

My Little Brony: Connecting Gender Blurring and Discursive Formations

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Abstract

In 2010 Hasbro launched its TV series *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*. Although it was targeted at young girls, it quickly became popular among adult men. This paper analyzes the brony movement as a discursive formation with an orientation towards a critical rhetoric to determine how bronies are impacting gender identification. The analysis shows that they blur gender lines by identifying with traits that they know are not perceived as masculine.

Thesis and Rationale

The purpose of this paper is to determine the impact that bronies have on existing power structures and to understand what the existence of bronies within the *My Little Pony* universe means for us as a society. I study how the discourse that surrounds the brony movement modifies gender identities and what the brony movement says about U.S. society by understanding *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic (MLP: FiM)* as a discursive formation. The information that is provided on this group consists of informal accounts or articles that explain that the movement exists. In addition, John deLancie, who voices one of the ponies, has produced a documentary on BronyCon, which is the annual convention for *My Little Pony* which is held in New York each year. This documentary examines what it means to be a brony and why they enjoy the show, but it does not analyze how they are changing power dynamics. The research itself is pertinent because a “critique establishes a social judgment about ‘what to do’ as a result of the analysis, it must serve to identify the possibilities of future action available to the participants” (McKerrow 92). By employing a critical rhetoric we are able make judgments as to what is the next best logical step in society’s evolution. In addition, orienting the critical rhetoric toward an *ideologiekritik* is to orient the research towards “the production of knowledge to the ends of power and, maybe of social change” (McKerrow

102). The critique itself functions as creating new knowledge about power and the potential for future social change.

I will be identifying the discursive formation within the brony movement by looking at three different forum/comment sections from different websites. The first will be forum posts from *Equestria Daily* because this is the largest brony website at this point in time. The second will be comments from a YouTube video, which is an audio clip from the Howard Stern Show that interviewed bronies at BronyCon in 2012. This is a relevant audio clip because it sparked a large brony uprising during the time when it was released. The response from this video was arguably the reason why Fox News and other networks started reporting on bronies last year. This site is also necessary because this comment section is not mediated by brony “admin” (site administrators), and as such, people who dislike bronies or “anti-bronies” have free reign to speak their mind. The final site I will be analyzing is the comments from a *HuffingtonPost.com* article that spoke about BronyCon 2012. This affords a rather different demographic of people from either of the other two sites. This site also includes an open comments section so bronies and “anti-bronies” will be represented equally.

Literature Review

Several articles have examined males who have successfully attempted to cross established gender lines. In one of those articles, entitled “I’m METRO, not Gay!” Hall, Gough, and Seymour-Smith studied how men have slowly accepted caring about their looks and hygiene. The study found that the reason why this has become more acceptable is due to the use of gender neutral terms or no gendered terms at all when talking about personal care. This lack of terminology has made it so that it is becoming more acceptable in the present day for men to wear makeup and other such items that were traditionally considered feminine products. Another study conducted by Caplan, Kornreich, and Maag explained that more than 80% of couples who have wedded are both involved in the planning of the wedding itself. This has precipitated the adoption of the term “groomzilla.” Grooms are working out the details of their special day with their wives, which is a concept that would have been unheard of not too long ago. This has led wedding planners to start advertising to men for business and not just women. My study builds on the identification blurring that these studies have proposed.

Identities are formed through the use of frames, which are “an interpretive schema that simplifies and condenses the world out there by selectively

punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one's present or past environments" (Snow and Benford 197). Our identities are created from what happened to us or around us. This, however, seems to be a very basic understanding of identity construction. When delving deeper into their construction it seems that such frames are created in opposition to what one does not stand for. Kenneth Burke explains that individuals and groups define themselves in opposition to others. Burke called these polarizing identification forms "ultimate terms" that place the other individual as wrong in direct correlation to you (183-97). Your identity is created by what you believe you are opposed to. Dana Cloud used the term "foiling" to define this concept. Cloud thought that it was "important to understand not only the self-frames of individuals and groups but also how the sense of self often is the product of defining oneself against the characteristics of an antagonist" (460). By understanding how people frame others within the discourse, one can understand what attributes they identify themselves with.

Gender identities have traditionally been fixed for both biological sexes with specific norms and values. For males, "militarism became ingrained boys at an early age through quotidian cultural practices such as children's games and toys that celebrated violent ambition, revenge, and military glory" (Eastman 247). Men are usually thought of as being more aggressive and confrontational, largely due to the fact that they are indoctrinated to think of these as natural at an early age. This is apparent since "female dissenters are treated and represented differently in public life and private correspondence than male dissenters because of the complex interconnections among gender ideology, national identity, the division of labor, and justifications for war in the modern nation state" (Cloud 466). For a female to dissent against power dynamics would be violating expected norms since this is supposed to be something indicative to the male gender. Cloud continues by explaining, "A 'good' woman defends the nation and reproduces and nurtures its warriors and workers. As a result, women who speak out against nationalism and war pose a dual threat to conventional gender roles and the sanctity of the nation state" (467). A woman who is against nationalism and war is seen as being opposed to the defense of the nation and of being nurturing to warriors. This would indicate that men should be seen as the aggressors and women as the more passive and caring gender. "For men, it is less of an offense to engage in public demonstration of outrage than it is for women" (469).

Even space has become gendered in terms of who can use specific space and how. "Spaces are imbued with symbolic meaning and make statements about gender construction either through inclusion or exclusion" (Korzeniowska 6). Depending on what spaces you are allowed to speak in helps to identify what gender roles you fill. "It is clear that the public/private distinction is gendered, the private domestic sphere traditionally the preserve of women and the public sphere that of men" (Duncan 128). Public space is being discussed slightly differently than how Jürgen Habermas initially discussed it. While from a Habermasian point of view a public space would be that of governmental distinction, what Duncan and Korzeniowska are speaking of is rhetoric that is being engaged by the public. Duncan believes that these spheres are "frequently employed to construct, control, discipline, confine, exclude, and suppress gender and sexual difference, preserving traditional patriarchal and heterosexist power structures. Space is not therefore neutral" (128). The use of space determines what form the discourse takes within the site. It is what allows for power dynamics to remain in a hierarchical structure that entrenches patriarchal viewpoints. However, Korzeniowska believes that they can also be used to blur gender roles. When examining how women were dressing in two French magazines that she analyzed, she found that "These inroads into masculine territories are presented by these two magazines as totally normal, thereby contributing to a slippage in traditional gender roles and encoding new relations of authority and status in which women invest the masculine public sphere" (12). By presenting a slippage in the gender roles as normal, it allowed for women to become a part of the public sphere that is typically thought of as only for men. This means that blurring of gender roles is possible.

The brony community is one of few large groups of individuals that actively respond to phenomena outside of their socially accepted norms pertaining to heterosexuality, thus making them relevant for study. Other research has identified smaller groups of individuals who have deviated from certain aspects of gender norms, but this group attempts to break free of the majority of established gender norms all at once. An analysis of the brony community will give us a greater understanding of what gender norms are moving towards in the near future. In addition, while analysis has been done about women bringing "women's" issues to the public sphere to make it less patriarchal, there has been little research done to see what would happen to the public sphere if the dominant were to bring these issues to the public sphere instead of those perceived inferior.

The Brony Community

The primary site that I will be examining is the discursive formation of the brony community. The original *My Little Pony* was first released on air in 1984 and ran about 50 episodes through 1986. Since this time there have been a variety of movies and games set in the *My Little Pony* universe. In 2010 Hasbro relaunched the show under the name *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*. This show, like the previous media, was aimed at young girls to enjoy. In fact, the phrase in the middle of their website reads, "Your ponies are SO happy you are here! Come by anytime for fun, friendship and pony adventures including pony games for girls, pony videos to watch and activities to do. Yippee!" (Hasbro). While the show was targeted at young girls, it has attracted another audience that was quite unexpected. "A mostly older audience (male fans call themselves "Bronies") has given 10 million views to a fan website, *Equestria Daily*" (Weinman 2011).

Bronies are quickly becoming a powerful force in the internet world, already placing *My Little Pony* literature, artwork, and memes at the top of online rankings for views and submissions. Bronies are creating mash-ups on YouTube and fan art which is then posted onto sites like *deviantArt*. "The online artist collective *deviantArt* had, at last count, nearly 90,000 pieces of *My Little Pony* artwork and hundreds more are going up each day (on one random day in May, about 330 pieces were submitted)" (Watercutter 2011). In addition to YouTube and *deviantArt*, a blog titled *Equestria Daily* has been created where fans share fan fiction, art, and discussions with one another and it has been increasing in popularity quite quickly. Initial thoughts are usually that these bronies must enjoy the show in a satirical fashion, but in fact they genuinely enjoy the show. Some fans say the show's appeal lies in good illustration, excellent characters, or 80's nostalgia" (Watercutter 2011). Due to this genuine enjoyment of something associated with *My Little Pony*, bronies have been ridiculed quite a bit. However, Feminist Emily Manuel explains that, "*MLP: FiM* has managed to attract a huge male audience who've become figures of fascination and derision in equal measures. Despite this, the number of bronies seems to be growing by the day, shrugging off the disdain with their trademark 'I'm going to tolerate and love the shit out you' rebuttal" (Manuel 2011). It would seem that the bronies are taking the messages about friendship and love within the series truly to heart.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

After coming to an understanding about how identities are constructed, how gender lines have been blurred before, and finally what the current gender lines are now, we can formulate the framework for the research. In his book *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Michel Foucault defines a discursive formation as "the total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and possibly formalized systems" (191). In other words, discursive formations are identities or thought processes that allow for order and truth to be created and understood. Foucault believed that discursive formations were the basis for understanding and knowledge in society. The reason why he calls these structures discursive formations is due to how important he finds discourse. Foucault claims that knowledge or reality is created out of shared discourse. Therefore understanding a discursive formation allows one to understand a truth about the society we live in. To understand a discursive formation, Foucault identifies five aspects: discursive practices, rules, roles, power, and knowledge.

A discursive practice is a speech act that follows particular rules or has passed certain tests so that it can be understood as true. The statement, "The Lakers are a hard team to beat this year" is one that by itself has no relevant importance. However, when it is spoken by an important Basketball analyst and is deemed to be a true claim due to the analyst's experience, it becomes a speech act that embodies a speech act. Foucault does not limit discursive practices simply to written and spoken discourse but includes other types of acts as well. Architectural forms, use of space, institutional practices, and social relations are also types of discursive practices (Sheridan 106-7). For example, Foucault's analysis of the panopticon is a discursive practice based on architectural forms.

The next aspect of a discursive formation involves rules. "Rules, for Foucault, are principles or procedures that govern a discursive formation; a discursive formation assumes its particular character because of these rules" (Foss and Gill 386). The rules are not always explicitly stated or written but determine what can and cannot be said in the discourse. Discursive formations can be under the influence of several different types of rules. Foucault believes that there are a number of rules that govern discursive formations. "One category of rules control the fact that something is able to be talked about and governs the appearance of objects of discourse" (Foss, Foss, and Trapp 349). These rules dictate what is and what is not appropriate to be discussed in

the discourse. The second category of rules “concerns not what is talked about but who is allowed to speak and write” (Foss, Foss, and Trapp 349). Some people might be allowed to speak about particular subjects, but perhaps because of who they are, they are just not allowed to speak in general. The third category of rules “concerns the form that concepts and theories must assume to be accepted as knowledge” (Foss, Foss, and Trapp 350). This could mean that certain statements, depending on how they are framed, could be or could not be considered knowledge statements.

The third aspect of a discursive formation identified by Foucault is that of roles. These are the roles that the rhetor plays that are allowed by the discourse in order to discuss and discover knowledge. For Foucault, the rhetor is not the origin of knowledge but the vessel through which knowledge is conveyed. The knowledge that is available will determine which rhetors are allowed to speak and take on the roles of knowledge conveyers, as well as those who will not be allowed to. “Specific individuals will not be seen as organizing discourse and knowledge; rather, discourse as a set of formal relationships long antedating our personal identities will constitute the organizing principle for those who use the discourse” (Foss and Gill 388). It is for this reason that Foucault does not concern himself with individual rhetors, but rather, the discourse that they are allowed to use. While Foucault believes that discourse is uniquely a human quality that humanity created, he contends that the knowledge and discourse that place rhetors into particular roles is what creates power and position and not the rhetors themselves.

Next, Foucault discusses power within discursive formations. He defines power as “the overall system, process, or network of force relations spread through the entire discursive formation” (Foss and Gill 389). Foucault believes that the discursive formation itself has power due what the particular formation stands for. Being a part of the formation forces one to ascribe or conform to the norms and standards of the formation in order to be considered correct. However, most people are not aware of this force relation being placed upon them. “For Foucault, then, power as conformity to norms is omnipresent, diffused, and thus generally hidden to the participants of the discursive formation because it is contained in all relationships in that formation” (Foss and Gill 389). As soon as one becomes a part of a discursive formation or interacts within one, they become subject to the power it holds.

The final aspect of a discursive formation is knowledge. Knowledge involves what artifact is being discussed in the discourse. The knowledge can be considered the content that is being understood or expressed within the

discursive formation itself. It is “discourse that comes from individuals’ occupation of certain roles, that follows specified rules, and that involves certain power relationships of the discursive formation” (Foss and Gill 389). Knowledge occurs as a result of the other four categories but also affects them prior to knowledge being expressed.

Foucault believed that the discursive formation was simply an understanding of power itself, which was ever fluctuating. It would serve no purpose to try to fight the power since all one would be doing would be constructing another new power structure. “The possibility of change is muted by the fact that the subject already is interpellated with the dominant ideology. Actions oriented toward change will tend to be conducive to power maintenance rather than to its removal” (McKerrow 94). The person attempting the change is working for change within the power structure itself. This means that the person is subject to the power that they are trying to break free of. “The more the speaker is subjected to power, the more he [she] situates himself [herself] conceptually in reference to the very place where power is concretely exercised” (Bisseret 64). However, in his article “Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis,” Raymie McKerrow identifies how simply doing the critical analysis that Foucault imagines is valuable in and of itself. “A critical rhetoric serves a demystifying function by demonstrating the silent and often non-deliberate ways in which rhetoric conceals as much as it reveals through its relationship with power/knowledge” (92). A critical rhetoric helps us understand how the discourse is perpetuating or creating power and knowledge. In addition, it tells about “the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age” (92). According to McKerrow, a critical rhetoric analyzes both of the following ideas regarding power: the critique of domination and the critique of freedom.

The critique of domination is focused “on the discourse of power which creates and sustains the social practices which control the dominated. It is, more particularly, a critique of ideologies, perceived as rhetorical creations” (McKerrow 93). These ideologies are created much in the same fashion that Burke and Cloud understood identity construction, by exploring what one is not. Domination occurs through “the construction and maintenance of a particular order of discourse and the deployment of non-discursive affirmations and sanctions” (Therborn 82). The domination occurs when we understand what we allow and what we do not allow within the discourse itself. This acceptance and rejection create an ideology within the formation proper. McKerrow calls these ego and alter ideologies. “Ego ideologies [are]

those core themes identifying 'who we are'; these exist in conjunction with 'alter' ideologies that define what we are not. In the 1950s 'patriot' was a key term of the ego-ideology, while 'communist' was a key term of the corresponding 'opposing' ideology" (95). We form our identities and the ideologies that grant us power based on how we view our opposing identities and ideologies. Understanding the distinction between the ego and the alter ideology allows us to better comprehend where the problem in society is located. "The 'ego-alter' distinction...serve[s] as potential *topoi* for the unraveling of universes of discourse, as well as locating the nexus of struggle" (95).

The critique of freedom is based off of Foucault's analysis, which explains that "the work of profound transformation can only be done in an atmosphere which is free and always agitated by permanent criticism" (Patton 34). This state of permanent criticism allows us to continuously reevaluate existing power structure; however, McKerrow is quick to point out that "results are never satisfying as the new social relations which emerge from a reaction to a critique are themselves simply new forms of power and hence subject to renewed skepticism" (96). By orienting ourselves toward a critique of freedom we are essentially placing no bias within our understanding of the formation, the critique, and what options this presents us with. "The most we can do is to ever guard against 'taken for granted' that endanger our freedom—our chance to consider new possibilities for action" (97). Thinking from the perspective of the critique of freedom, forces us to act as if we are constructing new knowledge on power. We must therefore find ways to defend ourselves against the new power structures that will form from these critiques. By using McKerrow's analysis of critical rhetoric as an orientation towards a site rather than a method, we can find a practical use and meaning for understanding the discursive formation within the bronx movement.

Analysis of *Equestria Daily*

The first site to be analyzed is the *Equestria Daily* forums. Before one can actually post on the forums they are asked to read the rules of the forum. The *Equestria Daily* creator, whose avatar is named Dashell, has created a total of 11 rules and regulations when attempting to use the forums. These are the explicit rules within the formation itself. The first is, "Don't be a total dick for no reason/Be respectful to your fellow posters" (*Equestria* "Board Guidelines"). This indicates what is not allowed to be discussed. The use of a gender specific term in this rule indicates that gender stereotypes are not completely removed

from this discourse. This may be due to the fact that this forum is largely used by males and the person creating and posting these rules is male.

There are several other rules that also explain what can and cannot be discussed. Rule number three reads, "What happens at X stays at X" (*Equestria* "Board Guidelines"). This means that if there is a problem going on in another forum, place, or location, it should not be brought to be discussed in these forums. Rule number seven explains, "No mature content in avatars or sigs/risqué content must have a warning/you must be 18+ to look at NSFW stuff" (*Equestria* "Board Guidelines"). This is in reference to what bronies call "clap," which is erotic pony art. Clap or other sexually related images are not allowed in these forums without a warning first. This rule explains what is appropriate versus what is not. Finally, rule nine explains, "Yeah, bronies are awesome, but we don't need to talk about it in every thread/defend ourselves against idiots" (*Equestria* "Board Guidelines"). The rule explains that the forum is there for people who enjoy ponies and you engage in the forum knowing that this is the population of people you are dealing with. As such, there should not be examinations as to whether bronies are awesome or whether people who dislike bronies are not. Dashell explains that one ought to leave people bashing bronies alone, which is indicative of a tolerant attitude. This is counter to what is expected of a male to do. The expected response to ridicule is supposed to be an outburst of violence instead of the tolerant attitude the forum is expected to take. The posting of the rules of conduct can also be considered a discursive practice since they are being created by one of the more famous bronies in the community. Therefore because he is validating the forum post, the discourse within the forums as well can be considered discursive practices. Within this discursive formation, Dashell takes on the role of moderator, which means that he and the other admins enforce the rules of the forum. Finally, these rules help us understand the formation from the perspective of the critique of domination by indicating that bronies are tolerant because others are not and that bronies ought to be respectful because others are not.

Within the general topic folder of the forums there were many discussions going on about what being ridiculed as a brony means. One respondent states, "If it's a friend saying hurtful things, try to get some time alone to have a serious open heart to heart. You don't have to demand them to like ponies, or apologize for being a brony or anything extreme. Just let them know how you feel when they say what they do" (*Equestria* "Topic 12455"). This again is counter to standard gender norms. Men are not supposed to be emotionally invested in one another and do typically have heart to hearts, or at least are not

expected to. In addition, the final sentence in this quotation is one of nonviolence in which the respondent asks the originator of the forum post to simply explain the problem and not necessarily to force the offender into anything. This is contradictory to the military glory and dominance that is ingrained into men. This post also places the respondent in the role of nurturer, which is typically identified as a female role. The respondent continues by later explaining that “If whatever they say just digs a little too deep for you to dismiss it yourself, you’ve ALWAYS got friends and fellow bronies here that’ll help you out. =) There’s no ‘I’ in Herd!” (*Equestria* “Topic 12455”). This again identifies the role of the respondent as a nurturer.

Additionally, the knowledge that is created from this discourse about bronies is that bronies are helpful and inclusive. These established norms about bronies indicate that at least in this respondent’s post, the formation has a lot of power. This helps us understand things from the standpoint of a critique of domination by explaining that bronies are inclusive because others are exclusive. Further in this same post another respondent explains, “Grow up and accept that people have different opinions than your own, and that’s got a hell of a lot more to do with maturity than whether or not you enjoy pastel-coloured ponies” (*Equestria* “Topic 12455”). This post again indicates that bronies need to be tolerant of other opinions even if those opinions are negatively portraying bronies. This particular respondent showed that bronies can also play the role of mediator without being an admin. He was attempting to mediate the way bronies ought to think in relation to the forum post.

In another forum in the general discussion section entitled “feeling bad because I can’t create stuff for fandom,” a member of the community asks for the community’s feedback. The creator of the forum explains, “All I can do is enjoy as a spectator; I can’t really participate. I’m not really creative or good at anything ‘artsy’ so, although I’d like to participate, I’d rather not embarrass myself and get the possibly negative reception. I wish I could create happiness for others” (*Equestria* “Topic 5103”). This shows that bronies also take on roles of “happiness creators” or “artsy” roles. They also take on the role of the creator of *MLP: FiM* material. This role as creator shows that the content of *MLP: FiM* is considered to be constantly in flux and changing since material is constantly being added. One respondent to this post stated, “Everyone has art inside them. I believe in you, set the artist free!” (*Equestria* “Topic 5103”). This shows power of the formation itself. This respondent is conforming to the established norms in that despite the creator of this forum believing they will

not create good art, the respondent thinks that everyone can do anything. This portrays bronies as a caring, passionate, and inclusive group.

There are, however, some gender norms that are perpetuated in these forums. One respondent to the post about being ridiculed for being a brony reads, "I'd either ignore their happy asses or metaphorically kick it" (*Equestria* "Topic 12455"). While posts like these were rare, they do indicate that the power of the formation is not absolute. The need for expressed violence still occurs within the formation. Another post within this same forum explains, "I'd feel terrible. But I always keep it a secret because I don't have the balls to admit it" (*Equestria* "Topic 12455"). This use of the word "balls" implies that men are courageous while women are subdued.

The formation has been portrayed through *Equestria Daily* in a number of ways. First, the rules set out by Dashell portray the discourse within the forums as a discursive practice. Second, there are the explicit rules set forth by Dashell which indicate what can and cannot be discussed. You cannot discuss what is occurring in another venue, mature content without a warning, and why you dislike people who hate bronies. Third, there are roles that are identified within the forum discourse itself. There are roles of nurturers, moderators, and creators. The power within the formation at least within *Equestria Daily* is rather strong. While there were a couple of posts that entrenched gender norms, in one of the two I identified there was an indication of metaphorical kicking which is less violent than what would be expected of a male outburst. Fourth, the knowledge that is being created within this discourse is what it means to be a part of the brony community. To be a brony one must be supportive of everyone. Finally, *Equestria Daily* helps us to evaluate a critique of domination by explaining that bronies are tolerant, inclusive, respectful, and caring because others are not.

Analysis of *The Howard Stern Show* Comments

The second site that will be analyzed is responses to an audio clip from *The Howard Stern Show* when he interviewed bronies at BronyCon. This was an open forum on YouTube, meaning that there were responses in favor of Howard Stern from non-bronies and responses not in favor of Howard Stern largely from bronies. One of the first brony respondents states, "We get to choose how we define masculinity, and I personally think it's a lot more logical to define masculinity as being kind, smart, understanding, and tolerant, as opposed to mean and cruel" (YouTube). This quotation helps us understand the formation from the viewpoint of the critique of domination by identifying bronies as kind,

smart, understanding, and tolerant and the other as mean and cruel. The knowledge that is being created is what it means to be masculine. Further in the comments another respondent explains, "So the intended demographic determines what you're allowed to like? I guess girls can't like video games then, and senior citizens aren't allowed to enjoy young adult fiction; sorry, but I don't agree with your sexist and ageist logic" (YouTube). This indicates that the brony community can also take up the role of the morally right. This is because the majority of people would consider most "ism" words as immoral acts or thoughts. Therefore since bronies do not agree with these "isms" they are morally correct. The knowledge that is being created about gender identity in this instance explains that the intended demographic for a show does not dictate who is allowed to view and enjoy that show. Finally, from a critique of domination standpoint it explains that bronies are not immoral because the other already is.

Further down the comments section, an "anti-brony" stated, "I don't think anyone would bat an eye at a girl playing video games or a senior citizen reading a book. In fact if I saw an old lady reading 50 shades of grey [sic] I'd probably smile because that's funny. Has anyone ever smiled after seeing a brony?" (YouTube). This statement was meant to imply that there are certain deviations from standard societal norms that were acceptable and others that were not. In this instance, bronies were identified as outside the standard societal norms. In response to this, a brony asked, "Why the double standard? Do you feel that your masculinity is threatened? I just don't understand. No disrespect to you of course, I'm sure you're a great person, but I simply don't understand" (YouTube). What I find interesting about this comment is that the brony clarified and actually complimented the person who was attacking their hobby. The brony wanted to understand the other's perspective even though his perspective was not being given that same respect. This shows again that even outside of *Equestria Daily* a rule within the brony discursive formation is that you need to be tolerant and respectful of others' opinions. This is an indication of the power of the formation itself.

Much further down in the comments section, an argument broke out between two respondents. The first explained that "The way you talk about spreading friendship and harmony makes you sound like a pathetic 5 year old as well, you people really ARE pathetic, don't yah think?" (YouTube). This shows the entrenched gender norms for males, in that they are supposed to be dominating and warlike, whereas women are supposed to be more harmonious. This comment would indicate that the brony formation is friendly and peaceful

because those that are not bronies have identified themselves as something other than this. In response to this comment another brony stated, “No, we just know how to look past simple words. If more people did that, then the world would be a much better place” (YouTube). This portrays the role of intellectual, which is indicated by the respondent stating that they look past simple words. This would also mean that bronies look beyond standardized norms unlike the rest of the population. The second half of this statement complies with the assertion made by the first respondent that bronies are friendly and harmonious.

The analysis of comments from *The Howard Stern Show* explain to us several ideas regarding the discursive formation of the brony community. The first is that bronies take on the roles of the morally right and the self prescribed intellectual. The brony community believes that it does not participate in surface level bias and therefore is right in comparison to the other. Second, the power of the norms established within the community is shown to be quite considerable. This is due to the fact that the bronies commenting on this video are still attempting to be, if not friendly and understanding, at the very least cordial with the “anti-bronies.” Third, we have gained an understanding of the knowledge that is created within the discourse, which is what it means to be masculine. Masculinity, according to bronies, would be better thought of as being kind and tolerant instead of mean and cruel, which is what they normally associate that word with. Finally, these comments help us understand bronies from a critique of domination by identifying bronies as kind, smart, understanding, tolerant, moral, friendly, harmonious, and intellectual because the other is none of these things.

Analysis of the *HuffingtonPost.com* Article Comments

The final site of analysis involves an article by Christopher Mathias entitled “BronyCon 2012: Bronies, Adult Male Fans of 'My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic,' Gather in New York,” which appeared on the *HuffingtonPost.com* website. The article also has a comments section where bronies and “anti-bronies” meet and exchange words. One respondent explains, “This show is about more than just ponies, and pink and girly things. It’s about the lessons you learn from this show that you would otherwise not learn from any other. I would sooner be watching a show about friendship and learning to tolerate one another than watching a show about killing each other for selfish reasons” (*HuffingtonPost.com*). This again is an indication of power within the brony formation because this respondent is still attempting to portray tolerance of ideas rather than intolerance. This also identifies the knowledge of the brony

community being about more than the show but instead about friendship and tolerance. Finally this helps us understand what the brony is by stating that they are friendly and tolerant while the other is violent and selfish.

Further in the comments section, an “anti-brony” explained, “It’s not so much that it’s men but it’s GROWN men. My friends like to have fun, but none are cute and pink and useless. I think I’ll keep it this way, thanks. Those pony things creeped me out when my daughter had a passing affection for them. Luckily, she grew out of it pretty quickly. She also has never been cute and pink and useless” (*HuffingtonPost.com*). This comment identifies common stereotypes about women and why men should not associate with them. Men cannot be associated with pink because it is cute and useless. Pink is also the color that is most often associated with women rather than men. The term “pink, cute, and useless” usually refers to a women who is completely “girly” and an “air head.” This respondent is essentially identifying bronies as feminine, at least from a stereotypical point of view. In response to this comment a brony said, “What’s wrong with blurring the lines of gender? Teaching little boys it’s okay to want a doll and its okay for little girls to like card and superheroes. You really should be more open minded. Pink does not equal girls, and cartoons do not equal children” (*HuffingtonPost.com*). This comment explains that bronies want to blur the gender lines, they do not have a problem with it. In addition it portrays the brony as open minded because the other is close minded. This also indicates an implicit rule within the brony community that you ought to only speak if you are open to other ideas. This also identifies a role within the brony community, which is to be a deviant from standard norms.

The content of the brony community is also identified as having to deal with mitigating gender roles. This respondent continues by stating, “And this last quote is something very interesting about a community that spawned around this show – they don’t bash other people, spreading negativity (such as you’re trying to do), they actively seek to be positive towards others, which I think is something that is desperately needed these days” (*HuffingtonPost.com*). This comment identifies bronies as positive people because the other is negative. Immediately after this comment another brony chimed in, “At least these guys aren’t out fighting, drinking, causing violence, and being mean and violent towards women. Or would that be a better idea of a male image for your mind?” (*HuffingtonPost.com*). This comment identifies standard societal norms for males and portrays bronies as the opposite of this. This would indicate that bronies are peaceful and believe in equality of attitudes regardless of one’s biological sex.

From the *HuffingtonPost.com* comments we have identified several ideas about the discursive formation of the bronie community. The first is that the established norms within the bronie community are powerful, because yet again bronies outside of *Equestria Daily* are following in the guidelines set forth there. Second, bronies have identified themselves as fulfilling a role of the deviant from established societal norms. Third, the content or knowledge being created within the bronie formation includes discussions of friendship, tolerance, and blurring gender lines. Fourth, an implicit rule of only speaking if you are open minded has been discovered. Finally, we have identified certain characteristics of the identity of the bronie. Bronies are opposed to societal norms surrounding gender, peaceful, and equal in attitudes.

Discussion

After the analysis of the three sites, a clear discursive formation has been identified. The discursive practice within the bronie community is the discussion of anything related to *My Little Pony*. This includes stories, artwork, comments, suggestions, and the discourse surrounding the viewing of the show itself. Of these practices, the one that is discussed the most in the general public is the viewing of the show, whereas the other practices are constituted within the community itself.

Explicit and implicit rules have been identified within the discursive formation. The explicit rules are the 11 rules written out in the *Equestria Daily* "Board Guidelines" for forum posts. These are rules pertaining to what can and cannot be discussed. One cannot discuss what is occurring in other forums, mature content without an explicit warning, and why people dislike or like bronies. This reduces the discourse within the forums on *Equestria Daily* to *My Little Pony* related discourse rather than off-topic discourse. The implicit rules identified in the three sites are that you can only speak if you keep an open mind, are tolerant of others, and believe that everyone has an equal right to speak. These implicit rules form the basis for thought of what types of bronies are allowed to speak and how bronies ought to deal with others speaking. They place more restrictions on themselves by stating that if they cannot accept that others have differing opinions, than they have no right to speak out against them. However, they believe that they also ought to be tolerant of others' speech and let the other speak no matter what.

Several roles have also been extrapolated from these sites. Bronies within the community take on the roles of mediator, creator, deviator from social norms, morally right, intellectual, and nurturer. Bronies are expected to create

material for other bronies to enjoy, to mediate brony discourse, to look beyond societal and expected norms, and to always help others regardless of the circumstances. Many of these roles are contrary to gender roles that men are expected to fill. Men are ingrained to believe in violence, dominance, and selfishness. However, bronies are expected to take up roles like nurturer, which is typically considered a female role. In addition, they violate societal norms by believing in harmony rather than fighting or positivity over selfishness.

Next we must discuss the power of the formation itself. Overall, the discourse seems to be fairly powerful. There are some individuals that still cling to gender norms and violate some of the established rules, but for the most part those rules are followed regardless if they are in the *Equestria Daily* forums or outside of them. The only rule that seems to not be followed as closely is the established rule of not talking about why people dislike or like bronies. On the other sites outside of *Equestria Daily* there were many bronies acting as a defense against negativity from “anti-bronies.” However, even in those discussions the bronies for the most part followed the rules of kindness and tolerance despite being berated.

The final aspect of the formation is that of knowledge and the content involved in the formation. The knowledge that is being created and discussed within the brony community includes what it means to be masculine, how one can be friendly, how one can be tolerant, and how one can blur gender lines. The brony community is aware that it is violating the accepted understanding of what it means to be male and attempts to break free of this understanding by valuing things that are identified by the general public to be feminine.

Finally, we can discuss the identity of the brony through the critique of domination by discussing what the brony is not. According to the brony discourse, a brony is kind, smart, understanding, tolerant, moral, friendly, harmonious, inclusive, respectful, caring, opposed to societal norms, and equal in attitudes. They are these things because they have identified the other as having the opposite of these traits.

My findings demonstrate that bronies are fully aware that they are blurring gender lines and are purposefully doing so. They are attempting to modify gender identities by reframing masculinity with traits that are typically associated with femininity. This is also apparent from the discourse from “anti-bronies” that questions the bronies’ manliness or masculinity. This questioning implies that they are being feminine.

There were a couple of surprises encountered in the analysis, however. For a group of people that wanted to be inclusive, I was surprised to find many

bronies using gender specific language. The phrases “Don’t be a dick” or “I don’t have the balls for that” were more common than I expected. What this may indicate is that while the bronies are attempting to break free of several gender roles at once, the societal formation of gender identity is still influencing them to a great degree. It was also surprising that many bronies believed themselves to be above others. For a group that is supposed to believe in tolerance of all others because everyone is equal, this idea doesn’t seem to be complimentary to that thought. This again would be an indication of the societal gender identity formation still maintaining some form of influence. I also found it interesting that some bronies fulfilled the tolerance criterion far beyond what I would have expected. It is very rare to see someone sincerely compliment a person who has just insulted them. In addition, the amount of support the bronies put behind one another is very much unlike anything you will witness stereotypical men doing. As stated by Eastman, “militarism became ingrained in boys at an early age through quotidian cultural practices such as children’s games and toys that celebrated violent ambition, revenge, and military glory” (247). A brony will post a single comment about how they are feeling down, and within minutes will have dozens to hundreds of supportive comments and advice, and there will also be some offers to do Skype chats to cheer up the sad brony.

Regarding future study, an analysis of whether or not bronies have become more accepted in the general public would have to be identified. If they have, this would be an indication that the bronies were successful in blurring gender lines. The analysis of these sites has simply yielded that they are attempting to change gender identities but not necessarily that they were successful or not. It may also be useful to answer whether or not this formation is indicative of only the online world. People are much more likely to be more vocal online rather than in in-person conversations. As such, an analysis of in-person conversations surrounding bronies would be necessary to verify if this discursive formation is indicative of the whole community or just of those who are a part of the online community of bronies.

The bronies have created a movement of men that embrace traits antithetical to societal norms and have become the subjects of much derision and fascination in equal measure. After completing an analysis of three sites—*Equestria Daily*, comments on *The Howard Stern Show*, and comments on a *HuffingtonPost.com* article—the discursive formation of the brony has been identified. The brony movement attempts to modify gender identities by embracing what it and the “anti-bronies” believe to be feminine traits. The

brony movement shows that the United States still is entrenched in gender norms but the limited acceptance of the brony movement could indicate that the general discursive formation of gender might be changing. The brony movement has been accused of being sexual deviants, unemployed, pedophiles, furies, creeps, useless, and unattractive. However, if there is one thing the bronies would like us all to remember, it is that no matter what, they will tolerate and love the shit out you.

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