

*My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* and Bronies:

Seriously, I Watch it for the Plot

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Fandoms take all forms: men, women, teens, adults. Recently, however, there's been a strange fandom emerging around the show *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* created by Lauren Faust. From the show there has sprouted a legion of Bronies dedicated to the show.

Roughly one year ago *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* aired. A children's television show sprung from the My Little Pony franchise. The series follows the pony, Twilight Sparkle, as she and her pony friends- Rainbow Dash, Rarity, Apple Jack, Pinkie Pie, Fluttershy- as well as her dragon friend Spike, go on adventures and learn about the magic of friendship. The princess, Princess Celestia, sends Twilight Sparkle to Ponyville to make friends and report back with letters about what she's learned about friendship from her adventures.

What appears to be a simple concept that appeals to young girls has attracted an unusual fanbase. College-aged males have become a large part of the following, going so far as to create at least two different fan websites: [equestriadaily.com](http://equestriadaily.com) and [bronies.memebase.com](http://bronies.memebase.com). They have coined a name for themselves, "Bronies" and they have not gone unnoticed by the creators of the show.

Advertisements for the new season included the term "Bronies" as well as a fan name for one of the ponies (DJ-Pon3). Vara and Zimmerman (2011) note that members of this odd fanbase organized and gathered at a convention in New York called "BroNYCon". This strange fanbase, consisting of college-aged males, has puzzled the show's creators who simply decided to go with it.

This paper will explore three possible reasons for such an odd audience. First there is the aspect that has been cited when a Brony was interviewed: the artistic style in terms of both animation and character design (Vara and Zimmerman, 2011). Second there is the concept of the morals that makes the show appropriate for young children. The morals changed between season one and season two going from morals that had more concrete concepts (such as it being okay to accept help) to more abstract concepts (one should never forget their home and friends no matter where they go). Finally, there is the idea that this is a continuation of the trend of "Room-bound males" that is growing in Asian countries.

And while the answer is very possibly a combination of all three of these, understanding about these three aspects separate from each other is essential.

### ARTISTIC PULL

Vara and Zimmerman's (2011) article states that "some Bronies say they got hooked on the high-quality animation," and that other Bronies felt that they could identify with the characters. The artistic edge and the witty writing of the series can be seen as a definite pull of the series. Especially with how cartoons are being looked at recently as crossing from low art to high art, how the art style can draw people in based off of aesthetics, and how simplicity in a script can pull in those who simply need some time for their mind to relax after a hard day.

In thinking about the idea of the artistic quality of the show to be an element of interest to Bronies there should be some thought towards the line between high art and low art not necessarily being drawn between high culture and popular culture (Evans, 2007, 379). Evans (2007) suggests that there is a feeling of elitism that surrounds the idea of high art and culture especially when surrounding animation. If this is the case it would suggest Bronies are looking at My Little Pony and thinking of the show as higher culture due to the higher animation quality itself and the perceived deep meanings surrounding the characters and the problems they are forced to solve. But what would it be exactly about the animation that sets it apart from other cartoons?

Interest in art can derive from the perceived amount of complexity and coherency in a piece. Humans seek out both interesting pieces as well as pieces that make sense to foster an understanding (Forsythe, Nadal, Sheehy, Cela-Conde, and Sawey, 2010, p. 41). Forsythe et al. (2010) then connect complexity with interesting and coherency with understanding (p.41). The premise of My Little Pony is odd and interesting in itself. It is a society of multi-colored ponies that can talk and live very similar to humans. Ponies can wear clothes though they are not naked if they do not; they have a mark on their flank that is representative of their special talent (their "Cutie Mark"). There are unicorns, pegasi, and Earth ponies. Though despite this strange alternate universe, the story's world makes sense.

The coherency derives from the ability of those who watch to be able to observe these characters in their natural world and understand how their world works. The rules of the

pony world remain consistent and the audience's knowledge of horses creates a sense of the universe. There is an amount of sense that is made within the world that helps contribute to the understanding of the show. The interesting and complex world in which the ponies live in plays right into the next aspect of the artistic pull.

The script of the show is clever without requiring much deep thought to get the idea and the plot of the story. Rice (2009) points out that this is a pull of cartoons and animated shows, the simplicity yet presence of a moral "appeases appetites for brain candy yet provides social and moral nutrients as well" (p. 1103). The simplicity of the problems and yet the ability for the script to be written in a way where the characters can believably be troubled without the problem appearing too trivial attracts the audience. The little allusions in the episodes that acknowledge the adults watching can make the Bronies feel that there is brain candy that isn't too simple.

The writing of My Little Pony brings in allusions that pique the interest of an older audience, another common theme with children's shows. Potts (2001) notes that "while children won't understand ... references, they provide specific forms of enjoyment for parents," raising a key point with My Little Pony. The audience of My Little Pony has pulled out multiple references to popular culture. There is an episode that the audience likens with an episode of *Star Trek*, there are similarities between a scene in My Little Pony and a scene in *Star Wars*, and episodes involve characters that appear to be like popular characters such as Dr. Whooves who people compare with the Doctor from the British television series *Dr. Who*.

The intricacy of the art—both written and visual—are often cited as on-the-surface reasons for why Bronies enjoy the show. However, there is reason to believe that the morals may also be an attraction.

### MY LITTLE MORALS

Morals of the story are not explicitly cited often as reasons by young adult males for being into a show for young girls. Though there may be jokes about the morals being the reason for watching the show, such as "I will love and tolerate the [expletive] out of you!" it is pointed out by multiple sources that morals do have an influence over an audience. But what is curious about this case is that the morals of the story may be taken differently than how they were intended, which is what is pulling the Brony audience. Adding the internet

element to the morals where the audience can play with the morals and apply them as soon as the episode airs or while they watch the episode. The Brony world is brought closer and the morals given an even deeper meaning through the help of the internet. When looking at the morals as a possible attraction, taking into account the effect morals usually have on audiences, the possibility of the existence of both intentionalism and constructivism, as well as the role of the internet among the fans is essential.

The effect of media morals and an audience has been studied rigorously, especially when children appear to be the target. It's already been noted that people have claimed to identify with the show because of the characters and the ability for them to identify with the ponies. This is an important aspect of how context is taken and how morals are understood by the viewers. Eyal and Kunkel (2008) say that context shapes how characters are understood and their learning experience is taken (p. 163). Other sources, such as Spike (2008) point out that television shows make you care about the characters and you want to see how they overcome drama in their lives- leading to observing how they manage difficult situations (11).

The ability to relate to the characters in My Little Pony help viewers feel closer to the problems and the stake they have in the friendship of the six ponies drives them to want to see how they resolve the conflict. While viewing this they see how the problem began and how it resolved and then the problem and its solution are laid out in very clear language- clear enough for preschoolers to understand. The repetitive nature of the morals in this story could very well stick with the viewers. Tamborini, Weber, Eden, Bowman, and Grizzard (2010) watching a show that has a specific behavior pattern that later turns out to be positive for the character increases the likeliness of that action in the viewer. Since Bronies are watching a show where the negative behavior has explicit negative consequences (The bragging pony, Trixie, is humiliated and runs away) and the positive behavior returns positive results (Maintaining a good friendship), they may be drawn to this world where being a nice person results in multiple benefits.

While the benefits of following the morals of a story such as those presented in My Little Pony are clear to both children and adults, they are just as obvious- if not more- in other children's television shows. This lends one to think that perhaps the Bronies are getting something out of the show that was unforeseen by its creators. This pulls out of the partial intentionalism idea that is presented by Maes (2008), where while it is important to

keep in mind the author's intent a piece, it is also possible that a reader or viewer would create a meaning for a piece themselves and both meanings can coexist (p. 86-87).

The intent of the creators of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* is clear. In fact, on the Hasbro website for the show there are guides for parents so that as they watch they can discuss the meaning with their children in a structured format. This is the intentionalism aspect. The children are getting out of the show exactly what is intended: the morals are the morals, nothing more. However, the fact that there is an odd audience for this show brings up the idea that maybe there is a constructivism aspect to the moral. The question then is presented as: Do Bronies get something out of *My Little Pony* that is not clear on the surface? Is there an aspect of the plot that pulls at them that the creator did not intend? Fandoms are also known to create an attachment to series and to point out what the casual observer may not see so the activity of the internet in the Bronies fandom may provide clues as to what the true attraction of the show is.

The involvement of the internet in fandoms is not new necessarily. Of course, the greater the presence of the internet in the lives of the viewers the more it is used. However, as Todd (2011) notes, fans resort to the internet to discuss and recreate the text of the episodes- applying their own meaning and their own takes on the meaning of the episode (p. 855). This creation of a new meaning ends up becoming central to those who consider themselves to be the fans who love the show enough to go to online message boards- Bronies can be seen with this sort of mentality as well. Bronies gather online at their websites and create inside jokes (such as DerpyHooves and Princess Trollestia). This involvement in the plot and the morals, recreating that text so that it applies more fully to them, could lend itself for the constructivism idea where Bronies are seeing more or different meanings than what the creator, Lauren Faust, intended.

### ROOM-BOUND MALE AND CREATED CULTURE

The final possibility for why this has created such a phenomenon can appear simpler on the surface: *My Little Pony* is so popular because of boredom and the culture that was created. There is an idea of a growing phenomenon in Asian countries consisting of the "Room-Bound male", and an element of this is the safety provided by an online community. These two factors can also play in the idea that the show has created a culture that can be

identified by images- an important aspect for those involved in the community to feel it is more than just their fandom- it is their culture.

Chou, Wu, and Wang (2010) report that in Asian countries, specifically Taiwan and China, the trend of college-aged men who spend their time inside on the computer is significant and has coined the term “Room-Bound male” (RBM) (p. 2485-2486). The reasons for these men spending so much time on the computer are not very well understood, though it is interesting to point out that the findings of Chou et al’s (2010) study found that the RBMs’ have a perceived preference for forming social environments on the internet (p. 2492).

Forming a social environment on the internet appears to be a common trend when the internet and fans are involved with each other. In the terms of My Little Pony, the internet has helped connect fans and created a culture of “Bronies” much like Todd (2011) said that the internet helped *Friends* fans connect and make these characters much more real (p. 868). The characters in My Little Pony all have Bronies who decide which one they like best, the tough Rainbow Dash, the crazy Pinkie Pie, or the adorable Fluttershy. These characters are real to the fans, and they have created a culture and a cultural identity using the visual symbols of the ponies and their cutie marks.

Sperling (2011) says that the benefit of using a visual image to promote a cultural identity is the ability for the picture to mean something universally with no language restrictions (p. 27). This creation of a cultural identity based off of a visual image has grown due to the internet, and Sperling (2011) also informs that with the internet there is the growing ideal about the mutability of culture (p.28). Within this internet world that the RBM would be escaping to, there is a specific understanding that the people he is communicating with are also Bronies.

The RBM in his internet world would discuss these characters and create them realistically in his mind. They would become more than just cartoons, they would become symbols. Symbols of what he would want his friends to be like, symbols of what he would want the world to be like, and he can share those ideas with others in this culture that has been created. Their symbols that they have put on shirts are the cutie symbols, representing the special talent of their favorite pony, and it’s also a symbol in the real world to others who recognize that they are Bronies as well. This creation of a culture is more complicated than simply having nothing better to do, and proposes a deeper, psychological desire for acceptance than the RBM study by Chou et al (2011) would suggest.

## METHODS

This study would best start with a pilot study of about 40 Bronies in a non-randomized sample to gather basic data to get an idea of the scope. Then there would be focus on getting a large amount of data, which would be significant in displaying likely trends in the male age group that is most commonly cited for watching My Little Pony. The survey would target college age men specifically in different parts of the country. It is important in this though to make sure that the surveyed men are Bronies, but the level of involvement of the community is not a factor that will go into who is surveyed.

The preliminary survey, once the Bronies are established by an initial question of “Are you a Brony?”, will go into the intensity of the fan. It will ask how many episodes of My Little Pony the Brony has watched, if they have watched through the series and then once the level of involvement is established the survey will delve into more specific levels questions pertaining to the series.

These questions will ask about morals of episodes and what was taken from each. There will be a list of the most popular episodes which will be determined by view count as noted on sites such as Youtube and the moral lesson taken from each episode will be asked in an open ended question with the option of “I do not remember” or “I did not watch this episode”. Bronies will also be asked what they notice and like about the artistic and animation aspects. Next characters will be discussed and the Brony will be asked which pony is his favorite, which he identifies closest with, and which pony he thinks is the most popular.

Once this data is gathered the morals will be compared with each other and with the preschool guide. This will help determine if there is a different moral being taken from the series than what the creators had intended. The other data will be compiled and compared with each other and measured against the different levels of Brony involvement.

## CONCLUSION

*My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* is a cultural phenomenon that has puzzled the show’s creators and outside viewers alike. The fans all gather behind their favorite pony, Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie, Apple Jack, Rainbow Dash, Rarity, and Twilight Sparkle and discuss their latest adventures which consist of discovering the magic of friendship. The



attraction to this show by these college-aged men is strange and there is the constant question of *why?*

When thinking of the question about why My Little Pony is popular among young adult males it is important to keep in mind aspects that usually attract people to fandoms and the like in general. Art, involvement in a fan community, and an identifying culture are three of these elements that pull people together. This study would look at the reasons cited for enjoying My Little Pony and the original intent, as well as the growing trend of RBM. Though the three reasons are discussed as separate and will be studied as separate entities, they are most likely not mutually exclusive.

An anticipated finding of this study would be that there is a mixture of all three reasons for why My Little Pony has gathered such a strange fanbase. Though art is the most commonly cited it only scratches the surface of the reasons.

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