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BEST OF 2013: 'Brony' Fandom Carves Out Space For Young Men To Enjoy Friendship ... And Cartoon Ponies

by Hilary Stohs-Krause, NET News



Robin Payton, a Brony mom (and grandmother), helps with registration at Pon3Con. She said it's a way to bond with her daughter Kyrie. (Photo by Hilary Stohs-Krause, NET News)

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Forget Trekkies – there's a new fandom in town, centered around a cartoon show created for little girls. Yet most of the fans? They're males in their twenties. Take a peek inside Nebraska's "My Little Pony" convention to learn more.

"So how's everybody doing today? You ready for the Pon3Con 2?"

In a hotel conference room in west Omaha, dozens of people cheer the opening ceremonies of Pon3Con 2, a fan convention focused on the My Little Pony cartoon reboot, "My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic."

You can tell just by looking at the costumes: the girl with the overalls, cowboy hat and fake freckles? That's Applejack. Over there with the purple hair and gray skirt? Probably the pony Rarity. And the boy – yes, boy – with the long pink wig and yellow pony-ear headband? He's Fluttershy.

The origin of Bronies

According to Brony researchers Marsha Redden and Patrick Edwards, Brony culture started as a mocking joke on the online forum 4chan, known as, in PG terms, the armpit of the internet. Those who found the show silly, or had never watched it, started harassing - or "trolling" - those who professed to be

"There's certain characters in the background that are really popular," said Dylan Morse, a Michigan artist who traveled to Omaha to sell his "My Little Pony" digital artwork to fellow fans. "Dr. Hooves is really popular, who's kind of a spin-off of 'Doctor Who.' The princesses are always really popular, like Princess Luna, Princess Celestia." The show's targeted audience is young girls - but Morse is 28

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fans. But instead of retaliating, fans co-opted the movement and tried to kill the detractors with kindness. Their motto? "We will love and tolerate the s— out of you."

Animator Max Gilardi inadvertently upholds the original Brony ideals. His pony.mov parodies feature pony gore and mayhem, including ponies with chainsaws and ponies smoking joints.

"This is something that I can make fun of, so I'm going to grasp onto that," he said. "It's basically just taking this show that's really cute and innocent and making it gross and offensive and horrible. I'm just looking to offend as many people as I can."



Photo by Hilary Stohs-Krause, NET News

Animator Max Gilardi



Photo by Hilary Stohs-Krause, NET News

Doctorate student Samuel Miller presents his findings on the Brony fandom at Pon3Con in Omaha.

years old, and he's far from an anomaly. Young adult male fans of "My Little Pony" are known as "Bronies," an amalgam of "bro pony."

More than 350 people attended this year's Nebraska convention; a national convention in New York last year counted around 4,000. A map of Brony meet-up groups, created by major fan site *Equestria Daily*, shows hundreds located all around the world.

North Carolina clinical psychologists Marsha Redden and Patrick Edwards have been studying Brony culture for the last few years. Edwards said he first learned about Bronies when his then 16-year-old son "confessed" he was one of them.

They said many people are confused by – if not suspicious of – young men who are passionate about sparkly pink and purple ponies.

"(They say) it's a gay thing, that they are sexual perverts, that they're 30-year-olds who live in their parents' basement and watch TV all day," Edwards said. "You know, they must be a deviant group. And so our interest in the first survey was to look at some of those myths and see if in fact they were true."

Redden and Edwards surveyed more than 24,000 Bronies. Among their findings: the average age is 21 years old, and 86 percent percent of Bronies are male (some female fans call themselves "pegasisters," but others prefer the umbrella "Brony" term).

As for the assumption that Bronies are gay? Edwards and Redden found that 84 percent consider themselves heterosexual.

"A lot of times, I think, when fandoms first start up, they first get bombarded with these negative stereotypes," Edwards said. "But our research showed rather quickly that was not the case."

'That's not fair'

"Have you pre-registered? Well, in that case, I need to see your ID."

Back at the Omaha convention, Robin Payton sits at a table in the hotel lobby helping with registration. Her daughter Kyrie got into the show through friends, and Payton said she got involved as a way to spend time with her daughter.

"I was concerned," she said, describing her initial reaction to the prevalence of young men in the Brony fandom. "I still am a little concerned about aspects of feminism and how it relates to the Brony culture. But right now, I think it's just a social group for her, and as long as she's happy and having fun and things are going well, I'm OK with that."

While some feminist commentary has applauded Bronies for refusing to be restricted by social and gender norms, others have chided the Brony community for co-opting the fandom.

"I don't think that's fair," said 17-year-old avowed Brony Aaron Edwards of Omaha. "I've noticed girls can like sports, games and all this other stuff and they won't get any trouble for it, but when a guy likes something girly, it's the exact opposite."

Many Bronies keep their interest hidden to avoid retaliation or mockery.

Sixteen-year-old Joey Lengyel was at the convention, too, wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with the word "Brony" and holding a plush stuffed pony.

Has he ever been picked on for his dedication to "My Little Pony"?

"I've had my fair share of that," he said, "but usually, people are accepting."

The rise of neo-sincerity

Samuel Miller is working towards his doctorate in communications at the University of North Dakota. He's been studying the Brony culture (particularly those who attend Omaha's convention) as part of his dissertation work. He said so many young men are drawn to the show because they genuinely like it.

"It's that whole idea that guys wearing pictures of pink ponies on their shirts are not being ironic about it ... but actually being sincere in that message."

Edwards, one of the North Carolina researchers, agreed.

"The term that's used for it is neo-sincerity, where's there's sort of this idea that it's OK to like something just because you like it," he said. "So there's less of a, 'Let's filter things through the gender stereotypes.' As my son said to me, 'What's wrong with a guy liking pink?'"

After all, in the early 20th century, pink was a "boy color."

Edwards' research partner Marsha Redden said the show's strong themes of friendship, paired with the focus on a moral or teaching moment woven through each episode, resonate with young people who've spent half their lives in the post-9/11 atmosphere of war and terror.

She pointed to the history of the 20th century: World War I was followed by the Roaring Twenties. World War II gave birth to bohemians and beatniks. The Vietnam War led to the hippies. Perhaps the so-called War on Terror has led to Twilight Sparkle and Rainbow Dash.

"My Little Pony is just the happiest, friendliest, let's-all-get-along cartoon or show that you could find," Redden said. "And this is a respite from the daily life of living with, 'What level of terrorism are we today?' and things like the bombing in Boston."

Robin Payton, the woman whose daughter introduced her to "My Little Pony," said the influx of young men to the fandom is "definitely" a sign of loosening gender norms.

"In fact, my 5-year-old grandson is one of the fans of the show," she said. "And he wants purple spangly pants and bright colors and things like that, and (his mother's) fine with that."

"As long as he has supportive parents, and supportive family and friends, I think it'll work out just fine."

Editor's note: This story is part of our "Best of 2013" Signature Story report. The story originally aired and was published in May.

Watch the trailer for the documentary *Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony*.

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