problem with Bronies: A Look at the Corruption of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*." *Citypaper,* August 1. http://www.citypaper.com/blogs/noise/bcp-the-problem-with-bronies-20140801,0,1667255.story.

Edwards, Patrick, and Marsha H. Redden. 2011–14. The Brony Study. http://www.bronystudy.com/index.html.

Elder, John. 2013. "The Male Goes by Brony Express." *Sunday Age,* October 13. http://newsstore.fairfax.com.au/apps/viewDocument.ac;jsessionid=BB040BF79737EECCF707867820DBAFD6?sy=afr&pb=all_ffx&dt=selectRange&dr=1month&so=relevance&sf=text&sf=headline&rc=10&rm=200&sp=brs&cls=1808&clsPage=1&docID=SAG131013RD6954RE6ER.

Fallon, Kevin. 2014. "Inside the Bizarre World of 'Bronies,' Adult Male Fans of 'My Little Pony.'" *Daily Beast,* May 1. http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/05/01/inside-the-bizarre-world-of-bronies-adult-male-fans-of-my-little-pony.html.

Faust, Lauren. 2010. "My Little NON-Homophobic, NON-Racist, NON-Smart-Shaming Pony: A Rebuttal." *Ms. Magazine*, December 24. http://msmagazine.com/blog/2010/12/24/my-little-non-homophobic-non-racist-non-smart-shaming-pony-a-rebuttal/.

Gladnick, P. J. 2014. "Atlantic Writer Tries to Convince Readers That Adult Male 'Bronies' Are OK." *Newsbusters*, August 9. http://newsbusters.org/blogs/pj-gladnick/2014/08/09/atlantic-writer-tries-convince-readers-adult-male-bronies-are-ok.

Gregory, Jennifer Goforth. 2014. "The Bros Who Love *My Little Pony*." *The Atlantic*, August 8. http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/08/bros-and-my-little-pony/375793/.

Jenson, Joli. 1992. "Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization." In *The Adoring Audience*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis, 9–29. London: Routledge.

Johnson, Derek. 2007. "Fan-tagonism: Factions, Institutions, and Constitutive Hegemonies of Fandom." In *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, ed. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, 285–300. New York: New York Univ. Press.

Johnson, Derek. 2013. "Participation Is Magic: Collaboration, Authorial Legitimacy, and the Audience Function." In *A Companion to Media Authorship*, ed. Jonathan Gray and Derek Johnson, 135–56. Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/9781118505526.ch7.

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

Loving, Olivia. 2013. "It's Hard Out There for a Brony: Finding a Place in NYU's Community." *NYULocal*, May 9. http://nyulocal.com/on-campus/2013/05/09/its-hard-out-there-for-a-brony-finding-a-place-in-nyus-community/.

Marcotte, Amanda. 2013. "Triumph of the Bronies: Hasbro Turning My Little Pony into Sexy Human Characters. Neigh." *Slate*, June 13. http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2013/06/13/triumph_of_the_bronies_hasbro_turning_my_little_ponies_into_sexy_human_characters.html.

Moody, Kathryn. 2011. "My Little 'Brony': Show Attracts Older Audience." *UWire*. http://uwire.com/2011/12/09/my-little-brony-show-attracts-older-audience/.

Murray, Simone. 2004. "'Celebrating the Story the Way It Is': Cultural Studies, Corporate Media, and the Contested Utility of Fandom." *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 18 (1): 7–28. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1030431032000180978.

OOPH. 2011. "Bronies: Adult Men Who Like My Little Pony and Why It Disturbs Me." SDMomfia, June 15. http://sdmomfia.com/2011/06/bronies-adult-men-who-like-my-little-pony/.

Peters, Chris. 2013. "'Bronies' (Dudes Who Like 'My Little Pony') Have Strong Community in Nebraska." *Omaha World-Herald*, March 19. http://www.omaha.com/living/bronies-dudes-who-like-my-little-pony-have-strong-community/article_50643808-4237-5fd2-8c89-23818a8587cf.html.

Riess, Jeanie. 2014. "New Orleans Bronies Prepare for DerpyCon South." *Gambit*, September 15. http://www.bestofneworleans.com/gambit/brony-ing-up/Content?oid=2500061.

Robertson, Venetia Laura Delano. 2014. "Of Ponies and Men: My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic and the Brony Fandom." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 17 (1): 21–37. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1367877912464368.

Schlichter, Kurt. 2012. "Terrifying New Trend: Grown Men Who Dig 'My Little Pony?'" *Breitbart*, April 25. http://www.breitbart.com/big-hollywood/2012/04/25/my-little-pony/.

Scott, Suzanne. 2013. "Who's Steering the Mothership? The Role of the Fanboy Auteur in Transmedia Storytelling." In *The Participatory Cultures Handbook*, ed. Aaron Delwiche and Jennifer Jacobs Henderson, 43–52. New York, NY: Routledge.

Seiter, Ellen. 1995. *Sold Separately: Parents and Children in Consumer Culture*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press.

Stanfill, Mel. 2013. "'They're Losers, but I Know Better': Intra-fan Stereotyping and the Normalization of the Fan Subject." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 30 (2): 117–34. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2012.755053.

Vlahos, Kelley. 2014. "Rise of the Bronies." *The American Conservative*, January 3. http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/rise-of-the-bronies/.

Watercutter, Angela. 2011. "*My Little Pony* Corrals Unlikely Fanboys Known as 'Bronies.'" *Wired*, June 9. http://www.wired.com/2011/06/bronies-my-little-ponys/.

Watercutter, Angela. 2014. "Bronies Are Redefining Fandom—and American Manhood." *Wired*, March 11. http://www.wired.com/2014/03/bronies-online-fandom/.

Zimmerman, Neetzan. 2013. "Thirtysomething Father Claims He Was Fired for Being a Brony." *Gawker*, September 30. http://gawker.com/thirtysomething-father-claims-he-was-fired-for-being-a-14267145131.