



Brony Up

by Jamie Friedlander



In order to help me spot him in the morning crowd at Starbucks, Kyle Hedlund, 25, said he would be wearing a white hat.

The white hat would not have been the only clue to separate Hedlund from his fellow coffee drinkers. He's donned a white fedora, white button-down shirt and crisp black vest and slacks. Curly dark brown hair peeks through the sides of the fedora. Two small, metallic rainbows in the shape of lightning bolts fasten the cuffs of his shirt. On the table in front of him sits a plastic purple pony with flowing, vibrant hair.

No, he's not a Liberace reject. Hedlund is one of many men across the world who call themselves bronies, or adult men who are fans of the animated TV show originally created for young girls, *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*. If Hedlund felt self-conscious about discussing the show, his face didn't indicate it. As he expressively chatted about brony fandom at length just before 9 a.m. on an uncharacteristically warm spring day in River Forest, Illinois, neighboring coffee drinkers shot inquisitive stares and crooked smirks our way.

To say the least, *My Little Pony* is an unlikely show for a grown man to enjoy. It follows the adventures of six female pony friends. But bronies are in fact quite average men (albeit sometimes nerdy) typically in their 20s. They have been around since the animated show first aired in 2010 – it's about to start its seventh season. Most bronies are heterosexual, single and educated. And there are lots of them. In 2015, just over 10,000 people attended BronyCon, the annual brony convention held in Baltimore. (In 2016, the conference saw a slight dip, with around 8,000 attendees.) An entire news website dedicated solely to brony culture exists called *Equestria Daily*. Women are part of the fandom as well and while most still call themselves bronies, some do prefer the term pegasister. There are also quite a few military bronies. Three documentaries have been made about bronies since the fandom started in 2010. Robert Downey Jr. even posted a photo on Facebook saying, "Crap, am I gonna have to go Brony?" in which he compares the characters in *My Little Pony* to famous television superheroes.

Despite some people's initial reactions that bronies are creeps, quite the opposite is true. Bronyhood is merely a fandom for a group of quirky men. We all have our "thing" – our hobby, interest or obsession that we don't feel comfortable sharing with our co-workers, parents, or even some of our friends. The world is overflowing with fandoms just as bizarre as bronies – furies, juggalos, and trekkies, to name a few. These people merely found other people who understand their quirks and

unique interests, and they formed a bond.

I later discover Vinyl Scratch, a DJ pony from the show, is the character that sits on the table in front of Hedlund. His cufflinks depict the “cutie mark” of one of the ponies, Rainbow Dash. Cutie marks are small symbols drawn on the pony’s backside that resemble each pony’s virtue or talent.

Late one night in 2012, Hedlund was mindlessly surfing the internet. He typed the term “brony” into YouTube – he had heard the phrase, but didn’t know exactly what it meant. Then he found out. Knowing himself and that he might become addicted to the show, he flipped a coin to determine whether or not he would watch it. The coin said yes. So he watched one episode. And then another. And before he knew it, he binge-watched the whole first season.

Hedlund, who went to culinary school and worked at a Jewel grocery store deli counter when I met with him (he now works at Argo Tea), eventually decided to attend a Chicago brony event.

“The first time I went to a meetup, I lied to my parents and told them I was going barhopping with friends in the city,” he says with a laugh. Eventually, he came clean. Though his parents tolerate him having such a peculiar interest, he says he suspects, “They’re probably saying to themselves, ‘When is this going to be over?’”

He struggled telling his parents about being a brony. “At first, I was a little bit afraid because obviously, it’s something very different,” he says. “It was something that not everyone accepted. And I just kind of decided that if I’m going to be part of this, I have to tell my parents. I have to let them know I’m into this.”

In *A Brony Tale*, a documentary film about bronies, Ashleigh Ball – a voice actor from the show – says, “The pervert alarm for sure went off in my head when I first heard about it.”

However, most bronies insist that no unseemly motive lurks behind their fandom, but rather that they are impressed by the show’s flash animation and can relate to the themes presented in the show – friendship, loyalty, and kindness, things that some of them didn’t experience growing up. Many creative types also watch the show and “give back” – Hedlund is a “brony chef” known as *Le Brony Gourmet* who creates recipes based on the show. Many other enthusiasts also write fanfiction, create music, and draw art inspired by the show.

Marsha Redden, Ph.D., a psychologist based in Houma, Louisiana, began studying bronies with other researchers in 2011. Around this time, she and the other researchers put out a survey so they could learn more about brony culture.

Far from perverts, Redden says, “The stereotype of bronies is gay, high-school dropout living in their parents’ basement smoking dope and playing video games.”

Their survey, also known as “The Brony Study,” found this wasn’t the case. Most bronies are heterosexual, educated men. All of the bronies I met did not live in their parents’ basement, but rather lived alone. According to the study, bronies range in age from 14 to 57, though most are around age 21. The majority of bronies, 86 percent, are male. Eighty-four percent of bronies reported being heterosexual,

10 percent described themselves as bisexual, 4 percent reported being asexual and just fewer than 2 percent reported being homosexual. Only around 3 percent of bronies are married.

Most single bronies – a little over 60 percent – said they were not currently dating but are interested in doing so. Only around 6 percent said they dated frequently.

Chad Huffman, 23, says he shies away from bringing up his lifestyle on first dates. Huffman, who has pale skin, slightly curly brown hair, glasses and a faint goatee, feels apprehensive about telling people he’s a brony.

“I don’t bring it up because I realize it’s kind of a weird thing, especially for girls,” Huffman says. “When they hear it, they’re like, ‘You like a little girl’s show?’”

Huffman identifies most with Rainbow Dash, the pony who boasts loyalty as her individual virtue.

“I connect very strongly with the loyalty aspect of her,” he says. “I’m very loyal to my friends and my family. It’s one of the things I tell my dates, when I go out on dates: I’ll never cheat on you, I’ll never go behind your back. And I believe very strongly in that. I actually got a tattoo of it.”

Huffman slowly pulls back the sleeve of his red T-shirt to show me a tattoo inked on his right bicep: a colorful rainbow (the same as Hedlund’s cufflinks) with the word loyalty inscribed on a banner across it. The symbol is Rainbow Dash’s cutie mark.

Most bronies I met outwardly expressed their love of the show. Michael Standiford, 25, unzipped his black jacket at one point during our conversation to reveal a My Little Pony T-shirt with the phrase, “20 percent cooler,” an inside joke among fans of the show. Standiford is soft-spoken and short with fair skin and long brown hair reminiscent of the popular Emo-style haircut of the early 2000s. When I met with him, he had just graduated with a degree in electrical engineering from Purdue University, where he discovered the show. Like many bronies, he has decided to keep his love of the show a secret from his family. He worries that his parents, who live in Hawaii, might find his brony-ism strange.

“When they visit me here, I usually take all my pony merchandise, stick it in a box and hide it,” he says, laughing.

If you were alive and had any form of TV exposure during the 1980s and 1990s, you probably encountered the My Little Pony franchise. Young girls played with the small, vibrantly colored Hasbro ponies and occasionally watched the animated show on TV, which was designed, more or less, solely to market the toys.

My Little Pony has had several iterations over the past few decades, but aficionados identify with what they call Generation Four, (Friendship is Magic) or the most recent version of the show that began in 2010. Animator Lauren Faust – also the mind behind The Powerpuff Girls – created the fourth generation. Although the earlier versions of the show were much girlier and focused on marketing the pony toys, the fourth covers adult themes, features high-quality flash

animation, and highlights characters who aren't just "girlish," but have distinct personalities. An animated film, *My Little Pony: The Movie*, hit theaters in October 2017.

Brony Matt Drummond, 32, says some in the fandom believe bronies existed during the show's earlier generations.

"Something we've learned since, is that there were guys back then," he says. "I'm sure they were fewer and far between, but ever since the brony fandom came out, there were a number of people who came out and said, 'You know, I really wish this existed 20 years ago, because I was a fan of MLP in the '90s.'"

Perhaps they could not bond over their love of the show because internet culture was just blossoming. Or perhaps people weren't as willing to be public about their unique interests. Regardless, they seem to have relished the opportunity to explore a shared interest with each other now.

Between bites of his "healthier" cheeseburger at Lyfe Kitchen (served with a citrus kale salad, not fries) Huffman tells me how he has been trying to drop weight to join the Army. At five-foot-nine, he currently weighs around 285 pounds. In order to meet the Army's weight requirements, he must get down to 180. He has been breaking a sweat at the gym and watching his diet in order to meet this goal.

Huffman explains that military bronies – yes, they exist – can be seen as the outcasts of the armed forces. They're often very skinny, not strong, and work in tech or computer support roles. Many are in the Air Force as well. Despite facing stigma, Huffman says bronies are proud of their military counterparts. Not all work in IT positions. Some even fight in combat and have patches of *My Little Pony* cutie marks sewn onto the sleeves of their jackets.

"We're very proud to have a military side because it really shows that we're not all weird, we're not all nerds," he says. Huffman hopes to be an Army Ranger, what he describes as the Delta Force of the Army, like special ops.

"I've got a high goal," he says, smiling.

Most bronies I spoke with acknowledged that brony fandom is odd. They know that although most people might be skeptical of their hobby, they tolerate it. But there is cause for some concern. As with every fandom, a dark side lurks beneath the brony culture. Some artists and fans create animated pornographic films and sexual drawings based on the show. The internet calls masturbating to the show "clipping." Huffman says the pornographic side of *My Little Pony* is "obviously more creepy since it's a little kids' show."

The large majority of bronies insist that this is a small fraction of the fandom and that they shun anything having to do with that type of behavior. Many try to counteract it by taking sexual fan art or pornographic animations off the internet. "Obviously, there are little kids who like this show and there are parents who are looking at it," Huffman says. "We don't want you to type in 'My Little Pony' and have a bunch of porn come up on Google."

Drummond told me about one situation in which the pornographic fan art side of My Little Pony took a bad turn. Most bronies have an “original character” or OC, which is a pony they create or have commissioned by an artist that they feel portrays them. One young boy was able to have his OC made into a character on the show on behalf of the Make-A-Wish Foundation. According to Drummond, the young boy’s mother was familiar with the brony community and asked bronies to refrain from creating sexual fan art based on her son’s character.

“Unfortunately, when you go and tell the internet [not to] do something, there are people who go out of their way to do it,” Drummond says. “This isn’t the brony fandom, this is the internet. The brony fandom got its start on 4Chan, which is the Mos Eisley spaceport of the internet.” Mos Eisley is a spaceport in Star Wars that Obi-Wan Kenobi describes as “a wretched hive of scum and villainy.”

One Facebook group, the Anti-Brony Coalition, prides itself on hating this world and “trolling” the internet to anger and annoy them. According to Sushi, a spokesperson from the Anti-Brony Coalition, bronies aren’t as “pure-hearted” as some might think. Sushi said he would only respond to questions under the alter ego name “Sushi” because “some bronies will pay anything to get information on us.”

Sushi says fanfiction is a prime example of the dark side of brony culture. “There’s one [fanfiction] about how one of the characters cuts another character to small pieces and bakes them into cupcakes which is served to her friends,” he wrote in a Facebook message. “Another is a forum or Tumblr page called ‘Princess Molestia.’ This is a series where one of the characters molests others.”

Most internet fandoms have trolls. But like the majority of bronies, Drummond doesn’t let the haters and pornographic fan artists ruin the show for him. He thinks the show allowed him to move away from his quieter, more anxious self.

“One of the things the show did for me is that it really convinced me to break out of the shell where I was trying not to make waves, trying not to get in peoples’ faces, trying to be quiet, trying to be more reserved,” he says. “It really convinced me [and said], ‘Hey, you can absolutely be as boisterous as you want to be.’”

Drummond, who dropped out of college and worked at a Chex Cereal factory when I spoke with him, also thinks brony culture has allowed men to break away from the idea that they have to be tough or unemotional. “One of the interesting things about the brony movement is it’s letting guys like me redefine what masculinity is,” he says.

In the documentary *Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony*, John de Lancie – the voice actor of the villain Discord in the show – can be seen embracing the brony community at BronyCon. Many bronies admire the actor for his stint as Q on *Star Trek*.

“Bronies are not just fans that are interested in watching a cartoon,” he says in the movie. “What makes them special is that they’re willing to take the lessons from this show – and they’re lessons that were intended for children – and turn them into adult lessons, and they’re still the lessons that we need to be applying as

adults.”

As we sit at Starbucks, Hedlund’s fingers dramatically swipe through photos on his phone of his Le Brony Gourmet concoctions. First, he pulls up a photo of what looks like a Cosmopolitan martini. Instead, he says it’s the “Flutterbat Gazpacho,” a combination of cucumbers, apples, raspberries, apple juice, cherry juice, sea salt, and ginger inspired by a character named Flutterbat. Then he shows me the “Rainboom” Noodle Bowl – a dish that includes rice noodles, chicken Andouille sausage, and various sautéed veggies and is inspired by the pony Rainbow Dash.

“Basically, what I like to do is cook, and I like to cook about ponies,” Hedlund says, clarifying, with a grin, that he doesn’t cook the ponies themselves.

“Plus, I want to be the first bronny to ever be featured on the Food Network – even if it’s just for a few seconds.”

