Article

SEXUALITIES

Sexualities
2019, Vol. 22(3) 325–342

DOI: 10.1177/1363460717731932
journals.sagepub.com/home/sex
SAGE

'That pony is real sexy': *My Little Pony* fans, sexual abjection, and the politics of masculinity online

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Abstract
The cartoon *My Little Pony* has drawn attention for its audience of young adult men, described as "bronies." Although popular narratives have emphasized their comparative sexual normalcy, a subset of these fans form communities where enjoyment of pornographic content is normative. Through ethnographic observation of the My Little Pony (/mlp/) discussion board on the website 4chan, we find that these men construct a communal identity around their sexual desires. We argue that, by placing them outside of normative heterosexual desire, this communal sexuality renders these men abject. By sharing and policing these sexual desires, these men build a communal sense of masculine failure and create discursive support for a politics opposed to progressive gender change. We thus suggest an important role that collective sexual desire, especially in online communities, can play in the emergence of reactionary gender politics.

Keywords
Feminism and sexuality, masculinity, media and sexuality, My Little Pony, online sexuality

Introduction

Popular news outlets spent a year gawking at bronies (e.g. Watercutter, 2011): young men who enjoy *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*. These narratives often made a point of emphasizing bronies' sexual normalcy: "their hobby has nothing to do with their sexuality or gender" (Vara and Zimmerman, 2011) and "the vast majority consider themselves to be heterosexual" (Angel, 2012).

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This emphasis reflects cultural anxieties about straight men with a pronounced feminine interest, with transgressions of normative masculinity often conflated with deviant sexuality (Martino and Kehler, 2006). Academic writers also worked to separate bronies from the threatening stigma of "bad" sexuality, with one survey arguing that "there is little evidence to support the misconception that 'brony' is a fetish or an interest driven by sexuality" (Plante et al., 2016).

However, these narratives only attend to public, offline performances of fan identity. Erotic non-conformity is generally punished when made visible in public spaces (Rubin, 2013), and heterosexual conformity is particularly important to performances of masculinity (Messner, 2013). Moreover, previous research suggests that online spaces facilitate the expression of stigmatized sexualities (e.g. Kavanaugh and Maratea, 2016; Waskul, 2003). Studies of publicly identified "bronies" thus ignore the potential for sexual desire as a component of *My Little Pony* fans' collective identity. However, anonymous spaces permit these desires to be expressed without risk of public reprisal. We thus conduct an ethnography of /mlp/, an anonymous online *My Little Pony* discussion board. Through unobtrusive "lurking," we find that these men construct a collective sexual identity around deviant desire, which places them outside of normative sexuality, rendering them abject. Anonymous online spaces, we argue, allow abject sexual identities to be shared communally in ways they could not offline, forming the basis for both collective identification and collective politics.

We illustrate this process by showing how /mlp/ users first define, then police and politicize, their own abjection. First, by defining their sexual desires and objects as deviant, they produce a communal understanding of their identities as outside masculine norms. Second, by enforcing the containment of this failed masculinity in public, they define their sexual desires as acceptable only in an anonymous online context. Finally, this shared abject identity allows them to define women as advantaged to men, with their gender allowing them sexual, social, and material privileges that /mlp/ users find inaccessible. Previous research has explored how men's collective beliefs about women's increasing power relative to men's declining status and material security can exacerbate antifeminist sentiment (Kimmel, 2013). We build on this research by demonstrating the potential for collective sexual shame to contribute to a broader narrative of women's sexual power and men's victimization.

We do not argue that /mlp/ users stand for all bronies. As we show, /mlp/ users insist that they are anything but bronies. We therefore want to establish discursive distance between /mlp/ users and bronies as a whole. The /mlp/ community is a subset of the *My Little Pony* fandom characterized by insistent emphasis on failed heterosexuality. Thus, rather than representing bronies, we shed light on online communities where stigmatized sexual tastes are similarly routinized as a point of belonging.

Hegemonic masculinity and heterosexuality

A prominent strain of sociological scholarship theorizes gender as a field of power constituted by identities and the relationships between them (Connell, 2005).

Substantial research has examined how men, both as material bodies and as cultural ideals, are accorded differential power as a function of their identities and structural locations (Hearn, 2004; Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009). The intersections of class, race, sexuality, and physical ability with gender mean that masculinities are always multiple, and men experience varying advantage and disadvantage relative to women and other men. Hegemonic masculinity lies at the center of this field of power: the imagined figure who represents the most valued way of being a man in a given context and whose existence legitimates patriarchal domination. Hegemonic ideals of masculinity vary, but their consistent emphasis on dominance, the material rewards granted to men who embody them, and the punishment of men who fail to achieve them explain men's large-scale investment in patriarchy, despite the frequent harms it causes men (Connell, 2005).

Hegemonic masculinities are always constructed with regard to a specific context, such as class identity (Lamont, 2015; Pyke, 1996), racial identity (Asencio, 1999; Mora, 2013), or subcultural identity (Wilkins, 2008). In each of these cases, masculinity is partially built through "manhood acts," or behaviors that men use to signify their fulfillment of hegemonic ideals (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009). This perspective is consistent with interactional accounts (West and Zimmerman, 1987) that view gender as continually produced in social situations. Along with constructing a positive ideal that men aspire to, manhood acts denote a negative ideal that men seek to avoid. This negative is represented by the "abject": an unclean part of the self that must be denied in order to escape stigma (Halperin, 2009). By repudiating the contents of the abject, the subject – in this case, hegemonic masculinity – establishes a "defensive position" against the Other (Kristeva, 1982: 7). This rejection of the Other plays out at the interactional level as continual repudiations of unacceptable performances of masculinity, which often include femininity, emotionality, or insufficient heterosexuality (Pascoe, 2007). The ritualistic rejection of the abject ensures that it continues to represent a "constitutive outside," a bundle of traits, behaviors, and identities that define acceptable gender by what they are not (Butler, 1993).

Sexuality plays a central role in the construction of abject masculinity. Heterosexuality is made compulsory through enforcement in families, formal schooling, and career settings over the life course (Bird, 1996; Martin, 2009; Thorne, 1993), and is experienced by men as a pathway to maturation intertwined with notions of agency and competence (Pascoe, 2007; Schalet, 2011). Positive evidence of heterosexual desire is seen as an essential sign of developing manhood: boys' consumption of heterosexual pornography, for example, is considered appropriate by fathers despite a proscription against children's consumption of sex (Solebello and Elliott, 2011). Men who fail to provide evidence of heterosexual virility, such as "nerdy" men, find themselves in a subordinated position despite their other advantages (Almog and Kaplan, 2015). Along with positive evidence of heterosexuality, men are expected to actively reject homosexuality. Desires that deviate from heterosexuality are "driven underground," rendered unconscious and unintelligible (Messner, 2013: 358). The "perpetual danger" that the abject

represents to the subject is thus acknowledged and defended against (Kristeva, 1982: 10); when men do express homoerotic desires, they often reframe them in ways that bolster, rather than threaten, their masculinity, such as men who engage in sex with other men but would ''rather hook up with a chick'' (Ward, 2008).

Thus, performing normative heterosexuality is essential to avoiding abject status. Deviant sexuality is not, of course, the only way in which masculinity can be threatened by the abject; as Kristeva notes, the abject can be anything that threatens the boundary between self and other (1982). However, previous research has highlighted the centrality of preserving normative sexuality to avoiding abject status. For instance, through jokes and insults, boys alternately strive to avoid and force each other into the position of the ''fag,'' a discursive figure who signifies failed masculinity (Pascoe, 2007). Performances of heterosexual masculinity are thus constantly scrutinized by peer groups, as in the case of Latino schoolboys who deploy embodied ethno-racial masculinity to distance themselves from homosexuality (Mora, 2013), or English teenagers who use sexualized vocabulary to contest each others' heterosexuality (Dalley-Trim 2007). Thus, previous research has established that performing heterosexual normalcy, and distancing oneself from abject sexual categories is essential to embodying hegemonic masculinity. While scholars have argued that cultural shifts have decentered homophobia as central to masculinity (e.g. Anderson, 2009), others have suggested that this decentering is primarily aesthetic, allowing masculinity to become more culturally flexible without putting heterosexual privilege at risk (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014).

Research suggests that communities mediate the relationship between masculinity and sexuality by creating collective sexual identities with different valuations of sexual and romantic behaviors. For example, abstinent Christian men position themselves as more masculine than their sexually active peers by virtue of self-control and the ability to resist ''base'' sexual impulses (Wilkins, 2008). Online communities of men are particularly important for the construction of sexuality due to the ambivalent association between masculinity and technology. While the technology industry is historically male-dominated, men who devote their lives to tinkering with technology are often consigned to the abject ''nerd'' category, with its attendant heterosexual insufficiency. Finding their heterosexual competence under question, they collectively develop cultural logics that minimize or redress individual failure. Kendall (2002) demonstrates how the occupants of a ''virtual pub'' create a collective culture of blaming ''jerks,'' and the women who fall for them, for their own unsatisfying sex lives. Similarly, online pickup artist communities create sets of game-like ''seduction'' strategies that reconstruct members' masculinity through self-control and objectification of women (Almog and Kaplan, 2015).

Online spaces are especially important for sexualities experienced as stigmatized over and above masculine failure: the so-called ''bad sexualities'' that sit outside the ''charmed circle'' of sexual morality (Rubin, 2013). The comparative anonymity and flexibility of online spaces provide opportunities to explore the ''dark side'' of sexuality, or desires stigmatized by the mainstream (Langdridge and Butt, 2004).

For communities built around these stigmatized desires, online platforms represent a unique way to share experiences and struggles and, in the process, establish a collective identity. For example, members of an online zoophile forum use their stigmatized sexuality, which cannot easily be expressed offline, as a platform to build a collective sense of esteem that includes political commitments, ethical standpoints, and public codes of behavior (Kavanaugh and Maratea, 2016). Online spaces thus become essential locations for the development of politics around sexual stigma. Our site represents one such community, where offline stigma around sexual desires is negotiated online and becomes the foundation for heterosexual men's collective identity and politics.

An introduction to /mlp/

Our data are drawn from /mlp/, a section of the online imageboard community 4chan. Imageboards are anonymous spaces designed for discussion and image sharing; they are structured by discussion threads, or linear sequences of posts, which are grouped into "boards" by topic. Imageboards have no registration of profiles, making it impossible for users to know who has written a particular post. This anonymity leads imageboard users to refer to each other as "anons," a usage we extend to this article, although we also use the terms "posters" or "users."

4chan is one of the largest English-language imageboards, with topical discussion boards named for their URLs, such as politics (/pol/), sports (/sp/), and, as discussed in this article, *My Little Pony*, or /mlp/. The site is notorious for its antagonistic culture designed to offend and alienate outsiders, which includes sexist, as well as racist, ableist, and otherwise exclusionary, discourse: for example, 4chan briefly had a discursive norm of referring to women as "cumdumpsters" (Manivannan, 2013). In addition to sexist language, 4chan users deploy the homophobic slur "fag" as normal social discourse. However, "fag" is frequently a term of identification as well as an insult. Artists are "drawfags," writers are "writefags," and so on. While homophobic rhetoric does appear on 4chan, the use of "fag" reflects more than attitudes about masculinity or homosexuality. For example, a user calling someone a "normalfag" is not trying to discredit their target's masculinity, but rather insult their slavish adherence to society's norms, and a user may laud the talent of a particular "writefag." Thus, we do not treat uses of "fag" in our data as clear instances of the "fag discourse" (cf. Pascoe, 2007), but rather as discursive constructions of identity that need to be understood in context.

Data and methodology

Ethnography has increasingly been used as a viable way to understand social life online (Boellstorff et al., 2012; Hine, 2000). In addition to specifically collected and coded discussions, described later, we observed /mlp/ for an average of 15 hours a week over the course of eight months, taking extensive fieldnotes. We limit our ethnographic participation to "lurking," which refers to witnessing discussions but

not actively participating, for several reasons. First, like offline ethnography, internet ethnography requires participation on a field site's own terms (Boellstorff et al., 2012). Many 4chan users are "lurkers," which is itself an engaged form of participation: "lurking" entails actively watching and refreshing multiple discussions simultaneously to see whether new posts have been made. Thus, lurking is a representative form of participant observation on /mlp/. Second, lurking gives us an important window into non-elicited cultural understandings that cannot easily be described in an interview (Boellstorff et al., 2012).

Unlike a traditional ethnography, we are unable to distinguish between specific posters. This makes the inference of bodily identity impossible, which we acknowledge as a potential limitation of our data. However, we take after internet researchers who have emphasized that the performance of identity online takes place entirely through discourse (Markham, 2005). We treat these discursive representations of gender as significant regardless of what bodies may be sitting behind keyboards. Previous research suggests the importance of masculine discursive culture to 4chan in general, such as the frequent use of sexist epithets (Manivannan, 2013). Our data suggest that /mlp/ shares the larger site's masculine culture, as evidenced through frequent references to existing or desired relationships with women, use of masculine pronouns, and incredulous reactions whenever a poster identifies themselves as a woman.

We analyzed specific discussion threads using "case study logic," an analytical premise allowing us to develop hypotheses over time (Small, 2009). Our sampling was guided by a coding scheme developed through observing the site, with the broad goal of determining the gendered components of identity on /mlp/. This initial scheme included four categories: expressing sexual and romantic desire, mocking other men, discussing feminism and "social justice" politics, and sharing emotional stories. We then sampled for threads that fit these categories, aiming to collect approximately 50 threads in each category. We avoided threads that received fewer than 10 responses, as little discussion occurred in these threads; longer threads are more characteristic of discourse on /mlp/. The shortest thread in our sample is 12 posts long, with many reaching the site's maximum of 500 posts. In total, we collected 207 threads, which we used along with our fieldnotes to elaborate our categories into themes through an iterative process of coding and memo writing (Emerson et al., 1995).

Collecting data from /mlp/ presents several ethical issues. First, while a traditional model of research ethics suggests that /mlp/ contains texts rather than individuals, internet researchers have argued that issues of vulnerability and personal information should supersede a focus on "human subjects" (Markham and Buchanan, 2012). Indeed, the data we collect involve sensitive topics like sex and embarrassing disclosures that might be harmful were they to be associated with offline identities. However, text on /mlp/ is practically impossible to link to any identity, as posts are not connected to any user name or pseudonym. Thus, except in instances where a user explicitly identifies themselves in a post, no offline identity

can be inferred from text on 4chan. We have taken care not to include any such posts in this article.

Additionally, we take an explicitly profeminist stance in drawing conclusions from our data and in suggesting its political implications. Because misrepresenting subjects' lived realities is a key concern in feminist research, particularly when subjects have different politics than researchers themselves (Borland, 1991), we acknowledge that /mlp/ members may interpret their performances differently than we have. However, as our perspective is grounded in a feminist tradition that seeks to reduce the harms patriarchy does to men (hooks, 2004), we believe our research may disagree with, without disregarding, the accounts of our subjects.

We divide our analysis into three sections. First, we describe how masculine failure is performed on /mlp/ through narratives of sexual desire. Next, we describe the policing of this sexual desire outside of /mlp/. Finally, we describe the politicization of this masculine failure, in the form of an explicitly antifeminist politics.

'I can clop to that': Asserting sexual failure on /mlp/

Performances of masculinity typically imply a claim to membership in a privileged gender group (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009). Conversely, /mlp/ is a site where men construct themselves as distant from gender privilege by sharing descriptions of their failed heterosexuality. This failure takes the form of sexual and romantic attraction to characters from *My Little Pony*, and ambivalence or frustration around relationships with real women. Rather than trying to normalize their desires within hegemonic understandings of masculine heterosexuality, /mlp/ users integrate this otherness into their community identity, establishing themselves as abject through their failure to achieve "normal" heterosexual relationships.

The expression and fulfillment of sexual and romantic fantasies form key pillars around which /mlp/ is organized. Regular threads are devoted to erotic or romantic fiction, with eager audiences clamoring for "writefags" to finish their story. Even when these stories aren't designed to titillate, they still frequently revolve around the ponies as sexual beings. For example, the post beginning a recurring discussion thread reads: "[This thread] refers to a collection of stories about the ponies from MLP trying to have sex with Anon, the only human in Equestria... Most are lighthearted stories about the ponies failing in their comical attempts to get into Anon's pants." Despite these stories being framed as comedies rather than smut, they still describe the sexual desires and actions of cartoon ponies. By sexualizing fictional non-human characters, especially ones associated with a children's program, /mlp/ falls outside conventional moral boundaries of sexuality, occupying the negative side of the line demarcating "good and bad sex" (Rubin, 2013).

The /mlp/ anons are clearly aware of the stigmatized and uncomfortable nature of their desires. In one thread surveying anons' opinions about their attraction to

cartoon ponies, a number of posters note their initial discomfort with the discovery. In response to the question "What was your reaction when you first realized you were attracted to an animated pony?" anons describe their ambiguous feelings:

> "I was creeped out, and disappointed in myself."
> "Strange and worried. It kinda came out of nowhere for me."
> "Disbelieving really... never thought I could get a crush on a cartoon character."

The discomfort felt on /mlp/ around attractions to cartoon ponies, represented by these anons' feelings of being "creeped out," "strange and worried," and "disbelieving," highlights the abject position of their shared sexual culture; the abject always provokes a "fascinated start" that attracts and repels the subject (Kristeva, 1982: 2). Additionally, these quotations suggest an attraction to ponies that is romantic as well as sexual, evidence by the anon who has a "crush." Ponies are thus enshrined as ideal romantic partners as well as sex objects. In the same thread, anons describe their feelings for particular ponies:

> I always liked [Rainbow Dash], but... those feelings started getting stronger for some reason. And it just wouldn't stop... I like the fact that she has this tough girl persona that's hiding a softer side to her that she's a little ashamed of... she's still a very strong person, and has no problem standing up for herself. Also her eyes are to die for.

For this anon, the pony in question is loved for her human-like personality traits, as if one were speaking about a crush in real life: she has a "tough girl" persona with a "softer side." Anons' sense of sexual shame is thus extended to their sense of romantic shame, as they desire not only deviant sexual objects but inappropriate and impossible partners.

These partners are often referred to with the term "waifu," a term for a favored fictional woman derived from the use of "wife" as a loan-word in Japanese. Waifus are understood as the pony one feels a special sexual attraction to: "So, /mlp/, who's your waifu? Mine's Vinyl Scratch," begins one discussion. "Excellent choice, that pony is real sexy," responds an anon, and another agrees. "I can clop [masturbate] to that." The common use of "clopping," an onomatopoeia for the sound of hooves, as slang for masturbation is an explicit acknowledgment of /mlp/ anons' attraction to ponies.

However, the fervor with which waifus are discussed attests not only to their attractiveness but their unreality; waifus are desirable, but are always out of reach, as this anon reflects:

> [D]o you get wistful over the fact that they [our waifus] are not real?... Example: You will never hold Twilight Sparkle in your arms. You will never keep her warm during the chilly winter months. You will never tell her you love her.

This anon tells a characteristic anecdote about wistfulness: anons will never be with their waifu, who in this case is Twilight Sparkle, and thus will never be able to perform intimate, romantic gestures like cuddling. This longing attests to anons' sense of loneliness and romantic isolation. They collectively represent themselves as unsuccessful with women, complaining frequently of romantic failure. For example, in several discussions about Valentine's Day, posters commiserate about their lonely evenings:

> "Being alone lurking here, much like every night. Save for the added crippling loneliness."
> "Depressed fap [masturbation], cry because she [my waifu] isn't real, sit on my couch, watch a sad movie or six... just like I do every year."

While many men feel romantically inadequate during Valentine's Day, notable in these accounts is the sense of persistent failure. The experience of loneliness is "much like every night," not a special case; this happens "every year." This recurring failure to engage in romantic relationships often leads anons to frame themselves as having "dropped out" from the heterosexual romantic economy, a hallmark of "nerdy" masculinity (Kendall, 2002). Indeed, this sense of dropping out renders heterosexual failure volitional, with anons framing their loneliness as active rejection rather than frustrated desire. This rejection often takes the form of hostility toward anons who do talk about their girlfriends, wives, or hookups. For instance, in a thread asking anons "How has your love of the show affected your sex life?" one anon refuses to answer the question: "Anyone on this board who cares about 3DPD [real life] companionship should die." This anon expresses /mlp/'s explicit distaste for those who desire real women, as opposed to fictional waifus. Failure to form relationships thus becomes a point of communal identification on /mlp/, with anyone who talks about engaging regularly in offline sexual relationships rejected as being too "normal."

Thus, the collective discursive representation of the average /mlp/ poster is "failed man": a man who does not, or cannot, participate in the heterosexual economy. Even when individual posters contest this construction, they acknowledge its presence, such as this anon who describes the pressure to conform:

> When we say that we have some nice hobbies and don't think about fucking ponies all day, we are the hated normalfags and should leave the board. Basically we need to be perverted fucks with no life just to fit in.

This anon describes the collective culture of failed masculinity on /mlp/: having improper heterosexuality by being "perverted fucks." Even though this anon finds it restrictive, this communal culture of sexual otherness nevertheless frames the way anons discuss sexuality on /mlp/, and, as we argue later, creates discursive support for a notion of men's victimization. In the next section, we describe how this

otherness is maintained by constant self-policing of public expressions of community membership.

'Make sure they don't see you watching it again': Containing abject masculinity

Aware of the need to keep their erotic desire for cartoon horses a secret, /mlp/ anons engage in constant public self-policing. Anyone who reveals how much they like the show is strongly rebuked. This bears similarities to the policing of masculinity involved in the "fag discourse," where men maintain the legitimacy of hegemonic categories by policing their boundaries (Pascoe, 2007). However, unlike the "fag discourse," /mlp/ anons identify themselves, not others, as members of the abject category: /mlp/ users acknowledge, rather than contest, the abjection implied by their sexual desires, and seek to hide it from the public eye rather than contest it openly. This secrecy, however, does not need to be enforced online. Online spaces thus enable stigmatized sexual desires to become the basis for /mlp/ users to build a communal identity without needing to be contested as abject.

By carefully monitoring their own performances to ensure their love of the show, and implicitly, their sexual desires, are hidden from others, /mlp/ users remind each other that their own performances of masculinity are shameful if seen in public. Anons frame *My Little Pony* fandom as generally worthy of shame, as evidenced by their mockery of the larger community of "bronies." But /mlp/ users express special concern over their erotic relationship to the show. Thus, they use "bronies" as a foil to describe their own need for secrecy. One poster states this logic explicitly:

> The way I see it, 'bronies' are those fans who don't hide their power level in real life... In what way is someone a trekkie if nobody knows they like Star Trek? I'm a horse-fucker, because I want to fuck pastel ponies but no-one will ever know.

This poster refers to one of many names 4chan users give to self-policing: hiding one's "power level," a reference to the depths of one's passion for a humiliating interest. Bronies, as this poster explains, show off their power level in "real life," rather than containing it online and ensuring that "no-one will ever know" except other anons on /mlp/. Bronies thus become a lesson about management of abject identity offline, which /mlp/ anons take to heart. They often describe monitoring their own expressions of fandom, discussing potential threats that might reveal them as abject. For example, one worried anon starts a thread recounting an indiscretion:

> Watching pony in dorm room. Roommates don't know about MLP or bronies. Accidentally bump audio jack and headphones disconnect.

This quotation demonstrates the importance of secrecy on /mlp/: this anon wants to preserve his roommates' ignorance, and thus watches the show with headphones.

However, by accidentally unplugging his own headphones, this anon has revealed his embarrassing taste in feminine cartoons. The thread responds to this story with commiseration, making the gendered shame one should feel at revealing one's fandom explicit:

> I remember when something similar happened to me... My buddy asked why I was watching a show about princesses and unicorns. Almost committed suicide.

This anon echoes the original poster's emphasis on secrecy, noting that he's not comfortable revealing his love for the show to offline companions, even his "buddy." He also illustrates the potential depth of shame with a hyperbolic reference to suicide. However, one anon argues that, since this is apparently the first transgression, his abject identity remains hidden:

> If they don't know... [this show's] fandom then they won't care. Why would they? To them it's just a little girl's show. Just make sure they don't see you watching it again or they are going to totally catch on to the fact you fuck horses.

If seen watching the show more than once, this poster implies, others will "catch on" to his stigmatized sexuality, shifting his transgression from an error that can be laughed off to making him a "type" of person who "fucks horses." This connection echoes anxieties around men's investment in feminine interests, where nonconforming gender practices, such as men loving a little girls' show, imply deviant sexualities (Martino and Kehler, 2006). Many anons describe experiences where others assume that their affinity for the show implies sexual desire for its characters, such as this anon who was approached at school:

> Sitting at campus lunch table... Guy walks up to me and asks me what a brony is. I tell him it is a term for men who like the show My Little Pony, and try to leave it at that. He then asks me if... I would bang any of the characters. I would bang dress horse [Rarity, a fashionista pony], but I tell him that I'm not like one of those guys. Faggots now come up to me everyday asking me if I like to fuck ponies.

This anon is frustrated that he talked about the show with anyone in real life, although as he notes, he would still "bang" one of the characters. By complaining about "everyday" harassment, he provides an example of the imagined consequences of revealing one's desires, and thus a warning to other anons to keep their "horsefucker" status online, where others cannot identify or bother them. This anon thus emphasizes the importance of the online context: desires to "fuck ponies" that would be the subject of constant ridicule offline can be expressed safely online. Thus, he is not trying to remove himself from the abject category; rather, he is policing his own behavior to make sure his abjection isn't made visible to others, and encouraging anons to do the same. Thus, /mlp/ anons are constantly

made aware of the sexual stigma, and therefore the need for secrecy, attached to their identity.

Hence, /mlp/'s collective sexual culture makes the tension within the abject explicit: they experience "loves and pleasures... constituted in relation to parts of [them]-selves that are causes of irredeemable shame" (Halperin, 2009: 70). Online worlds allow some resolution of this tension, allowing shameful parts of the sexual self to be expressed without fear of tarnishing public identity. In an online space free from offline surveillance, men can build a collective identity around their stigmatized sexual identity without challenging the stigma around it. Users of /mlp/ share but do not valorize their sense of abjection, producing a communal sense of both solidarity and victimhood that can only exist in an anonymous online space. In the following section, we discuss how this collective sense of abjection creates discursive support for a reactionary gender politics based around men's victimhood.

'They don't know what sexual frustration or loneliness are': Politicized abjection

The /mlp/'s discursive positioning of themselves as abject becomes fodder for the development of politicized narratives that contradict those posited by contemporary feminism. Whereas feminism asserts the existence of masculine power, especially in the realm of sexuality, /mlp/ anons see their masculinity primarily in terms of the sexual partners or activities they lack. Additionally, they often identify women as having easy access to heterosexual relationships and esteem, to the point where, rather than men's privilege, /mlp/ anons frame the social world in terms of women's privilege. One anon suggests that women have easier access to sex partners than men do, and another agrees: "true. being born a girl... is literal easymode for the first 40 years. Free drinks, free fucks, free attention. [Women] don't even know what sexual frustration or loneliness are." Women, in the eyes of this anon, are able to receive a variety of social benefits based solely on their gender, especially those that /mlp/ anons feel unable to access. They get "free" sexual and social attention, which, as noted earlier, /mlp/ anons feel uniquely distanced from; they even receive nominal economic benefits, such as "free drinks." Women are thus represented as privileged and powerful, at least within the realm of social and sexual interaction.

Anons do, on occasion, note the problematic tensions created by the social expectations of masculinity, though they generally view feminism as contributing to this tension. For example, one anon describes the struggle he experiences between his own introversion and the outgoing, sociable personalities expected of men:

> I'm really friendly and nice towards close people, but very distant and introverted to strangers. I wish I was a girl... people like quiet girls. But I'm a man, and this shit society expects me to be a great mover and leader and provider... fuck the male role. don't even get any rewards for all that struggle anymore thanks to feminism.

Here, this anon extends the previous quotation's point about women's advantages: "quiet girls" are liked by default, while "distant and introverted" men are understood as inadequately masculine compared to "movers and leaders." He also suggests that "thanks to feminism," being a man no longer carries social or material "rewards" for the "struggle" of keeping up the "male role." Feminism is thus framed as denuding masculinity of its benefits while preserving its strictures. Anons view feminism as the cause of a contemporary masculine double bind: men are simultaneously punished for achieving and for failing to achieve the hegemonic ideal.

This perceived double bind extends to anons' sexual plight. In an "Anon in Equestria" thread, where anons compose fiction about a human 4chan denizen living in the world of the show, one poster writes a brief scene imagining the character Spike's interactions with "Femanon," a fictional woman who bullies Spike about his masculine sexuality.

Femanon: If you want a girl to like you, first you have to support every choice she makes.
Spike: But Femanon, Rarity sometimes makes terrible choices... I feel as a friend and potential partner I should voice concern.
Femanon: You disgusting male pig! Using friendship as a guise to get into her pants is worse than rape! Unless you actually rape her than rape is worse than rape... You have a small dick, that's your problem! You're a small dicked, bitter virgin loser who needs to lie and deceive women to get his way!
(Femanon stomps away as Spike tries not to cry)
Spike: A-Anon, what did I do?
Anon: You made the mistake of asking a girl from my world for advice, that's what.
Spike: Are they all like that?
Anon: After feminism? Pretty much.

The femanon in this story illustrates /mlp/'s perspective on feminism: a readiness to compare any slight against a woman to rape, the belief that women can do nothing wrong, and the source of a similar "double bind": men are both sexually predatory and sexually insufficient. The anon at the end of the story depicts feminist politics as ruining women, rendering them shrill critics who won't leave men alone. Another anon posts a telling response to this story: "Let's not bring such unpleasantness here shall we. It's bad enough talking to these ideologues in real life. Can't we escape to the land of equine fornication without them?" This post frames feminists as pervasive critics in "real life" spaces, and reinforces the importance of the online world as a space where stigmatized sex can be freely expressed without social critique – a "land of equine fornication."

Hence, the collective representation of /mlp/'s masculinity as abject is linked to a rejection of feminism. As shown through their posts on /mlp/, many anons see themselves, and men more generally, as disadvantaged compared to women, especially regarding sexuality. Feminist claims that men have social privilege seem not

only wrongheaded but re-victimizing to /mlp/ anons. This last perception is aided by the framing of feminist criticisms as petty, vitriolic, and mean; in addition to being wrong about the world, feminists are interpreted as participating in the shaming project that renders the masculinity of /mlp/ users abject. Thus, through being shared in an anonymous online space, gendered shame based on sexuality produces a communal perception of disadvantage that supports antifeminist politics.

Sexual stigma does not fully explain /mlp/ anons' sense of disadvantage, which is also supported by the broader material conditions shaping men's lives acknowledged by previous research. Scholars have argued that narratives of "endangered men" are a response to the social changes that are calling patriarchal authority and privilege into question (Stein, 2005). Blocked from the success that their fathers experienced by a less stable economy, many men are unable to meet the sexual, social, and economic expectations placed on them by society (Kimmel, 2013). The experiences shared on /mlp/ reflect this sense of material disadvantage, as well as sexual stigma and social isolation. For instance, while the employment status and education level of individual posters on /mlp/ is impossible to determine, anons describe themselves as lacking fulfilling careers or educational opportunities. In a thread asking about anons' futures, many give accounts of educational and professional failure:

> I got a degree but it's completely worthless (music)... I can't get any financial support to go back and do something that would actually get me a job, so I'm... still in my parents' house at 25. I won't kill myself, though. I'm fascinated to see how it gets worse.

This anon characterizes his economic failure as an existential threat, referencing the possibility of suicide. Other anons describe these economic and educational barriers in similar existential terms: "I have no future. Shit hit the fan. When I can't pay my bills anymore with what I have saved up, I'm just going to jump off the roof of my building."

Collectively, then, anons on /mlp/ portray the world as empty of opportunity, with their futures tenuous and uncertain. Disadvantage, rather than economic privilege, dominates the experiences that /mlp/ users share with each other, constructing a collective sense of men's declining status. This sense of disadvantage augments the angst produced by /mlp/'s collective sense of sexual shame, and provides discursive support for antifeminist politics. Thus, while /mlp/ shares the well-documented sense of men as endangered, they compound economic fears with sexual and social ones. Our data suggest that stigmatized sexuality represents an important additional element of men's collective sense of disadvantage.

Conclusion

We have shown how a specific subset of the *My Little Pony* fandom collectively positions their sexuality as shameful. Community members on /mlp/ articulate this

shame through a shared narrative of sexual failure, which places them outside the normative heterosexuality constitutive of hegemonic masculinity. By creating interactional reminders that their sexual identities are sources of shame, they reaffirm the normalcy of hegemonic masculine heterosexuality, marking themselves as the "constitutive outside" that characterizes the abject (Butler, 1993). This shame contributes to a collective representation of men as sexually disadvantaged, which bolsters a broader narrative of failing masculinity that opposes progressive narratives of gender change. We argue that online spaces facilitate not only the collective production of stigmatized sexual identities (cf. Kavanaugh and Maratea, 2016), but the emergence of communal politics surrounding them.

Previous research emphasizes how shifting economic conditions can contribute to a perception that men and masculinity are "endangered" (Stein, 2005). We find that, while /mlp/ users share this economic anxiety, they also suggest the potential importance of sexuality as a discursive resource for the argument that men are collectively disadvantaged. Thus, our findings indicate the role that sexual failure and shame can play in the production of antifeminist politics, especially in online spaces where stigmatized sexual desires can be collectivized in ways that are difficult or impossible offline.

We suspect that this link between sexual failure and reactionary politics is not limited to /mlp/ or 4chan. Future research might investigate how other online communities are bound together either by narratives of collective sexual failure or collective sexual politics, and the potential links between these concepts. Additionally, future research might investigate the recent proliferation of online antifeminist social movements. For example, Gamergate, a high-profile antifeminist movement that began online and criticized women's influence in the gaming and entertainment journalism industry, emerged from claims that a woman game developer was using her sexuality as a way to gain unfair favor from game reviewers and journalists (Chess and Shaw, 2015). This echoes the perspective on /mlp/ that women receive "free attention" and other unfair advantages thanks to their gender. We argue for further research on how sexuality may play a role in antifeminist campaigns like Gamergate, especially ones that begin online, as well as online communities where stigmatized sexuality is politicized. Our research suggests the dynamics of sexual shame and abjection that may contribute to these political attitudes and movements.

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