The Brony: A Fan Cultural Analysis

Out of the many fan cultures and subcultures that have formed in the past decade, one of the newest and perhaps controversial are the bronies. This fan culture is based over young adults as well as older teens, with most of the members of the fan culture 16-25 years of age enjoying the show My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic©. The first thing to note is that bronies are indeed a fan culture, not a subculture. Hebdige would define a subculture as a group that breaks from mainstream society due to homologous feelings of being outcasted from dominant society, and in doing so, upsets the established dominant/subordinate feelings expressed by a culture (Hebdige). While a fan culture can share this trait, the main separation is that a fan culture is not necessarily formed on a feeling of being outcasted, but in response to a large fan base for something, and without that something, the fan culture could not possibly exists. And while they are indeed a fan culture, bronies step closer to subcultural status than most fan cultures formed in recent years, and this is likely due to its controversial fan base; where the original target audience for My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic© is children, has picked up a fan base past that limit.

The origins of the Brony community started on 4chan, more specifically, the /co/ board (Carver). There, likely posted as some form of an ironic joke, were the first posts that turned seed to what would become the Brony fan culture (Carver). However, and not unexpectedly, resistance was soon met after the spreading of the posts eventually dipped in to the more generalized board known as the /b/ board. (Carver). It’s not too shocking when one thinks about it; 4chan is the same place that spawned such groups like the infamous hacking group Anonymous (Coscarelli). The Brony does in fact revolve around a My Little Pony© cartoon, a show that was stereotyped back in the 1980’s a show that was for little girls. And after the 1980’s there was a downward spiral where the show became exclusively and unquestionably for girls. And this is the mindset that has plagued the gender driven media commercial that was the 1980’s. Once in the 1990’s, and other cartoon programs surfaced, ones that could fair without the need to be product driven, the commercialized programs were driven out or evolved to meet the changing views. In this, My Little Pony© evolved, and instead for opting for the more adventure driven “Generation 1” television series or the more story driven “Generation 2” series, My Little Pony went for the all-out tea party, sterilized, and story lacking nonsense that My Little Pony© has been characterized as and cemented as, sealing its fate in the views as a show strictly for little girls and nothing more (Carver). However, this all changed when Lauren Faust was brought in to redevelop the series, she brought the adventure, and more importantly, the story back to the show. And this is what turned many grown adults on to the series. What the show has become is rather than stereotypical nonsense such as tea parties day after day, is a show that has story, has action, and presents slapstick humor on the side.

However as the opposition came, so did what every internet message board fears: a flame war. Now, those of you who have not been keeping up on internet lingo, “flaming” is a sort of internet bullying where the “flamer” attempts to discredit the victim in every and any way possible. The /b/ board of 4chan faced an internet “war” of sorts, in which the flamers mercilessly attacked the new Brony culture with every sort imaginable (Carver). It is this point in time, while the community was still young, that many of the rituals, attitude, and values (Carver). Eventually, this flame war escalated into such a scale, the any talk of “MLP” as it became known to the bronies was banned from 4chan all together (Carver). However, it was already too late to stop the Brony fan culture, and once released from 4chan, Bronies spread like a wildfire, sprouting their own websites. From here, Bronies also created their own niches inside online communities they already preoccupied. At first, due to the War of 4chan, many online communities were reluctant to accept Bronies, seeing them as magnets for trouble. It is at this point in time that bronies were first starting to gather media attention. It was from here, that on June 14, 2011, that Bill Shultz, a cohost for Red Eye W/ Greg Gutfeld stated when referring to Bronies watching My Little Pony© was not as bad as terrorists, “Bronies? That’s on the edge” (Shultz, 2011). So, are bronies the next worst thing to terrorism? Obviously not. It’s clearly Fox News blowing things out of proportion as they are so famed for, but it is media coverage, and negative media coverage at that. So, is the claim by Bill Shultz true? Are Bronies in fact the deviant and morally corrupted fan culture that Fox News has made them out to be?

Well, in order to answer the above accusation, careful analysis and study must be made. First off, the reader is likely wondering what exactly the word “Brony” means. It is a portmanteau of the word “bro” with is a sort of subculture in itself, detailing the sort functions are acceptable between two young men in a sort of “bro-code”. The second, is more obvious, and therefore does not need further explanation, and that is the word “pony”, obviously derived from the pony aspects of “My Little Pony©”.

First off, who exactly are these Bronies, and is it only a male thing? Actually no, study has shown that while roughly 87% of respondents were male, 1 in 8 respondents were female (Edwards and Redden). This is actually backed by the notion that in this author’s own life he actually knows more female Bronies than male Bronies. However, the name has been found to be slightly different. Female Bronies can often be identified with the term “Pegasister”. It should be noted, however, that while Pegasister is still in use today, many female Bronies often go under the term Brony, which has led to a reaffirmation of the term to be more inclusive than earlier definitions.

As for the age group, the study performed by Edwards and Redden have resulted in that the largest percentage, 53%m was under the age of 20 (Edwards and Redden). While the next largest was 41%, and that was for those aged 20-30 (Edwards and redden). Adjacent to this, is the education level. Despite the largest percentage coming from those under 20 years of age, it appears that the largest percentage (43%) are currently in high school. That would mean that of the majority that are under 20 years of age, most of those are at least 18 or older, seeing as they are in college (Edwards and Redden). In addition, 19% are currently in high school, 15% have completed high school, and 15% are post college graduates, and 5% have completed an advanced degree (Edwards and Redden). These numbers makes sense. As media and technology driven as the college experience is, it would be most likely that those who are well versed in internet culture and use would be the ones who are likely to be exposed to the Brony phenomenon the most and in turn, the ponies that they take part in.

Like any fan culture or subculture, Bronies have their own values, codes, and rituals. First I shall cover the values of Bronies. The most prominent and displayed value their value for “love and tolerance”. First developed during the 4/chan war, sayings such as “We will love and tolerate the shit out of you” was used as countermeasures for the attacks that often came in the form of pornographic, bestialitial, or gore imagery (Carver). Once the war had ended, Bronies continued to promote their notion of love and tolerance. It’s very interesting that such a community, one that had endured so much malice towards it, found it in themselves to still promote such values like love and tolerance. It is also important to remember what day and age the Brony has appeared in. With graphic images such as escalating revolutions and terrorist induced violence coming from news sources, many in the world has come to a state of constant fear, where questions like, “where will the next revolution pop up” and “how will it affect the world economy” have become prominent, one would imagine it would be hard for the adult mind to focus on anything like love and tolerance for all. But in reality, it is these very codes that are instilled upon the home culture of My Little Pony©, and the home culture is that of the United States of America. The United States has a long history of being looked to as the place to be. And it is the value of tolerance of which America had been founded upon. As for love, this is not merely an emotion, but a value held by religions world wide. The notion of “love thy neighbor” is a predominant part of Judeo-Christian scripture.

As for rituals engaged by the Brony fan culture, there are several. One of such is the adoption of the shows warped language. As the Trekkie learns Klingon, “Ringers” or “Tolkienists” as fanatics of Lord of the Rings are called, learn Elvish , the so does the Brony attempt to introduce the words, when at appropriate times, that pop up within My Little Pony©. Words like “everypony” and even some of the actual “swearing” that takes place, which is far less obvious to the target audience, light “swearing” that happens. Phrases such as “what the hay” and “I don’t give a flying feather” are meant to cover much worse words than they actually display, these covering for the swear phrases “what the hell” and “flying fuck” respectively. There are also more physical rituals undertaken by Bronies. The “brohoof” is an older ritual once taken from the “Bro” side of the origins, where it was not uncommon to find Bros “bumping fists” of “giving knucks” (sometimes shortened simply to “knucks”). The act is simple enough, and is a greeting performed through the act of punching one’s fist against the fist of another Brony. However, this act is not merely limited to real life social interaction between two Bronies, and has found a way to be expressed within virtual interaction as well. Really quite genius of design, the electronic emotional symbol, or “emoticon” as it is often shortened to, is expressed in this symbol: /)(\ . When asking for a brohoof to be given, the symbol is merely sliced in half and a question mark is added to appear like this: /)? To which another Brony will respond in turn: \*(\ where the asterisk used to indicate contact was made with the fellow Brony.

So on out of these findings, are Bronies still the next step to terrorism? I would have to say no, they are not. It seems that Bronies are nothing more than a harmless fan culture, the same as SpongeBob fans or Trekkies. However, Bill Schlichter knowing the praise that these Bronies are getting, still states, “All the while, as these pathetic sissies giggle like school girls over magic unicorns that spray rainbows from their horns, real men – and women – who have put aside the temptation to retreat into a frivolous fantasy world are tromping through the wilds of Afghanistan. Such young adults, some younger (in years) than the “Bronies,” are protecting all of us – including these pathetic weirdoes” (Schlichter). Ah where to start, where to start. Well, first studies have shown that the majority of Bronies are actually heterosexual, at a whopping 70% (Edwards and Redden). So, apparently being a Brony does not indicate some sort of effeminate behavior. His next attack, is completely unfounded, and there are in fact reports, stories, images that depict possibly entire platoons of the not only the US military that have become smitten with the Brony cause, going so far as to have a Military Brony Facebook page. Opposite of being the next step to terrorists, it appears that Bronies are in fact the ones fighting them. And because this will drive the author crazy if it is not mentioned, Afghanistan is not a “wilderness” as Bill Schlichter is trying to convey it as. The mountainous region that is Afghanistan is actually the desert side of the Himalayan Mountains. It is the side that does not get the water, which is sourced by Indian Ocean monsoons that allow large buildup of snowfall on that side of the mountain range. It instead is a desert climate, with large portions of the flora being shrub land and meadow savanahland, vegetation similar to the more dry alpine areas of the Bighorn Mountains (Breckle). Only Afghanistan flora substitutes the prominent Sage brush of the Rockies with juniper, a bush not more than a couple feet high. Not much of a “wild”. And Schlicter’s attack on the morals of My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic is plainly cruel: A story like “Lord of the Rings” may be a bit nerdy – I mean, it has elves – but the lessons there, about the need to overcome one’s fears and to sacrifice one’s self if need be to defend your people, are as vital as ever (Schlichter). So, as I mentioned above the values of Bronies being that of love and tolerance, are these not good values. They seem to be good enough for religious figures to teach, and for America to adopt. Many of the friendship lessons that are meant to be taught to small children would do well if taught to adults as well. Lessons that state not only is friendship something that you can have with everybody, or that you shouldn’t judge somebody based on preconceived notions of them, but that the friendships you make are actually worth something, enough to fight for it. It tells you how important it is to be loyal to friends and family. How important honesty is to a good relationship (something that many adults could use a lesson on), how important it is to show a little kindness to people. As goes the old saying, “you get more flies with syrup than you do with vinegar”. How people should let a little laughter into their lives, and how generosity can lead to acts of kindness back.

It appears that Bronies are nothing than a harmless fan culture, revolving around college kids not only watching My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic, but actually enjoying it. It has attracting everyone from political parties to ex-presidents. The group actively engages in the morals and values expressed by the show My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic©, as well as creating their own based from it. They aren’t afraid to stand up and say, “Hey! I Am secure enough in my masculinity to admit to enjoy watching a show featuring pink and rainbow Ponies!” and for that, I applaud them. It takes real guts to stand up and admit something like that. When the day comes that mankind is not persecuted for the television show they watch, that my dear reader, is the day mankind will truly be free. The day that any person can stand up, and shout, “Rainbow Dash is best pony”, the day that preconceived ideas of what constitutes as girly, and that girly is then supposed to dictate “silly” or “stupid” vanishes, will be a great day indeed.

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