

*Contextualising the Bronies: Cult, Quality, Sub-Culture and the Intricacies of Contemporary Fandoms*

Ewan Kirkland, University of Brighton

**Postal address:**

University of Brighton  
School of Media  
College of Art and Humanities  
154-5 Edward Street  
Brighton  
BN2 0JG  
e.kirkland@brighton.ac.uk

**Biog:**

Ewan Kirkland teaches Screen Studies at the University of Brighton. Their research interests including children's media, horror video games, and popular representations of dominant identities. As well as being a regular speaker at My Little Pony conventions, in June 2014 Kirkland organized the first one-day academic conference on the franchise. Kirkland is author of *Children's Media and Modernity: Film, Television and Digital Games* (2017, Peter Lang), which explores media for children across modern history, and contains case studies of *Hook*, *Teletubbies*, *Little Big Planet* and the Children's Film Foundation. In addition Kirkland has published chapters and articles on *The Powerpuff Girls*, Robin Williams, *Twilight*, *Battlestar Galactica* and *The Lego Movie*.

**Abstract:**

This paper critically situates *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* and the 'brony' following it has attracted in terms of age and fandom, discourses of quality television, cult media, and interactions between fandoms and cultural producers. Far from unprecedented, the show's unexpected male audience reflects adults' historic appreciation of media for children, the increased mainstreaming of animation, and the already infantilized persona of media fans. Aspects of the reimagined series reproduce characteristics of 'quality television' concerning characterisation, genre, authorship and political intentionality. Simultaneously the show corresponds with overlapping aspects of cult television and cult cinema, crucially affording both cultural and sub-cultural value. Finally, examples of the series deliberately courting adult fan audiences are presented as reflecting reciprocal relationships between show producers and its mature viewers. The brony following consequently reflects changes in contemporary fandom dynamics, and the increasing mobility of twenty-first century television viewing.

**Key Words:** brony, cult media, cultural capital, fandom, *My Little Pony*, quality television

## **Introduction**

The surprising, controversial, potentially subversive adult male fandom for Hasbro's animated television show *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (2010-) has already been the subject of several academic studies. These explore the subculture surrounding the small screen spin-off of the thirty year-old toy range from a range of perspectives. Bethan Jones (2015) examines the extent bronies, as the series' male fans have been labelled and self identify, have been subjected to 'anti-fandom' practices. These include being stereotyped and pathologized along lines of gender and generation, both outside and within the fandom itself. In a paper focussing on the subset of 'military bronies', Maria Patrice Amon (2016) considers the complex ways fans within the armed forces justify and negotiate the challenge to gendered identity their enthusiasm for pony culture entails. Andrew Crome (2014) analyses another subgroup, religious bronies, and their use of the show's characters and relationships to engage with the teachings of scripture; while Bell (2013) details the controversy surrounding a pony known as Derpy Hooves, a co-creation of the show's producers and the television series' fandom. Each study reveals specific cultural struggles entailed in the enjoyment of Hasbro's show by what Claire Burdfield (2015) labels the 'unexpected audience' of the series.

This paper seeks more broadly to explain the situation whereby adult men gain conspicuous pleasure from an animated television series about colourful talking horses. With a further reboot of the franchise destined for 2020, ten years after the current version attracted so much attention, this represents a timely moment to place this fan phenomenon in broad critical and historical context. While gender remains the most prominent framework for interrogating the franchise, as ably covered elsewhere (Kirkland 2017), this paper is more concerned with the generational transgression the series' appropriation by adult men entails. Brony fandom emerges from, reflects, and contributes to changing relationships between age and consumption practices, discourses of quality and cult connoisseurship, long-running series' relationship with audiences, online cultures, and merchandising strategies. The series, and the success it has achieved with older viewers, relates to trends in screen media making television animation, and its appreciation, more mainstream. The nature of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (*MLP:FIM*) the show and *My Little Pony* (*MLP*) the brand mean fans might justify their pleasures via both discourses of quality television and notions of subcultural capital associated with denigrated culture. As much contemporary scholarship suggests, fandoms, even the unexpected ones, are frequently co-opted by established media organisations as a means of securing loyal audiences and maximising profits on ancillary products. Despite its apparent transgressive, subversive or inexplicable nature, the fandom for this show makes more sense when situated within such frameworks.

## ***MLP:FIM, Age and Fandoms***

While largely discussed in terms of gender, the pleasures of brony fandom also entail the intersecting transgression of consumption boundaries aligned with age. Age may not be appreciated a construction of social, cultural and discursive processes to the same degree as gender, class, race, ethnicity, or national identity. Nevertheless there is increasing awareness of the extent age, as a facet of identity, emerges from similar external factors. The alignment of audiences of a certain age with particular media, genres or franchises itself reflects the very cultural processes which continue to partition the generations. While the fluidity of such structures and the mobility of audience tastes consistently exposes the constructed nature of

such affiliations and associations, the antagonistic response to bronies practices, evident in Jones' (2015) discussion of anti-fandom, suggests continued investment in maintaining and policing boundaries of appropriate age-based media consumption.

Nevertheless, products aimed at young people have consistently been enjoyed by adults, just as children have always consumed mainstream culture. The line demarking children's media has always been characterized by its indistinctiveness, a point repeatedly evident in histories of media for children, including books, cinema and broadcast entertainment. Gesturing to the success of the Harry Potter series, folklore scholar Jack Zipes asserts that 'children's literature is the most popular of popular literature' (2002: 209), further evident in the crossover success of franchises such as Alice in Wonderland, Lord of the Rings, His Dark Materials and A Series of Unfortunate Events. Cary Bazalgette and Terry Staples (1995) argue the commercial film industry has never produced movies primarily for child audiences, preferring the more vague, inclusive and potentially lucrative cycle of the family film. This is a category appropriate to most cinema releases commonly considered 'children's films', including those of Disney and Pixar, movies based on fairy stories, and big screen adaptations of children's literature. Concerning 1960 British radio, David Osswell notes that more adults listened to segments broadcast for children than children themselves, while more young people listened to adult programming than those intended for their age group (2002: 24). Such tendencies continued into the era of television broadcasting. Lynn Spigel writes of anxieties expressed in 1950s America that television might expose children to adult knowledge, while simultaneously infantilising adult viewers through their consumption of juvenile material. The persistence of such concerns are evident in negative commentaries surrounding bronies. At the same time Spigel observes the pleasures offered by family orientated recreation expose how 'the liminality of children's entertainment is often just as appealing to adults as it is to children' (1998: 127). Adult nostalgia for old stop frame animation, student enthusiasm for shows such as *Teletubbies* (1997-2001) or *Yo Gabba Gabba!* (2007-2015), the re-editing, re-broadcasting and re-branding of a show like *Horrible Histories* (2009-2013) for adult viewers indicates the continuation of such tendencies in broadcasting and audience behaviour.

The dissolution of age-related boundaries of spectatorship and consumption may well have accelerated over recent years. While adult fandom of children's media is not the focus of their article, C. Lee Harrington, Denise D. Bielby and Anthony R. Bardo make many salient points concerning aging, agehood and fandom. The authors detail how traditional twentieth-century life courses have been characteristically defined by the tri-partite structure of childhood, adulthood and retirement. The extension of childhood or delaying of adulthood, combined with the increasing aging of the Western population, has resulted in the emergence of a more flexible 'liquid' adulthood. One consequence of this is 'disconnect between chronological age (number of years lived), subjective age ("the age I feel"), and ideal age ("the age I would most like to be")' (2011: 571-2). Consequently, fans do not 'grow out' of fandoms in ways previously expected. Fan activity functions to provide support and community which compensates for the deteriorated structure of previous institutionalized life courses. In addition, as they mature fans become more astute, gaining economic, cultural and social capital which allows them to participate in activities differently to their younger equivalents. Such tendencies can be observed in the acceptance many find in the bronny community. In the under-explored area of female MLP fandom, narratives of women's lifelong fan participation entail an extension of fan activity alongside adults' greater freedom of movement and access to resources. Although the authors focus on how fan attachments change over time, Harrington, Bielby and Bardo cite 'bemused speculation about older fans' interest in the

*Twilight* series, Justin Bieber or *Gossip Girl* [2007-2012]’ as examples of the confusion such developments produce (577). Brony fandom incites the same sense of bewilderment.

Adult male *MLP:FIM* fandom therefore reflects the historic permeability between adult and children’s culture and audiences. This may be exacerbated by recent social developments which have impacted upon contemporary consumption and fan practices. The show’s animated content also facilitates its relationship with older viewers. Although commonly aligned with juvenile audiences, fairy stories, and children’s television, animation has always enjoyed a broad audience of different age groups. Theatrical cartoons were originally part of the mixed bill of entertainment screened to cinema goers of the pre- and post-war periods. Animated fairy tale adaptations continue to attract mainstream audiences, indicative of their stories’ origins in pre-modern oral popular culture. As noted, historical evidence suggests adults have always watched television scheduled for children, including animation. The emergence of continuous channels dedicated to animation and children’s media have extended the cartoon beyond its segregated slot in the schedule, developing late-night adult audiences for *The Ren and Stimpy Show* (1991-1995), *SpongeBob SquarePants* (1999-) and *Adventure Time* (2010-). Indeed, Marsha Kinder (1995) claims that in its early years kids’ channel Nickelodeon deliberately courted both adult and child audiences, cultivating older viewers is a strategy employed by many similar broadcasting platforms. Indicative of the further expansion of animation into mainstream television, Kevin S. Sandler (2003) argues that cartoons function well within a multi-channel branded environment to distinguish one broadcaster from another. In a similar vein, Paul Grainge argues that animation has become increasing central to a film industry preoccupied with franchises, international sales, character-based commodities, marketing and the creation of multi-modal ‘total entertainment’. In such a context animation becomes ‘a locust of corporate identification and revenue potential’ (2008: 114). The visible presence of animated film and television characters from Pixar, Dreamworks, Disney, Warner Brothers and Hanna-Barbera across mainstream cinema, financial and internet services promotions, live entertainment and a wide range of licensed products suggests the significance and popularity of the genre extends well beyond young consumers. Such developments, along with the unprecedented longevity of *The Simpsons* (1989-) and the success of rivals *South Park* (1997-) and *Family Guy* (1999-), have led to the mainstreaming of television animation, severed from its alignment with child audiences, and many bronny fan histories attest to a long appreciation of the format.

Placing bronies in the context of geek subcultures and anthropomorphism, Venetia Laura Delano Robertson draws connections with other underground texts featuring humanized cartoon animals, such as *Fritz the Cat*, ‘*Omaha*’ the Cat Dancer and *Maus*. Although *MLP:FIM* appears far removed from such ‘gritty, drug-fuelled, and sexually explicit animalian underworlds’, these texts anticipate the cult status of the series and challenge exclusive associations between talking animals and children’s culture. Robertson sees further parallels in adult appreciation of Warner Brothers shorts revived by recent broadcasters, the *Hello Kitty* brand, cat-eared young women and online LOL cats. The author draws on Sarah Thornton’s useful term in bringing together aspects of anthropomorphism, cuteness, *manga*, *anime* and Japanese *kawaii* in arguing humanized animals have, within geek circles, markings of ‘subcultural capital’ (2014: 23-4). In another context Mizuko Ito relates adult consumption of juvenilia to the subcultural identity of the ‘otaku’ or ““media geek””. Paralleling many popular perceptions of bronies, such figures are ‘often objects of suspicion because of what are perceived as dangerous boundary crossings between reality and fantasy, adult and child’, a cultural type associated with the ‘regressive, obsessive, erotic, and antisocial’ (2008: 307). Within otaku communities Ito sees several ‘marginalities’ combining. These include the

marginal status of children, of adult subcultures, and of the ‘grey markets’ within which trading card dealers and other entrepreneurs operate as a significant component of cult media conventions (313). Traditional female MLP fan activities include the customising of existing toys, producing physical designs based on fan favourite characters of whom no official merchandise exists, and the creation of artwork bordering upon copyright infringement. More recent male *MLP:FIM* fan culture is significantly screen based, flourishing on the internet, and largely concerned with the franchise’s television presence. This is expressed through less material fan art, animation and music. Significantly, in the fandom’s early stages most episodes were unofficially available on YouTube, meaning they could be viewed by audiences who did not have access to the Hub channel on which the show originally aired. Without this crucial development in television distribution it seems unlikely the brony fandom would have developed to the same extent. While Ito suggests, along with many scholars, the outsider position of the fan consumer and producer, the tolerance Hasbro has extended to such communities, and the reciprocal relationship developed between fans, toy producer and show creatives, questions the bronies’ marginal status.

### ***MLP:FIM* and Quality Television**

The permeability between children’s and adult culture and the multi-generational audience for television animation, combined with contemporary changes in generational relations, the presence of animals in fan culture, and the already juvenilized identity of the adult fan, provide context for adult appreciation and appropriation of a cartoon show designed for young girls. Another explanation, frequently mobilized to justify adult enjoyment of the show, is the high quality of the series itself. Aesthetic judgements, as Matt Hills wryly observes, are ‘something of a dark art’ in media and cultural studies (2007: 37). In a chapter informed by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Jeffrey Sconce writes of the extent ‘all forms of poetics and aesthetic criticism are ultimately linked to issues of taste; and taste, in turn, is a social construct with profoundly political implications’ (2008: 117). Clearly one reason brony fan practices have attracted so much attention is the transgression of normative adult values inherent in championing a show featuring magical cartoon horses based on a range of plastic toys. In the context of television drama Christine Geraghty observes that the impulse to reject traditional formations of value, informed by an awareness of the power relations such evaluations reinforce, means cultural studies debates about quality are frequently channelled through issues of ideology and representation. The word ‘quality’, if employed at all, is marked by obligatory ‘scare quotes’ (2003, 28), indicative of the scholar’s disdain for and distance from associated value judgements. However, as Jonathan Gray (2005) asserts in the context of audience studies and the ‘anti-fan’, while researchers may be wary of considering ‘value’ or ‘quality’, interrogating what fans like (or in Gray’s example, dislike) offers an opportunity for engagement with such issues in a meaningful and productive manner. Given fan academics’ obligation to declare themselves enthusiastic consumers of their object of scholarship, exploring notions of quality, pleasure and value become less problematic than in more dispassionate disciplines. At the same time, situating a favoured text within established traditions of artistry undeniably enhances the author’s preferred focus of analysis in the eyes of the academy.

Interrogating issues of value and screen media have been aided in recent years by the emerging notion of ‘quality television’. Resulting from various developments in and outside the television industry, this represents a discursive category within popular, critical and academic circles, functioning in a similar manner to ‘art cinema’. The term implies the

presence of tropes frequently aligned with high culture aesthetics such as cinematic visual density, a literary script, performances by respected theatrical actors, and an authorial creator. Displaying certain canonical examples, the cover of Mark Jancovich and James Lyons' (2003) *Quality Popular Television* features images from *The X Files* (1993-2002), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and *The Sopranos* (1999-2007). Writing of the prestigious Peabody Award, Lindsay H. Garrison cites *The Wire* (2002-2008), *Lost* (2004-2010), *Friday Night Lights* (2006-2011), *30 Rock* (2006-2013) and *Mad Men* (2007-2015) as cases of recent television which have 'elicited celebration from viewers, fans, critics, and academics alike'. Reflecting a similar caution as many others, Garrison admits that widely circulating concepts of television 'quality' and 'value' alongside concepts of "smarter" storytelling are 'complex and contentious' (2011: 160). Many established aspects of 'quality television' resonate with *MLP:FIM*, which can be mobilized by bronies in defence of their favoured show. Rhonda V. Wilcox and David Lavery, introducing an early scholarly publications on *Buffy*, start by identifying aspects of 'bad' television, which is 'predictable, commercial, exploitative' (2002: xvii). They proceed to detail how their favourite show transcends such limitations, while heroically working within them. *Buffy* is prized for its feminism, its dialogue, its employment of metaphor and symbolism, its mobilisation of fairy tales (with reference to Ezra Pound), and its invitation for active audience engagement. Similarly, Robertson observes *MLP:FIM* is praised within the bronny community for the depth of its characters who 'become more than just simplistic female archetypes', for its scripts, animation and voice acting, and its 'clever use of bricolage, employing references from science fiction, fantasy, and popular culture' (2014: 29-30). It is also celebrated for the active fan base it has facilitated, something which for many appears as important as the show itself.

Drawing on Robert Thompson's list of quality characteristics gathered from viewers, critics and scholars, criteria similarly referenced by Garrison (2011: 160-1), Wilcox and Lavery (2002: xxi-xxiv) cite numerous components in *Buffy* which are also evident in *MLP:FIM*. The cartoon has an ensemble cast in its six distinct central characters. The series has a memory, with many episodes referencing events from others, and characters developing across the seasons. The show mixes genres, as evidenced by Robertson's catalogue of 'geek' references. As Catrin Prys argues, the fact that television is a conspicuously collaborative medium means the identification of any author in the production process entails 'a whole manner of unfounded and sometimes naive critical assumptions' (2006: 20). Notwithstanding, a prominent criteria implicated in concepts of 'quality' culture is that of authorship. As Derek Kompare observes, television studies may have 'strenuously avoided' such literary and film studies concepts. Nevertheless 'authorship still wields considerable discursive and material power' (2011: 96). This is evidencing in the 'showrunner' commentaries the author details, and the television 'auteurs' Garrison sees in writer/producers David Chase, David Simon and Tina Fey (2011: 160). Consequently bronny fandom celebrates original show creator Lauren Faust, whose previous work include the girl power superhero cartoon series *The Powerpuff Girls* (1998-2005) and *Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends* (2004-2009), although when these were originally broadcast Faust's name was significantly overshadowed by Craig McCracken. Johnson observes how Faust constructed *MLP:FIM* as 'an outlet for her individual vision and voice' in a manner counteracting the franchise's more mercenary implications in selling toys to children. Faust's status as independent creative artist was repeatedly emphasized in interviews, blog posts, and an online journal. Through politicising *MLP:FIM* as challenging a sexist media industry that routinely devalues women and girls' culture (2013: 149-151), Faust appealed to constructions of quality television as controversial, together with historical notions of the author as politically or socially

motivated. The circulation of such claims contributes to fans' discursive repertoire in defending the series along established lines of artistic and televisual quality.

### ***MLP:FIM* as Cult Media**

While conforming to aspects of quality television, *MLP:FIM* also expresses various characteristics of cult television. Catherine Johnson observes significant overlaps between 'quality' television, fandom, and cult spectatorship (2005: 100). Kompare notes similar intersection between discourses of 'cult' and 'authorship' (2011: 101), while Jancovich and Lyons' (2003) edited collection on quality television is subtitled *Cult TV, The Industry and Fans*. *MLP:FIM*'s relationship with fandom is also facilitated by the alignment Johnson observes between 'quality' television and fantasy (2005: 100), established by shows like *The X Files*, *Buffy*, and perpetuated by *Lost*, *Battlestar Galactica* (2003-9) and *Game of Thrones* (2011-). The significant fictional detail Robertson sees surrounding Equestria, the setting of *MLP:FIM*, including its regions, its history, even its language (2014: 26), is suggestive of a cult television series. Indeed, Sara Gwenllian Jones, may well be writing of the 'extended universe' of *MLP:FIM* when detailing the typical cult show's 'vast, elaborate and densely populated fictional world that is constructed episode by episode, extended and embellished by official secondary-level texts... and fan-produced tertiary texts' (2002: 84). Echoing Sandlers' (2003) discussion of animation's compatibility with television branding, the series exploits what Johnson (2005) sees as the fantasy genre's opportunity for visual flourishes associated with cult quality television's distinctive style. Indeed, the 'look' of *MLP:FIM* is one of three 'drawcards' Robertson argues adult fans can play in defending the show to its detractors. This emerges from the influence of manga and anime on the show, alongside references to Japanese *kawaii*, *chibi* and *moe* culture. Such components appeal to adult animation fans and allow further mobilisation of geek subcultural capital (2014: 28-9). The fantasy show's development of a particular visual styles, as Johnson observes, also serves the promotion of ancillary products easily aligned with a series through aesthetic continuities (2005: 109). While Johnson's observations relate to more contemporary developments in the merchandising of mainstream television to teens and older audiences, this particular series already had such an established aesthetic, resulting from the show's origins as a toy brand rather than screen entertainment.

Although *MLP:FIM* fans might mobilize proximities between cult, fantasy and quality television, as Derek Johnson observes, several factors potentially compromise the show's claim to cultural value. These include the series' production using animation software associated with online sites, its commercial rather than artistic motivation, its hyperfemininity, and the brand's association with young girls (2013: 138). However, such lowbrow aspects afford audiences a more complex form of capital, more associated with cult cinema than cult television. Bronies characterize the film spectatorship practices Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton identify of using screen media to construct communities and, more importantly, as a means of 'challenging taste and acting outside of mainstream consumption norms' (2011: 59). Suggesting significant divergence between the 'quality' of cult television and the 'degradation' of certain cult cinema, Sconce discusses "badfilm" as a form of para-cinema historically consolidated through such publications as *Zontar*, *Subhuman* and *Trashola*. These encompass diverse lowbrow cycles such as 'splatter-punk, "mondo" films, sword and sandal epics, Elvis flicks, government hygiene films', the celebration of which gains coherence through collective efforts 'to valorize all forms of cinematic "trash".' Comparable cult television appropriation might exist in camp appreciation of soap operas, gameshows, old

situation comedies and other forms of daytime television. While brony discourses are not defined by such ironic modes of viewing, there are considerable parallels between the ‘counter-aesthetic turned subcultural sensibility’ considered by Sconce, and *MLP:FIM* fandom. Like advocates of paracinema, online brony activity, particularly in its early stages, represented ‘a disruptive force in the cultural and intellectual marketplace’. While far removed from the controversial content promoted by Sconce’s paracinema publications (2008: 101-2), the franchise challenges traditions of taste, quality and legitimate culture in numerous ways, as evidenced by the outraged responses the fandom frequently attracted, and even encouraged. In celebrating the show’s pleasures adult male fans are engaged in a comparable act of countercultural appropriation to those championing trash cinema.

*MLP:FIM* fans might thereby mobilize discourses of cult film spectatorship, celebrating the subversive, guilty or forbidden pleasures of lowbrow culture along lines of gender and age, which coexist alongside seemingly oppositional aspects of ‘quality television’. This apparent contradiction reflects how cult media distinguishes itself from the mainstream, either through rejecting the polished conventions of commercial culture and the stuffy preferences of middle-brow critics, or by representing more artistically challenging experiences than those proffered by an industry catering to the lowest common denominator. As Joan Hawkins highlights, the kinds of publications which promoted Sconce’s paracinema also advertised European art, avant-garde and experimental films. Both ‘art’ and ‘sleaze’ video companies retailed titles associated with high and low culture, and the catalogues listing these titles subsequently effaced distinctions between the two. Both forms of outsider media trade on sensational material, controversial social subjects, and sexuality. Both are somehow ‘different’ and their consumption represents ‘a reaction against the hegemonic and normalizing practices of mainstream, dominant Hollywood production’ (2000: 6-7). Consequently, Hawkins provocatively asserts that ‘high culture trades on the same images, tropes, and themes that characterize low culture’ (21). Cult’s status as simultaneously ‘outsider’ and ‘quality’ cinema is also observed by Sconce, as paracinema fans adopt the elite discourses of “legitimate” French New Wave or American independent films (2008: 108-9). Bronies are similarly free to deploy discourses of respectable television, outsider media, and subversive pleasure. As paracinema is characterised by ‘an aesthetic of excess’ and an opposition to mainstream culture (107), *MLP:FIM* is a series and a franchise which Johnson notes is ‘over-determined by its commercial and gendered excesses’ (2013: 136). Ellen Seiter argued of MLP’s 1980s equivalent, the series’ bright, colourful palate and bouncy musical numbers ‘capitalize on a tradition of subversion in children’s literature and folklore’. Its ‘ultrafeminine’ design (1995: 232) challenges the middle class tastes and values of parents who condemn such bubblegum culture as sexist, garish, formulaic and cliché-ridden. In addition to the various marginalities adopted by the adult male *MLP:FIM* fan might be added the marginality of young girls and the media they enjoy.

### ***MLP:FIM* as Fan-Focussed**

Many studies of contemporary television highlight the growing significance of fan cultures and expressions of fan creativity for media producers, industries and institutions. In the introduction to their much-cited collection, Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss and C. Lee Harrington suggest the past decades have seen fans and their practices becoming increasingly ‘mainstream’ as a consequence of shifts from broadcasting to narrowcasting, deregulation of media markets, and new communication technologies (2007: 4-5). There are many recent examples of fan practices being appropriated by official culture in a manner which challenges

received popular and academic perceptions of fans as outsiders, tricksters or thieves. This model has been replaced by a more nuanced appreciation of the mutually beneficial if imbalanced relationship between fans and the organisations whose intellectual property they poach. In a chapter exploring *Enchanted* (2007), Maria Sachiko Cecire considers the profusion of references to Disney movies within the feature film as echoing the kind of fan activities Henry Jenkins famously explores in their seminal study (2012: 247). Given the Corporation's historically aggressive response to unauthorized use of its trademarked characters, the recognition and appropriation of fan practices throughout this animation-live action hybrid is particularly significant. However, the tacit exoneration of fan activity inherent in Disney's *Enchanted* pales in comparison to the celebration of fandom represented by *MLP:FIM*'s hundredth episode.

‘Slice of Life’ was organized entirely around the activities of characters popularized through the adult fanbase. In an inversion of standard practice, the main six characters feature only as background ponies. This was not the first instance where online communities were explicitly acknowledged. The most notable was the aforementioned naming of Derpy Hooves. A grey and yellow figure with mismatched eyes, this pony appeared on the show with increasing frequency after being spotted and adopted by fans, although the moniker has subsequently been retracted due to disability sensitivity (Bell 2013). ‘Slice of Life’ starred an un-named Derpy alongside a British scientist character with an hour glass cutie-mark dubbed ‘Dr Whooves’ by audience. Octavia Melody and DJ Pon-3, a character whose fan name was similarly adopted by producers (Amon,2016: 95) were another frequently fan-matched couple shown sharing a house together. A third popular pairing, Lyra Heartstrings and Bon Bon, was also depicted, with sly references to the latter’s alternative name of Sweetie Drops. The canonisation of these couples not only indicates the blurring of boundaries between ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ cultures, but questions assumptions concerning the ‘subversive’, ‘transgressive’ or ‘queer’ nature of slash fiction. As Jones argues, if media producers and media texts are complicit in the generation of slash pairings, this challenges traditional understandings of such practices as necessarily oppositional. Instead, ‘the exotic erotics of slash fiction look much less like instances of “resistance” and much more like extensions of cult television’s own contra-straight logics’ (2002: 89).

Crome observes one trope of cult media that *MLP:FIM* frequently employs is the integration of popular culture references which reward careful repeated viewing (2014: 403). Many of these increasingly prominent allusions belonging to media with pre-existing cult status. A bowling alley scene featured ponies resembling characters from the Cohen Brothers’ cult film (Klinger 2010) *The Big Lebowski* (1998). The season two finale closed with a shot-for-shot homage to another cult movie (Hills 2003) *Star Wars: A New Hope* (1977). ‘It’s About Time’ references *Escape from New York* (1981) and *The Terminator* (1984), 1980s science fiction classics which would not appear out of place in a late night movie screening. The casting of John de Lancie, known for playing Q in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-1994), as the voice of recurring trickster character Discord further aligns *MLP:FIM* with the most well-known of television fandoms, and another show which graces the cover of Jancovich and Lyons’ (2003) edited collection on quality television. Mainstream filk musician ‘Weird Al’ Yankovic, whose songs include parodies of nerd culture, *Star Wars* and internet downloads, also voiced the character Cheese Sandwich in the episode ‘Pinkie Pride’. As further shout outs to cult, fan and geek media, throughout the series characters have been magically transported into a comic book (‘Power Ponies’), a role playing adventure game (‘Dungeons and Discords’), and attended a fan convention in cosplay (‘Stranger than Fan Fiction’). As

Robertson suggests, the nature of these references implies a ‘tailoring to the geek demographic’ (2014: 30), aligning the series with other cult texts, culture and activities.

Given the franchise’s entrenchment in toy culture it is unsurprising that certain ranges of merchandise are implicated in this appeal to fandom. The feature length spin-off, including *Equestria Girls* (2013), *Rainbow Rocks* (2014), *Friendship Games* (2015) and *Legend of Everfree* (2016), in which pony characters appear as high school students constitutes a nod to fan art traditions of redrawing the characters as humans, as well as a means of promoting Hasbro’s new doll range. Alongside other favourites such as Dr Whooves, Lyra and Daring Doo, the latter being the object of an in-show character’s fan devotion, the pony formerly known as Derpie has been memorialised as a vinyl figure which retails at a significantly higher price than traditional MLP toys. Collectable versions of these characters commonly sell in comic shops, fan conventions and stores specialising in geeky merchandise. Further show-accurate figures have been made of Gilda the Gryphon, Queen Chrysalis, Granny Smith and photographer Photo Finish, a character designed after Barbara ‘Biba’ Hulanicki. These products are far outnumbered by those stocked by traditional toy stores, sold at pocket money prices, aimed at the franchise’s traditional demographics. Nevertheless, the presence of pony collectables, adult-sized pony clothing, even the release of entire seasons of *MLP:FIM* on DVD, a practice rarely employed in distributing shows only popular with young children, indicates an acknowledgement, courting and monetisation of adult consumers and fan practices.

## Conclusion

Stories of adult men happily watching a television show made for young girls may represent a positive sign that boundaries segregating male and female culture are, for some generations at least, becoming less rigid. At the same time, the negative reactions the Brony phenomenon has attracted, in popular media and online, suggests there remains something taboo about crossing such borders of taste and consumption. More complex is the possibility that the transgression of these lines constitutes part of the pleasure of the show and the formation of the brony community. Moreover, these audiences are in numerous ways being actively facilitated by show producers, suggesting a less transgressive practice than may first appear.

In contrast to media whose initial remit was a deliberate multi-generational audience, the adult male fandom for *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, whose diversity is obscured by the discursive label of the ‘brony’, seems to have taken all concerned by surprise. Nevertheless, as this paper has argued, the fandom for the show correspond to patterns of audience appreciation circulating fantasy, quality television, and screen media on the borders of legitimate culture. The adult male *MLP:FIM* enthusiast might draw upon a range of established cultural and subcultural capitals in justifying their viewing practices. Moreover, *MLP:FIM* can be understood as a franchise facilitating various aspects of contemporary fandom. Based on a pre-existing range of toys, the series can be readily incorporated into an array of official merchandise ranges targeted towards audiences of various ages. The series features a plethora of regions, cities, and countries with various proximities to actual locations, inhabited by a host of characters, cultures and species thereby providing fertile ground for fan-authored fiction. Its anthropomorphic protagonists, in contrast to other animated or live action characters, are relatively straightforward to reproduce within fan art. A pony’s individualism is simply distinguished through their colour, mane, accessories, and the icon-like ‘cutie mark’ on their flank which signals their special talent. The straightforward

displacement of this distilled image onto a lunch box, earring, cufflink or woolly hat immediately transforms that object into a piece of pony merchandise. Such brandability suits producers of both official, and unofficial, products. Ponies are eminently themable and customisable, providing a blank slate to be appropriated by any artist in producing crossover ‘ponified’ protagonists from other franchises or original characters. These can, in turn, be coherently re-orientated back into the show in a manner which satisfies fan’s desire for recognition, and producers’ interests in securing a loyal audience. Although it may have taken many by surprise, the structures of fandom surrounding *MLP:FIM* have a traceable history, with interactions between fans and television producers reflecting mainstream trends in contemporary media more acutely than either party might acknowledge.

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