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Rebooting Ponies and Men: Discordant Masculinity and the Brony Fandom

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Abstract

In recent years, Brony fandom has grown from a small Internet-based fan community into a pop culture phenomenon complete with large-scale conventions. The appearance of Bronies in mainstream media confounds onlookers because the majority are young adult men celebrating the virtues of candy-colored ponies. This fandom is openly contesting traditional concepts of masculinity, particularly in the United States, by embracing the pony mantra of "love and tolerance." This theme promotes sharing feelings, acceptance of others, and improving interpersonal relationships. This article seeks to describe some of the characteristics of the fandom and how Bronies are creating a new construction of masculinity called *discordant masculinity* that steers away from postfeminist trappings in other, "hybrid," forms of masculinity.

Since 2010, the "Brony" fandom has slowly emerged from Internet message boards and grown to the point that large-scale conventions now exist in the United States and abroad. At these gatherings, fans celebrate everything pony by dressing up as characters and singing songs about friendship. The novelty of the fandom has garnered the attention of the media, mainly for one reason: Brony fandom largely consists of young adult males who enjoy a television show primarily targeted to a demographic of young girls. Below I examine how Bronies challenge traditional Western forms of masculinity construction and what Arxer (2011) calls *hybrid* constructions of hegemonic masculity in the creation of a new form of masculinity I call *discordant masculinity*.

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Brony Studies

In 1984, Hasbro (2012) introduced a toy line of pastel-colored ponies called *My Little Pony*. In recent years, the ponies are experiencing a resurgence in popularity. This is partially due to a reboot of the 1980s cartoon show currently airing on *Discovery Family*, the family entertainment channel co-owned by Hasbro (2012). As a result, the *My Little Pony* franchise continues to expand, garnering the toy company millions of dollars in new sales, as well as the announcement of an animated movie premiering in 2017 (Dornbush, 2014; Yahoo Finance, 2013). Remaking an older franchise for younger generations to enjoy is nothing new; however, the source of this revival is out of the ordinary. Consisting of teenage boys and young adult men, this new fandom not only watches the show. Fans also purchase merchandise and create fan art related to their favorite ponies.

This subgroup within the *My Little Pony* fandom goes by the name of *Bronies*. A Brony (portmanteau of "bro" and "pony") is typically a young adult man between the ages of 13 and 35 years who engages in fan activities relating to the franchise's latest television series: *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic* (Watercutter, 2011). These fans "simply aren't afraid to admit to enjoying a show that is innocent, colorful, and funny" (Littleshy, 2014, n.p.). Many Bronies are willing to share with others the "magic of friendship" (e.g., conveyed by hugging, sharing their feelings, collecting pony merchandise, and wearing pony t-shirts) without worrying about how their activities might be perceived as contrary to common understandings of gender roles. Bronies present a conundrum to conventional understandings of masculinity, especially in the United States and other parts of the West. People are perplexed as to how young adult men could genuinely enjoy colorful ponies talking about friendship issues and applying those same ideas in their own lives.

Research on this nascent fan community has been prevalent in scholarly journals over the past few years. Various fields of study provide angles for discussion of the novelty of the Brony fandom and how male fans confront issues of gender while enjoying a television show for which they are not the intended audience. Some, like Edwards and Redden (2012) and the Turner's (2013) "State of the Herd Census," look at who identify as part of the fandom. Other scholarly work examines the rationale fans implement while engaging associated media texts. Robertson (2014) suggests fans derive lessons from anthropomorphic animals in the same sense as previous generations did with Aesop's fables. However, Valiente and Rasmusson (2015) propose that the morals extracted by fans do challenge traditional understandings of gender roles. Hautakangas (2012) and Silverstein (2013) take this supposition further and propose Bronies construct their understandings of gender roles through their discursive practices within the fandom. During these moments of identity construction within the fandom, Ellis (2015) suggests, fans transform or "queer" images and messages of the show to subvert prevalent beliefs about sexual orientation and gender identity.

These challenges to gender by the predominantly male subset of the fandom draw attention to the group, in both positive and negative ways. Bell (2013) documents how

the fandom engaged with show creators to increase the presence of a fan-supported character who originally started out as an animation error with accidentally crossed eyes. Other researchers chronicle how members of the media sometimes dismiss the fandom (Gilbert, 2015) and how online individuals belittle the fandom (Jones, 2015) because they cannot understand how adult men find enjoyment in a show teeming with glitter, rainbows, and pastel ponies. These misconceptions by nonfans about Bronies stem from contemporary understandings of masculinity in Western society. While much of the work done in the name of Brony research does encompass masculinity studies, there is little discussion of how the fandom may speak to current theories in the field. Haenfler (2015) claims the fandom follows other contemporary understandings of gender construction like *inclusive masculinity* in subcultural spaces where renegotiation of gender roles takes place. Anderson (2005) gives it the *inclusive* designation on the grounds that it welcomes differing forms of gender without implementing marginalizing tactics toward certain behaviors. Amon (2016) posits that the reinterpretation of masculinity in Brony fandom (particularly the subset known as *military Bronies*) occurs through "masculine innocence" where members of the fandom reject traditional meanings and delimitations of masculinity by disregarding gender binaries.

The present article examines the Brony fandom and its method of gender construction as highlighted by cited scholars, but proposes there is something more occurring in regard to how male fans are reconfiguring their masculinity. Discordant masculinity separates itself from other work involving Bronies by exploring how this fandom's behavior differs from inclusive masculinity and other hybrid masculinities.

My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic

Understanding what Bronies derive from the program requires a brief introduction of the cartoon show and some of its themes. The current generation of ponies resides in a fantasy land called Equestria where the citizens live under the rule of Princess Celestia (*Friendship Is Magic, Part 1*; Faust & Thiessen, 2010). Episodes chiefly focus on six ponies who reside in the town of Ponyville. This group consists of Applejack, Pinkie Pie, Twilight Sparkle, Rarity, Fluttershy, and Rainbow Dash—which the fandom dubs "the Mane Six" due to their prominence in the show's storylines (Lewis, 2012). Each of these ponies embodies a specific friendship trait which is collectively a part of the Elements of Harmony (*Friendship Is Magic, Part 1*; Faust & Thiessen, 2010). The Elements of Harmony are honesty, laughter, generosity, loyalty, kindness, and magic.

At times, these elements combine to defeat larger physical threats to the kingdom, but most episodes involve the ponies coming together as friends and collaborating to overcome the common relationship conflicts that befall them. In fact, the overwhelming majority of episodes have very little action where in ponies are confronting an enemy. Instead, most stories in the show's run could be considered "slice of life" episodes. These episodes discuss assorted friendship issues people of any age contend with daily: gossip, jealousy, and bullying (*Bridle Gossip*; Keating-Rogers & Thiessen, 2010; *Green Isn't Your Color*; McCarthy & Thiessen, 2011; *One Bad Apple*; Morrow

& Wooten, 2012). Typically, after the crisis is resolved, the ponies recount the "friendship lessons" they learn at the end of each episode. These lessons are relayed through individual letters written by the ponies to Princess Celestia about their friendship experiences, such as not judging others without getting to know them first (Bridle Gossip; Keating-Rogers & Thiessen, 2010) or how sharing your feelings can keep a relationship strong (*Green Isn't Your Color*; McCarthy & Thiessen, 2011). Season four introduces a friendship journal which replaces the individual letters and serves as a compendium of their collective lessons for the purposes of posterity (*Castle Mane-ia*; Haber & Thiessen, 2013).

For many Bronies, the friendship lessons are a primary reason they continue to watch. These lessons within the show often draw comparisons to the fables of Aesop where animals exemplify human behaviors and illustrate the consequences of those traits; the program provides lessons of universal values concerning relationship-building and friendship-making (Robertson, 2014, p. 21). Although such stories are geared to a younger audience, they have potential to provide guidance to living a better life regardless of age. In an interview with Molly Lambert, Lauren Faust (the creator of *Friendship Is Magic*) underscores this point: "These Bronies are taking these lessons to heart. We need to allow men to be sensitive and to care about one another, and not call them weak for caring" (Lambert, 2013, n.p.). It is this notion of caring and sensitivity commonly not associated with masculinity which has drawn the most curiosity from people outside the fandom.

Masculinity: From Hegemonic to Hybrid

Over the last four decades, the study of men and masculinity has undergone significant changes, beginning with Raewyn Connell's landmark work on hegemonic masculinity which suggests there exists a system of hierarchical categories within masculinity prioritizing desirable traits while dismissing alternatives as abject (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 846). This system purports that characteristics deemed more appealing receive greater emphasis and are thus promoted as ideal traits for young men, lending to the creation of an illusionary model of excellence. However, Connell and Messerschmidt do not suggest hegemonic masculinity is a monolithic entity. Instances can occur when ideal representations are unattainable, resulting in alterations as hegemony adjusts to contextual restrictions. When this occurs, dominant forms of masculinity reconcile to the prevailing conditions of a situation, thus creating a hybrid framework which can still operate and maintain a semblance of the dominant form.

Traditional masculinity studies emphasize that male identity is a dubious standard in constant danger, requiring constant vetting and approval (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Gardiner, 2013; Pascoe, 2007). However, research in hybrid masculinities has begun to show how masculine identity can alter in such a way that, even when there is a threat of appearing feminine, circumvention is possible without losing respect. This occurs through the development of alternate forms of masculinity that do not wholly follow all aspects of traditional masculinity but find justifications to sustain a masculine identity. Bye (2009) attests that masculinity still requires "strategic identities" (p. 280)

to reconstruct itself in ways to appear dominant despite not performing masculinity in a traditional sense. In her study, rural men required negotiated alterations to presumed conceptions of masculinity to maintain their identity. Such negotiation allows alternative interpretations of masculinity to take precedence over traditional forms out of contextual necessity, such as working in the nursing field because they feel better equipped for the physical demands or enjoying wildlife photography because it is just as hard to shoot deer with a camera as it is with a rifle. Even though these compromises do not easily congeal into hegemonic masculinity's framework, these substitutions still follow familiar patterns through identity rationalization. Emily Ryalls (2013) exemplifies this notion through her examination of the *emo* subculture which demonstrates how seemingly contradictory forms of masculinity can still protect heteronormative power despite its feminine-appearing transgressions. In essence, hybrid forms may look progressive and appear to eschew dominant masculinity forms, but they still fall short in challenging dominance or even maintaining dominance via covert means.

While research on hybrid masculinities and strategic identities highlights how hegemonic masculinity allows for these accommodations, Eric Anderson (2005) proposes an alternate form of masculinity called *inclusive masculinity*, which does not necessitate similar negotiated compromises to retain aspects of masculine performance. This form of masculinity is given the *inclusive* moniker because of how it is accepting of various forms of gender without creating hierarchies or marginalizing certain behaviors. Anderson describes how his framework operates with participants in male cheerleading and how they construct their masculinity in a site that is typically reserved as a feminine space:

> The second category of masculine performance is labeled as *inclusive* [emphasis in original]. The men in this group view orthodox masculinity [read as traditional or dominant masculinity] as undesirable and *do not aspire to many of its tenets* [emphasis added]. Particularly important to the study of men in feminized terrain, this research shows that inclusive masculinity is based less on homophobia and antifeminity than orthodox masculinity. Men in this group willingly embrace the feminized underpinnings of their sport. (p. 338)

Anderson indicates that inclusive masculinity freely espouses more feminine aspects of gender and requires less justification for these male cheerleader's involvement in that feminine space. Anderson suggests that young men who participate in inclusive masculinity are "less concerned with the expression of femininity among other men" because they view dominant forms of masculinity as less desirable (p. 347). If these points are true, then the need to prove oneself does not require a repudiation of the feminine to secure one's masculinity.

Ross Haenfler (2015) suggests inclusive masculinity "co-occurs" with hegemonic masculinity as the conceptions interact with each other through performances which establish masculine identity in various localized forms (p. 135). As mentioned earlier regarding hybrid forms, hegemonic masculinity allows for concessions and compromise when contextual issues concerning male gender norms are taken into account, but

inclusive masculinity does not seek the same justifications when incongruences with traditional masculinity materialize. Anderson (2005) argues that inclusive masculinity cannot adhere to the same guidelines as other masculinities because this form of gender identity does not perform in the same manner; rather, "these men construct a hierarchy that esteems inclusivity and stigmatizes orthodox masculinity" (p. 348). As Anderson sees it, inclusive masculinity cannot fall into the hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity because it works outside the hierarchal structures that privilege dominant forms of masculinity.

Finally, inclusive masculinity allows young men to engage in feminine spaces or portray feminine characteristics without fear of losing their masculinity. Haenfler (2015) proposes, this rendition of masculinity allows for more dynamic interpretations of gender against the common binary notions pervasive in society: "Inclusive masculinity suggests not only that men are developing more progressive attitudes toward queer people but they develop more egalitarian relationships with women and their straight male peers" (p. 131). However, several critics (De Boise, 2015; McRobbie, 2009; O'Neill, 2015; Tasker & Negra, 2007) claim that inclusive masculinity is not as socially progressive as purported. Issues raised against inclusive masculinity include maintenance of gender inequality (McRobbie, 2009), subtle reactionary control implementation against the pro-gay rights movement (De Boise, 2015), and hegemonic manipulation that sustains White privilege (O'Neill, 2015). Overall, their discrepancies suggest underlying factors of inclusive masculinity are more hurtful than helpful for gender studies work, and imply that it is another hybrid construction that maintains prevailing gendered power structures.

Taking these accusations against inclusive masculinity into account, I propose *discordant masculinity* as a hybrid form that does not succumb to the same entrapments as other composite conceptualizations while addressing some discrepancies feminist critiques have alleged about other hybrid frameworks, in particular postfeminist critiques against inclusive masculinity. Core aspects of this new form of masculinity are illustrated by how members of the Brony fandom conduct themselves. I submit this is achieved through their activities at conventions and local meetups to ensure all individuals feel welcome in the fandom. Their conduct in these spaces is absent of ironic rationalization and strategic identities to secure their masculinity. This will be supported by news articles as well as ethnographic research. Next, I discuss how this new construction of masculinity operates within the fandom, how it differs from other forms of masculinity, and some of its limitations.

Method

The concept of discordant masculinity was arrived at through a mixed approach including analysis of news articles, ethnographic research, and an online survey (2015) involving 1,263 participants discussing various aspects about the fandom. Many of the survey questions were derived from responses given by participants at a small Brony convention in Omaha, Nebraska, in 2013. Later interview questions and the online survey utilized the same questions and covered three themes: background and

demographics; the positive and negative experiences of being a Brony; and positive and negative news stories about the fandom. The survey contained Likert-type scale, check box, and narrative response questions, the latter allowing participants to clarify their responses as they saw fit.

The survey was officially launched during a panel given at a Brony convention called BabsCon 2015 held in San Francisco. The survey was initially distributed through business cards with QR codes linking to the instrument. Shortly thereafter, the survey began circulating through several Brony/*My Little Pony* news websites and forums including *EquestriaDaily, DerpyHoovesNews*, and *PonyChan.* Prior to the survey's launch, emails to all website administrators regarding the aims of the project were sent to clarify intentions behind the study and to ensure potential participants that their responses were handled with due discretion. All participants stated being willing volunteers and their responses were kept anonymous.

The participants in this study identified themselves as Bronies. Participants hailed from across the globe, including the United States, Canada, Germany, Russia, Italy, France, Taiwan, Nicaragua, Australia, New Zealand, and Peru. Of the sample ($N = $ 1,263), 992 participants were between the ages of 18 to 29 years, with 845 identifying as *male*, 113 as *female*, and 34 as either *transgender, other*, or *not sure*. The majority of this sample resided in the United States (68%) and had had some level of college education (56%).

Findings

Reforming Discord Into Harmony

I base the term *discordant masculinity* on a male character in the *My Little Pony* universe known as Discord. Discord embodies the hybrid framework because of his physical composition and attitude. He is a *draconequus* (read: chimera) which the pony Cheerilee describes as having "the head of a pony and a body made up of all sorts of things" (*The Return of Harmony Pt. 1*; Larson & Thiessen, 2011). His serpent-like body is composed of various animal body parts including a deer antler, goat horn, a bat wing, an eagle claw, a lion arm, a lizard leg, and a horse leg. His body and demeanor both represent chaos, and he initially appears in Season 2 as an antagonist to the ponies before reforming (under the guidance of the ponies) in Season 3. Although he claims to be reformed, he still goes through growing pains in the process of learning friendship. His experiences prior to transformation mirror those of someone who is individualistic and shows little compassion to others. However, after spending more time with the ponies, he has learned the value of relationships and helping others. Even after his reformation and partnership with the ponies, there are still some characters who do not fully trust him and believe that he is still willing and capable of throwing the kingdom into chaos. Appropriately, discord encapsulates this gender construction because of how he initially appears chaotic, mish-mashed, and an oddity. However, after further review, there is something within him that is genuine and good—something which openly conflicts with our own understandings of gender roles. People outside of the

fandom might feel the same way about Bronies, when they see young men dressing up as Rainbow Dash and singing about helping a friend who is in need, or wearing all pink clothes while handing out balloons to complete strangers outside of a pony convention in downtown Baltimore.

In many ways, the Brony fandom appears equally chimeric, so let us review how the Brony fandom functions as a fan community. As the popularity of the show grows, Bronies are steadily creating fan conventions worldwide with the sole purpose of celebrating everything concerning the *My Little Pony* franchise. *BronyCon*, their biggest annual convention, garnered an attendance of 10,000 people over a 3-day weekend in Baltimore, Maryland, during the summer of 2015 (BronyCon, 2015). News of young men coming together in large groups at one place to celebrate a genre like science fiction or anime is nothing new. However, when similar numbers of people unite to praise the merits of a television show themed around unicorns and friendship, there tends to be a few curious onlookers.

Un-Ironic Pony Play

Despite the growing number of fans, Bronies must still contend with gender identity issues emanating from outside the fandom. Part of the problem stems from the disbelief that men are actively engaging in a fandom featuring ponies, rainbows, and companionship. Some media outlets contend that the fandom must be some form of ironic trend because men could not have a genuine interest in a show geared toward young girls (Stanley, 2012). Most Bronies disagree with this sentiment, as one online participant from Texas claims in response to a survey question:

> [T]he adoption of imagery from *My Little Pony* is not considered ironic for [us] because [we're] not attempting to disguise [our liking] of the show through some pretend criticism. The openness of [our] shared [liking] has helped create a unity within the Brony fandom that is unlike any other.

Just as the name of the fandom implies, members are finding a brotherhood among other pony fans. Community building is one of the key elements within the fandom. One Minnesota Brony describes the fandom: "We practice kindness, friendship, generosity, etc. . . . a lot more because of this show." Accordingly, the Brony title is not solely the designation of male fans, as female fans also claim the moniker without reprisal from their male counterparts.

If irony is not the reason for members of the fandom to become involved, then there must be something more to Bronies than at first glance. This would mean that Bronies are genuinely enjoying a show that is not catering to their demographic and are therefore resisting prescribed age and gender roles. Watercutter (2011) notes how Bronies openly confront traditional forms of masculinity through their chosen fandom:

> This is the quality that differentiates Bronies from almost every other fandom: Their very existence breaks down stereotypes. Socialized gender norms (not to mention marketing)

dictates that boys are supposed to like things like trucks, while girls are supposed to like princesses and pink stuff. Bronies obliterate that ideal. (n.p.)

Considering the legitimate involvement of Bronies in the fandom, this has many implications for current dominant notions of masculinity which go far beyond a bunch of men playing with pretty ponies. What is occurring in meetup groups and convention centers is a safe space of gender resistance and identity play, giving fans more room to rearrange traditional roles. This fandom appears to follow what some researchers (Bell, 2013; Watercutter, 2011) describe as a prime example of *neo-sincerity*, a movement that takes ironic statements and art and incorporates them as a transgressive message with sincere intentions. For example, there is a popular Internet image of Twilight Sparkle giving a mean glare with the tagline, "I'm gonna tolerate and love the SHIT outta you." Yet, for most Bronies, this is their mentality even when dealing with people who are against their fandom.

From the outset, the Brony fandom appears to challenge numerous traditional conceptualizations of masculinity. When grown men walk around a convention space wearing pink pony t-shirts and singing songs about friendship, it is hard to see this as anything other than an open protest against contemporary constructions of manhood. A Brony from Connecticut encapsulates the issue in the survey thus: "It is true that the Brony community arose as a rejection of the idea that cute, compassionate friendship was not for men, but in terms of the show, that is highly feminist, and better off for it." This rebellion helped spur the growth of a fandom that allows young men to express themselves and share their feelings in a space free of judgment regardless of age, gender, race, sex, or religion. Haenfler (2015) explicitly points out how the Brony fandom accomplishes this in their fandom through their mantra: "[the] Bronies' motto is 'love and tolerance,' a nod to the show's values but also a refutation of the relentless, denigrating criticism they receive for their gender transgressions" (p. 133). As one online Brony from California describes the fandom mentality: "the general message the community has adopted from the show, 'Love and tolerate,' didn't appear spontaneously. The show has a strong message of community, compassion, and equality, and a lot of fans have taken that to heart."

Many Bronies admit their fan participation knowingly breaches the borders of masculinity norms, and they understand the complications their fandom brings to current conceptions of gender. Mikko Hautakangas (2012) explains how fans reorganize their identity in ways at odds with traditional constructions of masculinity:

Bronies recognize their fandom as a violation of gender norms, and becoming a Brony is described as a process of having to rework one's masculine identity, incorporating aspects that used to be absent or repressed. This is simultaneously a challenge and an opportunity: the points that are underlined as deviation from the norm are also the points that make the fandom valuable, since they are depicted as resources that are lacking from mainstream masculinity. (p. 113)

This fandom allows young men to explore various nuances of their gender construction in a space without fear of reprisal. Members can engage in activities such as

carrying around stuffed animals, wearing skirts or midriffs, and physically embracing each other, to show how much they appreciate their fellow Brony without judgment by others in the fandom. In most cases, these activities are readily accepted by other members and are often utilized by members of the fandom to make everyone feel welcome. As one online fan from Oregon explains, "There is no blue, there is no pink, there is the mixture of every color that makes up each individual."

Love and Tolerance in Action

The most telling aspect of the love-and-toleration mantra is how this fandom implements the sentiment by doing its best to make sure that anybody and everybody feels welcome within the pony community. Gabriela Garcia (2015) explains how the organizers of *BronyCon*, the largest convention for *My Little Pony* fans, institute policies that cultivate these feelings of inclusion:

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

Event planners went to extraordinary lengths to ensure that no identities were intentionally dismissed. Moments like this illustrate what the Brony fandom is capable of; members look for ways to ensure that individuals who do not fit within traditional identities feel welcome. An online participant from Norway succinctly summarizes: "This is exactly what the show is about and what it's teaching us, Bronies or not: love, compassion, equality, and the importance and the benefit of friendships."

This inclusive nature within subcultures is not an entirely new phenomenon. Other scholars note the importance of these communities as sites that foster identity construction in a space that allows young people to experiment with and challenge traditional gender norms. Haenfler (2015) subscribes to the notion that subcultures can be "havens for subversive masculinities, sites of genderplay, and gendered resistance" (p. 130). It is this mobilization of strategic identity that plays a crucial part in how Bronies begin to reconfigure masculinity. This movement toward inclusiveness has even begun to be recognized in larger media outlets. One reporter for the *Denver Post* documents his interactions with fans after watching the documentary *Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony*:

> At the core of the Brony story is a culture of acceptance, happiness and friendship. It's a culture of inclusivity where men and women can have fun without a judgmental atmosphere. It's a culture that forced me to take a step away from my caricatured view of manhood: the prideful, desensitized male who unfailingly attracts women with his body spray. (Johnson, 2014, n.p.)

For Johnson, the message of inclusivity is relatable, and he sees the fandom as a positive fan community which does not exclude individuals nor privilege the toxic facets of masculinity.

Bronies and Postfeminism

The fandom allows young men to engage in the norms of socially constructed femininity without the need to rationalize their behavior or reappropriate feminized practices as masculine. Haenfler (2015) proposes this turn is possible within subcultures as a space where individuals can shun the restrictions of gender binaries or the pigeonholing of particular activities into specific gender domains and allow for greater gender fluidity.

> Rather than succumbing to the "crisis of masculinity," some young men are seizing the moment to explore new masculinities less bound to traditional patriarchal norms. As spaces that encourage cultural resistance and oppositional identities, youth subcultures may foster inclusive masculinities, less accepting of sexism and homophobia. (p. 128)

By creating a new identity in a subculture like the Brony fandom, many young men no longer concern themselves with the trappings of traditional masculinity. Instead, they are using their formative years as a time of evaluation in the same way that Arnett (2000) describes during "emerging adulthood," in which young people attempt to understand who they are and what they want to be.

However, Arnett and Haenfler differ in how this search for identity is conducted. Arnett implies that there is a moment of exigency with which young men contend while struggling to understand who they are and how they fit in the world. Haenfler proposes that alternative masculinity in a subculture allows for experimentation and exploration without the same complications that may arise in the case of an individual in emerging adulthood. The impetus in the decision-making process does not have the same impact as those in Arnett's argument because Haenfler infers that identity formation in subcultures can occur with the help of others in a fan community. The same online Norwegian Brony mentioned above surmises how the show has influenced him as an individual:

> I can only speak for myself when I say that I am sincerely attracted to [most of] the message(s) of the show, as well as the show itself and am not at all being ironic about it. It brings so much good, but not from the show alone. The community is what has really inspired me to identify myself as a Brony.

Many of the concepts within this construction would appear akin to inclusive masculinity. However, there are discrepancies with that comparison and some distinctions need to be made—primarily, the issues of recuperation. Within Anderson's framework, there remains the need for heterosexual recuperation through ironic or "conquestial" means. As McCormack (2012) suggests, this recuperation serves as a "soft"

or subtle form of gender policing which suggests some hegemonic practices are still in place without overt homophobic tactics (p. 90). This strategy allows those who are in a privileged position to exercise inclusive masculinity and distance themselves from accusations of homosexuality by suggesting their actions were intended as a joke. This move pardons them from justifying their facetious actions within a hegemonic framework where such actions would traditionally relegate them to the margins of masculinity.

When the fandom first emerged, a similar argument surfaced. Detractors suggested that Bronies are only looking to upset gender dynamics through a form of ironic enjoyment; the fans are not sincere because they are looking to create a disturbance for controversy's sake. However, Gavia Baker-Whitelaw (2013) dismisses this assertion, claiming the fandom is changing perceptions of gender:

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

Baker-Whitelaw asserts that, even if the fandom was an ironic trend, the evident sincerity in the way Bronies participate suggests something else entirely. The level of engagement by fans creating their own pony-inspired work and actively practicing the show's tenets of friendship seems counterintuitive if this participation was solely based on irony. In addition, for a massive fan base like Bronies, maintaining a farce of this scale would be difficult. One California Brony opined, "I don't think irony would bring 8,000-plus people from around the world to Baltimore, Maryland (location of *BronyCon*) for three days of irony-fueled—I might go so far as to call it *worship*—of this show."

It is at this point that comparisons between the implementation of irony in inclusive masculinity and the Brony fandom begin to show dissonance. McCormack and Anderson (2010) highlight the need for irony to be present in their framework:

> While we suggest that heterosexual recuperation techniques are mechanisms to re/make a heterosexual identity, we also highlight that the ironic form serves as a social mechanism enabling boys to expand [and even break] the tightly policed gender boundaries described by masculinities literature. (p. 847)

This suggests masculinity cannot alter itself legitimately without posing as self-aware to the situation and downplaying the boundary infraction as good-natured fun.

Rosalind Gill (2007) sees the move toward irony as a postfeminist ploy by hybrid forms of masculinity to "have it both ways"; participants are able to make gender infringements without suffering consequences because the intent was tongue-in-cheek (pp. 266-267). This absolves the potential offender from accusations of failed masculinity—such

as homosexuality, effeminacy, and other forms of gender subversion. This need for recuperation through irony does not allow for true gender fluidity because rationalization still takes place to ensure no mistaken identity. While Bronies use irony for transgressive purposes, the intent behind the messages is still sincere. Bronies can understand how people outside the fandom see them as an ironic trend, but fans do not see their actions of love and tolerance as a joke.

Chimera of a Different Color

Discordant masculinity does introduce new facets to hybrid frameworks, but these dimensions mirror, to varying degrees, other contemporary forms of masculinity. Bussey and Bandura (1999) explain how context allows these changes to occur in everyday life when individuals "vary in their gender conduct depending on a variety of circumstances" (p. 679). This variability allows individuals to bend the seemingly immovable conceptions of binary gender roles. A person cannot be of a singular identity at all times during the course of a day as it will shift during different encounters and situations. The variability within discordant masculinity begins to nullify the idea that involvement in a feminine space automatically marginalizes men for straying from masculine practices.

The emergence of the Brony fandom, as well as the messages of love and tolerance emanating from the fan community, are carving out this new type of masculinity. It allows men to engage in traditional feminine spaces and roles without the need to reappropriate that space, nor does this conception use recuperation to police its boundaries. This framework promotes nontraditional masculine traits such as friendship, open feelings, compromise, and teamwork which are trademarks of community building. It steers away from the stoic emotions, physical domination, exclusionary practices, and homophobic policing often associated with traditional forms of masculinity.

Community establishing traits are regularly viewed as feminine in nature because they contrast with masculine individualistic expectations, yet Bronies have found a way to see beyond this dichotomy and embrace a system of universal values that builds relationships rather than tearing them down. As one Pennsylvania Brony puts it, "[*My Little Pony*] breaks past gender roles, age groups, and cultural divides; it unites us as a community and makes us happy." Discordant masculinity allows members to express themselves while still welcoming others for who they are, despite differences. While alternative views may exist within the fandom, fans do not marginalize or exclude individuals. Instead, members view each other as equals and settle disagreements with hugs rather than harsh words or physical force. An online Austrian Brony summed up the show and the Brony fandom as follows:

> I'd go even further and say that one of the central reasons for the show's success is its refusal to cater to or exclude any demographic group specifically, which counts not just for gender, but also age or worldview. This shows demographic is "Anyone." No restrictions.

This new construction of masculinity may not be the solution to larger issues surrounding gender norms which are still prevalent in society, but it does allow for the progression toward a more malleable understanding of masculinity which does not need to include all the trappings of toxic masculinity or the colonizing influence of other hybrid forms.

Minimally, exposure to the themes prevalent in the Brony fandom and discordant masculinity can influence young men to be more sympathetic to masculinity issues. As Haenfler states, "Generations of young, subcultural men have transitioned to adulthood, amid at least some exposure to antisexist, queer-positive ideas, creating fissures in which inclusive masculinities, and more inclusive relationships might blossom" (p. 135). Haenfler suggests subcultural spaces are sites of progressive antihomophobic, antimisogynistic ideals and have historically given those concepts room to flourish. Scholars have found alternative forms of masculinities emerging from fandoms like the *Twilight* book series (Click, Miller, Behm-Morawitz, & Aubrey, 2016), hobbies such as gender-swapped anime cosplay (Close, 2016), and sports like skateboarding (Beal, 1996). Subcultures in the realm of music create alternative forms of masculinity in genres like gothic, post-punk, and emo. The culture surrounding these genres and scenes allows for what Marjorie Garber (1992) calls "a space of possibility" (p. 11) in which gender performances can cross borders. Artists in rock music have pushed conceptions of masculinity since the early days of the genre—David Bowie, Freddie Mercury, and Pete Burns—which has allowed for the slow evolution away from gender binaries (Rhodes & Pullen, 2012, p. 34). Taylor Houston (2012) contends that this evolution has led to an environment in the indie rock scene that allows men "to express rather than suppress their affection and emotions toward other men and support their construction of alternative masculinities" (p. 161). However, the construction of these alternative masculinities is emanating from cultures predominantly controlled by men. Even in the emo music scene, which feature men appropriating feminine and gay stylistics (crying and same-sex kissing), there is criticism that these alternatives only serve to reinforce hegemonic masculinity through domination of women and gay men (Ryalls, 2013, p. 84).

These subcultural spaces may allow for subversion, but many findings show that reappropriation is required. Participants in skateboarding culture may tend to avoid the competitive aspects of masculinity, but still view it as a primarily male activity (Beal, 1996, p. 218). In gender-swapped anime cosplay, male cosplayers like Sailor Bubba can pose as effeminate men for the sake of irony because they are in control of their body, while female cosplayers are not afforded the same right in that space (Close, 2016). Even in the feminized terrain of romance novels, alternative forms of masculinity still require forms of reappropriation. Click et al. (2016) compared Bronies and male fans of the *Twilight* series known as *twi-dudes* as two male groups enjoying a feminized text. However, their work revealed many male *Twilight* readers maintain they are "typical guys" who read the stories for the action and adventure elements in the plot (p. 11). While these young men are enjoying a romance novel, they still feel the need to rationalize their enjoyment to maintain their gender identity.

What differentiates Bronies from other gender-ambiguous movements is how this fandom's evolution is taking place in a cartoon show intended for young girls, while other sites that contest hegemonic masculinity are predominantly male-centered. This iteration of the ponies takes several traditionally feminine themes within the show and turn them on their head by providing a more diverse cast of female characters in bright colors with more development than the default setting of "girl." This presents the ponies as avatars of different gender possibilities and gives fans a way to explore those varied roles. As *Friendship Is Magic* creator Lauren Faust explains how the fandom is changing conceptions of gender, "They're proud that they're forward-thinking and modern enough to look past this misogynistic attitude" (Gould, 2012, n.p.). The discordant masculinity occurring in the Brony fandom is making a move toward inclusivity by eliminating the binary barriers separating genders through community building and friendship.

Furthermore, discordant masculinity does not justify itself through the erosion of what Anderson (2012) calls *homohysteria*—a combination of homophobic attitudes and mandatory heterosexuality—which O'Neill (2015) critiques. Rather, discordant masculinity does suggest that there is progress within constructions of masculinity, but not at the cost of other foundational theories of masculinity studies; it is built through community bonding within the fandom and seeks to foster greater acceptance of others through the show's message of "love and tolerance." Haenfler (2015) reminds us that "subcultures are relatively diffuse groupings having a sense of shared identity and distinctive, nonnormative ideas, practices, and objects, along with marginalization from and/or resistance to perceived conventional society" (pp. 130-131). Those diffuse groups coming together to form the Brony fandom all share in creating the parts of discordant masculinity under the banner of love and tolerance.

Limitations and Conclusion

Despite all of this positivity about discordant masculinity's framework, there are some issues that require redress. The show and the fandom are making progressive strides in terms of inclusion and compromise, but as one online Virginia Brony states, "This show is a step in the right direction, but let's not pretend it's a progressive bastion. It could do more on that regard."

There are two key issues surrounding the fandom which could lend to criticism regarding discordant masculinity. The first of these is access through privilege. Within the demographic composition of the survey, certain markers for privilege were in the majority: 72% identified as White, another 72% identified as heterosexual, and 56% enrolled or completed college. These markers of privilege are a common problem within the research of hybrid masculinities as Bridges and Pascoe (2014) suggest, and are further compounded because most of the research for this project was conducted online or at convention spaces. The cost of attending a convention is expensive, especially depending on the amount of travel time required. In addition, there is still a divide in access to the Internet which limits some fans from expressing themselves or sharing their experiences with others.

Second, some scholars (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; O'Neill, 2015) believe hybrid masculinities tend to mask their perpetuation of gender power structures and are usually local variations at best. As one female Brony from Illinois notes without giving specifics, "as much as I wish we were equal, there is still a distinction [in visibility] between female and male fans in the fandom." As Bridges and Pascoe (2014) note about hybrid masculinities, this conception will require further consideration of women's roles within the fandom. For instance, a small percentage of the fandom sexually fetishizes the ponies, and their engagement in the fandom could influence discordant masculinity. Furthermore, the question still remains regarding how women who have been fans of the franchise through other reincarnations feel about Bronies because the notoriety of male fans does, in some aspects, push women out into the fringes of the fandom. Yet the term *pegasisters*, which was initially used to describe female fans of the show, has been largely abandoned as they have willingly attached themselves to the Brony moniker. This preference for amalgamation over segregation illustrates the chimeric nature of the fandom itself. These are all issues which will require further research as this construction develops.

In this way, discordant masculinity defines itself through means of collaboration and agreement without coercion or appropriation of other gender norms. This form of masculinity varies from other hybrid constructions in that it allows for greater fluidity and a wider array of gender performances while further fracturing contemporary understandings of traditional masculinity. Furthermore, this framework allows men to engage in traditionally defined feminine activities without the necessity of recuperation of their identity—a point that McCormack and Anderson (2010) still grapple with in their framework where, "heterosexual boundary policing continues, and heteronormativity exists through the presumption of heterosexuality" (p. 844). In many ways, inclusive masculinity and discordant masculinity are similar. However, some postfeminist concerns about inclusive masculinity are addressed by discordant masculinity, such as the absence of heterosexual recuperation and the use of irony.

More analysis is required to understand some of the finer underpinnings of this fandom. Significant among the questions remaining is whether young men occupying a space traditionally relegated, indeed mass-marketed, to little girls is truly a progression toward gender equality. In addition, can discordant masculinity account for individuals who are still trying to balance their identity with expectations of gender or is this construction primarily limited to spaces of privilege. Even with the issues yet to be addressed, Bronies are remarkable because they willingly engage in feminine terrain without attempting to claim it as their own. Yet if the initial findings are any indication of how Bronies are approaching masculinity, then there is evidence that progress toward gender diversity is being made.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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