

**GENDER IN EQUESTRIA:
AN EXAMINATION OF RECONSTITUTED FORMS OF MASCULINITY
AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES FOR GENDER RELATIONS IN THE
BRONY COMMUNITY**

by
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For my son, Avi. You didn't help enough to make it into the acknowledgements, but everything I do is for you.

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ABSTRACT

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Title: Gender in Equestria: An Examination of Reconstituted Forms of Masculinity and their Consequences for Gender Relations in the Brony Community

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In this dissertation, I analyze the Brony community to better understand reconstituted forms of masculinity. Specifically, I focus on the following questions: What does it mean when men incorporate what has traditionally been viewed as stigmatized or feminine into their gender presentations? How do these forms of masculinity represent a challenge to gender politics and how do they reinforce gender inequality? How do women navigate spaces defined by reconstituted forms of masculinity? In what ways do women within these spaces both challenge and maintain power relations? I address these questions through an analysis of interviews with 43 men and women who are fans of *My Little Pony* and ethnographic observations at four *My Little Pony* fan conventions. In doing so, this dissertation nuances and extends the literature on reconstituted forms of masculinity, including hybrid masculinities.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Nathan is a White 19-year-old college student who started watching *My Little Pony* after he lost a bet with his sister. Even though it is a show for kids, he felt it was of higher quality than most kids' shows and he loved the animation, interesting characters, and "deeper meaning" of the show, including the lessons of morals. He relates the messages of the show to Christianity, saying that watching the show has in some ways come to occupy a space in his life that religion used to. The episodes of the show are like parables to him, and he relates how the characters resolved issues in their lives to situations that he has experienced. He is also an avid fan of fan-made music related to the show and has begun writing and recording his own *My Little Pony* music to post online. He has never been to a *My Little Pony* fan convention, but he'd like to if he could save up the money for it.

Derek is a Black/biracial 37-year-old entrepreneur who first heard about *My Little Pony* online and decided to check it out. He was already into *Powerpuff Girls*, *Samurai Jack*, and other cartoons, so it wasn't surprising to him that he ended up liking *My Little Pony*. He writes fanfiction- his own stories based on the characters and world of the show- and posts it online almost every day. He also designs and sells unofficial merchandise that blends the show with the world of *Dungeons and Dragons*. He spends his summers traveling to *My Little Pony* conventions around the country selling his merchandise and hanging out with friends.

Kelly is a White 27-year-old preschool teacher who discovered *My Little Pony* when she was babysitting a child who liked the show. She loved that the show was "fun" and

“innocent” while also having compelling storylines- as she said, it’s not the “typical Dora the Explorer type of show” or vapid like other children’s entertainment. She collects official My Little Pony merchandise and has a YouTube account where she shares and discusses her collection. During our interview, she gestured around her room in the background, showing that that every inch of space was decorated with My Little Pony.

Nathan, Derek, and Kelly are all fans of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, a cartoon designed for young girls that has become popular with adults- most notably adult men. Such individuals are often referred to as Bronies, a portmanteau of ‘bro’ and ‘pony.’ They form a community based around the show where members create art, music, stories, and costumes inspired by the characters, discuss the show on online forums and at conventions, and connect with others based on their shared interest in *My Little Pony*.

Although these three individuals are all Bronies, they vary based on gender and the way they engage with both the show and the community- representing meaningful forms of variation. Nathan primarily watches the show for its messages and morals and is inspired by the show to try to be a better person, while Derek primarily watches the show for entertainment and makes merchandise that transposes the aesthetics of *My Little Pony* into the more traditionally masculine genre of quasi-medieval fighting and adventure. Kelly is in a community organized by men around their interests, despite being situated around a show for girls, and where as a woman she is in the minority.

I examine the case of adult fans of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*. This case of mostly White, heterosexual, privileged men engaging in atypical gender practices provides a unique opportunity to study the meanings behind these practices and their implications for

gender relations. This represents an extreme case, though one that reveals processes that would be applicable to other groups. The purpose of this dissertation is to carry out an ‘instrumental case study,’ that is, a study that attempts to understand a theoretical question rather than elaborate upon the specifics of a particular case (Berg and Lune 2012). There are many other examples of cases in which men engage in reconstituted forms of masculinity.¹ Other scholars have examined the ‘soft boiled masculinity’ of Christian men’s movements (Heath 2003), how vegan men both challenge and reinforce hegemonic masculinity (Greenebaum and Dexter 2017), and men’s creation of ‘hybrid masculine configurations’ through fashion.

In examining the case of Bronies, this dissertation contributes to our understanding of shifts in masculinities and gender relations. Scholars have taken an interest in the ways in which masculinities have transformed. I argue for a need to attend to variation within groups that reconstitute masculinity, understanding both the transformational potential of such gender practices as well as how they may reinforce power. Additionally, I examine women’s role in responding to and actively shaping such practices. In doing so, I develop the concept of ‘relations of hybridity’, which refers to the interrelated- yet sometimes competing- ways that both men and women participate in reconstituted forms of masculinity that serve to both challenge and maintain gendered systems of power. The major contribution of this dissertation therefore lies in its theoretical contribution to the scholarship on gender and masculinities to better understand reconstituted forms of masculinity.

It is vital to examine shifts in masculinities because we cannot understand marginalization without understanding privilege. In order to understand power, it is therefore

¹ In this dissertation, I use the term ‘reconstituted forms of masculinity’ instead of ‘hybrid masculinities’ because, even though the latter may be used as a generic term to describe men’s incorporation of gender atypical aesthetics and practices, it has become strongly associated with the theoretical perspective proposed by Bridges and Pascoe (2014). Thus, I use this term only to refer to the theoretical perspective in order to avoid confusion.

central to examine how men experience their position within the hierarchy of masculinities, how they are impacted by shifts in gender politics, and how their gender practices impact power structures. It is also important to understand how these practices directly impact women and how women make sense of such practices and respond to them in ways that serve to both challenge and maintain power relations.

Studying Power and Privilege

Societal shifts have challenged systems of power in American society as marginalized groups have experienced gains- for instance the increase in women's educational achievement and participation in the labor force and the Supreme Court ruling in support of same-sex marriage in 2015. However, inequality persists, often taking new forms such as colorblind racism and the creation of a new racial caste system through the War on Drugs and mass incarceration (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Alexander 2010). Though men and White people, and particularly White men, still hold most of the power in society, they may feel that their privilege and power has been undermined (Kimmel 2013). One response to this has been the proliferation of men's rights activism and white nationalist groups, manifestations of anxieties surrounding social change (Messner 1997; Kimmel 2013; Kelly 2017). As these changes, and reactionary movements in response to such changes, persist, it is important to ask the following questions- how do privileged groups experience privilege in this changing landscape? How might these groups make sense of their positions within hierarchies and reinforce power? Further, how do marginalized groups respond to these shifts in ways that further serve to challenge and maintain systems of power?

While the study of inequality often focuses on marginalized populations, it is essential to understand privilege and the relationship between privileged and marginalized groups. The study of society's elite has deep roots in sociology, from Mill's (1956) *The Power Elite* to Domhoff's

(1967) work on the ruling class. More recent scholarship has taken up the call of ‘studying up,’ examining how privileged populations preserve and leverage advantages (Khan 2011; Rivera 2015). Scholars of Whiteness and masculinities have shed light on previously unexamined categories assumed to be the norm, enriching the scholarship on race/ethnicity and gender (e.g. Connell 1987, 1993; Messner 1997; Nayak 2007; Hughey 2012). However, this work has only just begun to unravel the complexities of these groups, in particular how they make sense of their social positions, experience hierarchies, and adapt in a changing world.

Examining Privilege: Men and Masculinities

Since the 1990s, scholars have recognized the importance of studying masculinity. The study of masculinities emerged within the scholarship on gender, with Connell (1987) laying the foundation for this body of work with her concept of hegemonic masculinity. In her book *Gender and Power*, Connell argues against the idea that masculinity and femininity are singular, unified categories. Instead, she defines them as collective practices that come in multiple, interrelated forms. Of these forms, hegemonic masculinity is the most culturally valued and sets a standard that few men are able to achieve. However, all men derive power from hegemonic masculinity through its role in supporting “the global domination of men over women” (Connell 1987: 183). Other forms of masculinities that she identified in her further writings on the subject include subordinate and marginalized masculinities, representing men who embody masculinities that are devalued in society, such as gay men and men of color. Work on masculinities has built upon these concepts, analyzing hegemonic masculinity and its relationship with other forms of masculinities as a way of better understanding men’s place in the gender order.

According to Connell (1993 [2005]), masculinity is a “configuration of gender practice” that takes many forms and must be understood within the larger structures in which it is located

(p. 72). Power relations are vital to shaping masculinity in that multiple forms of masculinities are organized hierarchically. Hegemonic masculinity is constructed in relation to subordinated masculinities in that the subordination of some groups of men (notably gay men and men of color) reinforces the power and dominance of this form of masculinity. None of these forms are fixed, but are constantly shifting configurations of practice. For example, scholars have examined organized sports as a form of practice integral to shaping masculinity and its role in the “construction and legitimation of male privilege” (Messner 1992: 5). While a few men are able to achieve the hegemonic ideal, the majority of men are complicit in “benefitting from the patriarchal dividend” and supporting the gender order (Connell 1993 [2005]: 79). This is to say that masculinities are multiple, interrelated, and intersect with race, class, and sexuality.

Just as forms of masculinity are interrelated, so are gender categories more generally. Gender categories are fluid and have no objective meaning. Instead, they derive meaning through their relationship to other categories, and are particularly defined by power (Glenn 2000). This is to say that the category of ‘man’ is meaningful only in that it is contrasted with the category of ‘woman,’ a contrast that is dependent in part of the differences of power granted to individuals within each category. The existence of privilege is predicated upon oppression, and so it is important to not just examine privileged groups in isolation. Instead, it must be understood that the practices of men and boys are connected to the “structural order of gender” in that they reinforce men’s dominance over women (Bird 1996: 120). The gender practices of men thus have an impact on women (and individuals within other gender categories).

Men’s Responses to Societal Shifts

In the United States, the past 50 years have opened a new chapter in gender politics and gender relations as a result of the women’s rights movement’s challenge to established notions of

men's power and women's roles (Ferree and Hess 1994; Rosen 2000; MacLean 2009). How men and masculinities have adapted to these shifts is of interest to masculinities scholars (e.g. Messner 1998; Anderson 2005, 2009; Kimmel 2012, 2013; Bridges and Pascoe 2014). Kimmel (2012) argues that there is a "contemporary 'crisis' in [American] masculinity," the result of challenges to the status quo that have "transformed the landscape on which American men have sought to test and prove their manhood" (p. 191). Whether or not this idea of a 'crisis' in masculinity is overblown, it is clear that changes in gender politics have had an impact on men and reshaped masculinity in a variety of ways. Traditional markers of white masculinity, such as being a 'breadwinner' or having a career, have been opened up to women, reshaping men's role in society. This has resulted in anxiety around masculinity and the state of manhood among some men, the impact of which can be seen in the rise of men's movements around the world (Messner 1997; Asher 2007; Hodapp 2017).

Men have made sense of anxieties around masculinity in different ways. There has been a proliferation of men's movements since the 1970s, with some adopting an explicitly anti-feminist orientation and others focusing more on the meaning of manhood in the modern age (Kimmel and Kaufman 1995; Messner 1998). For instance, the mythopoetic men's movement of the 1980s and 90s drove White, suburban, heterosexual men into the forest for weekend retreats in which they attempted to forge a new vision of masculinity based upon the bestselling books of Robert Bly. This vision was a direct response to shifts in masculinity, a "cry of privileged American men...a cry for certainty about the meaning of manhood in a society where both men's power and rigid gender definitions [were] being challenged by feminism" (Kimmel and Kaufman 1995: 18-19). Though largely a self-help movement, it also reframed men as oppressed in such a way that served

to reinforce hegemonic masculinity, while also reinforcing an essentialist view of gender that was largely a reactionary response to feminism (Messner 1993; Kimmel and Kaufman 1995).

In the 21st century, men's movements in the United States have largely moved online. The online 'manosphere,' consisting of men's rights websites, forums such as Reddit's /redpill, and blogs, brings together a wide range of men under a loosely defined shared ideology related to gender (Hodapp 2017). This ideology is essentially that feminism has been damaging to men and that it has 'gone too far.' For instance, 'red pill' discourse states that the idea that women are oppressed and in need of rights is a fallacy and that the truth is that men are abused in society (Love 2013). This shared sense of being victimized by feminism bridges that community of 'red pillers,' 'incels' (a subculture of men who define themselves as 'involuntarily celibate'), and men's rights organizations (Hodapp 2017). These groups are explicitly organized around men's perception of the erosion of their privilege and the need for men to reassert their power in society (Asher 2007; Hodapp 2017).

Another response to shifts in masculinity has been the rise of unique gender expressions that appear to challenge traditional notions of masculinity. While it is clear that backlash movements represent cases in which men feel their status is threatened and organize to reassert their power, it is less clear what it means when men appear to challenge the status quo by adopting aspects of femininity. What does it mean when men incorporate what has traditionally been viewed as stigmatized or feminine into their gender presentations? Are such gender practices evidence that masculinity is becoming more 'progressive'? Are men who adopt these reconstituted forms of masculinity challenging gender politics, or merely reinforcing gender hierarchies in new ways?

Masculinities scholars are split in the answers to these questions. Inclusive masculinity theory, championed by Anderson (2005, 2009), posits that societal shifts have resulted in a greater

acceptance of gender atypical behavior by some White, heterosexual men and undermined the hierarchy of masculinities. Inclusive masculinity is a rejection of what Anderson refers to as ‘orthodox masculinity’, freeing men from the concerns of constructing a masculinity in opposition to heterosexuality and femininity. This theoretical framework has been utilized to examine everything from ‘metrosexual’ soccer players (Adams 2011) to the ‘softer’ masculinity of teenage YouTube celebrities (Morris and Anderson 2015). However, it has also been criticized about being overly optimistic about gender and sexual politics, with some arguing that it represents only surface changes that do not challenge power relations (O’Neill 2014; de Boise 2015).

Less optimistic is the body of scholarship around hybrid masculinities. Hybrid masculinities are defined as the “selective incorporation of elements of identity typically associated with various marginalized and subordinated masculinities and- at times- femininities into privileged men’s gender performances and identities” (Bridges and Pascoe 2014: 246). The concept of hybrid masculinities first emerged in Demetriou’s (2001) critique of hegemonic masculinity, in which he wrote that “the existence of non-heterosexual elements in hegemonic masculinity” was an indication of the dynamism and flexibility of men’s power rather than a “sign of its contradiction and weakness” (p. 349). Bridges (2014) and Bridges and Pascoe (2014) further elaborated upon the idea of hybridity and its connection to men’s power. While Connell and Messerschmit (2005) dismiss hybridity as a form of local variation that does not represent meaningful shifts in masculinity, Bridges and Pascoe (2014) assert that these practices are widespread and are a way of reinforcing inequality. In their work on hybrid masculinities, Bridges and Pascoe (2014) argue that men’s co-option of marginalized and subordinated masculinities allows men to distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity while still reinforcing existing power relations and fortifying boundaries around gender, race, sexuality, and class. Thus, more

sensitive and ‘inclusive’ expressions of masculinity may not be harbingers of gender inclusivity as much as a way of strengthening hegemonic masculinity and the gender hierarchy.

While the concept of hybrid masculinities offers a compelling perspective on transformations in masculinities, I argue that it fails to account for the variety of motivations for reconstituted forms of masculinity and their potential for transformation. For instance, Haenfler’s (2004) work on the straight-edge movement suggests that contradictory expressions of masculinity may emerge within a single movement or subculture. Thus, different men may engage in reconstituted forms of masculinity differently, with some reinforcing hegemonic masculinity and others moving toward a more progressive form of masculinity. It is therefore important to attend to contradictions that may exist within hybrid masculinities.

Additionally, neither inclusive masculinity theory nor scholarship on hybrid masculinities have accounted for women and their responses to such gender practices. Inclusive masculinity theory rejects the idea that gender is always relational. Responding to the critique that the theory does not account for the position of women in society, Anderson and McCormack (2018) argue that this is not a focal point of their research and that they do not agree that “the dynamics of men’s behaviors are *necessarily* closely related to the dynamics of women’s behaviors” (p. 554, emphasis in the original). Instead, they claim that gender is “predominately relational during homohysteria periods when orthodox masculinities are dominant, but that expressions of gender need not be relational in other times” (Anderson and McCormack 2018: 554). That is, when men are less afraid of being labeled gay and more open to progressive forms of masculinity, their ‘inclusive’ practices are not necessarily constructed in opposition to women or serve to reinforce gender inequality. While inequality is flexible and power structures often shift, I argue that it is unrealistic to claim that men’s inclusive practices are always solely inclusive and never simultaneously reinforce

power relations. I also find the idea that such men also do not passively benefit from the overall power of men over women suspect. Even if one accepts the premise that masculinity is becoming increasingly inclusive, it is impossible to understand the impact of this trend on gender inequality if one examines men in isolation.

In contrast, scholarship on hybrid masculinity highlights how men's gender practices "maintain the structure of institutionalized gender regimes to advantage men collectively over women and some men over other men" (Bridges and Pascoe 2014: 247). Thus, the idea that gender is relational is central to theorizing on hybrid masculinities. However, such work has taken an abstract view of gender relations, examining the mechanisms through which men reinforce power without considering the direct impact of these practices on women or how women respond to such practices. This misses an essential dimension of women's role in shaping these practices.

Thus, I propose the concept of relational hybridity to address the abovementioned gaps in existing theories of reconstituted forms of masculinity. Relational hybridity refers to the multiple, interrelated practices of both men and women in engaging in and with reconstituted forms of masculinity in such a way that both challenges and maintains power relations. Unlike previous theories, this concept highlights the relational aspect of reconstituted forms of masculinities- how the gender practices of men impact women's practices and vice versa. Further, it emphasizes the multiple forms that these gender practices take, which in turn produces multiple outcomes. Therefore, instead of asserting that reconstituted forms of masculinity are always a way of reinforcing inequality or always a move toward a more progressive masculinity, this concept recognizes the variation within groups that results in different meanings for these practices and, as a result, different outcomes.

The Case

The dim hallways are full of people, mostly White men in their 20s, though also quite a few women and children, wearing everything from tutus and pony tails hanging out of the back of their jeans to paintball armor and military fatigues. Although the gathering of men, on the surface, looks like any other, there are cues that something is different- someone walks by in a fursuit (mascot suit) of a bright orange pony, another man carries a giant stuffed Twilight Sparkle (a purple pony who is the main character in the *My Little Pony* cartoon).

The above is an entry from my field notes at Trotcon on July 14th, 2017. Trotcon is an annual convention for adult fans of *My Little Pony* held in Columbus, Ohio. At Trotcon, fans gather to buy fan-made merchandise related to the show, get autographs from the voice actors, play games, attend panels discussing theories about the show, and dance to *My Little Pony* music. The theme of Trotcon 2017 was Fallout Equestria, a popular, novel-length fan-made story that merges the post-apocalyptic universe of a popular first-person video game with ponies. The result is the discordant imagery of cute looking ponies roaming a wasteland wielding magical, floating guns and fighting off mutated enemies. As this quote illustrates, the convention itself merges what is considered adult or masculine with what is considered child-like or feminine. Trotcon is a gathering of people, largely young adult men, that heavily features elements typically associated with this demographic (such as video games). However, it is also organized around a cartoon about multi-colored ponies and the magic of friendship, love, and tolerance.

Trotcon is one of many *My Little Pony* conventions or, more specifically, Brony conventions ('Brony' being a portmanteau of 'bro' and 'pony'). Brony conventions are geared toward the adult fans of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, a children's animated cartoon about the adventures of six girl ponies that takes place in the fantasy land of Equestria. These conventions

are primarily held in the U.S. but are scattered all over the world and are put on by adults who are fans of the show and funded through convention registration fees. While these conventions are all intended to be ‘family friendly’ to varying degrees, they tend to be organized around the interests of adult men and feature a blend of the stereotypically masculine (paintball armor and military fatigues) and the stereotypically feminine (tutus and pony tails). This blend is visible everywhere from Fallout Equestria, to art that depicts ponies as pin-up girls, to a popular fan-made video game called *My Little Pony: Fighting is Magic* that pits the ponies against each other in a parody of the video games *Street Fighter* and *Super Smash Brothers*.² However, it is also a community that allows for gender play, including cross-dressing, and celebrates friendship and open expression of emotion.

The *My Little Pony* franchise was launched in 1983 as simply a toy line of colorful ponies (Connelly 2016). The history of the franchise consists of four ‘generations’ representing the different styles and media associated with *My Little Pony* in various eras. Generation 1 consists of the original toy line, TV series, and 1986 feature-length film (Connelly 2016). Generation 1 was primarily seen as a vehicle for selling toys, in a similar business model as *G.I. Joe* and *Transformers* (Connelly 2016). This generation of *My Little Pony*, as well as the redesigns and reboots in 1997 and 2004 (generations 2 and 3, respectively), were as gender stereotyped as their boy-centered counterparts. The franchise, especially in its early years, was an example of men designing something for girls based upon a stereotypical understanding of girl’s interests (Connelly 2016). Despite this, it resonated with young girls and was immensely popular from the late 1980s through the mid-90s.

² Due to a cease-and-desist from Hasbro, the parent company of *My Little Pony*, the game was remade with original characters to comply with copyright law and re-released as *Them’s Fightin’ Herds*. The original version, though no longer available online, is still popular with fans.

My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic is the fourth-generation reboot of the Hasbro franchise and represents the first time in the franchise's history that it had popularity outside of its target demographic of young girls. This iteration of the cartoon was developed in 2010 by Lauren Faust, a childhood fan of *My Little Pony* who created the new series with the intention of providing a "respectable show for girls" that would be engaging to both parents and their children (Wilson 2012: 1). In a piece on the *Ms. Magazine* blog titled "My Little NON-Homophobic, NON-racist, NON-Smart-Shaming Pony: A Rebuttal," Faust proclaimed herself a "lifelong feminist" who has spent her career fighting for the inclusion of positive representation of girls in children's programming (Faust 2010). The piece was written in response to a critique made by a writer who accused the show of promoting racism, smart-shaming, homophobia and totalitarianism in a piece that is no longer available online but referenced in Faust's rebuttal. Faust countered these claims by pointing out that the main message of the show is that "there are lots of different ways to be a girl" and that it is character-driven and complex in ways that girls' TV shows have rarely been allowed (Faust 2010: 1).

The show quickly became a popular point of discussion on 4Chan, an online image board that allows users to post anonymously. 4Chan is divided into boards for specific interests, and is known as both a popular space for online subcultures such as *Anonymous*, men's rights activists, and the alt-right as well as for its proliferation of memes. Though initially the show was the target of derision on 4Chan, within weeks of the air date of the original episode there were already adult men online adopting the identity of 'Brony,' signaling themselves as proud and sincere fans of the show (Connelly 2016). The Brony community spread widely, hosting more than 25 conventions around the world (though mostly in the United States), having clubs at most college campuses, and having been the subject of at least two major documentaries. At its height in 2015, Brony apparel

was sold at Target and Hot Topic, demonstrating how much of a cultural phenomenon it had become.

The Brony community exists both on and offline and is primarily structured around enjoyment of the show and its characters. Fans discuss the show online, dress up as the characters at conventions, and produce, sell, and consume fan-made art and other products related to the show (Watercutter 2011). Many are extremely serious about their love of the show. For instance, two of my participants had been “diamond sponsors” at Bronycon, the highest level of sponsorship (costing \$2,000 in 2018). Abby, one of the diamond sponsors, estimated that she had spent over \$40,000 on the fandom, from conventions to art and other merchandise. This was despite her relatively difficult financial situation as a nursing student. Three participants sported *My Little Pony* tattoos and one legally changed his middle name to a pony-related nickname.

Interest in the Brony community has mainly been focused on its largest constituency- adult men. However, adult women are also fans of *My Little Pony* and members of the Brony community, though they are sometimes referred to as ‘Pegasisters.’ The most recent community-led online survey of Bronies, referred to as the ‘Herd Census’ or ‘State of the Herd Report,’ found that in 2014, a little over 80% of Bronies were men (herdcensus.com). Therefore, women Bronies are in the minority, though they still make up around 20% of the community. The same online survey reported that Bronies are largely White (79.2%), heterosexual (85%), and cisgender (95%). While this was a non-scientific survey, these numbers fit with the public perception of Bronies as White, heterosexual men.

The Brony community has garnered interest from the popular press, which has questioned what men’s love of *My Little Pony* means for masculinity in America. For instance, a piece in *The American Conservative* questioned whether Bronies signaled the “end of American manhood”

(Vlahos 2014: 1), while a response to that piece in *Wired* claimed that Bronies are instead “redefining American manhood” (Watercutter 2014: 1). Either way, Bronies are seen as having something to say about masculinity. Despite this journalistic interest, little academic work has examined the gender politics of the Brony community. Instead, scholarly research on Bronies has focused on how Bronies fit within the geek subculture (Robertson 2013), the gender policing Bronies face by non-fans (Jones 2015), and how men negotiate gender norms in their love of the show (Hautakangas 2015). A notable exception is Bailey and Harvey’s (2017) examination of the politics around sexuality and pornographic content on a *My Little Pony* message board on 4Chan. However, they analyze only a certain subset of the *My Little Pony* fandom and found that many of the individuals on the board distanced themselves from the Brony label. Despite gender being so central to most of the interest in Bronies- either in that they are seen as ‘perverts’ for liking something intended for young girls or that they are celebrated for challenging gender norms- there is a lack of research examining Bronies from a gender and masculinities perspective.

While Bronies are in many ways a unique phenomenon, best illustrated by how they have captured the fascination of the media, they are also an example of the larger trend of reconstituted forms of masculinity. The extreme nature of the case makes it ideal for examining men and women’s gender practices and the meanings of these practices in that such practices are exaggerated (and therefore more easily observable). Further, the fact that these gender practices occur within the demarcated boundaries of a community allows for clearer illustration of gender relations in reconstituted forms of masculinity.

Outline of Dissertation Chapters

This dissertation consists of five chapters. In this chapter, I have provided an introduction to the study, including a review of the relevant literature, information about the case, and statement of the research questions that drive this dissertation.

In the second chapter, I provide an explanation for the data collection process and analytic strategy for this dissertation. I describe the sources of data, recruitment of participants, selection of observation sites, analytic strategy, and my positionality as a researcher.

In chapter three, I draw upon interviews with men and observations of gender practices at *My Little Pony* conventions to address the questions of what it means when men enact reconstituted forms of masculinity and how these gender practices represent both a challenge to gender politics and a way of reinforcing inequality. In doing so, I examine the different ways men engage with *My Little Pony* and men's divergent perspectives on gender that result from these different forms of engagement. The findings in this chapter make up the first of the major aspects of relational hybridity- the variation in how men engage in reconstituted forms of masculinity and how this produces different meanings for these gender practices.

In chapter four, I draw upon interviews with women and observations of gender relations at conventions to examine how women navigate spaces defined by reconstituted forms of masculinity and how women within these spaces both challenge and maintain power relations. The findings in this chapter make up the second of the major aspects of relational hybridity- how women engage with reconstituted forms of masculinity in such a way that is both shaped by and influences men's gender practices and how this impacts power relations.

In the fifth and final chapter, I discuss the major conclusions of this study and synthesize my findings to further develop the concept of relational hybridity. I also discuss the theoretical implications of this dissertation and its implications for future work.

CHAPTER 2. DATA AND METHODS

Over the course of fourteen months, from May 2017 to July 2018, I immersed myself in the Brony community. The formal data collection for this project consisted of semi-structured interviews with men and women fans of *My Little Pony* and ethnographic observations at fan conventions. However, I also watched the show, joined Brony Facebook groups, and, among other things, learned to play a fan-made *My Little Pony* card game. These experiences helped give me a deeper understanding of the community and its lingo and norms, which was important for providing me with the context to make sense of my data. I also conducted informal observations at three *My Little Pony* conventions in 2015, for a separate project, which also helped me understand the case and develop my research questions.

Qualitative methods were the ideal approach for this project in that they enable and facilitate the study of processes, meaning, and the subjective experiences of individuals (Rubin and Rubin 2005). My interest in approaching this project was to capture something not easily quantifiable- the mechanisms through which power and privilege are articulated within the Brony community. Qualitative methods were therefore uniquely able to address my research questions, granting me insight into how men and women made sense of gender and how gender operated within the community.

I used both semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observations for methodological triangulation (Berg and Lune 2012). Each method revealed something different about the community. Interviews provided me a window into how individuals' sense-making and perceptions, while observations demonstrated group dynamics. Additionally, what people say and what they do does not always align (or their stated perceptions do not match reality), and I quickly realized the value of collecting different forms of data for this reason. For example, men often

over-estimated the number of women within Brony spaces. Additionally, as Emerson et al. (1995) point out, it is easy to slip into imposing one's own judgements of a situation and critical to try to understand observations from the perspective of the participants. Interview data thus helped me contextualize my observations and better understand the thoughts, feelings, and values of participants.

Semi-Structured Interviews

I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 43 participants to ask both men and women about their entry into and experiences within the Brony community as well as questions about their perceptions of gender dynamics in the fandom. These questions gave participants space to broadly reflect upon the community and discuss a wide range of issues that they found most meaningful. Additionally, I specifically asked men questions about their feelings about masculinity to better understand how men made sense of reconstituted forms of masculinity. The full interview protocol can be found in Appendix A. In this section, I discuss my sampling strategy, recruitment of participants, interview process, and the demographic profile of the participants.

Sampling Strategy and Recruitment

I purposively sampled interview participants based on two criteria of variation, age and gender. I interviewed both men and women to capture the meanings behind men's practices of reconstituted forms of masculinity and how women responded to these practices. Age was included a criterion of variation because of its potential theoretical significance. The Brony community tends to be younger, with an average age of around 21 years old (herdcensus.com). Given previous research on masculinity and age that suggests that young adulthood is a time in which men feel the need to prove their masculinity, it was possible that there would be differences in self-

perceptions of masculinity between Bronies in the young adult age range (18-25) and those who were older (Connell 1991; Richardson 2010).

I also intentionally facilitated variation in my sample by using multiple entry-points to locate participants. I advertised my study on seven different Facebook pages, which were found by searching ‘My Little Pony’ on Facebook, as well as in-person at four *My Little Pony* conventions. I chose to advertise on Facebook because it is home to many Brony related groups. Additionally, Facebook has a more neutral reputation and is not a place in which certain types of people tend to congregate. This is different than other popular online spaces where Bronies can be found, such as 4Chan, which are more ‘niche’ communities. Advertising through fliers at conventions granted me access to Bronies offline, potentially tapping into a different segment of the community who may not be as active online.

By advertising on multiple Facebook groups, I cast a wide net, as each group catered to slightly different populations. While some groups consisted of people within a specific geographic area, other groups communicated more subtle messages about the purpose of the group and its constituency. For example, some groups explicitly stated that they were “family friendly” and had rules banning “offensive, grotesque, violent, bloody, or sexual” content, while others allowed more suggestive and sexualized images and humor. Each Facebook group therefore offered a unique entry point into the community and contributed to variation in my sample.

Interview Process and Overview of Participants

Forty of the interviews were conducted through Skype, while three were conducted in-person at conventions. Using Skype allowed me to interview as many people as possible without concern for geographic location. Few individuals wanted to take time out of their busy convention

schedules to sit down for interviews while we were in the same space, and those who were recruited from Facebook were spread out over the United States.

Of the 43 participants, 30 were men and 11 were women. They ranged in age from 18-56 years-old and came from 16 different U.S. states across all major regions of the country. Only five participants identified as anything other than White, with two identifying as Asian American, one identifying as Black, and two identifying as Black/biracial. A breakdown of these demographic characteristics can be found in Appendix B.

The participants had a mix of educational backgrounds. Of the 30 men, 22 had some college education. Of those, ten had a college degree or more and six were current college students. All the women had at least some college education, with four holding a bachelor's degree and three being currently enrolled in school. They also held a range of jobs- participants were janitors, fast food workers, teachers, therapists, lawyers, government employees, railroad mechanics, and small business owners. The most common job, however, was in IT.

Most of the men were single and childless, though four were married and three had children, while five of the women were married and two had children. More than half of the women reported falling somewhere under the LGBTQ umbrella, with seven identifying as either gay, pansexual, bisexual, or questioning. In contrast, only four men identified as anything other than straight and, of those four, all identified as bisexual. Based on my observations, I believe these demographic characteristics are not radically different from those of the general Brony community.

Ethnographic Observations

I also conducted ethnographic observations at four *My Little Pony* conventions to examine men's gender practices in action as well as gender dynamics within fan spaces. In conducting my observations, I attended a variety of official panels, sat in populated spaces, and conversed with

other attendees. In addition to taking notes, I also photographed fan-made merchandise that was for sale (including art), costumes, and the way the convention spaces were staged.

Selection of Sites

Like many fan communities, conventions are a gathering space for fans of *My Little Pony* to meet and get autographs from writers, voice actors, and artists on the show as well as buy fan-made merchandise, attend panels discussing aspects of the show, dress in costume, and socialize with other fans. Brony conventions are put on by fans and typically take place over a three-day weekend. Passes can be purchased either for a single day or the entire weekend and usually cost around \$35 for a day pass or \$50 for a weekend pass. There are also opportunities for more expensive packages or sponsorship. For instance, at Bronycon 2018, a select number of people could buy a “diamond pass” for \$2,000 that included a weekend pass, t-shirt, a badge and pin that indicated one’s level of sponsorship, reserved seating at events, and a hotel room, among other benefits.

Each year there is a theme for each convention that governs the décor and atmosphere for the event. A large number attendees dress in cosplay (a costume of a character from a piece of media), often fitting the theme of that year’s convention, and some conventions hold costume competitions. Since music is a large part of the community, with many fans writing their own songs about the characters and the show, many conventions feature a concert or dance. All conventions also include a vendor hall, which consists of booths of fans selling their artwork and other *My Little Pony* related crafts and merchandise.

Equestria Daily, a major Brony fan website, compiles a list of conventions every year that includes details about the dates and locations of conventions as well as a small write-ups advertising conventions to fans. In 2017, the year I began collecting data, there were around 15

Brony conventions in every major region in the United States. These conventions vary in size, region, and ‘character’- that is, some have a reputation for wild parties and drinking while others are considered more ‘family friendly.’ I intentionally selected conventions in different regions, of different sizes, and with different reputations to get a perspective of the range of conventions available. Based on my pre-dissertation observations at conventions for a separate project and the write-ups on the Equestria Daily website, I chose to conduct observations at Everfree Northwest, Trotcon, Nightmare Nights, and Bronycon.

I conducted observations at Everfree Northwest in May 2017. Everfree Northwest is an annual convention that takes place near Seattle and is the second largest *My Little Pony* convention in the world (attracting around 3,000 attendees). In 2017, it was in its 6th year. I selected Everfree Northwest in part due to its size and location, but also because it had a reputation for being one of the more ‘family friendly’ conventions- thus providing additional variation in comparison more ‘adult-oriented’ conventions. The theme of Everfree Northwest 2017 was “United in Harmony,” though the convention always also has a camping related theme based on its name being drawn from the name of a summer camp in one of the spin-off movies.

The second convention I chose, Trotcon, was also in its 6th year and took place in July 2017 in Columbus, Ohio. The theme was ‘Fallout Equestria,’ speaking in part to the more ‘adult’ orientation of the convention. Trotcon is considered a mid-size convention, attracting around 900-1,000 attendees. The third convention, Nightmare Nights, is also a smaller, regional convention in Addison, Texas. I attended Nightmare Nights in October 2017, which had a Halloween theme. Though I did not know it at the time, this was the last year of the convention after 5 years due to declining attendance and financial strain on the convention organizers. There were under 500 attendees in 2017.

Finally, I conducted observations at Bronycon in July 2018. Bronycon is the largest *My Little Pony* convention and considered the ‘flagship’ convention of the community. Whereas other conventions largely attract people within a particular region or who are seeking a particular experience, Bronycon draws a wide variety of fans from around the world. The theme of Bronycon 2018 was road trip across America, which appeared to only influence the art on the programs and t-shirts. There were around 6,000 attendees in 2018, although it was announced at the convention that 2019 would be its final year due to a stated desire to ‘go out with a bang’ while the event was still popular and making money.

Field Logistics

Gaining access to the conventions was as simple as purchasing a weekend pass online. I purchased basic, weekend passes to each convention with my own money and attended as much of each convention as possible. This meant arriving the Thursday night before the conventions began (often referred to as ‘day zero’ of the conventions) and staying until Sunday evening. I stayed at the same hotel as the convention in two cases (at Everfree Northwest and Trotcon) in order to fully immerse myself in the convention environment.

All conventions put on a full program of official events, ranging from activities such as “Don’t Forget the Lyrics” (a game testing participant’s knowledge of songs from the show) or to panels on cosplay, fanfiction writing, or analysis of the show. Some panels also feature advice on personal growth, touching on everything from relationships to mental health. When I first began conducting observations, I spent the majority of my time attending these official events, taking notes on the attendees and presentations. It quickly became clear, however, that these official events are not the major draw of the conventions. Several panels only had a handful of attendees, with people entering and leaving at their leisure.

The action, so to speak, largely occurred in the hallways and other informal gathering spaces. Once I noticed this, I cut down on the amount of time I spent attending official events and put myself in situations that encouraged casual conversations with other attendees. For instance, at Everfree Northwest, I joined a group of people playing games in the hallway and learned to play “Twilight Sparkle’s Secret Shipfic Folder,” a fan-made card game. At Bronycon, I ate lunch in the convention center café with a young man who was sitting by himself and struck up a conversation. These casual encounters helped me get a feel for the convention and its attendees, giving me a window into the community that I would have otherwise missed had I only attended official events.

I also spent much of my time conducting observations sitting in public spaces and simply watching people and overhearing conversations. The vendor hall was an excellent place to conduct these types of observations, since these areas were usually crowded and drew a wide variety of attendees. I also noted what was sold in the vendor halls, particularly the art.

I took unobtrusive quick jottings of my observations using the Notes application on my phone while in the field and expanded upon these notes every night when I returned to my hotel. I also took pictures as a way of recording my observations. It was very common and therefore not out of place for me to take pictures of art, costumes, and other aspects of the conventions. These pictures helped me later elaborate upon my notes and remember details that I would have otherwise forgotten.

Position as a Researcher

The qualitative researcher is, in many ways, also the research instrument (Cassell 2005; Rubin and Rubin 2005). My social position shaped the way I conducted interviews and how my participants responded to me as well as my interpretations of my data. As Denzin and Lincoln (1994) explain, the researcher as a storyteller is deeply entangled within their work. It is therefore

important to understand my social position and perspective and how it shaped both data collection and interpretation.

I do not consider myself to be a Brony and was technically an outsider in approaching this project. I say ‘technically’ because the insider/outsider dichotomy does not capture the complexities of identity. Social positions and identities are fluid and multiple, and not being a member of a particular group does not mean I was an outsider in regard to all aspects of my participants’ experiences (Dwyer and Buckle 2009). As a White man in my late 20s, I was demographically similar to many (though not all) of my participants. I had also watched *My Little Pony*, attended conventions, which blurred the boundaries between insider and outsider. Although these experiences were undertaken as part of my research rather than for personal enjoyment, this was enough for some participants to label me a Brony regardless of my own personal identity. This was despite me being up-front to my interviewees that I did not consider myself a Brony and that I was merely an open-minded, interested researcher.

When conducting ethnographic observations, I easily blended in and did not do anything to correct people’s assumption that I was a regular attendee. Negotiating disclosure in ethnographic research is complicated, though covertness is sometimes necessary and appropriate based upon the context (Lugosi 2006). In the field, it would have been difficult for me to disclose my status as a researcher to everyone with whom I interacted, particularly since my interactions were so often ephemeral. I decided to be honest if directly asked, but I was rarely asked about myself or in situations in which individuals were disclosing personal information and I might be expected to reciprocate. I did openly put up fliers advertising my study and hand out business cards that identified me as a researcher, and so I did not specifically try to hide this or deceive others. Additionally, I did disclose my status as a researcher to the handful of people with whom I had

extended, meaningful interactions (such as the group who taught me how to play the *My Little Pony* card game).

Though I was easily able to build rapport during interviews, at times I struggled to interact with people at conventions because I wasn't a Brony. Much of the social interactions at the conventions were organized around the show *and* shared community knowledge. Simply watching the show was not enough preparation for understanding the lingo, references, and norms of the community. For instance, it was common for people to reference a notorious, dark fanfiction called "Cupcakes" in which Pinkie Pie is a serial killer who murders Rainbow Dash. Convention attendees occasionally dressed up as the characters from that story (for example, Pinkie Pie in a bloody apron) or made jokes about Pinkie Pie offering someone a cupcake (the story begins with Pinkie Pie giving Rainbow Dash a drugged cupcake). It was sometimes difficult for me to sort out references from the show and references to the extended universe of fan-made content. However, I had a stronger base of community knowledge due to my experiences conducting observations in 2015 as part of a different project. Due to these previous hours in the field, I had some in-group knowledge that helped me make sense of my observations.

While my position as a White man made me similar to some of my interviewees, it created some difficulties when recruiting women. I struggled to find and contact women, in part because women are a minority in the Brony community but also because women may have been reluctant to contact a strange man for interviews. Men and women inhabited different spaces at conventions, and so my gender separated me from some potential participants. This gender segregation at conventions also shaped my observations. Though women were often open with me in our interviews about experiences of harassment and other sensitive issues, it is also possible that some women might not have felt comfortable describing these experiences to a man and adjusted their

responses accordingly. My gender was thus potentially beneficial for me in some instances (fitting it at conventions and interviewing men) and an impediment in others.

Analytic Strategy

I analyzed my data in an iterative process, beginning with open coding of interview and observational data in NVivo in which I searched my data inductively for patterns. Open, also referred to as initial, coding, allowed me to “remain open to all possible theoretical directions” in this first pass (Charmaz 2006: 46). This process resulted in the grouping of my data into multiple codes and gave me a broad understanding of the patterns in my data.

I then performed axial coding (Glaser and Strauss 1967), interrogating my data for themes related to my research questions. In this process, I re-read my data and added to my initial set of codes, while also sorting through previous codes for concepts that were meaningful to the theoretical questions driving the dissertation. During this process, I also kept memos about my thought process as I read and re-read my data, making connections between codes and developing themes.

Finally, I combined similar codes to develop a final set of themes that both addressed my research questions and reflected the major patterns in the data. Although this seems like a linear process, it is important to note that I moved between these steps throughout the data analysis process. I also performed open coding multiple times on different combinations of my data. For instance, I open coded my interviews with men separately from my interviews with women, and then all of my interviews combined. In this way, I was able to break down my data to look at relevant clusters of themes. This process is reflected in my final analysis, in which men and women are dealt with in two separate chapters.

CHAPTER 3. “IT’S SOMETHING I WEAR ON MY HEART”: MY LITTLE PONY AND THE MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF RECONSTITUTED FORMS OF MASCULINITY

In chapter one, I introduced the central question of this dissertation- what does it mean when men incorporate what has traditionally been viewed as stigmatized and/or feminine into their gender presentations? How do these reconstituted forms of masculinity represent a challenge to gender politics, as suggested by inclusive masculinity theory (Anderson 2005, 2009)? And how are they, as argued by Bridges and Pascoe (2014), a way of reinforcing inequality? In this chapter, I address these questions through analysis of 30 semi-structured interviews with men who are fans of *My Little Pony* and ethnographic observations at four *My Little Pony* fan conventions.

Making Sense of *My Little Pony*

On the surface, the Brony phenomenon appears to represent a transformation in masculinity in that men are openly embracing something stereotypically feminine- a girl’s show about friendship. Articles in the mainstream media latched onto images of men wearing pink and the show’s values of kindness, friendship, and generosity and claimed that Bronies are challenging or redefining masculinity because of their love of the show (Angel 2012; Rugnetta 2012; Watercutter 2014). For instance, an article in *Wired* claimed that “[Bronies’] very existence breaks down stereotypes” in that men are not supposed to like “princesses and pink stuff” (Watercutter 2014: 1). A documentary, *Bronies: The Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony* (Malaquais 2012) was centered on this argument- that Bronies are a unique community situated around love and acceptance that challenges traditional notions of masculinity by giving men space to be more gentle, caring, and sensitive. The documentary featured the stories of young men discovering the values of friendship and struggling with being bullied for not fitting into others’ narrow definitions

of masculinity, the message being that the Brony community allows men to move beyond these narrow definitions even as they unfortunately face pushback from the outside world.

My own observations and analysis of Brony conventions complicates the narrative that Bronies are *simply* challenging masculinity. I saw art that sexualized the characters or blended the ‘cutesy’ art style of the show with violent elements. Fans often wore costumes that included guns, military attire, and paintball armor. The blending of the stereotypically masculine with the purported challenge to masculinity was best illustrated by a popular slogan, “I’m going to love and tolerate the shit out of you,” demonstrating not a passive acceptance of the values of the show, but a twisting of those values into aggression. Thus, imagery and themes of violence and dominance coexisted with the show’s celebration of love, tolerance, openness, and generosity.

These nuances in behavior, attitudes, and gendered displays reveals a tension to the story missing from the simplistic one described in the media. Rather than the cut and dry story of challenging masculinity, my analysis reveals a complicated story that includes both inclusive masculinity and hybrid masculinity.

Competing Theories of Masculinity

Scholars have conceptualized changes in masculinities in two major ways, each of which have their contributions and limitations to understanding the meanings behind these shifts in gender practices. The first, inclusive masculinity theory, claims that men are increasingly contesting masculinity by rejecting homophobia, misogyny, and “excessive risk-taking” (Anderson and McGuire 2010: 249). The second, hybrid masculinities, argues that gender practices that appear progressive actually conceal privilege and reassert inequality (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). These competing perspectives each contribute something important regarding men’s gender

practices, though neither theory fully captures the motivations and meanings of men's engagement in the Brony community.

Inclusive masculinity theory emphasizes the decrease in 'homophobia,' or anxiety related to being perceived as gay, among young heterosexual men (Anderson 2005, 2009). Anderson first developed the theory based on his observations of college men, including men who are cheerleaders, athletes, and fraternity brothers, in which he found men adopting a 'softer' form of masculinity. These men were more open to forming close emotional bonds with other men, expressing their feelings, and were less concerned about conforming to what he termed 'orthodox masculinity.' The decrease in homophobia, Anderson argues, opens men up to greater acceptance of men's femininity and signals an era of more progressive masculinity.

Part of inclusive masculinity theory is a rejection of Connell's (1995) framework of hegemonic masculinity. In their reflection and refinement of inclusive masculinity theory, Anderson and McCormack (2018) state that gender is not always relational and that they are "not convinced by Connell's central claim that dynamics of masculinity are the process by which patriarchy is reproduced" (p. 555). As such, inclusive masculinity theory neither accounts for the implications of men's inclusive gender practices on women nor considers how these practices may also reinforce inequality. While Anderson and McCormack (2018) do not see these critiques as problematic due to their views on gender, their argument that social change related to LGBT issues has led to widespread transformations in masculinity that challenge inequality is overly optimistic (O'Neill 2014; de Boise 2015). While the suggestion that such social change has resulted in positive transformation is useful and important, it fails to capture the complex ways that men's gender practices may both challenge and reinforce inequality.

In contrast, hybrid masculinities focus on instances in which men appear to challenge hegemonic masculinity on the surface, yet reinforce traditional conceptions of masculinity and, by extension, gender inequality (Bridges 2014; Greenebaum and Dexter 2018; Barry 2018). While inclusive masculinity theory interprets straight men's incorporation of tastes, behaviors, and ideologies that they consider 'gay' as a symbol of progress due to a decrease in homophobia, hybrid masculinities sees such gender practices as allowing men greater freedom in their gender presentations without challenging systems of inequality (Bridges 2014). In this perspective, such practices sustain inequality by creating 'discursive distance' between privileged men and hegemonic masculinity, allowing men to frame themselves as victims by appropriating the struggles of oppressed groups and fortifying boundaries by obscuring systems of inequality.

There are three distinct mechanisms undergirding hybrid masculinities that serve to reinforce inequality (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). First, such practices create "discursive distance" between privileged men (predominately young, white, heterosexual men) and hegemonic masculinity. This allows men to position themselves as "outside of existing systems of privilege and inequality," or not part of the 'problem' of hegemonic masculinity (Bridges and Pascoe 2014: 250). Second, men's co-option of the aesthetics of oppressed groups (such as gay men) is a way of appropriating a victim status, further distancing men from their privilege. This is often a consequence of privileged men feeling that their identities are less meaningful or interesting than those of marginalized and subordinated forms of masculinities. Finally, men fortify boundaries by "obscure[ing] the symbolic and social boundaries between groups" (Bridges and Pascoe 2014: 254).

In my own analysis, this theory appears to explain at least *some* of the Brony phenomenon. In the Brony community, men can claim that they are a part of a group that values equality and

upholds the principles of tolerance and acceptance. This in turn allows men to distance themselves from their own privilege and complicity in systems of inequality. After all, if everyone is supposedly equal within the Brony community, then men can identify themselves as separate from structures of gender inequality. That is, gender inequality is seen as the result of other types of men, not ‘good men’ like Bronies. Due to the stigma faced by men who are fans of *My Little Pony*, they can also claim a victim status that further distances them from their privilege. For instance, a tongue-in-cheek meme circulated around the Internet in 2014 and 2015 that suggested that the B in LGBT should stand for Brony, equating the stigma faced by Bronies with the plight of gays and lesbians. While this was meant by many to be a joke, it poked fun at a pervasive attitude among Bronies that they are members of an oppressed group. Finally, by adopting the style of love, acceptance, and equality, Bronies are able to obscure privilege and further “entrench and conceal” systems of inequality (Bridges and Pascoe 2014: 254). As Messner (1993, 2007) argues, this may simply be a “softer” form of patriarchy. In this case, patriarchy in the guise of pastel ponies.

Both inclusive masculinity theory and hybrid masculinities capture something important about the Brony community, but neither tell the whole story either. While positive transformation occurs within the Brony community, it would be going too far to state that it is part of a larger trend of progressive shifts in masculinity. Further, inclusive masculinity theory fails to account for gender relations and the possibility that men may still reinforce inequality even when adopting what appear to be more positive gender practices. While hybrid masculinity offers a compelling counter-narrative, the motivation of men’s incorporation of femininities in the case of Bronies is more complex than simply a mechanism through which men can distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity. For some men, the draw to *My Little Pony* and the Brony community are the values and ideologies that run counter to mainstream societal views of masculinity. As such, I

argue that there is no single answer to the question of the meaning behind the incorporation of femininity into men's gender practices because groups that adopt such reconstituted forms of masculinity are not monolithic. The existence of variation calls for attention to the nuance within these cases and what this says about trends in masculinity.

Masculinity is not simply becoming more inclusive, though there may be a promise to hybrid masculinities that has previously been dismissed by scholars who see only that reconstituted forms of masculinity may reinforce hegemonic masculinity and gender inequality. Though such forms of masculinity may not result in the utopian vision for gender as described by inclusive masculinity theory, they may move the needle toward progress even as they fail to fully realize change.

Analysis: Patterns of Men's Involvement with *My Little Pony* and their Consequences

I find first and foremost that the Brony community is a site where masculinity is negotiated. For some men, identification with the values of the show has enabled emotional expression and openness to difference, while contact with women in the community has increased their gender consciousness. I term this form of engagement *deep investment*, which was characterized by the type of substantive change that has rarely been acknowledged in forms of hybrid masculinities. Other men's involvement in the community took the form of what I refer to as 'superficial engagement,' or investment in the aesthetics of the show and belonging in the community. This type of involvement better fit with previous work on hybrid masculinities, with men distancing themselves from privilege, obscuring inequality, and reinforcing hegemonic masculinity. These two forms of involvement are ideal types, and many men flitted in between the two- at times exhibiting deep investment and at other times reverting to superficial engagement. However, they speak to important differences in how men engage in reconstituted forms of masculinity and why.

In this section, I outline these two categories and how they vary in terms of their catalyst for involvement and points of transformation and how these differences lead to divergent perspectives on gender.

Deep Investment

Men who were deeply invested in *My Little Pony* and the Brony community were dedicated to the values and ideology of the show. Instead of primarily talking about *My Little Pony* and the community in terms of its aesthetics, these men emphasized the emotional component to their involvement. For instance, Thomas stated that his love for *My Little Pony* is “more a thing I carry in my heart rather than on the wall” as a way of explaining that owning pony art was less important to him than how the show and the community have changed his life. Like Thomas, these men described their experience with *My Little Pony* as transformative- changing the way they view themselves and others. I identified how men who were deeply invested were led to the community by emotional need or crisis and utilized the show for self-transformation in such a way that led to greater emotional expression, empathy, and acceptance of others.

Catalyst for Involvement: Emotional Need or Crisis

When asked how they became interested in *My Little Pony*, men who were deeply invested often described finding the show at a time of emotional need or crisis. This spoke to the emotional role the show and community played in their lives, giving them space to bond with other men and express themselves. This bolstering of intimacy between men and emotional expression may also be found in sports, where men are provided a socially acceptable space to connect with other men and emotionally invest in their teams (Messner 2002). Similarly, Christian men’s organizations such as the *Promise Keepers* (Barkowski 2004) and the mythopoetic men’s movement of the 1980s

and 90s created space for men to emote. What is unique about *My Little Pony* is that its messages were not originally designed for men and are in fact contrary to those men typically receive about emotion and intimacy. Instead of granting acceptability to a narrow swath of emotional expression in a particular setting, for instance allowing men to cry within the context of a sports game, Bronies are encouraged to live the lessons of the show in their everyday lives. Emotionally vulnerable men were therefore given an important space within the Brony community to improve their lives.

Thomas, a Black man in his late 30s, was on the verge of suicide when he happened upon a fanfiction that led him to the show. He credited the show and the community with helping him through his emotional crisis and turning him away from the decision to take his own life. He tells the story of his discovery of *My Little Pony* in the following way:

I was going through a lot in my life, working three jobs, supporting a wife and three kids and I was at my limit. And instead of making rational choices, I planned suicide. Four days before I would have [done it], I came across a fanfiction called ‘My Little Dashie’...the video is pretty much a man who finds Rainbow Dash, raises her, and then she’s taken away. But what it really is about is loss...for me, I realized what was gone was myself. I gave up my fun, my joy, my happiness for professionalism, to be an adult, to support my family. I just cried and let it all out...I turned around, came out of the room that day, hugged my wife...and it was two and a half years from this before I had a bad day, an angry day, got in an argument, nothing. Just positive vibes for two years, which is pretty impressive...I’m proof that the show can change you, affect how you progress in life.

For Thomas, *My Little Pony* was transformative. Reading the fanfiction ‘My Little Dashie’ helped him better understand what was causing his depression- that he felt he had given up joy and

happiness to be an adult and support his family. From the fanfiction, he discovered the show, which he felt helped him rediscover his joy and happiness and dispel feelings of anger.

Learning to deal with negative emotions such as anger is a theme that has been dealt with on the show multiple times. For example, the second episode of the seventh season follows the story of a character who magically bottles up her anger and frustration with disastrous effects, the lesson being that it is important to openly express your emotions and deal with them in a healthy way. Thomas took these lessons seriously and incorporated them into his own life to better deal with his negative emotions- sharing his feelings with his friends and wife instead of keeping them bottled up inside him and then exploding.

Thomas's transformation was not brought about by passively watching the show, but by the realization he experienced through both the show and the community. At the time, he was working a high-pressure, traditionally masculine job because he put supporting his family and being a provider above all else. After watching the show, he quit that job and took a job with less status as a custodian to spend more time with his family. This change occurred because of a shift in priorities that Thomas attributed to the show and the community. For him, the show illustrated what really mattered- interpersonal relationships and happiness, not money and status. He also felt that the community facilitated this change due to "taking away the stereotype" around masculinity and giving him space to be himself without feeling the pressure to sacrifice his personal happiness in order to be a provider.

Jeremy, a White man in his early 20s, also discovered the show at a time of emotional crisis. He described himself as having a history of "immense depression and anxiety" and was suicidal when a friend encouraged him to check out the show. "Without the show," he claimed, "I'd be dead." He found that the show improved his mood and helped him open up to his friends

about his depression and thoughts of suicide. *My Little Pony* made him realize that “life is beautiful and all you truly need is friendship to keep going.” Reaching out to his friends led him to the Brony community, where he felt accepted and supported. This process helped him move from being in a “dark place” to “being amazed by this world of magic and friendship.”

While Thomas and Jeremey were the most extreme cases of men being brought to *My Little Pony* by crisis, they illustrate a general trend. Although Roy, a White 56-year-old railroad worker, wasn’t suicidal when he discovered the show, it did help him through a winter in which he felt particularly depressed due to Seasonal Affective Disorder. As he described,

It was grey every single day [that winter], no sunshine, and I was feeling very depressed. I started flipping through TV channels and I came across this program that I’d never seen before...and I found out that it was *My Little Pony*...I found out these were re-runs and that the season had already ended, so I started watching a bunch of episodes on the computer to catch up and see what the other seasons were like. I was caught up by the time season 5 aired, and by that time I was hooked.

What he liked about the show was its positivity and that, in general, he “feels good after watching it” and that watching it “calms him right down.” The bright colors, upbeat songs, and the “unifying message” of the show were what he felt brightened his attitude. In a world that he identified as being particularly politically divided, he liked that “everyone is a different color but they’re all ponies and they don’t tend to be prejudiced against one another, and if they are then they are shown the error of their ways by the end of the episode.”

For some men, it was the community even more than the show that helped them through a difficult time. Jake, a White lawyer in his late-30s, started watching the show because he was bored but really became attached to the show and involved in the community when his mother was in

hospice. “Her cancer had come back the fourth time and at the same time I discovered the fandom,” he explained, “I’d be with her in the mornings and my dad would be with her at night, and at the end of the day I would come home absolutely in a terrible state and I could watch some of these old episodes [on a livestream] and people would be asking ‘how are you doing,’ ‘how is your mom doing,’ ‘is there anything we can do for you?’” The sense of support he received was, he said, “a really good thing in my life at a really tough point.” Connection provided by the fandom was therefore just as meaningful to Jake as the show itself, though he also felt the show provided much needed positivity.

The catalyst for these men becoming Bronies is important in that it shaped their relationship to the show and the community. When asked what it meant to them to be Bronies, these men often credited the show and the community with changing their lives for the better, helping them connect with others on a deeper level, overcome hardships, and adopt a more positive outlook. This was the case for about a fourth of the men I spoke to and the majority of men who fell clearly in the category of deep investment.

Transformation of Self

Men who took the messages of the show to heart felt that the show and the community helped them become more understanding of the experiences of others and open to difference. The show facilitated empathy and acceptance of difference directly through storylines that communicated the importance of love and tolerance, often centering on the characters learning to understand the perspectives of others and accept and celebrate differences. The premise of the show is that Twilight Sparkle must study the “magic of friendship” and learn “friendship lessons.” A recurring theme of these lessons is the need to embrace each other’s differences and not to judge others without getting to know them. For instance, in the 9th episode of the first season, the ponies

encounter a zebra who they initially stereotype as an “evil enchantress” who they fear because of her oddness. However, after getting to know her, they find that there was nothing to fear about her at all. The episode concludes with Twilight Sparkle reporting that she,

Learned an important lesson this week: never judge a book by its cover. Someone may look unusual, or funny, or scary. But you have to look past that and learn who they are inside. Real friends don’t care what your ‘cover’ is; it’s the contents of a pony that count. And a good friend, like a good book, is something that will last forever (CITE).

This is illustrative of the type of lesson learned in a typical episode of *My Little Pony* and what men meant when they referred to the messages of the show. Men who were deeply invested were often open to and actively engaged with the transformative potential of these messages and the community, perhaps because they more often came to *My Little Pony* at a time of crisis and were therefore seeking change.

For example, Jake felt the lessons of friendship, love, and acceptance were central to being a Brony. He was open to and appreciative of the personal transformation he perceived as having experienced by watching the show. As he explained,

It’s not just about the animation and the characters, it’s really about the lessons...basically how to make friends, how to be a friend, how to keep friendships strong, how to make friendships with people who you don’t think you’d be friends with. You know, just the way of being a better person, being able to resolve conflicts...I’m almost 40 and I’m learning more about being a good person and a good human being now than I learned in about 10 years of crappy public schools.

For Jake, the lessons of the show provided a roadmap for self-improvement and a path to being a better human being. Similarly, Roy felt the show changed his perspective on people, making him “more tolerant of people as a whole.” For instance, he said that he now realizes that “people are gonna make mistakes” and not to judge them because “maybe they don’t know any better or something happened at that particular moment and it’s not their fault.” Roy applied the situations in the show in which the characters pre-judged others to his own life, recognizing that he previously failed to understand how the everyday struggles of others might cause what he perceived as frustrating or irrational behavior. Both Jake and Roy were influenced by the messages of the show and as a result described being more sensitive toward others.

Men often stressed the openness and acceptance of the community as the result of the internalization of the lessons of the show. Sam, a White man in his mid 30s, described the community as having an “open-minded mindset” that allowed men to feel they could truly be themselves while encouraging them to extend that acceptance to others. Dan, a White man in his mid 20s, explained that the community had a “come-as-you-are” vibe and that “there are many different people, different situations, ways that some people would consider not right, but Bronies are totally cool with whoever you are.” For Dan, this was important because he also identified as a furry, part of a subculture of fans of anthropomorphized cartoon animals that is often negatively stereotyped in the media. Although the connection between Bronies and furies seems natural, the two communities have not always been friendly with one another. Dan was relieved that, despite the issues between Bronies and furies, he was accepted as a furry within the Brony community because “it’s generally very welcoming to anybody that shows up unless you’re there to cause trouble.”

Although the Brony community is relatively homogenous and largely made up of White, heterosexual men in their 20s and 30s, several participants stated that the community introduced them to people with different backgrounds with whom they otherwise would never have formed close and meaningful bonds. This provided men with opportunities to interact with difference alongside a community norm of open-mindedness. Men particularly discussed interactions with LGBTQ Bronies as making a difference in how they perceived individuals within these groups. The 2014 State of the Herd Report, a fan-made survey of the community, found that 4% of respondents identified as mainly or exclusively attracted to the same sex, while 11% identified as bisexual (herdcensus.com). In terms of gender identity, roughly 3% identified as transgender. Though these groups are a minority within the community, multiple participants mentioned that they knew quite a few bisexual, gay, or trans Bronies.

Josh, a straight White man in his mid 20s, felt that meeting LGBTQ Bronies was one of the most important aspects of his involvement within the community. He explained,

My outlook is really different from before I started watching [My Little Pony] in a lot of ways and I think what really contributed to that was probably being in the community. There was a relatively much larger proportion of LGBTQ users on the [My Little Pony forums] I think. Especially in terms of trans people, there were like several users on the forum that were trans. That wasn't something I'd ever really encountered before. I don't think I had personally known a trans or genderqueer person before I started interacting with people on the forums. They would have a lot of discussion threads and topics about gender identity and that was really eye opening...that changed my attitude and my outlook a lot...And I think that was the best experience because I'm not sure that would've happened to me anywhere else.

Reading about trans people's experiences opened his eyes to their perspectives and changed the way he thought about gender identity. He added that he felt that being part of a "gender defying phenomenon" may have explained why these discussions were happening on these specific forums and was one of the reasons he felt unsure that this would have happened to him had he not been a part of the Brony community. His experience illustrates the potential for transformation among men within the Brony community.

What is important about the lessons of the show and the ethos of the community that impacted these men is that they run counter to societal messages that men typically receive about masculinity. Instead of competition and dominance, what is promoted is empathy, acceptance, and cooperation. The community buttressed the messages of the show, providing men the opportunity to meet people who are different than them and form deep and meaningful connections with others. Of course, 'softer' forms of masculinity do not necessarily challenge power structures, but may instead reinforce inequality while obscuring privilege (Heath 2003; Messner 2007). However, the personal transformation these men experienced appeared deep and meaningful, impacting the way they related to themselves and others.

Superficial Engagement

Superficial engagement was characterized by a privileging of the aesthetics of the show over its messages and value as well as the reinterpretation of the symbols of the show to assert hegemonic masculinity. The term 'superficial engagement' should not be misinterpreted as suggesting that such men were less involved in the community or cared less about *My Little Pony*. Such men were still deeply involved fans. However, they interacted with the show differently. In this section, I discuss how men were led to the community for entertainment and were more likely to transform the show than to be transformed by it. These things in turn led to gender backlash,

attitudes that allowed men to distance themselves from privilege and reinforce hegemonic masculinity.

Catalyst for Involvement: Entertainment

Unlike men in the previous category, men who were superficially engaged were drawn to *My Little Pony* primarily out of a desire for entertainment rather than to fill an emotional need. These men often discovered the show because it was popular online or through friends. For some, they initially watched the show to make fun of it or because liking it was “ironic,” but this eventually led to sincere enjoyment. The aesthetics of the fandom were often more important to these men than the show or the emotional aspects of the community. That is, they often discussed the fan-made art and music as their favorite aspects of *My Little Pony* and emphasized these as their primary source of interest in the community. For these men, the value of *My Little Pony* had more to do with fun than fulfilling an emotional need.

Gavin’s story of how he discovered *My Little Pony* was typical of superficially engaged men. A White student in his early 20s, he stumbled upon the show online, found it interesting, and began watching. As he describes,

Well, I was just on YouTube browsing, I don’t know, video games or something. And I noticed this suggested video kept popping up on my sidebar...so I got bored at work one day and decided to click on it and it ended up being an incredibly inappropriate but also pretty funny parody animation of *My Little Pony*. I thought it was hilarious and then I was like, wait, so is this a parody of an actual thing? So I sorta started looking into it...and eventually I watched an episode and then I remember watching pretty much every episode there was in a matter of 10 days, probably less. And that was that.

Gavin's motivation in watching the show was boredom and *My Little Pony* was something he viewed as potentially funny or different to explore. Similarly, Luke, a White 18 year-old security guard, discovered the show from Internet memes and thought it "looked interesting" and "ironic" and decided to check it out. Alex, a White 20 year-old retail worker, also discovered the show from memes and decided it looked "cute as hell" and decided to give it a try. This was a common way of discovering the show, with men describing the draw as superficial ('it looked cute,' 'it was hilarious') rather than emotional.

Men who were superficially engaged who didn't discover the show online (often older men) were introduced to it by friends who were Bronies. Either way, the community was central to the way these men discovered the show in that they were first exposed to fan-made content or a direct suggestion from another Brony. The memes and YouTube videos that many men stumbled upon were infused with adult humor and designed by and for adult men. These men's initial experiences with *My Little Pony* were therefore shaped by the Brony community and filtered through the lens of other adult men and their interpretations of the show.

Transformation of the Show

By reinterpreting the show through the sexualization of characters or introduction of violent themes, men in the superficial engagement category subverted the show to be more in-line with conventional men's entertainment- changing the show (or more accurately, their interpretation of the show) rather than changing themselves. Though the material these men produced varied from suggestive to graphic, cartoon violence to gore, it had the effect of asserting the adult nature of online and in-person spaces in which it was present and, by extension, men's power within those spaces.

An example of this reinterpretation at work at the conventions was the ‘Artist Alley After Dark,’ a late-night vendor hall where pornographic or ‘not safe for work’ (NSFW) art was sold. I described the event as follows in my field notes,

I go next door to the other large room for what is euphemistically referred to as the ‘Artist Alley After Dark.’ I am carded before going in by a staff member because it is 18+. The room is set up like a smaller version of the vendor hall- it is a typical, brightly lit conference room where the tables and chairs have been moved to the perimeter to serve as booths. The tables themselves are draped with brightly colored pieces of fabric with *My Little Pony* patterns. The only difference from a typical vendor’s hall is that all the art are highly sexualized cartoons. Behind the first booth is a man in his mid-20s drawing in a sketchbook...he has a portfolio in front of him displaying some of his prints. It is open to a picture of Rainbow Dash with her legs spread showing off her genitalia. The next table seemed to be hosting a mini-party of their own and had a huge stash of alcohol taking up one side of the table and a handwritten sign that read ‘shots here! Alcohol free with ID’...this isn’t just where people buy art, it’s also where they are coming to hang out, drink, and leisurely browse.

As stated above, this space was not simply a venue for purchasing pornographic artwork, but a major late-night hangout at Trotcon that ran for several hours. This room was almost always crowded with people drinking and chatting while surrounded by pornographic images. Though the convention attracted a fair number of women, I only saw three or four at after-hours events- a fraction of the number of women at the convention during the day. The Artist Alley After Dark and other late-night panels and events were aggressively masculine spaces where men asserted hegemonic masculinity by recasting the characters of the show as objects of the male gaze.

The after-hours or party atmosphere at conventions was a large draw for some men. Luke described the Artist Alley After Dark as “thrilling” in that people were open about what they were into, even if society might find it weird. He said that he got drunk for the first time at a room party and then went to buy a NSFW body pillow. The point of the Artist Alley After Dark for him was not the art itself, but more the atmosphere of openness and fun. Based on informal conversations with men at various late-night events, including a panel on how to write pony erotica, for many men titillation was less of an attraction than the fraternity-like ambiance. Being able to drink and talk about girls, even if those girls were cartoon ponies, was perceived as just being a fun part of bonding with other men. An example of the casual misogyny of these spaces was a t-shirt I saw a man wearing that had a suggestive image of Rainbow Dash alongside the text “say neigh to fat chicks.” Women and girl ponies were thus transformed into objects for men’s pleasure and entertainment.

All of the conventions where I conducted observations had a ‘keep it PG’ rule during the day, manifested in signs asking convention attendees not to swear and the censoring of NSFW art in the vendor hall. Though some sexualized material still made it on the floor of the vendor hall during the day, such as body pillowcases of scantily clad anthropomorphized ponies, this was policed by convention staff and sometimes covered up or taken down.³ Still, the themes of some of the conventions were less ‘family friendly’ than others. While Everfree Northwest’s theme in 2017 was “bringing Equestria to Earth,” the theme for Trotcon was ‘Fallout Equestria,’ a popular fanfiction that places ponies in the post-apocalyptic world of a first-person shooter video game. Thus, even as sexualized images were censored, violent themes were allowed or encouraged even

³ One example of the covering up of NSFW material was a t-shirt that said ‘hung like a horse’ in which someone had put a post-it note over the ‘u’ in the word ‘hung.’ Thus, even though such material was policed, it was sometimes done in a haphazard way.

during the day. The convention hall at Trotcon was decorated with ponies dressed in armor with guns and many attendees wore paintball armor and other quasi-military attire.

In general, guns and fighting were popular themes in men's costumes and artwork at conventions. These often involved deliberate blending of the 'cutesy' imagery of the show with such themes. For instance, men dressed in purple cameo and paintball armor carrying airsoft rifles painted pink with butterflies on the magazine intended to evoke Fluttershy's 'cutie mark' (design on the character's hindquarters) and artwork sold in the vendor hall depicted the ponies decked out in heavy duty artillery. Such blending was discussed by participants as a fun way of merging their interests, though it could also be viewed as a way of asserting masculinity even while embracing the aesthetics of the show. Guns in particular are powerful symbols of masculinity, and their presence asserted masculinity within these spaces.

Online community spaces operate differently in that individuals can more easily group together based on their interests, avoiding undesirable content. For instance, some Facebook groups had strict rules against posting NSFW material, while others were developed specifically to share such content. Still, men utilized violent and sexual imagery to exert masculinity in online spaces as they did at conventions.

Fanfiction in particular was an important way that men reinterpreted the show online. Fanfiction may be viewed as a way of rewriting a show to be "more responsive to [one's] needs, in order to make it a better producer of personal meanings and pleasures" (Jenkins 1988). Fanfiction was originally largely written by women as a way of creating feminist role models and exploring stories and themes unavailable to them in mainstream entertainment (Jenkins 1988). Men's *My Little Pony* fanfiction serves a similar purpose, creating stories that are more responsive to men's interests and needs. However, in doing so, they also often actively dismantle some of the

themes of the show, ironically doing exactly the opposite of what their earlier women counterparts did. That is, instead of reinterpreting entertainment dominated by men to give voice to previously untold and unexplored women's stories and/or perspectives, they are taking a show for girls and rewriting it to be about men's stories, perspectives, and interests.

An example of the centering of men's stories and perspectives can be found in fanfiction that features men protagonists at the expense of women or girl characters, despite the fact that the show is almost completely about girls and their adventures. Luke describes a fanfiction that he enjoyed because it "lacks the boundaries of regular stories and doesn't feel mass produced." This fanfiction, called 'Adopting Fluttershy,' is about a man adopting a character from the show, he tries to be a good dad and deals with,

The awkwardness of having to raise a pony and not being sure how that works....it gets weirder and weirder and the thing I kind of liked was that it wasn't afraid to be awkward, because you couldn't address a 7 year-old girl masturbating in a TV show or anything, that's what caught me off guard. You can just write that! There's no limit, nothing you can't write, and it's important to the story because the whole thing is that he doesn't quite understand pony boundaries, even though he has a young daughter. And then he gets convicted of sexual molestation and that last chapter is a courtroom drama...it's just so fucking painful as the girl convicting him found his dairy and extracts quotes that could be just taken out of context because he didn't know any better, 'cause the girl he was dating was a crazy bitch and was essentially trying to lock him up.

While this story isn't meant to be taken seriously, Luke sees it as mostly a "fun read" that pushes the boundaries of conventional storytelling, it demonstrates an engagement with the show that is completely different from the deep investment described in the previous section. The fact that one

of the characters from the show is in this story is almost irrelevant. From how Luke describes the story, her character is a passive participant who could be any young girl, and her thoughts and feelings are not central to the story. Instead, the story is about a man cast as a sympathetic victim of charges of sexual abuse. Though this is an extreme example of ‘flipping the script’ of the show, it is part of a larger genre of stories in which a human man (positioned as a stand-in for the reader) interacts with the characters or the world of *My Little Pony*.

Through reinterpreting the show, men diffused what could be viewed as threatening about it. Given that it was intended to be empowering for girls, it is meaningful that men reduce the characters to sexual objects or deny them agency in their art and writing. Making *My Little Pony* about men was therefore not merely the blending of men’s interests with the show, but rather a way of asserting and reinforcing men’s power within the space of the community (either the physical space of conventions or online spaces).

Perspectives on Gender

Men’s patterns of engagement with *My Little Pony* and the Brony community resulted in divergent perspectives on gender. Deep investment often led to gender consciousness, or increased awareness of women’s experiences and gender inequality. In contrast, superficial engagement often led to gender backlash, or more reactionary views on gender. In this way, I argue that men who fall into the category of deep investment do more than just adopt an alternative style of masculinity, but challenge masculinity in a meaningful way.

Deep Investment: Gender Consciousness

Men who were deeply invested were also more aware of gender inequality, more sensitive to the experiences of women within the community, and less invested in hegemonic masculinity.

I refer to this as *gender consciousness*, a term that has been used in the literature on women and social movements to refer to “awareness of women’s political and social interests of women” (Aronson 2017: 335). While this typically relates to women’s adoption of a gendered frame to engage in collective action, I believe it is also relevant for describing men’s understanding of gender as a social category that shapes individuals’ experiences. Additionally, these men were critical of aspects of hegemonic masculinity in such a way that suggested a path toward a more progressive form of masculinity.

It may be that men who were more gender conscious were drawn to engage with *My Little Pony* in a deeper way or that deep investment created the conditions for gender consciousness. In their responses, men rarely linked their views on gender politics to *My Little Pony*, unlike their narratives of the show and community shaping their emotional expression and empathy. However, their perspective on gender set them apart from their superficially engaged counterparts and were tied to the way they related to *My Little Pony*.

Men’s awareness of women’s experiences and gender inequality was often apparent in their responses to the question of whether they thought being a Brony as a man was different from being a Brony as a woman. Brandon, a White software developer in his late 20s, was particularly sensitive to the issues he felt women likely faced in the Brony community, stating,

Yes [it is different], if nothing else because of demographics. The conventions at least are heavily skewed male. I work in software, which is an even more heavily skewed industry and, you know, have heard some of the tales of how that affects women, people who are in a minority demographic of that culture. Just stuff that I’d never think of...having people talk over you...getting passed up for stuff. People question your competence and expect you not to be assertive. All kinds of terrible things you hear about as a guy and you’re like ‘wow’ ...I would love to talk

to female Bronies and have them say ‘nope, everything is wonderful, I feel like one of the herd,’ I just don’t expect that to be the case.

Brandon applied his knowledge of the challenges of being a woman in a profession dominated by men, which he’d gained from close friendships with women colleagues, to what he saw as a similar situation within the community. Though he noted that he didn’t know exactly what it was like to be a woman Brony, he was able to extrapolate that it couldn’t be easy. Similarly, Josh mused that “because Bronies started as an audience of adult men, I still think that’s kind of seen as the norm in the community...the Brony community for the most part sees the adult male as the default member, so [a woman] might feel like an outsider.” Though these men didn’t draw on their interactions with women in the community, they both arrived at the conclusion that women likely struggled because men made up the majority of the community and were viewed as the default or norm.

Other men were informed more by their friendships with women within the community and what they’d witnessed them go through or heard from them about their experiences. Patrick, an Asian American student in his mid 20s, noted that “females receive a lot more unwanted attention because they are females in a previously thought of as male dominated kind of area” and that he has helped women he is friends with by telling people that they are making them uncomfortable. He told a story of a particular instance that stuck out at him,

I actually had to take care of one of our female members here who was having trouble with this guy, so I had to go resolve it kind of quickly...I like to give people the benefit of the doubt, maybe they don’t know that they’re making this person uncomfortable. But I just communicated, you know, I was like ‘hey, I’m sorry, but you’re making her uncomfortable and she doesn’t like that so please try to just tone

it down a little bit and don't talk to her so much.' She was fine after that, I think. She's a very nice person, she's just non-confrontational, she hates confrontation so sometimes she'll reach out to me and I'll come talk to them.

Though this story could be interpreted as a man believing it to be his responsibility to protect women and thus an example of benevolent sexism, Patrick did not frame himself as a hero. Instead, he told the story as a way of emphasizing the difficulties that women faced in the community. He noted that he only stepped in to resolve things because he was asked to by someone who he described as "non-confrontational." Sam, an active member of a Brony Facebook group run by a woman with a large number of women members, also reflected upon the experiences of the women he knew within the community. He described that women are often "pestered" by men trying to flirt with them and how women's contributions to the community are often downplayed or ignored.

Though men did not directly discuss their views on gender as related to *My Little Pony* or the Brony community, it is clear how personal transformation related to empathy and understanding could lead to increased awareness of the experiences of women. Part of taking the lessons of the show to heart for men who were deeply invested was seeing things from others' point of view and being a good friend by listening to others and considering their feelings. This sensitivity, combined with opportunities to form meaningful relationships with women in the community, led men to reflect upon women's perspective and hear the concerns of women they knew.

The open-mindedness facilitated by deep investment also extended to men's thoughts about masculinity. These men were reflective about masculinity and what it means to be a man. For example, when asked if he generally thought of himself as masculine, Jake responded that he

thought of himself as manly, “but not stereotypically so,” and added that “there are many different ways to be a man.” He explained,

There are a lot of stereotypes of manly behavior and, you know, some of them are good and some of them are not so good. Self-reliance is one of those masculine values that I try to model and I insist on doing a lot of things myself, you know, like I can change the oil in my car and change parts on my computer, fix plumbing, do electrical work. My dad is a handyman and he passed a lot of those skills to me. But the sort of, you know, get in people’s face, be violent, be belligerent, if somebody disrespects you that you need to fight to defend your honor, stuff like that, get shouty, brag about how many women you’ve slept with, that sort of thing doesn’t appeal to me. It’s like, if that’s being masculine, I want no part in it. So, I think masculinity is one of those things where there’s a lot of ways to be a man, and we really have to work on picking healthy ways to express it.

While Jake accepted some stereotypes related to masculinity, he rejected others that he deemed less appealing or healthy. Though he didn’t use the phrase toxic masculinity, he engaged in discourse that questioned certain aspects of masculinity and expressed a desire to embody a more positive form of masculinity. Rory similarly emphasized masculinity as being defined by character values, such as “owning your own mistakes,” though he also felt that these were important “even if you’re female.” He was also dismissive of the “cave man attitude” of some men who feel they need to threaten others or demean women to prove their own masculinity.

Several men also stressed that they were in touch with their own femininity and that they were not overly invested in societal views of masculinity. As Thomas explained, “I’m definitely manly and masculine, but I’m also in touch with my femininity, which is why I’m not afraid, why I’m not telling that guy over there that he should not be wearing that dress.” He identified men

who judged other men's gender presentations as being insecure in their own masculinity, in contrast to his confidence in his own identity, which he felt explained his open-mindedness. Likewise, Josh stated that, "I'm not really interested in being masculine...I don't feel that concerned with whether or not people perceive me as masculine." It is important to note that Thomas felt that *My Little Pony* helped him get in touch with his femininity and that he was far more invested in masculinity before the personal crisis that led him to the show. Being a part of a community that broke gender norms and celebrated friendship, generosity, and love made him feel he could free himself from chasing the goal of being "manly," a goal that had previously pushed him to the limit and made him an angry, unhappy person.

Though men's lack of investment in being perceived as masculinity could be viewed as a way of distancing themselves from privilege, such men also acknowledged their own privilege in their discussions of masculinity. Brandon reflected on the impact of men in the community, saying,

I read an article called 'I'm a Brony and I'm sorry' and it was about adult men kind of appropriating My Little Pony and talking about it being manly and it mentioned the sexualized depictions of the characters, just various ways in which people took My Little Pony and did things with it that would be off-limits to little kids for one reason or another. And it condemned and apologized for it and I agreed wholeheartedly with that. Young girls don't get enough cool stuff. The show was made so that they could have this one cool thing.

Brandon's perspective is that men should work to better share *My Little Pony* with girls, being careful not to appropriate the show and make the community around it unwelcoming for the very audience for which it was originally created. This acknowledgment of the issues with men's

appropriation is a recognition of the unequal power dynamic related to gender and age that these groups bring to the community.

Not all men in the deep investment category expressed gender conscious views, though all men who expressed these views exhibited deep investment. What set men with gender conscious views apart was meaningful contact with women- belonging to clubs or online groups in which women were in leadership positions, having close friends in the community who were women, or otherwise having the opportunity to have conversations with women about their experiences and perspectives. Deep investment likely opened such men up to these opportunities, facilitating empathy and putting them in the mindset to consider things from others' perspectives.

Superficial Engagement: Gender Backlash

While the beliefs about gender for deeply invested men were best characterized as gender conscious, men who were superficially engaged expressed beliefs I refer to as *gender backlash*. First, these men utilized their involvement in the community to distance themselves from privilege, appropriating a marginalized identity due to the stigma associated with being a Brony. Additionally, they expressed views that were often either explicitly or implicitly anti-feminist and concerned about what was perceived as a threat to men. Though none of the participants identified themselves as men's rights activists, both the appropriation of victimhood and sense of masculinity under threat align with sentiments often expressed by men's rights organizations (Messner 1998; Asher 2007; Palmer and Subramaniam 2017). Men in this group therefore both downplayed their own privilege (and men's privilege more generally) while also expressing anxieties about masculinity rooted in a perception of women's gains at the expense of men.

Men appropriated a marginalized identity by emphasizing the stigma faced by Bronies. Cody, a White 18 year-old man, described the stereotype of Bronies as being "older, probably

overweight, neckbeard, probably live in [their] parents' basement, got nothing to do, that kind of thing. I'm sure people think it's a pedophile thing. Gay, too feminine, something like that." These stereotypes were gendered, implying that men who like *My Little Pony* must be sexual deviants or social outcasts. Ryan, a White therapist in his early 30s, described how he was hesitant to tell his colleagues that he was a Brony because of the stigma, saying,

I never spoke about it at work because I never felt that anyone would understand. I do know that some people said that when they mentioned it at work they heard very derisive and insulting things. One person I know said that their coworkers claimed that men who watch *My Little Pony* were either pedophiles or degenerate perverts and that there was something wrong with them in that degree or that they were gay, which is another common misconception.

By taking on a stigmatized identity, men were able to claim victimhood and separate themselves from hegemonic masculinity even as they reinforced it in the community.

The positioning of men as victims was particularly clear in the way such men discussed the differences between men and women within the community, as they often contrasted the stigma faced by men to what they perceived as women's freedom to like the show without criticism. As John, a White man in his mid 20s, put it, "girls can get away with anything...they can probably have all the [*My Little Pony* merchandise] on them that they want, in public, and not get mocked...but us guys, we've gotta watch out for everybody." Liam, a White teacher in his late 30s, echoed this sentiment, saying, "one of the biggest things about the whole Brony phenomenon is the whole aspect of men loving a show that was made originally for girls, and you have that stigma in society regardless of how we feel about it. Girls don't have to deal that stigma, they can like it and no one cares." Men were rarely reflective about the root causes of these differences,

attributing them to women's ability to "get away with anything" rather than identifying the stigma against men's femininity as related to the patriarchy.

Men also distanced themselves from privilege by asserting that the community was completely egalitarian, suggesting that Bronies were above gender inequality. When asked about gender within the community, Luke explained that while "people are sexist" in the wider society, "in terms of the Brony community, there's no sexism." Similarly, Sean, a White student in his early 20s, responded that "the community treats both genders equally." By aligning themselves with a community that purports to be equal, men can strategically claim to be unrelated to the problem of sexism. For some men, this went even further, claiming a gender-blind attitude. Cody stated, "I'm not really interested in gender and race...I think people are just people. Gender and race aren't really worth thinking about, there are just bigger things to think about." In this way, Cody could ignore gender inequality while claiming to be egalitarian.

Egalitarianism was contrasted with feminism, which many men claimed to be against equality. For example, Cody stated that he considers *My Little Pony* to be the opposite of a feminist show because it promotes equality, saying that feminism now feels that "equal is not good enough anymore, they want more." He added that,

It is more difficult to be a man these days because there's a two-to-one chance a woman will be hired [for a job] because there's pressure to hire women, so you don't have a chance of getting a job if you're a man. Now they are trying to focus on women's education and stuff like that more than men's. It's getting to a point where it's getting kind of ridiculous, where it's hard to be a man without feeling that you're doing something wrong.

What the above quote expresses is a concern that men's standing has somehow been diminished by women's rights and a frustration that it has become increasingly difficult to be a man in society.

Anxiety about the state of masculinity as a response to feminism was shared by several participants. Austin, a White small business owner in his mid 20s, flatly stated that he is "very anti-feminist." He explained, "I want equality for women, but I think getting rid of things like due process, having different expectations for girls and guys, I think those are quite toxic, but that's exactly what modern feminism is." Not surprisingly, given that these interviews were conducted during a time when the #MeToo movement was in the news, men often expressed concern about sexual harassment claims. This is illustrated in Austin's reference to "due process," as well as John's passing comment to "all the lawsuits coming across men for doing things men do." Though John declined to elaborate about what exactly he meant, Austin discussed his at length his concern that,

A lot of feminists are able to, on the mere accusation, completely cripple men's careers. And that is actually going on now, NPR and PBS have been doing about two weeks of constant running right now where they're asking why politicians aren't being fired on the mere word of allegation. Whereas many private companies are firing people for mere allegation when no, we live in a society where rule of law is supposed to exist, and an accusation is not proven...that's what I mean where masculine traits are being turned into a hindrance...like now if I'm in a conversation with any woman, I actually have to record those conversations and document them for later in case they come back on me to prove that nothing sexual has been said. So in that sense, yes, it is harder to be a man.

This was his response to the question of whether he felt it was more difficult to be a man these days and expresses his anxieties about societal changes around gender. His response encapsulates

a sense that men and masculinity are under threat and that men are vulnerable to false claims of sexual harassment that could possibly dismantle their careers.

Anxiety about masculinity extended beyond a sense of threat. Some men expressed concerns about not being able to attain the masculine ideal, which they described as being athletic, strong, and financially stable. While Jordan, a White man in his early 20s who was in the process of joining the Navy, was able to achieve the first two masculine qualities, he found financial success elusive. When asked what it meant to be a man, he argued that it required “taking on a little more brute force responsibilities, picking up jobs, don’t be some bum in your mom’s basement.” After some hesitation, he admitted that he still lived with his parents, but added that he “helps pay what I can.” He continued, explaining that, “a lot of today’s generation, kids my age- I’m 22- we can’t afford housing with the jobs available nowadays...I’m a welder, but I have had a bad employment streak because of the economy.” He described a history of struggling to make ends meet and being laid off, which is what led him to the military. Being able to be a provider was a key aspect of masculinity for him, one which he admitted that he struggled to accomplish. Though he was hopeful about his prospects in the Navy, there was still an underlying anxiety about whether this would allow him financial stability and freedom from depending upon his parents, dependency that he viewed as antithetical to being a “real man.” Similarly, Nathan considered “being responsible for yourself” the central tenet of masculinity but found that because of what he perceived as a flagging economy, “financially it is more difficult to be a man these days.”

None of the men above discussed their anxiety about masculinity as influencing their interest in *My Little Pony*. Instead, they described being drawn to the show because it was popular, fun, and provided community. However, how they interacted with the community appeared to be shaped by their views around gender. Though again it is impossible to argue causality, it makes

sense that men who were anxious about masculinity engaged with the show and the community in such a way that distanced themselves from privilege while creating a space where they could be dominant. By transforming the show into something about men, they created a space for themselves where they held power, a space organized around their interests where they could enact a fantasy of dominance. The sexualization of the characters diffused the threat of feminine empowerment that they were intended to represent while also creating a fraternity-like atmosphere where men could celebrate masculinity. The addition of violent themes allowed men to similarly celebrate masculinity and communicate ownership of the space through the introduction of masculine symbols such as guns.

Relationship Between Deep Investment and Superficial Engagement

One might wonder how two such different groups coexist within a single community, particularly given their differing views on gender, privilege, and inequality. For the most part, men within each group move within different social spaces, belonging to different Facebook groups and attending different panels at conventions. However, some tension does exist, largely arising from concerns about reputation. For men who were superficially engaged, those who “take the show too seriously,” as Blake put it, reinforced stereotypes that Bronies were strange or “unhealthy.” For the most part, though, concerns about ‘undesirable Bronies’ around among men who were deeply invested, who worried that men who didn’t take the messages of the show to heart were insincere fans who twisted the show in inappropriate ways.

NSFW content was particularly a point of division among men in the community. Adam, a White man in his mid 20s, explained that the flagship Brony news website, Equestria Daily, had conducted a poll about NSFW content and found that “the results were split 50/50 as far as the group that did like it and those that did not like it at all.” He added that, “there are some people

with strong opinions about it, and there are definitely people who say that ‘this stuff should never exist’ and other people that will come back and argue strongly that artists are free to express themselves.” Several men who were deeply invested expressed concern about NSFW content, particularly the idea that children might stumble upon it. However, these men often emphasized that NSFW content was part of the “darker part of the fandom” perpetuated by a small number of “bad apples.” In fact, Tyler, a White man in his early 20s, believed that NSFW content in the fandom was the result of “trolls” rather than people who genuinely enjoyed it.

In general, the concern of men in the deep investment category was that the actions of those in the superficial engagement category might alienate the intended audience of the show, claiming space that doesn’t really belong to them. Josh expressed concern about the “sense of entitlement” of some within the community, those “adult male fans that just kind of assume that the show is only for them.” Such men were viewed as ruining the experience for children or pushing them out of the community. This was a frustration for Jason, an Asian American man in his mid 20s, who stated that his personal belief is that “[*My Little Pony*] belongs to the kids. Let the kids be the majority and we in our own little space shouldn’t interfere with it.”

What kept the community together, despite these differences, was the spirit of inclusion. Men across categories mentioned that what they liked best about the community was that it was accepting, allowing them to be themselves. Patrick lamented that it was an “unfortunate truth” that the community was “so accepting that they set a very, very low bar” that included “undesirable Bronies with extreme views.” However, this was viewed as an unavoidable side effect of inclusion and not something that he felt was easily changed. Acceptance was something participants saw as central to the community and a large part of what they felt made it unique, which kept these disparate groups within the community together despite any tension which existed between them.

Conclusion

These findings highlight the importance of considering variation within groups who engage in reconstituted forms of masculinity. This variation means that there is no single outcome of reconstituted forms of masculinity, but rather that these gender practices have different meanings and consequences based upon men's engagement with them. The two forms of engagement described above, deep investment and superficial engagement, are substantively different and led to two distinct perspectives on gender. As a result, reconstituted forms of masculinity may not simply reinforce inequality, nor do they simply challenge it. Instead, the story is more complex, with both possibilities existing simultaneously from different factions within communities that enact such gender practices.

In the case of Bronies, who are a largely homogenous group, their catalyst for involvement in the community seemed to most shape how men engaged with the show. Men who came to the show due to a crisis or emotional need in their lives seemed more open to the transformative possibilities of its messages, including empathy and understanding, which likely contributed to the fact that men within this group were also more likely to exhibit gender conscious views. Men who were drawn to the show out of a desire for entertainment were less likely to take the messages of the show as seriously and instead reinterpreted the show in such a way that made it about men-introducing the male gaze and asserting their power and privilege within the community. Men in the latter group were perhaps motivated by their anxieties around masculinity, which led them to attempt to neutralize the threat of an empowering show for girls by appropriating and transforming it. Men in this category also tended to hold more regressive views on gender, which were part-and-parcel of the way they interacted with the show. The objectification of women central to

superficial engagement, for instance, was paired with anti-feminist and misogynistic views toward women.

There were some men who I interviewed that did not fall neatly into either of these two categories. These categories are not intended to capture the full spectrum of men's engagement with *My Little Pony*, but rather to suggest something about masculinity. That is, that practices that appear to challenge hegemonic masculinity can be more *progressive* and more *regressive* than what is captured in the conflicting perspectives of masculinity represented by hybrid masculinities or inclusive masculinity theory. Instead, it is important to consider variation within groups that enact reconstituted forms of masculinity and the multiple possibilities for these gender practices.

The men who were deeply invested that I spoke to were not simply adopting the guise of a softer form of patriarchy; they were becoming more empathic, more generous, and more aware of gender inequality. I would not argue that these men represent a complete transformation in masculinity, but they certainly underwent personal transformation that offers a meaningful challenge- however small- to hegemonic masculinity. In contrast, the men in the superficial engagement category reinforced hegemonic masculinity, seemingly motivated by deep seated anxieties about masculinity for those men.

Better understanding this variation and what leads men to engage in these gender practices in different ways is important for those who wish to encourage more progressive forms of masculinity. These findings emphasize the promise of reconstituted forms of masculinity for creating positive change alongside their possibility for reinforcing systems of inequality.

CHAPTER 4. “I DON’T LIKE TO SEPARATE MYSELF BY GENDER”: WOMEN’S UNDERSTANDINGS OF GENDER AND GENDER PRACTICES IN THE BRONY COMMUNITY

Despite the gendered nature of the moniker, many women consider themselves Bronies. Though men are often considered the prototypical Brony by the media and those within the community, adult women make up a sizeable minority within the community. According to the 2014 “State of the Herd Report,” a fan-made online survey of the community, women made up about 18% of Bronies (herdcensus.com). Studying these women grants a more complete picture of gender within the Brony community, as well as the complex ways in which power relations operate within the space of the community.

Much scholarship on masculinities has examined how men simultaneously challenge and reinforce hegemonic masculinity and, by extension, power relations. Contradictory gender ideologies have been documented in several contexts as a way of understanding how contested masculinities often legitimize patriarchy even as they attempt to challenge some forms of men’s power (Heath 2003; Haenfler 2004; Greenebaum and Dexter 2017). For instance, men in the Straight Edge movement both attempt to redefine masculinity by rejecting substance use and aggression while also promoting a form of hypermasculinity that marginalizes women (Haenfler 2004). Despite this recognition of the nuanced ways in which men engage with power, considerably less work has theorized about how women do the same- often emphasizing women’s victimization or resistance rather than recognizing how they too challenge and reinforce power relations within spaces dominated by men.

Women have also largely been overlooked by the scholarship on reconstituted forms of masculinity, that is, men’s gender practices that appear to challenge hegemonic masculinity or

traditional norms for men. Both the perspective of hybrid masculinities and inclusive masculinity theory focus on the gender practices of men without examining women's responses to these practices. The work on hybrid masculinities discusses how men's practices reinforce power abstractly, suggesting that women are affected by these practices indirectly through the maintenance of structures of gender inequality (Bridges 2014; Pascoe and Bridges 2014). In contrast, inclusive masculinity theory disregards women- and gender relations- entirely (Anderson 2005, 2009; Anderson and McCormack 2018). While scholarship on hybrid masculinities at least acknowledges that men's practices impact gender relations more broadly, both perspectives still miss how women actively engage with reconstituted forms of masculinity.

In this chapter, I analyze the role of women within the Brony community, attending to the previously unexamined experiences of women within communities defined by reconstituted forms of masculinity. Specifically, I address the following questions: how do women navigate spaces defined by reconstituted forms of masculinity? How do women within these spaces both challenge and maintain power relations? I address these questions through an analysis of interviews with 13 women who are fans of *My Little Pony* and ethnographic observations at 4 *My Little Pony* fan conventions.

Accounting for Women in Theories of Reconstituted Masculinity

The two major perspectives on reconstituted forms of masculinity deal with women and gender relations in different ways, with both focusing on men in relative isolation. The perspective of hybrid masculinities examines how men's practices reinforce power abstractly, therefore missing how these practices may affect individuals directly (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). Inclusive masculinity theory, on the other hand, rejects the idea that gender is necessarily relational and thus does not connect men's practices to women or gender power structures (Anderson and McCormack

2018). The role of women in responding to and shaping reconstituted forms of masculinity is therefore unexamined, as women are left unaccounted for within the existing scholarship.

The perspective of hybrid masculinities primarily focuses on gender presentations of young, white heterosexual men and how the co-option of aspects of femininities and marginalized and subordinated masculinities reproduces inequality (Bridges 2014; Bridges and Pascoe 2014; McDowell 2017; Pfaffendorf 2017). Through these practices of incorporation, men distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity, while further obscuring inequality by appropriating victimhood (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). By claiming a victim status, men are able to position themselves as the oppressed rather than the oppressor and deny their role in sustaining systems of inequality. It is important to note that these processes have been observed by men across racial groups, sexual orientations, and social classes, suggesting that it is even more widespread than previously theorized (Young 2017; Barry 2018).

The theoretical framework of hybrid masculinities acknowledges gender relations in that men's practices are connected to larger systems of power and inequality (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). That is, hybrid masculinities represent a transformation in the way privilege operates, blurring boundaries and concealing inequality while also perpetuating gender and sexual inequality. Despite this connection to gender relations, scholarship on hybrid masculinities has not examined how women are directly affected by these gender practices or how women have actively responded to and shaped them. One notable exception is Fefferman and Upadhyay's (2018) analysis of hybrid masculinity and contraception management, which found that young men of color appear to help manage contraception use yet still place an undue burden on women in regard to pregnancy prevention. This study directly includes women's experiences and voices and suggests that women also play a role in "shap[ing] men's relatively circumscribed involvement"

in contraception (Fefferman and Upadhyay 2018: 388). However, they primarily focus on men's practices and do not explore in-depth how women's responses to these practices may shape hybrid masculinities or both challenge and sustain inequality. Thus, there remains a gap in the literature on hybrid masculinities in regard to the direct impact such practices have on women as well as how women actively respond to and engage with such practices.

Inclusive masculinity theory takes a more optimistic view of reconstituted forms of masculinity, arguing that such practices represent a transformation of masculinity (Anderson 2005, 2009; Anderson and McCormack 2018). Specifically, the theory argues that a decrease in 'homophobia,' the fear of appearing gay, has resulted in men contesting traditional (what Anderson refers to as 'orthodox') masculinity and embracing a more progressive form of masculinity (Anderson and McGuire 2010). This theory has largely been utilized in the scholarship on sports, often to discuss a decrease in homophobia among both athletes and fans as well as the facilitation of close friendships between men within the context of sport (Adams 2011; Cashmore and Cleland 2012; Jarvis 2013; Channon and Matthews 2015). However, it has also been applied to understand such diverse cases as the constructions of masculinity among working-class men (Roberts 2013) and the culture of young men YouTubers (Morris and Anderson 2015).

Inclusive masculinity theory focuses on how men construct masculinities that do not "degrade women or gay men in any measurable manner" and that encourage men to be "emotionally supportive of each other" (Anderson and McGuire 2010: 249). The theory does not suggest that such practices have any implications for women or gender relations, in part because it rejects the idea that gender is relational (Anderson and McCormack 2018). This rejection is predicated on the idea that gender categories are not always oppositional, particularly in more "inclusive times" (Anderson and McCormack 2018: 18). That is, they argue that masculinity is not

always constructed in relation to femininity if men are more open to incorporating femininity into their gender expressions. If men are rejecting homophobia and misogyny, as inclusive masculinity theory suggests, then they see no reason that men's practices might sustain inequality. This is tied to rejection of Connell's (1989) framework of multiple masculinities, as Anderson and McCormack (2018) argue that gender categories are not necessarily arranged hierarchically. This argument ignores the clear ties between men's power and privilege and women's oppression and marginalization that clearly continues to the present. In examining men's gender practices in isolation, they therefore fail to consider the mechanisms of privilege and oppression that are central to scholarly understandings of gender as a basis of stratification and inequality (Hess and Ferree 1987; Lorber 1994; Risman 1998).

By attending to women's experiences with and reactions to reconstituted forms of masculinity, I address a gap in the theoretical approaches to such practices. In particular, I examine how women actively respond to reconstituted forms of masculinity in ways that shape their implications for power relations. The Brony community provides an optimal case study for examining women's responses to reconstituted forms of masculinity in that it is a community that is dominated by men who incorporate femininities into their gender expressions yet includes a substantial minority of women. The size of the community means that women also must contend with the practices of their counterparts who are men, unlike other communities which are larger and more diverse. Further, the bounded nature of the community means that it is easier to identify those who participate in and would be impacted by such gender practices. This is in contrast to other cases of reconstituted forms of masculinity, for instance men feminists, in which engagement is based on ideology rather than community membership. Women's experiences in the Brony

community thus represents an extreme case that nevertheless allows us to uncover and examine what is otherwise subtle, mundane, or difficult to single out in other cases.

Context: Women in the Brony Community

Just as women have been overlooked by the scholarship on reconstituted forms of masculinity, they have also largely been ignored by the media coverage of Bronies. Instead, the discussion of Bronies in the popular press has almost exclusively focused on what men's love of the show means about masculinity (Wattercutter 2014; Vlahos 2014; Johnson 2014). However, a sizeable number of women are also fans of *My Little Pony* and participate in the Brony community. These women, sometimes referred to as 'Pegasisters,' discuss the show in online forums, attend *My Little Pony* conventions, organize and attend in-person meet-ups, dress up as the characters, and otherwise celebrate their love of the show alongside their counterparts who are men.

Though little has been written about women in the Brony community, an article in *The Village Voice* claims that such women are "exalted" among Bronies and receive "a level of respect that's uncommon in nerdy subcultures" (Toth 2015: 1). The same article mentions the existence of men who sexualize the show or who are creepy or predatory, but dismisses such aspects of the community as either the result of "unfortunate stereotypes" or representing only a small number of individuals within the fandom (Toth 2015: 1). This suggests that, despite being part of a community dominated by men, women are included within the community and do not face difficulties related to gender.

It would indeed be unique among fan communities dominated by men if women receive the level of exaltation and respect described by Toth (2015). In other communities that are dominated by men, such as the gamer community (fans of video games) or sports fans, women are often marginalized or rendered invisible by men (Esmonde et al. 2015; Paaßen et al. 2017; Gray

et al. 2017). Additionally, women in these spaces are often subjected to symbolic and real violence through violent and hyper-sexualized representations of women in video games and the harassment of women gamers (Gray et al. 2017). Gamergate, an online harassment campaign waged by men gamers against women in the video game industry in 2014, demonstrated the misogyny lurking below the surface of the community (Mortensen 2016). Similarly, women sports reporters have faced widespread harassment both online and in-person as a way of demeaning these women and asserting men's dominance within the hypermasculine space of sports (Mettler 2016; Deutsch 2017). The experience of women within fan communities dominated by men is therefore typically one of struggle.

What is different about the Brony community is that it is organized around a piece of media originally intended for young girls. *My Little Pony*, unlike sports and video games, is not considered masculine by society. The fact that the Brony community is a space in which men incorporate aspects of femininity- in other words, engage in reconstituted forms of masculinity- undoubtedly shapes gender relations within the community. The Brony community is dominated by men, yet also appears to challenge masculinity. The gender practices that men adopt that appear to challenge masculinity create a unique context for women in that these practices may reshape gender relations or- according to the perspective of hybrid masculinities- be another way of concealing and reifying gender inequality (Bridges and Pascoe 2014).

Analysis: Women's Sense-Making and Gender Practices in the Brony Community

I find that women make sense of gender within the Brony community in competing ways, simultaneously acknowledging men's practices that create gendered patterns of discomfort and marginalization while also downplaying the rule of gender inequality (and gender itself) in the community and valorizing men. As women sorted through their understanding of gender within

the community, they also reflected on the salience of gender to their identities as Bronies, at some times downplaying and at other times emphasizing their gender in the context of their own identities. The complex and conflicting ways in which women understood gender in the community in turn shaped their gender practices in the community. Women engaged in practices that simultaneously served to challenge and maintain power relations, which was most apparent through cosplay, women's creation of separate spaces, and the practices of women who pursued (and succeeded at) becoming 'horse famous.' These findings reveal the complex ways in which women engage in communities defined by reconstituted forms of masculinity and their role in shaping power within these spaces.

Competing Ways of Understanding Community

There was a tension in the way women discussed the Brony community, revealing two concurrent yet competing ways they made sense of gender within the community. On one hand, women recognized aspects of men's practices that caused them discomfort- particularly around sexualization of the characters- and shared instances in which they had experienced harassment. Women located this discomfort as directly tied to their gender, particularly the experience of being a minority within a space dominated by men. However, women also minimized these experiences and valorized men within the community, identifying men as victims of stigma who should be celebrated for breaking barriers. This tension led women to both acknowledge and deny the existence of gender inequality within the community and the salience of gender in their own identities as Bronies.

Recognizing Gendered Patterns of Discomfort and Marginalization

Women acknowledged discomfort related to their gender within the community and described this discomfort as a problematic result of men's actions. Women's discussion of discomfort primarily focused on unwanted sexual attention/harassment and uneasiness regarding sexualized or pornographic material produced by fans. Sex and sexuality are closely tied to gender, particularly in that what women found problematic in the community was the result of the sexualization and objectification of women. Women recognized that men violated their boundaries because they saw them first and foremost as sexual objects rather than respecting them as peers. This objectification extended beyond the treatment of human women to the sexualized artwork of ponies, which in turn led to women's feelings of marginalization within the community. Women did not use the term misogyny, though they recognized the results of it even as they resisted using that language.

Unwanted sexual attention, harassment, and boundary violation were widespread problems that women faced within the community. These experience often consisted of men "lurking" around women or making sexual advances. For instance, Chelsea, a White woman in her late 20s, shared a story where she was dressed as a background character in the show and a man dressed as another character often thought of as her character's love interest began bothering her. As she described,

He grabbed my hand and started trying to kiss my hand and started following me around and wanted me to be his date to one of the music events. It was very uncomfortable for him to just not be able to separate the show from real life. I get wanting to play along, but you gotta know where to stop. So this guy kind of kept following me and I just snuck into the girl's restroom and hid out until he left.

Chelsea's story illustrates a common experience that women shared, men's lack of respect for their personal boundaries. In her case, she was viewed as synonymous with her costume, a character who could be played with. These kinds of incidents are widespread enough that Bronycon has an official policy stating that "cosplay is not consent: just because someone is in costume, it doesn't give you permission to take a picture or touch their costume. Ask first, and if they tell you no, respect that." In their description of cosplay related harassment, women never referenced this policy (or similar policies at other conventions), and responded to such harassment as Chelsea did- by hiding in the women's restroom- rather than feeling there was an avenue through which they could report it.

Women's experiences of boundary violation extended beyond cosplay. Erin, a White woman in her late 20s, shared a story of an ongoing issue she had in her local meet-up group,

My worst experience in the community is actually surrounding a specific person in the community [who] really does not understand boundaries and has broken boundaries multiple times. I've asked him to kind of, like, stop, and he doesn't really respect that...he has made very uncomfortable sexual advances and I'm like, 'you know, you need to knock it off,' and he continues to do so. So, every time I see that person, I talk to that person, he breaks some type of line. It's just very uncomfortable for me...this person is pretty well known in our group and he has done it to many of the females in our group. It's just a very hurtful situation to the point where most of us don't really want to be in the same vicinity because we know that something is going to be said or a comment is going to be made, you know, it's just very inappropriate and uncomfortable.

While the fact that this was widely known in her meet-up group but this man was not asked to leave appears to reflect a structural issue in which such behavior wasn't addressed by other men

within the community (and was therefore tacitly accepted), Erin adopted an entirely individualist perspective. It was common across the interviews for women to attribute such behavior as the result of “bad apples” and not unique to the community.

Many of the same women also identified a certain level of discomfort as the inevitable result of the gender imbalance in the fandom. Chelsea explained that “[men lurking around women] falls into it being a more male-dominated fandom...there’s always a lot more attention on us when we go to these conventions because it’s like ‘oh, here’s someone of the opposite gender of me that’s into something I like’...so you take it with a grain of salt that it’s just people who are excited.” Similarly, Lisa, a White woman in her early 30s, lamented that men she doesn’t know often “hang around” her at conventions because “I’m a female and I’m there.” She therefore attributed unwanted sexual attention to being one of the only women in the space. Angela, a White woman in her early 40s, also dismissed the “locker room talk” she overheard from men Bronies that was “usually sexual, but also sexist” as being largely the result of the community being mostly comprised of men. Thus, incidents of harassment or discomfort were transformed into everyday frustrations that were viewed as part of the cost of being involved in what Chelsea referred to as a “male-dominated fandom.”

Women cited more than personal experiences when discussing harassment and discomfort, they also brought up instances in which harassment by Bronies was forgiven or swept under the rug by the community. An extreme situation that illustrated women’s perspectives on harassment within the community was the case of a YouTuber named “Toon Kritic.” This individual was a popular member of the community who made videos analyzing aspects of the show. In early 2018, allegations emerged that he had solicited sex from a 14 year-old girl, also a Brony YouTuber, who was a fan of his work. After this, other Bronies (both men and women) came out saying that he

had sexually harassed or groped them at conventions. As this situation was unfolding around the time that I conducted interviews, participants sometimes brought up Toon Kritic as a way of discussing the atmosphere around sexual harassment and abuse in the community. Holly, a White woman in her mid 20s, described the Toon Kritic situation as her worst experience in the community in part because of the community's response to the incident. She expressed frustration that the community was "split" in their responses, with some feeling "glad that he's finally getting what he deserves" (i.e. punishment for sexual misconduct) and the other acting "more concerned with optics...the public perception of the community." She was alarmed by prominent members of the Brony community who made excuses for Toon Kritic or defended his behavior. Through their discussion of Toon Kritic, women struggled with both identifying bad behavior as the result of individual bad actors and recognizing groups within the community that at times permitted or forgave such behavior.

Another result of misogyny that women identified was the proliferation of pornographic artwork related to the show. 'Not safe for work' (NSFW) material, also referred to as 'clop' within the community, can be widely found online and in-person at conventions. This often takes the form of anthropomorphized drawings of the ponies with exaggerated breasts and human genitalia in sexualized poses or engaging in sex acts with each other (or the male characters). Most conventions do not allow NSFW material to be sold out in the open. Instead, it is either censored or sold behind the counter- offered to those who ask to see it. However, though hardcore material is rarely openly sold, risqué artwork is quite common. Pin-up type drawings of the characters are widely sold in the vendor hall at conventions, as well as body pillows featuring scantily clad ponies (for instance, anthropomorphized ponies in bikinis). Female characters were often denied agency in this artwork. For instance, a common trope was for a character to be struggling (and failing) to keep herself

covered, suggesting violation as well as sexual titillation. Additionally, NSFW material includes erotic stories, which are posted on fanfiction sites and sometimes featured in late-night panels rated 18+ in which authors read such stories aloud.

Although women themselves were not the direct target of this sexualization, many felt it created an environment that was unwelcoming to them. While not all women were uncomfortable with this material- for instance, Angela said that it wasn't her thing but that it didn't really bother her- most women felt that NSFW material was in some way problematic. However, women did not frame this problem as related to gender. Instead, they described NSFW material as eroding the wholesomeness and innocence that they loved about the show. For instance, Kelly, a White preschool teacher in her mid 20s, explained that she didn't like "drawings and stuff that are sexual" because "I think my favorite part about *My Little Pony* is the innocence and escape from all that stuff, and I think it takes away some of the appeal when people turn it into something like that." Further, women attributed the existence of this material to people's "sick fantasies," again adopting an individualist perspective that was also gender-neutral.

Though women did not discuss NSFW material in terms of gender, they did discuss the lengths to which it pushed them out of certain spaces- spaces which are otherwise central to the community. Kelly, for example, stated that she "stays more on the surface" of the online community in order to avoid sexual content. She explained she avoids entire websites like Tumblr, Reddit, and 4Chan because the ubiquity of sexualized images on those sites. Melissa, a biracial 19 year-old student, described leaving an online community dedicated to roleplaying as characters from the show because others in the community were "really gross" and "things got weird." Although she declined to go into detail, it was clear from her description of events that men had tried to engage in "erotic roleplay" with her and/or sent her unsolicited sexual messages.

At conventions, Chelsea described avoiding certain places within the vendor hall where NSFW art was typically kept. Similarly, Kate, a White woman in her early 20s, said that she only attends “day stuff” where “everybody’s nice and its kid friendly” and avoids “after dark stuff” where she felt she would encounter “gross” or “inappropriate” content. In my own observations, women disappeared from conventions after 9pm, typically when more adult panels began and where NSFW art was allowed to be sold. Even as women did not identify NSFW material as having to do with gender, they described gendered patterns of exclusion that resulted from it.

The way women made sense of harassment and sexualized material reveals the nuanced ways in which women understood gender within the Brony community. Women both recognized systemic issues stemming from the community being dominated by men and adopted an individualist perspective that attributed negative aspects of the community to “bad apples” with “sick fantasies.” Women thus struggled to make sense of the discomfort and marginalization that they described in the community, both understanding it as related to gender and downplaying the role gender played in favor of a more individualist, rather than structural, perspective.

Valorizing Men

Despite the difficulties women described due to the fandom being dominated by men, they paradoxically celebrated men’s involvement in the community and felt it was good that men liked *My Little Pony*. Most women also sympathized with men, expressing a perception that women had it easier than men in terms of being a Brony. Given that *My Little Pony* was designed for girls, women felt that there was less social stigma for them to like it than their peers who were men. Women therefore valorized men for being Bronies despite the social stigma and legitimized men’s claims of victimhood. Through this, women reinforced the idea that men’s involvement in *My Little Pony* was more meaningful and important than their own while also facilitating men’s

practices of concealing inequality. The way women discussed men, particularly contrasted with their discussion of harassment and sexualized imagery, demonstrates the tension women felt between acknowledging structures of inequality within the community and downplaying them in such a way that ultimately benefitted men.

When directly discussing gender in the community, most women expressed the idea that men faced more stigma for liking the show. Ashley, a White woman in her late 20s who was married to another Brony, said that she faced some stigma because the show was not age-appropriate for her, but that for men it was also not gender-appropriate. The idea that someone was “too old for cartoons” was also considered less damaging than the stereotypes that men faced. As Kelly explained,

I definitely think there's less stigma for women, 'cause I guess people think it's for girls. So in a way there's less stigma around it [for women]. People still think it's strange because of our age, but they understand it a little more because people get nostalgic for the older toys, so they think 'oh, maybe they had them as kids' or whatever. I definitely think it is harder for guys. I've seen guys post in the group that their parents are disapproving or won't buy them merchandise or get upset when they buy merchandise. I haven't seen that as much from women that I recall at all. So definitely men struggle more with it.

This line of thinking was common, with women often emphasizing that men faced immense difficulty due to liking something coded feminine and therefore not socially acceptable for them. Just as some men claimed a victim status as a way of denying their privilege, women highlighted the stigma men faced *outside* of the community as a way of minimizing the importance of how gender operated *inside* of the community. Men were given a pass due to their “struggle,” as women expressed great sympathy and admiration for men due to their purported challenge to gender

norms. Many women brought up instances in which they defended men fans to their friends and family, challenging stereotypes that labeled such men as pedophiles or perverts. Men were therefore viewed as victims in need of protection and defense from the outside world.

Due to the perception of men's struggle with the stigma of being a Brony, women often celebrated men for liking *My Little Pony*. Women framed men's love of the show as "brave" and "admirable" in that it challenged gender stereotypes. As Angela put it,

The stigma around liking an animated show aimed at 8-12 year-old girls, there is, especially for male members of the fandom, there is a stigma around liking anything that's girly...the folks that blow me away are the guys that live in the deep South that go out and slap cutie marks on their cars and have their windows painted with *My Little Pony*, those guys have it hard. I've lived a hard life, I've had a lot of issues in my own life and I can't even imagine wearing their pride and their passion like they do in the Midwest. I can't even imagine what that's like for them. Like, mad props to them. Those are the folks standing against that like, toxic bias, if you will.

This quote demonstrates the valorization of men that was common among women and the idea that men were somehow heroic about being open about their love of the show. Angela minimizes her own difficult experiences in life in comparison to what she images the men who openly like *My Little Pony* face in what she identifies as more hostile areas of the country (the South and Midwest). Through this, she placed the struggles of men above her own. Additionally, her quote reveals how women saw Bronies as drivers of social change, standing against "toxic" elements of masculinity. This was despite elements of "toxic masculinity" that women acknowledged existed within the community.

The view that Bronies that were men were change-makers extended to the idea that their appreciation of *My Little Pony* changed societal views of cartoons and children's programming-

as well as gender. Ashley argued that Bronies “broke barriers,” which has “changed the standard of watching television.” She regarded Bronies as elevating cartoons, leading to a greater appreciation of the medium by challenging the assumption that cartoons should not be taken seriously. Many women also suggested that men Bronies challenged what it meant to be a man, enacting positive change for gender. For instance, Chelsea discussed men’s involvement in the Brony community as having the potential for shifting the meanings of masculinity, saying,

I think it’s a wonderful thing [that men like *My Little Pony*]. It really shows that there’s starting to be a separation of what we consider masculine and what we consider feminine and how it’s okay to be into feminine things or to be into masculine things. I really hope that it leaves some imprint on society that [men] don’t have to be this classic sense of what masculine is, what boys can be into.

Similarly, Kate felt that Bronies are “challenging what it means to be a man” in a good way, showing “it’s okay to like girly stuff.” By valorizing men and their involvement with *My Little Pony*, women reinforced men’s centrality in the community and the idea that men’s actions are more meaningful and important than women’s.

Women’s attitudes toward men in the fandom in many ways mirror the treatment of men in feminized workplaces. Scholarship on the ‘glass escalator’ suggests that men in feminized occupations such as nursing and social work may experience some stigma, but are also awarded structural advantages (Williams 1992; Hultin 2003; Cognard-Black 2012; Stokes 2015). In particular, Stokes (2015) study of the fashion industry found that men in the industry are often celebrated and taken seriously in ways that their women colleagues are not. Even though fan communities are very different than workplaces, men’s interest in a cultural product (such as a children’s TV show) is taken more seriously and understood as carrying more social importance

(such as the potential for social change) than women's interest. Further, men are celebrated for their courage in breaking social norms by their women counterparts, even when they do so in such a way that sometimes results in women's discomfort or marginalization.

What is unique about the Brony community is that men within the community are engaging in reconstituted forms of masculinity. The perspective of hybrid masculinities suggests that men's appropriation of a victim status when incorporating aspects of femininities (or marginalized and subordinated masculinities) is a way of concealing, and therefore, reinforcing, inequality (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). By emphasizing the stigma men face, women engaged in discourse that legitimized men's claims of victimhood. This suggests at least in part that men's claims of victimhood were successful in concealing inequality in this instance, as women appeared to not only take these claims seriously, but viewed gender within the community through the lens of men's victimhood. As such, women did not directly discuss gender inequality in the community, even as they described instances in which they experienced its effects.

Understandings of inequality were therefore complicated for women due to their sympathy toward men for experiencing stigma for liking the show and their perception that men were challenging- and perhaps transforming- gender through their participation in the community. This demonstrates the effectiveness of practices associated with hybrid masculinity in shaping the narrative around gender in these spaces. That is, men were able to effectively distance themselves from privilege and conceal inequality such that women framed gender in the Brony community as being primarily about men's victimhood and purported challenge to masculinity rather than inequality. This was the case even as women actively recognized and acknowledged their own discomfort and marginalization within the community.

Salience of Gender in Women's Identities as Bronies

Women's competing sense of gender within the community also extended to their discussion of the salience of gender in their own identities as Bronies. That is, women at times identified as 'female Bronies' or 'Pegasisters,' emphasizing the importance of gender in their identities and experiences within the community, while at other times rejecting the notion that their identities and experiences were gendered. This point of contention further reveals the nuances in how women made sense of gender in the community, both emphasizing and downplaying gender.

Women's reluctance to attribute patterns of discomfort and marginalization to gender while also emphasizing the role of gender in shaping men's victimization was tied to their ambivalence toward gender in their discussions of their own identities within the community. This was best illustrated in women's conflicting relationship toward the term 'Pegasister,' a woman-specific counterpart to the 'Brony' label. Some women felt that Pegasister provided much needed representation of them as women within the community. For instance, Jennifer, a White woman in her mid 20s, stated that "I consider myself to be a Pegasister, which would be like the female Brony...because Brony is mostly used to describe men and I prefer the woman term." Similarly, Ashley said that she felt it was a "pretty" and "elegant" term that "represents females" in a way that Brony does not.

However, the majority of women disliked the term Pegasister and felt that they were Bronies first and that gender did not (or should not) play an important role in their identities within the community. For these women, being singled out with a gender-specific term was 'othering,' suggesting that they were not truly part of the community. Abby, a White woman in her early 20s, was vehemently opposed to the term, saying "I hate when people call me a Pegasister, 'cause I don't like to separate myself by gender." She felt that the term Brony was "more inclusive" as an

umbrella term, despite the fact that Brony itself is based upon masculine-specific language (as a combination of ‘bro’ and ‘pony’). Erin too felt that Pegasister as a term was “very isolating,” because “you have to be a woman to get called [Pegasister] so Brony, to me, sounds a lot more accepting.” Through the rejection of Pegasister, women downplayed gender in their identity within the community- identifying as Bronies first and woman second as opposed to those who framed their identity as Pegasisters or ‘female Bronies.’

The fact that the dominant mode of framing gender and identity for women in the community was one that subsumed women into the men’s category speaks to the way women downplayed gender in their own identities and experiences as Bronies. The tension between women’s acknowledgement of gendered patterns of discomfort and marginalization and women’s celebration of men was in part due to women’s rejection of thinking of their identities within the community as gendered. As women did not view gender as salient in their identities as Bronies, it was easier not to view it as a meaningful way of organizing their interactions within the community. Thus, gender was downplayed as an explanation for their negative experiences within the community, even as they at times recognized that these experiences were happening to them because they were women. Instead, they emphasized the importance of gender in the community for *men*, particularly as it related to the stigmatization of their identities outside of the community.

Challenging and Maintaining Power Relations

Women’s patterns of making sense of gender, particularly in downplaying gender as it related to themselves as women and emphasizing it when it related to men’s victimization, facilitated the concealment of inequality in the community. This in turn shaped women’s gender practices within the community, as they engaged in practices that both challenged and maintained power relations. However, women’s agency was constrained by their lack of power within the

community, largely meaning that even their attempts at empowerment were *personally* empowering without transforming power relations in the community. Thus, women's practices inadvertently often led to the maintenance of power relations. These mechanisms were best illustrated by women's participation in cosplay, their creation of separate spaces on Facebook, and the practices of those who achieved status within the community- becoming what was commonly referred to as 'horse famous.'

Cosplay

Cosplay is a form of performance art which involves dressing up as, and taking on the persona of, a character from a piece of media (Gn 2011). Cosplay was a site through which women both created opportunities for empowerment and sought men's acceptance and approval. Women framed cosplay as empowering, doing so in such a way that subverted the notion that such costumes were intended for the male gaze. However, women also engaged in cosplay in a way that was primarily for men's entertainment. In the Brony community, cosplay often involved the crafting of elaborate costumes of characters within the show, allowing for creativity and self-expression. While men often wore military themed attire, paintball armor, or full-body pony suits, women typically wore homemade ball gowns or more revealing or sexualized clothing. Because of this, women's bodies were typically on display in a way that was uncommon for men.

Women were most valued and celebrated in the community when they were in positions in which their embodiment as women was utilized in ways that entertained men. For example, women who lent their voices to fan-made animations or whose bodies became canvases for costumes through cosplay. Whenever women were featured at conventions as community guests (that is, featured guests who were not officially affiliated with the show), it was usually in this capacity. Even though women are in the minority in the community, they were more often the winners of

cosplay competitions at conventions. It was common for women in cosplay to be stopped and asked to take pictures with men attendees or treated like celebrities. Cosplay was thus one of the few opportunities women had to gain recognition in the community. This attention was something that women valued and enjoyed. For instance, Abby described how, when in costume, “people come up to me, I see people taking pictures from across the room...it’s something you can’t really explain unless you’ve done it.” This positive attention from men was something that Lisa also relished, describing the feeling of having a crowd around her as one of the enjoyable things about cosplaying. While sometimes this attention became uncomfortable (as previously discussed), it was something that women sought after so long as their boundaries were respected.

Although women often played up their sexuality in their costumes and enjoyed the attention they received from men, they also resisted the idea that cosplay was intended for the male gaze or men’s entertainment and instead reframed it as a path to personal empowerment. Many women discussed cosplay as a form of artistic expression. Brooke, a White woman in her late 30s, dismissed the idea that what she did was “cosplay,” and instead used the term “costuming,” relating her homemade *My Little Pony* costumes as being akin to “full Victorian [attire] at Dickens Fair.” She discussed the artistry of costuming and the amount of time she has spent putting together costumes for herself and her group of friends. Through her use of language (costuming instead of cosplay), she elevated what she did, while also emphasizing the research and work that went into her costumes. While this reframing was meaningful to Brooke and other women who discussed cosplay in such a manner, it was unclear if the way these women thought of cosplay impacted the mainstream community.

Women also used the performative aspect of cosplay to explore aspects of themselves that might otherwise be considered unsuitable or difficult to embody within a space dominated by men.

For example, Holly rattled off a long list of characters she has cosplayed and said that cosplaying allowed her to tap into “the most confident, the most outgoing side of myself that I really want to incorporate.” She described one particular cosplay she did of a character called Daybreaker, the powerful, aggressive alter-ego of the benevolent Princess Celestia. Holly explained that upon seeing Daybreaker in the show, she felt “I need her in my life, because I’m like an outgoing, bubbly type, so when I see someone who is a powerful aggressor, I’m like ‘I need this in my life.’” Women were particularly drawn to female antagonists in the show, such as Daybreaker, in part because they were able to express aggression, power, and strength. One of the most popular cosplays for women was Queen Chrysalis, a brilliant schemer and fiercely powerful (and evil) pony. By inhabiting such characters, women were empowered to express more aggressive, strong sides of themselves and challenge the notion that women should be demure and agreeable.

Despite women’s reframing of cosplay as personally empowering, it still often consisted of women donning sexualized costumes in part for the entertainment of men. There is a debate in the literature on gender and sexuality about whether such sexualization is an example of empowerment or objectification (e.g. Lamb 2010; Gavey 2012). This dichotomy, however, is overly simplistic. Instead, women navigate a terrain in which the meanings of their sexualized attire are constantly negotiated (Loe 1996; Beaver 2014). Women’s practices related to sexualization must be understood in a context in which they may both choose to don sexualized attire for their own enjoyment while also feeling pressured to do so for men’s entertainment (Beaver 2014). Additionally, women’s agency in defining the meanings behind cosplay is constrained by their lack of power within the context of the Brony community. Even when women attempt to elevate cosplay as costuming or understand their cosplay as a way of expressing a form of femininity that challenges traditional notions of gender, these meanings do not necessarily filter

out to the larger community. Men have the power in the community to impose their own meanings upon women's practices, and do so in such a way that often understands women's cosplay as existing for the male gaze.

Thus, women's engagement in cosplay is simultaneously a path for women's personal empowerment and an activity that serves to maintain power relations within the space of the Brony community. Even as women attempt to transform the meanings behind cosplay, they still engage in a practice that reinforces the idea that women in Brony spaces are there for men's entertainment. This illustrates the complexity of women's practices within Brony spaces as they navigate a space in which their understandings of how gender operates within the community are conflicting and they have little power.

Creating Space

In order to avoid aspects of the community that created discomfort for them, women described creating alternative spaces for themselves online. Within these spaces, women could exert greater control over the content they were exposed to and the people they allowed in. In this way, they were empowered to make space for themselves and control these spaces, allowing women to engage with the community on their own terms and challenge elements of the mainstream community that reinforced men's power. However, by self-segregating, women also were not always represented in, and therefore had less impact on, the larger community.

Facebook was a vital tool for women to create space. The privacy structures of Facebook made it an excellent tool through which women could create separate spaces that allowed them control over the members of groups and what content was posted. For instance, women could create groups in which sexualized content was strictly policed- such as the group Ashley ran that banned "pornography, erotica, and bloody, violent, or creepy content." If a member of the group

tried to post content that violated these rules, their post would be immediately taken down and they would be ejected from the group. This was key to creating spaces where women could avoid sexualized content and “locker room talk.” Online, unlike in in-person meet-ups or conventions, physicality did not limit women’s ability to exclude harassers and those who made them uncomfortable. Instead of having to worry about kicking out a man who might be physically imposing, they were simply able to press a button to eject someone from the group.

Perusing the member lists of the groups participants were a part of on Facebook, they had a more even gender balance than others I’d encountered. Some women even belonged to groups where they were able to primarily surround themselves with other women fans. Brooke, for example, described herself as a “female Brony surrounded by other female Bronies with one token male Brony.” Because of this, she said her friends were “insulated as a group” from problems such as “mansplaining” or harassment. Even in groups where men were included, which was more common than not, women were able to control the *type* of men who were allowed to be a part of the community- expelling men who behaved inappropriately or expressed chauvinistic attitudes.

By needing to avoid certain online communities or spaces at conventions (such as events that occurred after dark), women self-segregated. This meant that these women were opting out of being able to shape the mainstream Brony community, instead operating in their own, separate groups within the community. Because they were in their own online groups and less present at the conventions, they were less visible. In creating space, women did not challenge what they identified as problematic aspects of the community. Instead, they cordoned themselves off in safe spaces without engaging the community regarding the issues that drove them to their own spaces in the first place. This inadvertently led to a maintenance of the status quo in the mainstream community, even as women felt driven out of that space. The Facebook communities they created,

however, were tightly-knit and meaningful to the women who shaped them. These spaces provided women distance from the “darker side of the fandom” and gave them more control over who they interacted with and the terms of those interactions.

Becoming ‘Horse Famous’

Some of the women I interviewed were able to achieve high-profile roles within the community, which in Brony parlance was described as becoming ‘horse famous’ (that is, famous in the community). For instance, Angela was on the board of directors of one of the major *My Little Pony* conventions and thus had a say in how the convention was run. She was also a big part of the online Brony community, including writing and posting fanfiction. Her position in the community was hugely beneficial for her, including becoming a paid job. Similarly, Abby worked for a company that sells *My Little Pony* merchandise. Her job was to give out merchandise and make unboxing videos to promote the company. One of the benefits of her central role in the community that she identified was that she was able to get tickets to the world premiere of the *My Little Pony* movie in New York City. Being well-known in the community meant getting to rub shoulders with the voice actors and writers for the show and have access to unique opportunities such as the movie premiere. As a result of these positions, women were able to have an impact on the larger community. However, the trade-off was that these individuals became emotionally and financially invested in the community. As such, despite being in positions of influence, they were reluctant to challenge the status quo. This led to many women minimizing gender inequality within the community to protect the community that had benefitted them as individuals, even when it was at the expense of women as a group.

Women who had achieved some measure of success within the community were protective (and concerned) about the its reputation. Abby insisted unequivocally that men and women were

treated equally in the community, while Lisa stated that “within the Brony community itself, nobody really cares [about gender].” This was despite these individuals’ acknowledgement elsewhere in our interviews of being treated differently because of their gender. Regardless, they minimized these experiences and claimed that gender was not an issue.

Women’s suggestion that gender was not an issue within the Brony community appeared to stem at least in part from a concern with community reputation, an issue that was raised several times within the interviews with women. For instance, Angela explained that “how the community appears on the outside...that’s always on my mind.” She stressed that the actions of “bad actors,” such as Toon Kritic, were not representative of the community and that it was important for the community to “move past” his actions. She reiterated multiple times that “the whole reputation thing is important to me, it matters to me.” This concern with reputation and hesitation to criticize the community meant that these women were less willing to use their unique perspectives as minorities within the community to enact change.

In my own observations, I witnessed multiple examples of women who appeared to ‘buy in’ to the structures that supported gender inequality within the community for their own personal benefit. For instance, there was a woman at the “Artist Alley After Dark” at Trotcon selling NSFW art that sexually objectified the female characters of the show. I noted that her table received a lot of attention, and so she certainly had a stake in the aspect of sexualization in the fandom. Speaking to women who sold art (of all types) at conventions, the consensus was that sexualized art sold the best. It was therefore financially lucrative for women to produce and sell such art, regardless of their own feelings about it. In this sense, the few women who were able to benefit from the systems of men’s power that elevated women who played into men’s desires were complicit in maintaining power relations.

The women who pursued success in the Brony community and became ‘horse famous’ in many ways were simply adopting the strategy of “lean in,” playing the game to get a seat at the table and accepting the status quo (Sandberg 2013). As ‘horse famous’ women benefitted from the structures that otherwise served to marginalize women as a group (for instance, sexual objectification), they were reluctant to challenge these structures. Furthermore, they refrained from critiquing the community (particularly as it related to gender inequality), instead focusing on the reputation of Bronies at the expense of calling for change.

Conclusion

If reconstituted forms of masculinity are an increasingly common way of concealing and entrenching inequality, as suggested by Bridges and Pascoe (2014), then the way women respond to these gender practices says something about how inequality is sustained. Men’s co-option of aspects of femininities and marginalized and subordinated masculinities allows men to distance themselves from privilege while maintaining inequality, in part by appropriating a victim status (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). These findings suggest that women play a role in legitimizing this victim status, and therefore in concealing- and reinforcing- inequality. This served to create a situation in which women downplayed the importance of gender in shaping their experiences within the community yet emphasized how gender was meaningful in organizing men’s experiences. That is, women prioritized men’s experiences of victimization over their own descriptions of gendered patterns of discomfort and marginalization, demonstrating men’s success in concealing inequality within the community through their claim of a victim status.

While women exerted agency in the way they navigated the Brony community, they did so in a context in which they were constrained by their lack of power. As such, women often engaged in gender practices that ultimately served to maintain power relations even as they in some ways

challenged them. These practices that served to maintain power relations were facilitated by women's minimization of gender in their own identities and understandings of the community. By making negative aspects of the community about bad individuals, it was possible to ignore gender inequality even as women acknowledged negative experiences. Additionally, in identifying as Bronies first rather than aligning themselves primarily with their gender, they were able to evaluate their practices in the community as whether they were individually empowering or personally beneficial rather than their impact on women as a group.

While these findings speak specifically to how women respond to reconstituted forms of masculinity, they relate more broadly to how women navigate spaces dominated by men. For instance, there is evidence that women sports fans balance traditional gender dynamics by stepping outside the boundaries of traditional feminine entertainment while also reproducing gender stereotypes (Kissane and Winslow 2016). For instance, women challenge assumptions about what is 'feminine' or appropriate for women to like by participating in sport fan culture. However, they may make sense of this departure from conventional femininity by aligning themselves with masculinity and reinforcing misogynistic views about women- claiming that they are 'not like other women' in a way that suggests that they are better by virtue of their proximity to masculinity. In other spaces, such as conservative religious movements, women also navigate between maintaining and challenging patriarchal norms (e.g. Manning 1999; Leamaster and Einwohner 2018). These findings may thus aid in recognizing the active role women play in responding to and shaping power dynamics.

CHAPTER 5. RELATIONS OF HYBRIDITY AND THE RESHAPING OF PRIVILEGE

The story of Bronies is a story of how individuals with power and privilege adopt the practices of marginalized groups in such a way that both challenges and maintains power, as well as how marginalized groups themselves respond to such practices. Though the specifics of this case relate to gender, scholars are increasingly recognizing the similarities of processes across systems of inequality- see for instance the parallels in Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organizations and Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations. The fans of *My Little Pony* (Bronies) provide insight into the mechanisms through which both men and women challenge and maintain power relations and contribute not only to our understanding of gender and masculinities, but reveal how privilege, power, and inequality may operate more generally.

Engaging in reconstituted forms of masculinity is one way in which privileged groups, specifically men, make sense of privilege. The meanings that men had for these gender practices were not monolithic, but demonstrate the nuance in how groups relate to privilege. In their discussions of masculinity, men were hyper-aware of changes in the status quo. They discussed how masculinity was at a crossroads and debated whether it was even meaningful anymore at all. Some expressed anxiety about these shifts, which in turn was related to engaging in practices that reinforced men's power. Other men were more open to change and acknowledged gender inequality and their own privilege in such a way that suggested a move toward a more progressive form of masculinity. As men negotiated the meanings of masculinity, they therefore engaged in practices that both challenge and reinforced systems of power.

Women within the Brony community revealed how marginalized groups understand and respond to the practices of dominant groups. I found that women adopted competing

understandings of gender within the community, downplaying the role of gender in shaping their experiences and therefore the role of gender inequality in general within the community. As a result, women navigated the Brony community in such a way that simultaneously challenged and maintained power relations. In particular, women pursued personal empowerment while also engaging in practices that conserved men's power.

These findings reveal that dominant groups may make sense of privilege in different ways, and that practices that appear to challenge power may have multiple meanings with different implications for systems of inequality. Further, I highlight the agency of marginalized groups- even when it is constrained by their relative lack of power- and how such groups' responses to the practices of dominant groups shape power relations. Regarding gender more specifically, I nuance and extend scholarship on reconstituted forms of masculinity to understand not just the meanings of men's practices, but also their implications for gender relations. This is best illustrated not simply by viewing the findings on men and women separately, but as part of the larger picture of gender dynamics within the Brony community.

Relations of Hybridity

These findings highlight gaps within the two major theories of reconstituted forms of masculinity, inclusive masculinity theory and hybrid masculinities. Instead, I propose the concept of *relations of hybridity* to describe how both men and women engage *in* and *with* reconstituted forms of masculinity in ways that both challenge and maintain gendered systems of power. 'Relations' highlights the relationships between different groups in shaping reconstituted forms of masculinity and their implications for power relations instead of simply focusing on men. Men, who themselves are varied in the forms and meanings of their gender practices, and women all participate in processes that are vital pieces of the larger puzzle of reconstituted forms of

masculinity. ‘Hybridity’ refers to both the blending of disparate practices found in reconstituted forms of masculinity (referencing hybrid masculinities) and to the combination of practices with conflicting meanings and consequences for power relations.

In bringing together the findings on men and women, one can see the larger story of how relations of hybridity operate. In this section, I review and synthesize the findings from the two analytical chapters on men and women, bringing together these findings to illustrate the major pillars of relations of hybridity- (1) how men and women’s practices work together to conceal inequality and shift the conversation about gender and (2) how these practices also contest masculinity and challenge power relations.

Concealing Inequality, Shifting the Conversation about Gender

The perspective of hybrid masculinities posits that men’s practices that appear to challenge masculinity are a way of reproducing inequality. Bridges and Pascoe (2014) identify three major consequences associated with these gender practices, including discursive distancing, strategic borrowing, and fortifying boundaries. They argue that men distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity by framing themselves as outside of the problem of gender inequality or as ‘good men,’ denying their own role in the gender power structure. Additionally, men who engage in hybrid masculinities appropriate the practices of marginalized groups for their own benefit, typically in ways that reinforce power (for instance, they give the example of straight men adopting the ‘emotionality’ of gay men in order to pick up women). Finally, they conceal inequality by blurring the lines between groups without disrupting power relations.

My findings support the idea that some men do indeed engage in practices that reify power in similar ways. Men who were superficially engaged in the Brony community obscured privilege by claiming that men and women were treated equally in the community and positioning

themselves as victims of stigmatization by the outside world. In doing so, men framed the conversation about gender in the community around themselves and their struggles as a result of breaking gender norms. In talking about gender in the community, superficially engaged men highlighted the difficulties men faced as Bronies in society, contrasting this with the relative ease of being a woman and a Brony. This itself merely illustrates hybrid masculinities at work. However, the examination of how women interpreted and responded to these practices adds something new.

Further, men's discourse around victimization shaped the way women thought about gender in the community. Women too discussed gender in the community as being primarily about *men*, and they legitimized men's claims of victimhood by repeating the narrative that men had it more difficult than themselves due to stigmatization. The narratives about gender that superficially engaged men pushed in the community therefore shifted the conversation around gender not just among these men, but among women as well. Thus, despite women's recognition of gendered patterns of discomfort and marginalization (for instance, sexual harassment) they downplayed the role gender played in shaping these experiences. This related to how women viewed the salience of gender in their own identities as Bronies, with many women seeing themselves as Bronies who happened to be women rather than women Bronies- a distinction that highlighted a lack of viewing their own experiences through a gendered lens, even when they utilized such a perspective for understanding the experiences of men.

Men thus reframed privilege and inequality within the community such that they were victims of oppression and women the ones with the privilege to break norms without stigmatization. Women internalized and legitimized this reframing, which further justified it in the eyes of men. When men said that their friends who were women didn't mention being treated

differently in the community because of their gender, they felt justified in claiming that gender inequality was not a problem in the Brony community and that their framing of the situation was correct. Women were also motivated to engage in practices that maintained inequality by a system that rewarded them as individuals for supporting the marginalization of themselves as a group (for example, making money selling sexualized artwork). This was facilitated by women feeling a lack of identification with other women in the community as a group. In participating in such practices, women played a role in concealing privilege and reinforcing inequality.

By ignoring the role of marginalized populations in responding to reconstituted forms of masculinity, the perspective of hybrid masculinities has missed a piece of the larger puzzle of how these practices reinforce power. Men's gender practices in the Brony community did not just reinforce power abstractly, but had a direct effect on women. For instance, the discomfort women described in their interviews often stemmed from practices related to superficial engagement such as sexualized artwork of the characters. However, it is even more important to understand the active role that women played in shaping the way gender and inequality were understood within the community. By legitimizing men's victim narrative and valorizing them for breaking barriers, women facilitated men's practices of concealing inequality and contributed to community understandings of gender that shifted the conversation away from acknowledging women's marginalization within the community.

This is not to blame women for their own oppression, but rather to recognize the complex ways gender operated within the community and women's agency in navigating the community. Instead of viewing women as passive participants in the community or victims, this work highlights how women actively both challenge and maintain power relations within spaces dominated by men. The dynamic between men and women was important in shaping gender in the

community. Without men's reframing of gender within the community, women would have perhaps been more likely to understand their experiences within the community as gendered and attempt to challenge men's power. In turn, women's acceptance and reproduction of such narratives legitimized and reinforced the concealment of inequality.

Contesting Masculinity, Challenging Power Relations

In the debate in the literature about the meanings behind reconstituted forms of masculinity, scholars have largely either argued that such forms of masculinity represent a move toward progress (Anderson 2005, 2009) or are a way of reinforcing inequality (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). This is represented by the two major theoretical perspectives on the subject- inclusive masculinity theory and the perspective of hybrid masculinities. However, neither of these perspectives fully captured the nuance within the Brony community. While, as discussed above, some of men's and women's practices within the community served to conceal and maintain power relations, there were also indications of positive transformation among some men in the community. This was demonstrated not only in the interviews with men who were deeply invested, but also how this form of men's engagement shaped women's experiences within the community. Additionally, women's creation of separate space facilitated gender consciousness in some men, even as it failed to challenge power dynamics in the community more broadly.

Deeply invested men embraced the values of *My Little Pony*, which in turn resulted in personal transformation. These men expressed that the show had helped them become more empathetic and accepting of difference. This translated to the way they involved themselves in the community, bringing the values of generosity, kindness, and open-mindedness with them. These were the men who put on, and attended, convention events that focused not just on enjoyment of the show but on its values. For instance, the panel on "Friendship Lessons" at Everfree Northwest,

which discussed disability and friendship in the fandom. These were men who were not simply taking on the aesthetics of *My Little Pony*, but its deeper message of love and friendship, and they brought this message to the community. These messages ran counter to traditional notions of masculinity that label emotionality as feminine, representing not only a personal transformation for individual men but a transformation in masculinity among such men in the community.

Women recognized and appreciated men's deep investment in that it helped create and sustain what they liked best about the community. Women often attributed their most positive experiences within the community to deep investment, raising the ethos of love and acceptance within the community as what made it special. The incorporation of the lessons of the show would not be possible without members of the community who utilized these lessons for personal transformation- i.e. those who were deeply invested- and brought this positive change to the space of the community.

The most meaningful aspect of deep investment for men, however, was that it was related to men's awareness and acknowledgement of gender inequality and men's privilege. Deeply invested men were more sensitive to the experiences of women and reflective about masculinity. Such men also discussed trying to make the community a safer and more inclusive space for women. While embracing the messages of the show appeared to relate to men's openness to gender consciousness, it was their interactions with women that appeared to most shape this perspective. Befriending women and listening to them was therefore central to the development of gender consciousness.

It is not coincidental that many of the gender conscious men who I interviewed were also members of Facebook or in-person groups that were led by women. When women created separate spaces, they controlled who was allowed to join in such a way that filtered out men who were not

deeply invested. Within these groups, deeply invested men were therefore given the opportunity to form meaningful friendships with women and to hear their perspectives. Even though women themselves often did not frame their experiences as gendered, simply being a part of groups in which women were given a voice appeared to have a meaningful impact on men.

Reconstituted forms of masculinity may in fact challenge masculinity and power relations, though it is important to note that change is slow and difficult. Some women stated that the community has become safer and more inclusive for them as time has gone on, and many interviewees regardless of gender claimed that more women are entering the community because of this. In my own observations, certain spaces within the community- such as Facebook groups- are certainly gender balanced and inclusive. However, the mainstream community is still shaped by the practices of superficially engaged men, practices which create conditions of discomfort and marginalization for women. The existence of deeply invested men therefore demonstrates the *promise* of reconstituted forms of masculinity rather than a more inclusive reality. Still, these findings call attention to the need to consider nuance within reconstituted forms of masculinity.

Theoretical Implications

This dissertation has theoretical implications for the scholarship on reconstituted masculinity, contributing to the debate about the meanings of these forms of masculinity and considering how women shape these gender practices. I argue that the current scholarship has treated such forms of masculinity as monolithic, failing to consider the multiple meanings these practices might have for different men within a given group. Inclusive masculinity theory is overly optimistic in claiming that men's gender atypical practices are a sign of a shift toward more progressive forms of masculinity, while the perspective of hybrid masculinities neglects the possibilities within these practices for meaningful change. As an alternative, I suggest that *how*

men engage in reconstituted forms of masculinity shapes their implications for gender politics and that such forms of masculinity may be a way of both challenging and reinforcing hegemonic masculinity depending upon men's patterns of engagement. If Bridges and Pascoe (2014) are correct in asserting that reconstituted forms of masculinity (hybrid masculinities) are an increasingly common way for men to respond to shifts in power structures, then as scholars we must unpack what these practices mean for the future of gender and power relations.

Additionally, women make sense of and respond to reconstituted forms of masculinity in such a way that both challenges and maintains power relations. This fills a gap in the work on reconstituted masculinity that has not examined the experiences of women and other marginalized groups who are affected by men's incorporation of aspects of what has traditionally been viewed as stigmatized and/or feminine into their gender presentations. My findings suggest that women are not simply passively affected by such practices, but also navigate the space in which such practices are enacted in a way that actively challenges and maintains power. This is important for understanding the role marginalized groups play in facilitating the multiple meanings of reconstituted forms of masculinity, such as concealing inequality by downplaying gender.

These findings are not only theoretically relevant to the scholarship on gender and masculinities, but also say something about how power and privilege operate more generally. As societal shifts reshape how privilege is articulated- for instance, making overt racism and sexism socially inappropriate- privilege and oppression take different forms. Understanding how some groups that appear to challenge power structures (such as hegemonic masculinity) may be both ways of concealing inequality and sites of transformation is therefore important. Future research should examine what causes some members of these groups to engage in practices that conceal inequality and others to experience more positive transformation. Such knowledge could aid in

actively trying to develop positive transformation among privileged groups- for example, developing programs that encourage men to express their feelings, develop greater empathy, and acquire gender consciousness.

Further, the ways women made sense of and responded to men's practices may be more broadly relevant to understanding how marginalized groups both challenge and maintain power relations. Similar mechanisms might be observed in other instances in which women navigate spaces dominated by men, such as workplaces or religious organizations. More research is needed to examine in what contexts such mechanisms occur and how they may vary based on the specifics of different cases. For instance, men's purported challenge to gender norms appears to be the reason that women accepted and legitimized men's claims to victimhood within the Brony community. This shaped the mechanisms through which women navigated the community and may be more unique to settings characterized by reconstituted forms of masculinity. However, there may be other cases in which women 'buy into' men's victim narratives, such as women who participate in men's rights organizations. Though the specifics may be different depending upon context, this dissertation draws attention to the need to move beyond examining men's gender practices in isolation and to consider women's responses to these practices.

This dissertation begins the work of examining how power and privilege associated with gender are reshaped in a changing landscape. Through an examination of the Brony community, I shed light on the implications of reconstituted forms of masculinity for gender politics and gender relations- introducing the concept of relations of hybridity to better understand how both men and women's practices come together to shape power relations. Society continues to change, and thus the gender structure must adapt to such change. For example, in 2018, a record number of women were elected to the U.S. Congress and multiple women announced that they were running for

president in the Democratic primary, signaling at least some gains for women's political representation (Desilver 2018). Such gains for women have been met with a variety of responses- from the rise of men's rights movements and the radicalization of men online (for instance, 'incels' and 'red pillers') to celebrity men stepping out as feminists. Reconstituted forms of masculinity are an example of one such response, representing a way in which men make sense of the shifting terrain of masculinity and gender in contemporary society.

Though this work reveals some of the mechanisms through which power relations are challenged and maintained as a response to societal shifts, there are still important broader questions to consider. How will men and women's gender practices continue to reshape power and privilege. For instance, as women gain political representation, how might they engage in practices that challenge or reinforce gendered systems of power? And, related, how will societal shifts continue to change the way power is articulated- giving rise to new configurations of practice such as reconstituted forms of masculinity?

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APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Entry into the Community

- Do you consider yourself a Brony?
 - What makes someone a Brony?
 - What does it mean in your life to be a Brony?
- How did you discover the show?
 - What was your reaction to it? What did you like about it?
- Tell me how you first became involved in the community
 - When did you first hear about Bronies? What did you think about them at the time?
 - Do your friends know you are a Brony?
 - How have they responded?
 - Does your family know you are a Brony?
 - How have they responded?
 - How active would you say you are in the Brony community?
 - What do you like best about it?
 - What do you like the least?

Experiences in the Community

- Have you attended a *My Little Pony* convention?
 - Which one(s)?
 - What was it like?
 - What did you do while you were there?
 - Did you make friends?
 - Did you meet up with people you knew?
 - What were the other attendees like?
- Are you involved with any local Brony activities (clubs, meet-ups)?
 - Why or why not?
 - What are people like there?
 - Did you feel you belonged?
 - Did you ever attend an event and not go back?

- Why?
- Have you participated in any online forums or communities related to *My Little Pony*?
 - Which one(s)?
 - What do you talk about there?
 - What are the people like there?
 - If you haven't participated in an online community, why not?
- What has been your best experience in the Brony community?
- What has been your worst experience in the Brony community?

Perceptions of Gender

- Do you think being a Brony as a woman is different from being a Brony as a man?
 - Why or why not?
- Have you ever felt uncomfortable in Brony spaces because of your gender?
- What do you think of the term Brony?
 - Does it include women or just men?
- What do you think about the term Pegasister?
- *My Little Pony* was created for girls, what do you think about it being followed by older people? Men?

For Men Only

- Have you felt that others have judged you as a man because you like *My Little Pony*?
 - If so, how?
 - How do you feel about this?
- Do you generally think of yourself as masculine?
 - Why or why not?
- What does it mean, in your opinion, to be a man?
- What do you think it means in society to be a man these days?

Demographic Questions

- Gender
- Race
- Age
- Marital status
- Parental status

- Do you identify as LGBTQ?
 - Specifically, how do you identify?
- Educational background
- Type of employment

APPENDIX B. PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS

Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Age
Abby	Woman	White	20
Adam	Man	White	25
Alex	Man	White	20
Angela	Woman	White	41
Ashley	Woman	White	28
Austin	Man	White	25
Blake	Man	White	26
Brad	Man	White	25
Brandon	Man	White	29
Brooke	Woman	White	39
Chelsea	Woman	White	27
Chris	Man	White	19
Cody	Man	White	18
Dan	Man	White	25
Derek	Man	Black/biracial	37
Dylan	Man	White	22
Erin	Woman	White	28
Gavin	Man	White	21
Holly	Woman	White	25
Jake	Man	White	38
Jason	Man	Asian American	25
Jennifer	Woman	White	25
Jeremey	Man	White	23
John	Man	White	26
Jordan	Man	White	22
Josh	Man	White	27

Appendix B continued

Justin	Man	White	25
Kate	Woman	White	23
Kelly	Woman	White	27
Laura	Woman	White	34
Liam	Man	White	37
Lisa	Woman	White	31
Luke	Man	White	18
Melissa	Woman	Black/biracial	19
Mike	Man	White	29
Nathan	Man	White	19
Patrick	Man	Asian American	26
Roy	Man	White	56
Ryan	Man	White	33
Sam	Man	White	34
Sean	Man	White	20
Thomas	Man	Black	38
Tyler	Man	White	21