Bronies:
A discourse analysis of the paradoxical nature of gender-stigmatized identity

Master’s thesis
sociology

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I hereby declare that this thesis is entirely my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, all other sources of information I used have been cited and acknowledged within the text.

Brno, May 24 2015

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I would like to thank Nadya for being the most patient and generous supervisor I could imagine and my parents for providing me with the perfect conditions for my studies. Also, I would like to thank Eva, Lenka, Lukáš, Nikol, Ojá, Ondra, Tereza and Zuzka.
# Table of contents

1. Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 5

2. Theoretical background .......................................................................................................... 9
   2.1 Self and stigma .................................................................................................................. 9
      2.1.1 What is self ................................................................................................................... 9
      2.1.2 Stigma .......................................................................................................................... 10
   2.2 Hegemonic masculinity ...................................................................................................... 13
      2.2.1 Hegemonic masculinity - key points .......................................................................... 13
      2.2.2 Unstable nature of Hegemonic Masculinity and Bronies .......................................... 14
      2.2.3 Realms of masculinity ................................................................................................. 17
   2.3 Discourse ........................................................................................................................... 21

3. Methodology .......................................................................................................................... 24
   3.1 Discourse analysis ............................................................................................................. 24
   3.2 The analytical process ....................................................................................................... 26

4. Analysis ................................................................................................................................... 29
   4.1 Stigma ............................................................................................................................... 29
      4.1.1 Creepiness/perversion ............................................................................................... 29
      4.1.2 Scolding/shame ......................................................................................................... 33
      4.1.3 Pathologization ......................................................................................................... 37
   4.2 Masculinity ....................................................................................................................... 40
   4.3 Relationships with “outside” .............................................................................................. 48
      4.3.1 Community feeling .................................................................................................... 48
      4.3.2 Dealing with “othering” ............................................................................................ 53

5. Discussion of findings ............................................................................................................ 58
   5.1 Maintaining the hegemonic .............................................................................................. 58
   5.2 Dilemmatic nature of community ..................................................................................... 60
   5.3 Further implications of the study ...................................................................................... 61

References ................................................................................................................................ 65

List of figures ............................................................................................................................ 68

Name index ............................................................................................................................... 68

Attachments ............................................................................................................................. 71
   1. Interview questions ........................................................................................................... 71
   2. Table of participants .......................................................................................................... 73
1. Introduction

This thesis will be dedicated to Bronies. Bronies are a community of (mostly) men in their teens and adult years that consider themselves fans of the TV series “My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic” (MLP). They call themselves Bronies, as a combination of words “Bro” and “Pony.” Bronies can take different positions to their broonyhood. The Brony community is very active in creating fan art. Their fan fiction comes in pictorial, textual, musical and other forms, and is often much darker than the TV show itself. My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic is the fourth incarnation of the original franchise My Little Pony that started in 1986. The plot of the fourth generation takes place in a fictional land named Equestria. Ponies, the inhabitants of Equestria, are subdivided into three main species. Earth ponies, pegasus ponies, who can fly, and unicorn ponies, who usually have magic powers. The show target group seems to be little girls. In every episode, the main characters experience adventures and learn friendship lessons. These can be summarized in the following imperative: “You need understanding and compromise. You've got to share. You've got to care. Leitmotiv of the show is friendship as a great experience which is worth learning and working on. Main characters of the show are ponies of different colors and every pony has its own character. They are very cute - they have big eyes, colorful manes and a small picture on their buttock that signifies their strongest power, as can be seen in the picture below.

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1 They can self-identify as secret Bronies, as social Bronies, as independent Bronies or as hidden Bronies. See the layout here: http://www.bronystudy.com/id1.html
2 There can be also alicons-ponies both with wings and unicorn horn.
3 At the end of most episodes, one of the main characters writes a letter to princess Celestia in which he or she reports what they learned; in season four, the letter reports are replaced by a shared diary, to which ponies write their findings.
4 MLP: FiM (S01E21)
1. Characters of MLP

From the left: Applejack, Fluttershy, Princess Celestia, Twilight Sparkle, Rarity, Princess Luna, Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie

Bronies are often blamed for not being “men enough”. To give a better insight into what I mean by “being men”, or more precisely, by practicing masculinity correctly, I will use the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connel 2005). Hegemonic masculinity is more likely an ideal type than something that real-life men can actually embody. One of its key points is the exclusion of the feminine. Since ponies are stereotypically seen as both feminine and childish, it can cause that the hegemonic version of masculinity is harder to achieve for Bronies. There are several reasons for that. First, there is an emphasis on the emotional investment and the generally peaceful atmosphere of the community (considering the inside of the community). It shows emotionality and involvement, which is in contrast to nowadays requests on masculinity that include, for instance, (ironic) detachment and “coolness” (Segal 2001: 246 cited in Kendall 2008:126). Secondly, Bronies are often being harassed for seeming too “effeminate” or “gay”, which are characteristics that stand in opposition to the core of hegemonic masculinity (Connel 2005), as I will show later.
I will start the thesis with a theoretical part. In this part I will introduce several important terms, starting with self and stigma. For now, it is sufficient to say that I will consider self as an entity that is negotiated in interactions and stabilized in discourse\(^5\), and that by stigma I mean a stereotype that evolves from a specific attribute that spoils one’s identity (Goffman 1963). After that, I will proceed to the next part - the theories on masculinity. This chapter will consist of three parts. Firstly, there will be an introduction of the term itself and its characterization, followed by a description of its unstable nature. I will end this chapter by introducing the realms in which hegemonic masculinity can appear (relevant to Bronies). After that, I will talk about discourse, as a preparation for the chapter dedicated to the method. Finally I will move to the analysis itself. For the analysis, I gathered data from interviews with men who voluntarily reacted to my call for interviews on a Bronies facebook site. I spoke with 14 males aged mostly from 16 to 33 years, both single and in a relationship, from both small villages and big cities\(^6\). I will use qualitative data analysis - the point is to show the possibilities of language (Peräkylä 1997 cited in Talja 1999: 13-14) more than some “hard” data and percentages. I will use discourse analysis of interviews in order to capture paradoxical nature of masculine identity stigmatized through lack of fulfillment of gender expectations.

Unsurprisingly, it was revealed that Bronies are generally aware that they do not fulfill the masculine stereotype. The question was - how do Bronies work with gender on the level of discourse? It turned up that claiming an identity of a Brony often causes the suspicion and questioning from other people and thus feelings of strengthened surveillance and mockery. Bronies deal with this situation in various ways. They can control “symptoms” of being a fan in order not to reveal themselves. If they decide to reveal, they can continue with self-control through monitoring their behavior. This happens in order to eliminate what they think could annoy others. Generally, Bronies are in the situation of strengthened attention that is based on them doing something inappropriate for men. Such stigma can be overcome through declared rebellion against stereotypes. That is carried by a character best described as a rebel Brony. This character, partly evolving from research of Wetherell and Edley (1999) on imaginary positions towards masculinity, combines the power implied in potential to break rules with the weakness implied in embracing “feminine” attributes.

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\(^5\) I will discuss that further in the chapter dedicated to discourse.

\(^6\) See the table of participants in the appendix.
I chose Bronies as the thesis topic for two main reasons. First one was that the MLP fandom has strong gender implications. The community presents itself as being very nice, tolerant and supportive, which is to some extent in opposition to the competitiveness and exclusive nature of hegemonic masculinity. Bronies deal with this situation in various ways. The can use metaphors, comparing object of their interest to the man-like entertainment such as football. They can emphasize the motive of revolt against the rules, or they can deal with mockery with invoking rational, self-controlling and gentlemen-like attitude. On the other hand, the “feminine” attributes and soft skills, such as love, tolerance and caring are welcomed and appreciated. Also, at the first sight the TV show seems to be targeted on little girls. Since one of the basics of hegemonic masculinity is its delimitation from the feminine, this can be considered as breakage of the rules of hegemonic masculinity. My second reason for choosing this topic was the fact that as the fandom started just a few years ago, there is almost no academic research on Bronies. Thus, the aim of this thesis is also to contribute to the research on masculinities and pop culture on an unexplored terrain of Bronies fandom. The goal of this thesis is to reveal the connections between masculinity and stigmatization in pop-culture, and its implication on (masculine) identity.
2. Theoretical background

2.1 Self and stigma

2.1.1 What is self

I would like to start my thesis with a discussion of the term self. We can think about self on several levels. One of them is purely material - we use it when we talk about one’s biological existence (Seigel 1999: 23). It is important to say that I do not reckon self in a sense of enlightenment subject. For my purposes, the most useful way of thinking about self is the concept of relational self. That is, positing, reflexive self created through “cultural, social and discursive relations (that constitute selfhood)” (Seigel 1999: 23). Foucault denies the notion of “true self” as something that can be constrained, freed or found. He is rather interested in discourse and its effects on the self, on creation of the self. He says that “we have to create ourselves as a work of art“ (Foucault 1984: 351). Unlike Foucault, Goffman (1973) takes a symbolic interactionist perspective. For him, the self can be regulated both from within and from outside of the subject. Goffman’s notion of the self implies more centered subject (1973).

For Foucault, meaning is brought to life in discourse (1972). For Goffman, meaning is created through performances (1973). How can we connect these two approaches to creation of a meaning? Abigail Locke summarizes that ”(t)he only way we could learn and use a word for an inner experience is by taking part in the ways it is publicly used“ (Wittgenstein 1953 cited in Locke 2002:6). When we think about the success of the performance (or speech or interaction), one of the criteria can be its understandability - the performance is successful when understandable. It is necessary to participate in discourse “correctly”, for one’s inner states are transferable by discourse. I will think of the self as of the entity constantly negotiated in discourse, both on the level of speech itself and on the symbolic level of interactions. One of the experiences of the self that can be produced and maintained both by discourse and interactions is stigma, as I will explain in the following chapter.
2.1.2 Stigma

Now I will explain what the term stigma means. Goffman defines stigma as “(a)n attribute that is deeply discrediting” and spoils ones social identity” (Goffman 1963: 3). Such an attribute is a stigma, especially when its discrediting effect is very extensive; sometimes it is also called a failing, a shortcoming, a handicap” (Goffman 1963: 3). Stigma can be also defined as a “special kind of relationship between attribute and stereotype” (Goffman 1963: 4). Stigma is something that refers not to individuals, but to a group of people that have the stigmatizing attribute in common. They are also connected by the socially constructed stereotype that is built around them. In other words, a person who at some point does not fit to what is currently considered as a norm can be stigmatized and their identity is “spoiled” (Goffman 1963). To give an example, the stereotype of IT workers is that they are asocial, which is based on the attribute that they understand computers (which is incomprehensible). On the same note, the abnormalizing attribute of Bronies is that they watch the show for little girls and Brony stereotype covers many attributes from unpopularity to pedophilia, as I will show in the analysis.

In the stigmatization process, the first thing to happen is the conceptualization of difference as something significant (Goffman 1963). For purposes of this thesis I will work with the assumption that differences are encoded and negotiated in discourse, as I will explain later. That means that differences are not essential. They have to be identified as differences first. What is important is the meaning that is imbued in stigma. One of the codes that influence the direction in which the meaning-making will proceed is gender. I will demonstrate it on the example of colors. Green, pink and blue colors are all different, but only pink and blue are identified as gendered colors. The distinction between pink and blue color is thus imbued with the meaning and on some occasions, e.g. when buying baby clothes, the gender code is activated and many people will not buy blue clothes for a baby girl. In Stigma, Goffman presents that the only man in America that can never be ashamed is “young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports” (Goffman 1963: 128). Simply put, requirements described by Goffman at many points meet the definition of hegemonic masculinity on which I will focus in the next chapter.

As I mentioned earlier, the first step in stigma attribution, according to Goffman (1963), is recognizing the attribute as stigmatizing, which means that the recognition of stigma itself comes first. In order to manage the stigma, there are several ways of dealing
with it. You can, for example, try to make your stigma invisible, or you can show it while keeping a “disclosure etiquette”, a way how to reveal the stigma and manage the tension of it at the same time. If stigma can’t be recognized at first sight, Goffman (1963) distinguishes people that are “discreditable” and people that are “discredited”. In the former case, people interacting with the stigmatized person are not aware of the stigma. The main issue for the stigmatized originates in the need for control of information about oneself. In the case of the “discredited”, the stigma is already known by others. The stigma here not only affects the individual’s behavior, but it also affects surroundings of the stigmatized and complicates relationships of the stigmatized as they are restricted. According to Goffman (1963), the discredited person is asked to restrict the demonstration of stigma and stick to the “disclosure etiquette”. That means to treat other people in interaction with respect to non-written codes and thus lowering the tension. “Normals” are not seen as people with bad intentions; they just need to be pushed in the right direction. Therefore, what is asked from the stigmatized is a will to provide such a help. When encountering inappropriate comments, the stigmatized should not answer in a same manner but he or she should try polite education (Goffman 1963).

One of the stigmatized types is “disaffiliate” - a deviant who is accused of defying the social order. A deviant of this type does not voluntarily act according to, as Goffman puts it, “basic institutions - the family, the age-grade system, the stereotyped role-division between the sexes (...)” (Goffman 1963: 143). Such a deviant disrupts the society order because he or she is seen as being disaffiliated voluntarily. They are betraying the society order, because they do not follow the steps that can be considered as traditional, as the “right” ones. The “disaffiliate” can be an “eccentric” when acting alone, the “cultist”, when his or her behavior is connected to a place or a particular activity, or the “social deviant” when the most crucial element is the community. It is questionable which type of disaffiliate Bronies are. We could consider them as eccentrics, because in some social contexts, they can defy gender order voluntarily on their own. We could consider them cultists for they are joined by the hobby they have. Also, we could consider them social deviants because they are members of a community that is potentially stigmatized for breaking gender, or more precisely, masculine rules. Nonetheless, this thesis does not aim to analyze the category of disaffiliate Bronies belong to. The important point is that they voluntarily do not act according to the gender rules they should follow.
Paul Lopez (2006), inspired by Goffman (1963), says that being stigmatized is not the same case as being marginalized or made fun of; potential for stigma is something much more intense. Pop-cultural genres can be stigmatized if they are viewed as potentially harmful. Lopes (2006), following Goffman (1963), considers stigma as a socially constructed stereotype caused by a differentiating attribute that functions to discredit individuals. The presence of elements of power and discrimination is symptomatic for a stigma (Link and Phelan 2001). According to Lopes (2006), fans of stigmatized genres are labeled (often by themselves) as geeks or asocial people, which can help to strengthen ties within the community (2006: 407).

I can summarize my definition of stigma as follows. I consider stigma as an ascription of attributes that are based on collective projection of phenomena. Attributes are ascribed to people distinct from whatever is currently considered as normal, while distinction has to be established as the significant first (Goffman 1963). The importance of the actual distinctive sign is negotiated in discourse. Also, there is a power aspect between the stigmatized and non-stigmatized person and generally, the person with stigma stands on the lower grade of hierarchy (Link and Phelan 2001). To visualize stigma, we can imagine a plane with a circle on it. The inside of the circle zone is inhabited with Goffman’s (1963) “normals” (unstigmatized) people and the outside of the zone is inhabited with stigmatized people. Being stigmatizes is a position, not an inherent and unchangeable fact - the fact that you are carrying a stigma does not mean you cannot put someone else in a position that is stigmatized more strongly. The more in the centre of the zone you are, the less potential for stigmatization you have. On the borderline, the potential for stigmatization is critical. At the end of the next chapter, I will add masculinities to this schema.
2.2 Hegemonic masculinity

2.2.1 Hegemonic masculinity - key points

Hegemonic masculinity is more of an ideal type than an actual behavior that can be obtained by individuals. It includes both attributes and behavior that allow men to maintain the dominance over women. There are many works on masculinity and also many lists of what (hegemonic) masculinity means. For Patricia Sexton (1969), such a list includes "courage, inner direction, certain forms of aggression, autonomy, mastery, technological skill, group solidarity, adventure and considerable amounts of toughness in mind and body" (Sexton 1969 cited in Donaldson 1993: 646). For Connell (2005), hegemonic masculinity is encoded through the body. Connell states that as a result of this, “men are naturally more aggressive than women” and homosexuality is seen as “unnatural” (2005: 45). Donaldson (1993) summarizes that hegemonic masculinity is “exclusive, anxiety-provoking, internally and hierarchically differentiated, brutal, and violent. It is pseudo-natural, tough, contradictory, crisis-prone, rich, and socially sustained” (1993: 645). More than the description of hegemonic males, the last few characteristics refer to the nature of hegemonic masculinity as such. Connell (2005) mentions several important principles. Hegemonic masculinity often seems to be “natural” while it is maintained socially. At the same time, due to its contradictories, it can be constantly negotiated and redefined. Unmasculine person would, then, show characteristics such as “being peaceable rather than violent, conciliatory rather than dominating, hardly able to kick a football, uninterested in sexual conquest, and so forth” (Connell 2005: 67).

Since the hegemonic masculinity is hardly, if ever, obtainable, these are not hegemonic males who maintain it (Connell 2005). Men can participate on the hegemonic masculinity differently, as complicit males (Connell 2005). These men cannot meet all the standards of hegemonic masculinity, but they are still able to gain so called “patriarchal dividend” that allow them to keep their ascendancy over women. It is fundamental for marginalized masculinities are being oppressed by other masculinity, most likely the hegemonic masculinity. Connell gives an example of factor of color or class (2005: 80-81). The last type, subordinated masculinity, shows characteristics that are repulsed by hegemonic masculinity, for example effeminacy (gay men) (Connel 2005: 78-79).

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7Connell defines those as „the advantage that men in general gain from the overall subordination of women“ (Connell 2005: 79).
The topic of this thesis is paradoxical nature of masculine identity stigmatized through lack of fulfillment of gender expectation. Since ponies are considered as both childish and feminine, it can make the attainability of masculinity problematic for Bronies. In the Bronies' case, attribute of stigma is carried by the object of interest, by the TV show My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic (MLP). Brony stereotype, at least as presented in interviews, consists of several characteristics that can be combined in different ways. It usually includes the presence of non-heterosexuality (e.g. being called gay or pedophile), the lack of social skills and non-attractiveness.

However, as Speer (2001) points out, the fact that one can identify hegemonic masculinity does not mean

that we (as analysts) should interpret this as meaning hegemonic masculinity actually exists, or that we might be able to identify a hegemonic person. All that it does mean is that a cultural category or way of describing masculinity (that we can all use) exists, and, as I have shown here, it exists to do business, and variable sorts of business, for the participants. (2001: 126)

That means, even if we are theoretically able to define which attributes are characteristic of hegemonic masculinity in a given sociocultural context, we should move further and investigate what “business” it does for the ones who use it. Thus, the next chapter will be dedicated to the unstable nature of hegemonic masculinity.

2.2.2 Unstable nature of Hegemonic Masculinity and Bronies

Hegemonic masculinity is neither necessarily consistent, unproblematic concept, nor it implicates that there is only one way social scientists can approach it. Wetherell and Edley (1999) present a few key points. They criticize Connell’s concept for being too “neat” (1999: 352). According to them, Connell overlooks the possibility that different strategies, that mean complicity and resistance against hegemonic masculinity, can appear together (Wetherell and Edley 1999: 352). Another problem with the concept of hegemonic masculinity is that, as Wetherell and Edley argue, the real males cannot actually fulfill the definition of hegemonic masculinity, which therefore might be an inappropriate object of a research. (1999: 337) Considering the admitted assumption that men cannot embody the actual hegemonic masculinity in whole, but they can still gain patriarchal dividend (Edley and Wetherell 1995: 129 cited in Speer 2001), it is not determinate of identity, but there is a plenty of space for resistance and negotiation of subordinated forms of masculinity trying
to gain dominance (Edley and Wetherell 1999: 165 cited in Speer 2001: 108). Wetherell and Edley (1999) also suggest that there is a possibility that the most hegemonic thing to happen is a man who can be considered so self-conscious to defy the expectations of society and have his own way of “being a man” while at the same time not fulfill the hegemonic masculinity expectations (1999: 351). As they put it, there are “other hegemonic ways of being a person in western societies, such as demonstrating individuality and autonomy from social forces. These different requirements for how to be a man are in conflict and are a potential source of ideological dilemmas” (1999: 351).

The prescriptions of normative masculinity, which is closely related to hegemonic masculinity, can change over time. As some authors show, the evolution of masculinity proceeds in a way of incorporating new techniques of being masculine into the realm of hegemonic masculinity (Allen 2007; Demetriou 2001; Connell 1995 cited in Koroborov 2008: 1-2). Koroborov, in reference to Allen (2007) and Demetriou (2001), says that “(a) range of social practices has emerged that simultaneously subvert and reinforce traditional masculine norms, thereby circulating new ways of being masculine that do not necessarily refute subordinated forms of masculinity but rather hybridize them within the confines of the traditional hegemonic bloc” (Allen 2007; Demetriou 2001 cited in Koroborov 2008). In such practices we can count distancing and irony (Koroborov 2008). Those strategies are needed because now, “(e)xpanding normative masculinity seems to involve resisting looking straightforwardly or obviously heroic or hypersexual while working to safeguard the traditional masculine values of appearing confident, secure, and knowing about what is at stake in displaying one’s views” (Koroborov 2008: 13). Koroborov (2008) also notes that young men are pushed into what he calls emerging crisis in masculinity. Men are asked to “reform or abandon their oppressive habits, to be more open and tolerant, and to practice sensitivity and compassion” and at the same time, to be “independent, confident, and secure in their masculinity” and “not taking themselves too seriously” (Koroborov 2008: 13).

What relationship then Bronies have with hegemonic masculinity? Generally, Bronies can be considered as geeks (Robertson 2013) or nerds. I combine these two terms because they overlap in many ways. McArthur (2009) characterizes geeks as “enthusiasts of board games, videogames, the genres of science fiction and fantasy, cartoons, comics, anime, manga, computer programming, and the internet in general” (2009: 62). He points out on the transition of the term from being slightly contemptuous to being sort of an “endearing
term of affection (and perhaps jealousy)” (McArthur 2009: 61). The key point of being a geek is a high level of expert knowledge on a topic, whether we talk about Star Wars or computing sciences (McArthur 2009). While expert knowledge and activeness can be considered as hegemonic practices, being a geek/nerd has also its non-hegemonic attributes. Kendall (1999) says that this identity can be “seen as asocial and incompletely adult (sartorial disregard, bad hygiene and lack of social skills)” (1999: 263). By that, this identity implies both hyper-masculinity and subordinated masculinity (1999: 264). In 2012, most of Bronies identified themselves as “adolescent, male “geeks” from western countries” (Robertson 2013)\(^8\). Thus, Bronies in general can be considered as geeks/nerds for several reasons. Firstly, they participate in internet culture, which is according to McArthur (2009) one of the crucial characteristics of geeks. Secondly, they share expert knowledge on a geeky topic-cartoon TV show. Thirdly, at some point, they feel that sometimes they tend to be thought of as being both incompletely adult and unattractive.

The nature of Bronies is at some points dualistic. If we consider Bronies as “geeks” or “nerds”, their identity includes both attributes of hegemonic masculinity and those of subordinate masculinity (Kendall 1999: 263). To this dualistic nature points even Hill’s note on being a fan. He says that being a fan implicates “duality of cult fandom both as an affective loss of self and as a rational claim to social identity” (Hills 2008: 143). Therefore, considering main features of hegemonic masculinity, being a fan goes against one of the most important one, autonomy. On the other hand, there is a strong call for group solidarity, which is one of the symptoms of traditional masculinity (Sexton 1969 cited in Donaldson 1993: 646). Also, the resistance against norms can be considered as both a subversive practice (because in this case, the resistance stands against gender norms) and practice of hegemony, considering the courage of fans that is required for such an action. To summarize, it is important to strive not to strictly distinguish between subversive and hegemonic practices, but to work with strategies, contexts and potential discrepancies between accounts. Considering such a variability of resources upon which identity of Bronies can be built, possible discrepancies between them have to be taken into account. Also, the focus should be on the strategies and logics according to which single discourses are used. When the concentration is only on the surface, only on what seems to be “subversive”

\(^8\) Robertson refers to „State of the Herd Report”, the online Brony statistics. See (available here): http://www.herdcensus.com/
and what seems to be “hegemonic”, a whole range of tactics that can function both as subversive and hegemonic practice can be overlooked.

2.2.3 Realms of masculinity

In this subchapter I will focus on particular realms in which different relations to attributes to masculinity can appear. It is important to mention Sandra Harding’s (1986) notion on so called gendered universe here. She says that western societies are based on binary codes. In those binaries, there is always one of the pair that is privileged over the other one. Those binaries also function on the gender basis. We can often ascribe gender to each word of the pair, while the word ascribed to male gender is valued more (Harding 1986). In the similar vein, Gergen notes several binaries that are commonly used: “rational versus emotional”, “effective versus ineffective”, and “strong versus weak”, while noticing the hierarchy implicated in them (Gergen 1999: 108, italics removed, cited in Locke 2002: 13). He says that “rational” is considered more important than “emotional”, “effective” more than “ineffective” and “strong” more than “weak” (Gergen 1999: 108, italics removed, cited in Locke 2002: 13). He also notes, similarly to Harding (1986), that these binaries are often used in depictions of gender with men being associated with the privileged terms” (Gergen 1999: 108, italics removed, cited in Locke 2002: 13). Ruddick attributes the engagement of relationship with others to women, because they are supposed to parent. To participate on relationships also implies getting emotions from them (Ruddick 1980: 108 cited in Lutz 1996). Therefore, to experience emotions is “antithetical” to “male individualism” (Lutz 1996: 162).

Wetherell and Edley (1999) offer three distinct types of how men can position themselves towards masculinity. For the first type, the heroic masculinity, it is essential that man who takes this position identify himself with traditional attributes of masculinity such as physical toughness, courage and ability to “keep his cool” (1999: 342). Second position is called “ordinary”. In the ordinary position, one can reflect those characteristics, but do not align with them (1999: 344). The conventional masculinity is re-coded as an extreme and in that context, a man talks about oneself as about an ordinary man (1999: 344). The third position is called “rebellious”. It is important to note that the rebellious and ordinary positions can overlap. According to Wetherell and Edley (1999), men in this position place themselves in a context of social expectations against which they rebel. But even the men taking the rebellious position are using the masculinity construction. Being a man in the rebellious position requires “autonomy and independence”, which are highly
hegemonic attributes (1999: 350). What is appreciated by those men is not the nonhegemonic practices themselves, but the attributes that allow men do such activities, such as courage, which is, again, very hegemonic value (1999: 350).

There are several areas in which the negotiating of masculine identity can take place. Wetherell and Edley (1999), quoting Connell (1987), say that crucial for hegemonic masculinity is its exclusion of the “Other”. The “Other” is generally represented especially by the feminine and non-hegemonic; that means gay or effeminate men (Connell 1987 cited in Wetherell, Edley, 1999: 336). One of the ways of how to maintain the hegemonic status is humor. Dominic McCann, Plummer and Minichiello say that one of the points upon which is successful masculinity built around are homophobic jokes and homophobia. They note that

“(h)umor utilizes Goffman’s (1973) concept of the ‘other’ to allow people to develop their own gendered identity by creating social, emotional and physical distances between themselves and those who were considered ‘failed’ males. (…) For hegemonic males, homophobic humor has a functional capacity to create their sense of heterosexuality and successful masculinity in opposition to other sexualities – the ‘failed’.” (Dominic McCann, Plummer and Minichiello 2010: 506)

Humor is therefore a significant method of how to support one’s hegemonic status. Let’s assume, along with Wetherell and Edley (1999), that hegemonic masculinity is more complicated than simply the list of characteristics. It is a performance, it is not coherent and it is not definition of identity. It is being accomplished more than being essential; its achievement can happen through many different tactics. One of such tactics is humor (or “humor”). Barnes (2012) talks about the jokes that take place in most classrooms. Jokes are “often at the expense of subordinated gay or effeminate masculinities, are shown to be central in the process of reinforcing and reproducing the dominant discourse of masculinity. It is clear that having that ‘laff’ in the classroom cannot be fun for everyone, as humor is an integral part of the maintenance of a hierarchical structure of relational masculinities” (Barnes 2012: 242). Humor functions as a technique of a hierarchy struggle, as an “othering technique” (Dominic McCann, Plummer and Minichiello 2010). It divides a social space into two areas. In one zone lies the serious. A space behind a demarcation line of humor belongs to objects that can be laughed at - the “othered” (Dominic McCann, Plummer and Minichiello 2010).
I described stigma as a circle with irregular densities in the first chapter. Now we can add masculinities into the schema.

2. Stigma and masculinity

In the picture I illustrate different relationships between stigma and masculinity. The point marked A refers to the rebellious position. It lies outside of the zone, but it is closer to the central, hegemonic masculinity than the point C, which is inside the zone. Point C refers to ordinary masculinity. Point B refers to the geek/nerd character that lies on the edge of the zone. The last point, D, shows the position that lies on the outside and is in a long distance from the central masculinity, because the distance is not changed by the shortcut as with the point A.

If we consider hegemonic masculinity as an ideal type, we can place Wetherell and Edley’s (1999) imaginary positions in dependence on how far from hegemonic masculinity they lie. Then, heroic masculinity could be found in the centre of the sphere. Not exactly in the centre, but still within the zone of “normals” (Goffman 1963) would be ordinary masculinity - the one that does not identify with the central, heroic one, but defines itself as a less extreme version of the central one. The circle can be bounded by the line of humor that signifies what can be laughed at and mocked (see Barnes 2012; Dominic McCann, Plummer, Minichiello 2010). Thus, on the edge of the circle inhabited by “normals” would be the geek/nerd type and on the outside, there would lie the rebellious type. It is important to keep the changeable density of the sphere in mind (please note the lighter and darker spots in the picture). Even if we theoretically imagine this on the model of a regular circle, the truth is different. The space can be deformed, it can contain irregularities, same as the universe has its black holes and deformed time space continuums. The aim of this thesis will be revelation
of such irregularities. In this model, those irregularities will be represented by discourses, the places where meanings accumulate. For example, the discourse of revolt can be placed between the position of heroic masculinity and the rebellion position. While on the “masculinity scale”, those two have the longest distance between them, the discourse of rebellion brings them much closer in a sense that a person who is able to resist something, which is a process that requires autonomy and independence, gets closer to heroic masculinity (characterized by its strength) (Wetherell and Edley 1999).

Bronies can theoretically rely on hegemonic masculinity in different manners. At the first sight, Bronies are defying key attributes of hegemonic masculinity (such as exclusion of the feminine). That places them on the outside of the “normals” zone. Also, Bronies can be identified (or self-identified) as geeks/nerds. Such a position consists of both hegemonic attributes, such as relationship to technologies, and non-hegemonic attributes, such as lack of social skills that can lead to exclusion from “popular” groups (Kendall 1999: 263). But as it showed up, all of that does not necessarily imply that Bronies excluded strategies based on hegemonic values out of their discursive practices.
2.3 Discourse

In my thesis, I will do discourse analysis of interviews. We can identify three main approaches to discourse analysis. They have blurred boundaries and therefore they can overlap. I will very briefly introduce all three, because my analysis will be inspired by all of them. The strong point of poststructuralist discourse analysis (PDA) is its orientation on multiplicity of discourses and their reproduction, which will be particularly helpful for analysis of conflicts between discourses. The contribution of discourse psychology (DP) is its focus on understanding of meanings. And since I am studying implications of the image of hegemonic masculinity, critical discourse analysis (CDA) will help me to thematize the aspects of power. Combination of those three approaches will help me to focus on the hegemony while keeping the potential for dilemmas and the importance of meanings in mind.

Although approaches to discourse analysis are interacting with each other, there are several distinctions between them. I will start with difference between critical discourse analysis and poststructuralist (Foucauldian) discourse analysis. Firstly, they have different goals. For Fairclough (1989), as for a representative of CDA, the key point is to reveal, as he calls it, ideological dominations. He considers participants in discourse as reproducers of dominant discourses (Fairclough 1989). That means that discourses which participants use suit the dominant ideology and participants only reflect the domination in their talk. Fairclough (1992) rejects the idea of top down process of discursive change; he admits a struggle for power over discourse in a sense that people can refuse or confirm changes. He focuses on conflicts, disadvantages and straightening of inequalities, but still thematizes the dominant discourse. Foucault (1994), on the other hand, allows the possibility of multiplicity of discourses. This idea enables comparative analysis of discourses. That means that as analysts, we have to consider discourses as being related to one another in different ways. They can be strengthened by each other, or they can be in conflict (Foucault 1994).

Foucault, unlike the representatives of CDA, considers discourses as abstract events. In this approach, actual manifestations of discourse are implicated, but they are not subject of the study by themselves (Fairclough 1992). Foucauldian discourse analysis is concerned more with the “bigger picture”. Let’s say that discourse is the painting. In this case, Foucauldian discourse analysis would be interested more in the production of the painting and its display regimes (where the paintings are shown, if they are shown, and under which
circumstances this happens) and why most viewers see the same thing on the painting. In the same situation, CDA would be more likely striving to reveal the social powers that influence the outcome of the painting process in order to make the paintings more e.g. propagating social equality. CDA would be also more likely to assume that all paintings are mirroring the same ideology, while Foucauldian analysis would see pieces of different ideologies.

Now I will add discursive psychology into the analytical frame. Wetherell and Edley’s approach to discursive psychology asks how hegemonic norms “become effective“ (1999: 337). That means that we have to focus on how hegemonic norms are circulating through language and how they are practiced. For discourse psychology, speech is considered as an act in the respect that we can do various things with the language. Using language is not just a bias-free expression of what people want to say. Through language, we can negotiate a position, we can dissociate from something or we can ascribe characteristics or meanings. (Potter and Wetherell 1999). To continue with the painting analogy, the DP would ask what internal states and norms are captured (or worth capturing) in the painting or how and with what techniques this happens. None of the approaches I have mentioned asks about the truth hidden behind the painting or its “real nature”, but all of them ask about forces that form the painting.

One of the places where discourse can be researched is in interactions. In interaction, we use symbols - verbal figures that carry out meanings. The symbols used in interaction have to have a specific meaning to have potential to be successfully used. The more established meaning a symbol has, the more understandable is the subject that uses it. In this process, the role of the subject is not passive. Speer (2005), citing Edley, Wetherell and Potter, says that identities are

‘actively accomplished’ (Edley and Wetherell 1999: 182; Wetherell and Potter 1992: 7). Identities are not created anew each time a person speaks, but they are developed progressively, over time. They are not fluid resources, but a sedimentation of past discursive practices’, which can subject and regulate individuals (Wetherell and Potter 1992: 78–9) or be ‘close(d) off” (Wetherell 1995: 136). (quoted in Speer 2005: 113)

Thus even when we think of one’s identity as actively accomplished, it does not imply that such an accomplishment happens freely or randomly. Subjects depend on “sedimentations of past discursive practices” (Wetherell and Potter 1992: 78-79 cited in Speer 2005: 113). When we want to express that we feel calm, we do not have infinite
number of options for performing it, if we intend to be understood by others. We can feel calmed down under many different circumstances. But when we want others to understand us, we will probably pick symbols such as light, blue color, or sounds of ocean over mismatching colors and cacophonous music, when we are to indicate this feeling. We use the symbols that can be successfully understood for their meaning is settled. Taking this process backwards, the affiliation between the feelings of calmness and blue color and ocean sounds becomes stronger. Nevertheless, the meaning is not essentially fixed. For people who lived long ago and did not know about the oceans, or were not familiar with the idea of exotic vacations, this affiliation would probably make much less sense. Thus, “people are seen as both the products and the producers of language” (Edley and Wetherell 1999: 338). Discourse(s) can function as an index, from which subjects can pick justifications, explanations, reasons and other tactics, which can make the personal identity and the sense of self more complete and smooth (Edley and Wetherell 1999: 338).

To connect all of this with masculinity and gender, I would like to proceed to how Wetherell and Edley refer to gender. For them, gender is a “discursive practice”, “a method of description, not a psychological attribute” (Wetherell, Edley 1998: 165; Wetherell, 1995: 141 cited in Speer 2001). As mentioned in the previous chapter, men can occupy different positions with regard to masculinity. In other words, they can build their identity as male beings in different ways - their sense of male identity can be based upon different discursive resources. Wetherell and Edley (1999) define three of them. The “heroic position”, the position of the “ordinary man” and “rebellious” position. They show that even the non-heroic masculinities can show hegemonic characteristics, such as revolt. That means the “hegemonic” and “non-hegemonic” position can be actually much closer than they seem to be, because they use the same discursive registry. They are derived from „hegemonic values of autonomy and independence“ (1999: 350). For purposes of this thesis, the key points of this chapter are that discourses are negotiable and variable and at the same time, they are stable to some extent, so they can be used in an understandable way. For both interactions and discourse is valid that they are not necessarily neat and clear. The coherence that can be present in interactions and discursive practices is often contested and, sometimes, can be changed. That means that, the different meanings struggling and causing misunderstandings and arguments can be found in the one discursive framework (or interaction). In those, meanings can be updated, stabilized or redefined.
3. Methodology

3.1 Discourse analysis

In this chapter I will introduce the outline of my discourse analysis. I will be interested in discursive meaning-making. In my analysis I will pay attention to implicit pronouncements such as descriptions, explicit ones - evaluations, and interpretative ones - explanations (see Talja 1999). I will focus on how interpretive repertoires, that can serve participants for meaning-making, are connected to masculinity. For the analysis, I interviewed 14 Bronies aged from 16 to 33 years, both from large cities and villages, mostly students.\(^9\) My sample was composed of Bronies that voluntarily reacted on my call for interviewees that I published on CZ/SK Brony facebook page.\(^{10}\) I interviewed every Brony who was willing to make an interview. Interviews took place via Skype in a form of semistructured interviews. They had to be performed via Skype because of the distance of their locations and requests for anonymity. Every Brony was asked the same set of questions\(^{11}\) including questions on how it feels to be a Brony, their stories or their community life. Whilst the set of question remained the same for all interviews (except occasional additional questions if they were needed), sometimes I changed their order so that the interviews were as fluent as possible.

According to Cruickshank, one of the stages of discourse analysis is description (2012: 39). Simultaneously, as Talja puts it, “(t)he first phase consists of the analysis of inconsistencies and internal contradictions in the answers of one participant” (1999: 8). As I explained earlier, the multiplicity of different and sometimes opposing claims can appear in each answer corpus, even if we take answers from only one participant (and sometimes, even in the single answer) into account. It is important to expect heterogeneity in participant’s discursive resources, so the whole range of identifiable variations can be captured. To do this, we need to pay attention to the textual level of discourse. Therefore, I started the analysis with reading the interviews I had made and describing the language that participants had used. In this phase, I did not assess each interview individually, but I put them into one corpus of speeches. The main purpose of this phase is to describe the “textual” level of discourse.

The second phase of the analysis is less concerned with the language externalities and more concerned with its implications. Talja (1999) describes this stage of the analytical

\(^9\) See the table of participants in appendix.
\(^{10}\) [https://www.facebook.com/CzechandSlovakBronies?fref=ts](https://www.facebook.com/CzechandSlovakBronies?fref=ts). This is the facebook page for fans of MLP from Czech and Slovak republic where news about MLP and community (such as event) are shared.
\(^{11}\) See the interview questions in appendix.
process as follows: “The second phase consists of the identification of regular patterns in the variability of accounts: repeatedly occurring descriptions, explanations, and arguments, in different participants’ talk” (Potter and Wetherell 1987 cited in Talja 1999: 8, italics in original). In terms of discourse analysis, we can use many different terms for what we can find: interpretive repertoires, mental representations, etc. (Billig et al. 1988: 91 in Talja). In any case, output of this sub-phase is to capture the images and to understand meanings that subjects imprint in discourse, and according to which logic(s) they interpret situation. This will be followed by a sociological interpretation: what discourse(s) implies (Talja 1999). That can be captured with what Foucault calls “statement”. The term “statement” means that particular angle is used for approaching the phenomena. By regarding objects from a specific position, some aspect can be seen and some aspects can be missing. Single statements put together build discourse. And as Talja summarizes, “discourses differ in what kinds of statements they legitimize and what kinds of (factual) statements are absent” (Foucault 1972 cited in Talja 2008: 9-11). The problem with Foucault’s approach is that Foucault tends to overlook actual bursts of discourse; he perceives them as necessary events of discourse and he does not pay attention to it (Fairclough 1992). The spoken or written word is not at the core at his work. Therefore I will partly use DP and CDA approach for those are more concerned with actual symptoms of discourses and more centered on the speech/text dimension.

Talja, inspired by Wittgenstein (1953), adds the notion of evaluative role of language. She says that there is no essence of the nature of things - language plays active role in creation the subject it speaks about. People, by using language, produce “a version” of what they are talking about, which is also evaluative (Talja 1999: 6). By speech, subjects produce their versions of reality. When doing analysis of interviews, texts are not descriptions of objects, they are objects (Potter and Wetherell 1987 cited in Talja 1999: 13, underlined in the original). That means that a researcher does not separate what is said and what is done, because the speech is considered as an action. Also, it has to be kept in mind that the messages contained in interviews can be contradictory or competing (or they can simply differ) and we need to “identify significant patterns of consistency and variation in them” (Talja 1999: 8) because participant’s accounts can be in conflict (Billig 1988 cited in Talja 1999: 11).
According to Ruiz Ruiz, main questions of discourse analysis can sound as follows: “Why have certain discourses been produced (and not others)? What social conditions have allowed certain discourses been produced and not others?” (2007: 45). In this thesis, I will apply the concept of hegemonic masculinity by Connell (2005) to relate discourses to the social world. Thanks to this concept, I will be able to classify and clarify what I will find out. First, I will describe the language and then I will focus on what it implies and what is its relation to hegemonic masculinity. From PDA, I will take the multiplicity of discourses that can appear. I will also consider the prevalent hegemony of particular type of masculinity and I will put emphasis on participant’s understanding of the world. In another words, I will focus on people’s understanding as an action that allows multiplicity of discourses to emerge. Such discourses can have relationship to the hegemonic - they can be confirmative or subversive.

3.2 The analytical process

Now I will describe how I proceeded during the analysis itself. In the first phase, I re-read the transcriptions of interviews for many times. I paid attention to parts of interviews that were connected to attributes of masculinity as I described them in masculinity chapter. There were topics and speech figures that seemed to appear very often, such as the motive of revolt or the descriptions of how men should be like and look like. I sorted those into corpuses based on what they had in common, such as the topic of revolt or the topic of community as a place of peace. I ended up with three main areas that were able to cover most of the topics. I dedicated one chapter to each area. First one is dedicated to stigma and stigmatization, second one to masculinity and third one to relationship to world outside the community.

After I sorted out the extracts into the topic areas, I described the language surface, the textual level, for extracts that were related to the attributes of masculinity. That was followed by the identification of regular patterns (Potter and Wetherell 1987 cited in Talja 1999: 8). This phase was similar to the first one, in which I identified the reappearing topics and speech figures, except that now I worked with more structured corpus of extracts. In this descriptive phase I focused on the participants and the meanings they were bringing. Drawing on Talja’s (1999) approach inspired by Potter and Wetherell (Potter and Wetherell 1987 cited

12 In the analysis you will find only those I considered the most illustrative.
in Talja 1999), I was aiming to capture what is said implicitly (descriptions) or explicitly (evaluations) and on connections between two events (explanations).

By description I mean those pieces of interview where attribution of characteristics occurs and where those statements are inherently considered as factual. A sentence such as “I saw beautiful painting in the gallery” can serve as an example. The state of painting being beautiful is considered as factual. Evaluations are slightly different. While descriptions are not self-reflexive, evaluations present opinion and/or judgment explicitly. If I change the previous example to “I saw a picture in the gallery and I think it was good”, than it would be evaluation, because, simply said, I ascribed it a value and I reflect that this value is not same for all the people. The descriptions produce a version of the subject they talk about; evaluations produce its value in the eyes of the speaker and/or the emotions it causes. Explanations produce relationships and connections between objects of speech. Thus, if I rearranged the example to the form of explanation, it could sound as follows: “I think this painting is really beautiful, because it is realistic.” In this sentence, I connect the state of being beautiful with the state of being realistic. Identifying those three types is not a goal of analysis, only a way of how to distinguish between the implicit and the explicit and the relationship between cause and effect. For that reason, I will not always use it in analysis explicitly.

After the first phase, which was inspired by discursive psychology since it was focused on meanings and discursive work participants did, I moved to the next phase, in which I aimed to capture the multiplicity of discourses as in poststructural discourse analysis. I put together arguments, used in the speeches, and its implications. If re-use the sentence “I think this painting is really beautiful, because it is realistic”, it would be suggested that I tend to consider beauty and realism of the painting as something worth noticing; also, my mental map leads me to concentrating on visual aspect of the painting. One opinion on how to evaluate beauty could be realism, other one could be that the less realistic painting is, the more beautiful I find it. Even though those opinions are on different ends of the scale, they still use the same registry; or, in other words, interpretive repertoire- the visual. (That also implies that other meanings, for example the price, did not come into my mind.) Then I searched for possible conflicts between arguments. Are there any settings in which a different scale, let’s say the price mentioned above, comes to my mind?
Then I defined interpretive repertoires and their relation to hegemonic strategy, as a contribution to critical discourse analysis. The outcome of the analysis is descriptions of the discourses and transgressive moments in the relationship between stigma, gender and Bronies. The goal is to capture connections between stigmatization in pop-culture and its implications for (masculine) identity. After this explanatory part, I will show the analysis on the actual answer of one of the participants.
4. Analysis

4.1 Stigma

The first subchapter of the analysis will be dedicated to stigma. I will be concerned with three topics. I will start with attributes that are related to Bronies. I will follow the ways in which stigmatization goes. Starting with what characteristics are being attributed to Bronies and on what attributes is the negative stereotype based on, I will continue with the risk of mocking, which will be the topic of the second subchapter. Bronies attributes mean also a higher risk for pathologization, to which will be dedicated the last part of the stigma chapter. The term often quoted in this chapter is the breakage of societal rules, its relation to masculinity and relation to people from the outside of the community. I will pay attention to all these in the following chapters. At this point, it is important to identify the rules that determine the demarcation line between the area of “normals” (Goffman 1963) and area of those who failed (Dominic McCann, Plummer and Minichiello 2010), and recognize what it means in terms of pathologization.

4.1.1 Creepiness/perversion

I will start the analytical section with the topic of perversion and creepiness - two characteristics that are attributed to Bronies. The prevailing discourse is based on the assumption that when an adult male watches show supposedly targeted on little girls, there is a discrepancy between the gender role and the actual behavior. The assumption is that hegemonic masculinity, in general, excludes the feminine and is to a great extent based on normative heterosexuality (Connell 2005). Bronies, by watching MLP, are thus breaking imperative of exclusion of the feminine.
One of the interviewed Bronies mentioned that some people dissociate from community because they are afraid it might seem “weird” and therefore they do not want to call themselves Bronies, even though they like the TV show. After that, he was asked why he thinks some people can find being a Brony weird. He answered as follows\textsuperscript{13}:

Generally, in all communities there are lots of people that pollute the image of the whole fandom, and the Bronies are not exceptional. In this case it is much worse, because lot of people look down on them (Bronies) just because they watch the TV series that is associated with My Little Pony, which is something that a lot of people consider as something childish, girly and inappropriate. When a grown up man watches that, many people think that he is somehow weird, that he is a pervert or a pedophile, and if the person knows some phenomena that happen in Brony fandom (cloppers, r34 and so on), it only confirms their opinion and in addition, they relate their opinion to the whole community. And dirtying the image of already despised community is not good, and that’s why some people dissociate of that.

On this extract I will demonstrate my analytical process in praxis. I begun with identification of descriptions (proclamations) and evaluations (reflexive proclamations) (Potter and Wetherell 1987 cited in Talja 1999). I consider descriptions as segments of the interview in which the speaker assigns attributes or characteristics to the subject he talks about. The point here is to identify which subjects of talk are constructed in discourse and how. Evaluations are tools that provide the speaker with the possibility to make one’s own assessments. While descriptions produce a version of the subject they characterize, evaluations shows its value in the eyes of the speaker and/or the emotions it causes.

Descriptions in this excerpt can be divided into two sections. The first one defines participant’s constructions; the other one is how the participant draws other people’s constructions. The participant himself says that Bronies as a group are “not exceptional” (with regard to the fact that it has some members that are polluting the image of a fandom) and that Bronies are “already despised community”. When he describes the way Bronies are perceived from the outside, he says that Bronies are seen as “childish, girly and inappropriate”; an adult male watching the show can be seen as “weird, pervert or pedophile”. For the participant, Bronies are in a common situation; they are a group of people, in which some of them might be dirtying the picture of the community. Despite the fact that these situations are normal, Bronies are hold in scorn by people. The participant constructs members of the outside group as people that attribute such qualities as childishness, girlishness, inappropriateness, weirdness, perversity and pedophilia to Bronies.

\textsuperscript{13} Please note that the transcripts were kept mostly in their original form so their meaning remained unchanged.
Now I will link this up with explanations and evaluations. By the term explanations I mean those pieces of interviews that connect different subjects of talk and describe causalities. Explanations are like maps that help a speaker with orientation, while some maps are more available or accessible than others. Participant’s answer states that it is problematic to do potentially dangerous things when you are a Brony, because Bronies are already looked down at, as watching a TV show for little girls is considered as “childish, girly and inappropriate” etc. He also says that the knowledge of other “phenomena that happen in Brony fandom (cloppers\textsuperscript{14}, r34\textsuperscript{15}) only confirms people’s opinion about Bronies and in addition, they start to relate their assumptions to the whole community.

Evaluations are those parts in which participants explicitly present opinion and/or judgment. In this case, the participant’s answer shifts from connoting Bronies with communities in general. Then he moves to demarcation of specificities that show Bronies in a negative manner (“in this case it is much worse”), followed by diminishment of justification of such an approach (“just because”). Then he introduces the justification he imagines others use. Participant joins imagined others in the notion of the “dirtiness” of some members of fandom, or better – along with them, he allows the possibility that there are some people in the community that have power to dirty the image of the community as a whole. He reveals the propensity of Bronies as a group to be looked at as perverts, which implies that they are subjected to stronger supervision. They have to follow more strict rules in order not to be looked at as perverts. The argument here takes form of the characteristics contradictory to hegemonic masculinity. Girlishness is in contrast with hegemonic masculinity imperative, which is inherently exclusive in respect of gender. At the same time, because of doing something “inappropriate” for men, sexuality gets under surveillance. It is because such sexuality is considered suspicious, “somehow weird”, and people can dissociate from the group because they might be worried they will be labeled the same.

The reason that such a risk even exists is often ascribed to the behavior of Bronies who are mentioned in interviews as Bronies that do not behave properly. They are described as trying to convince others to become Bronies; they can be cloppers, wear cosplay\textsuperscript{16} on inappropriate occasions, or generally do things that are perceived as inconvenient for their surroundings. As we can see in the extract above, the situations that are being perceived

\textsuperscript{14}Pony-related masturbation
\textsuperscript{15}Rule 34 means that everything on the internet has its porn version.
\textsuperscript{16}Cosplay is a mixture of words “costume” and “play” and it means dressing up like a fictional character.
by Bronies as problematic do not have to be caused by “inappropriate” Bronies themselves. What the participant expresses is that such a behavior happens, nothing more and nothing less. The problematic situation is caused by the generalization of characteristics of the excessive community members to Bronies in general.

Another participant takes a similar position:

**Q:** What does it entail to be a Brony?
**A:** Different people see it differently. In my opinion, it entails at least watching the show and willingness to be called a Brony. Many people dissociate from community, because it feels creepy/perverted, so they don’t want to call themselves Bronies, even though they like the show.

The state of being a Brony is not inherent and automatic. It is a result of the process that fans have to allow themselves. To watch the series is the minimal requirement here, but to be on the level of being a fan, or more, being a member of fandom, requires more. To be a Brony, you need the willingness to call yourself this way and for that, you have to overcome that you are facing higher risks of being pathologized or mocked. It brings out the decision whether it is acceptable for someone to be exposed to such a situation. It is necessary to make a choice and decide whether you are willing to succumb or not.

The feelings of shame and the strengthened surveillance that lie on Bronies are linked to atypical display of identity with regard to the stereotypical masculine role, which is supposed to be excluding the feminine (Connell 2005). Also, this divergence shifts Bronies under more inquisitive look. For that reason Bronies often talk about checking the amount of information they give to others. As I mentioned earlier, being a Brony can be seen as a stigma, taking its reception into account. Abnormalizing attribute here is being a fan (or watching the show). Stereotypes evolving from this attribute are connected to masculinity. Such a stereotype can consist of characteristics like physical weaknesses and non-heterosexual orientation. For fans have the option to decide whether they become Bronies or not, Bronies can voluntarily switch from discreditable to discredited people and become Goffman’s (1963) “disaffiliates” - social deviants who are accused of defying the social order (Goffman 1963: 143).
4.1.2 Scolding/shame

In this subchapter I will pay attention to the implications that arise from belonging to a stigmatized community. I will take a closer look on what effects can gender-based stigma have on displaying one’s identity. For Bronies, the stigmatization can lead to several moments of dilemma. I will focus on discursive environment from which those moments evolve. One of discourse roles in stigmatization process is that it functions as a channel through which the first step of stigmatization process, the identification of significant difference, happens. Goffman (1963) says that

(while the stranger is present before us, evidence can arise of his possessing ‘an attribute that makes him different from others in the category of persons available from him to be and of a less desirable kind-in the extreme, a person who is quite thoroughly bad, or dangerous, or weak. He is thus reduces in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one. (1963: 3)

I will illustrate this first step of stigmatization on the following excerpt. In this extract, the participant provides an answer to the question why does he think Bronies encounter the situation of being made fun of:

Those are prejudices adopted from society in which they live, or from education. Ponies, pink color (and warm colors in general), ballet, fashion, cosmetics, dolls etc. are domain of girls, while cars, weapons, cold colors, Indians role plays, brawls and stuff (someone might say “the fun stuff”) are domain of boys. When you look at a photo of soldiers in a line and you spot a woman, something in your mind says it's unusual, and it indicates that she has to be different, distinct from other women. If, as an unconcerned person, you see an adult man watching My Little Pony, you will see the same thing - he has to be different, distinct=he can be dangerous in a way=he enjoys children stuff like MLP, he has to be a child rapist!

The first topic that appears are prejudices (or education). They are the reason why in people’s minds, domains of boys and girls are separated. The participant explicitly distinguishes between the stereotypical notion of these domains. When a boy gets into the area of girls’ and otherwise (and is caught up doing that), he becomes alienated from others of his kind. This means that the distinction, according to which people are sorted, is gender. Or more precisely, acting differently from what is considered as a regular performance of one’s gender can cause the moment in which the difference is spotted and simultaneously evaluated as significant, which can potentially lead to suspicions. In this extract, the participant suggests that in the eye of an unconcerned beholder, the subject doing something distinctive from other people of his gender can become potentially dangerous (in terms of sexuality). The author of this extract alienates himself from such an attitude using depersonalized phrases
such as “someone might say” or “unconcerned person”. He comes to the conclusion that the equation is simple for unconcerned people. Watching MLP when you are a grown up marks you as dangerous, e.g. child rapist.

The author of the previous example is not the only one referring to gender prejudices:

(...) Or, generally, when a little girl plays with cars, they will say she is emancipated, or better, in the worst case they will say she is emancipated, in the best case nobody notices. But when a little boy plays with dolls, they take him to a psychologist for he is effeminate, for he is not a normal kid, for why should a boy play with dolls etc. etc.

The participant’s description of the situation implies that masculine behavior of females is seen as something inherently better and less dangerous than feminine behavior of males. The ideal state of things is presented as a society without gender limitations (“in the best case, nobody notices”). He mentions the imbalanced approach between girls performing masculinity and boys performing femininity. The difference is that while girls performing masculinity can gain at least some positive evaluations (as being emancipated), boys performing femininity are in the same situation subjected to closer attention and pathologized. It implies that the normatively feminine behavior is acceptable only for girls, while the normatively masculine behavior can be non-problematically performed by both genders. When boys are performing “feminine” behavior, it creates an entitlement to pathologize them. This is evident through the claim that the the boy is taken to a psychologist when exhibiting girl behavior.

The possibility of being pathologized for “acting like a girl” and thus being potential for stigmatization and pathologization can lead in thematizing one’s coming out

(...) as I said I would not say it to my family, and just recently I have told it to friends because I am aware that I am behaving more or less stupid because nobody cares, because more or less, most people just do not want to spend their time by being occupied with something like that, that they would purposefully waste their time by complaining and things like that.

In the extract above, the reaction that is awaited after telling someone you are a Brony is either “complaining or thigs like that” or disinterest. Here, making fun of someone is presented as a waste of time, not a pleasure or a goal. What is also imprinted in the extract is the topic of caring about what other people think. Since the expected reactions are either negative comments or disinterest, it is logical for the participant that most people will choose

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17 Bronies themselves use this term for acknowledging their bronyhood in public.
a disinterest, because he presupposes that nobody would actually waste their time by a negative reaction. For he perceives himself as acting illogically, he also considers himself as the problematic one.

Although the participant above talks about the expected indifference towards his bronyhood, another one expresses reasons for why it can be difficult to be open about it. He reacts to the results of an internet survey on Bronies, in which many Bronies (28% in 2012) identified themselves as “hidden Bronies”. That means, Bronies who “(r)ecieve a strong sense of moral guidance from MLP are dedicated and engaged fans, however, they do not share their “bronyhood” with family and friends.”\(^\text{18}\) As the reason why Bronies can be exposed to risks of negative reactions, and again, stereotypes are often mentioned:

Q: So you have already told your friends.
A: That layout\(^\text{19}\) has developed just because of those stereotypes, from the fear that society will condemn them. It is probably just because of that people will talk bullshit. If there weren’t hateful reactions, if it was, if it was taken like every other series, like actually Star Trek or Star Gate and so on, than the layout wouldn’t exist because anyone would have a reason not to present it publicly, to be somewhat hidden.

In the previous extract, the participant partly reacts to the layout of types of Bronies. One of the types, the “hidden Brony”, does not tell people about his being a fan of MLP. Here, MLP is put in the relation to other “nerdy” series such as Star Track or Star Gate. He actually mentions this as a distinctive sign, because fans of other series do not have to fear the hateful reaction. On one hand, the other people’s opinions are a thing that a person should not worry about. On the other hand, other people’s opinions are certainly a thread that can influence Bronies’ decisions on revealing their fanhood. It is the moment of the conflict between one’s need for self-expression and between one’s care for what other people think. In the case of Bronies, when one publicly present that he is a member of the stigmatized fandom, there are two different reactions possible. Others can either stay indifferent or they can give attention to Bronies. When others stay indifferent, it confirms that one should not bother about what other people perceive as illogical. When others start to pay negative attention to Bronies, Bronies are also the problematic ones for they deserved it for breaking gender rules.

\(^\text{18}\) See the complete results here: http://www.herdcensus.com/. In the thesis, I work with the 2012 version, which was current at the time of first interviews.

\(^\text{19}\) I described him the layout of types of Bronies; I describe this layout in the Introduction
To summarize-firstly, to mock someone, there need to be a reason. As Goffman (1963) says, such a reason comes from the distinction which is acknowledged as significant. In the stigma chapter I established that I will consider those distinctions as negotiated in discourse. In case of Bronies, they are marked off by the idea that they do not fulfill gender roles. Gender roles are thus seen as a source of impulse that can lead others to notice Bronies in a negative manner. Because of this possibility of negative acknowledgement, being a Brony entails the risk of being labeled. The next step in the labeling process is ascribing the bearer of a label with negative attributes (Link and Phelan 2001). In case of Bronies, the label is effeminacy (actually, it is on the edge between the label and negative attribute). One of the bases of hegemonic masculinity is heteronormativity and exclusion of the feminine (Connell 2005). By breaking one of its rules, the disrupted image is extended to other areas to which heteronormativity is applied. Thus, the negative attributes ascribed are generally based on “problematic sexuality” such as presumed homosexuality or pedophilia, on which I will focus in the next chapter. The whole stigmatization process can end up with status loss (Link and Phelan 2001). There are safe places, as a community, and unsafe places, from which the mockery can arrive. Such a place can be family or friends - generally people from outside of the community. Reactions, which are expected from others, are either mockery or loss of interest from others. When Bronies reflect on the interactions based on one’s bronyhood with other people, their position is problematic. In one case, they are the ones who break the rules and therefore they can expect mockery, in another case, they are the ones who unnecessarily bother with other people believes.
4.1.3 Pathologization

This subchapter will be dedicated to the question of reasoning of pathologization of Bronies. I will focus on discourses of incoherence between body and mind, and between instincts and society limits. From this point of view, stigma consists of several areas that are similar to those mentioned in the first subchapter, for instance sexuality. The potential of sexual deviance is present in the figure of the dangerous Brony.

In the first excerpt, this figure is paraphrased as a man-child:

Or, mm, the worst thing about it is that when a big TV station with a wide audience starts to pick on one particular person or a group of people. It happened once, about one year ago, that one big, big, big TV, Fox News, American news TV, something that would fit into tabloid category perfectly, just thought they will make fun of Bronies. And they took Bronies and pictured them as adult, biologically, biologically adult but not mentally, adult males with character issues, who have a great chance to be homosexuals, or, God forbid, pedophiles, and who have the tendencies to become so called men-children. That is some kind of psychological flaw that causes that person is… that adult person wants to be a child so he behaves as one. That is psychologically diagnosed and the person has it inborn. But actually they said that all Bronies are men-children and that oh god, what are we going to do, this is the end of humanity. They did the whole reportage just to make fun of Bronies and to diminish them in the eyes of all their viewers.

In the extract above, the first thing mentioned is the power imbalance. The distinction between television and the object of its interest (in this case Bronies) is emphasized by usage of the words “big” and “a wide audience” in the contrast with “one particular person”. The status of the TV is devaluated in the eyes of the participant as he points out that the TV is practically a tabloid. The effect of this reportage is doubted by the reference to the intention - they “thought” they will make fun of Bronies, not that they actually did a joke on Bronies. The registry of the words such as “picking up” or “diminish”, supplemented by the reference to a power imbalance, refers to bullying. Goffman notes that mass media can play part of an institution that allows transforming “private ‘person’ into a ‘public’ figure” (1963: 71-72). The attitude of public towards objects of mass media is based on a shorter list of characteristics than that of people knowing those objects in everyday life. In another words, the image of such a public figure is formed on only pieces of information and thus it creates a reduced image (Goffman 1963: 71-72).
The reportage, the participant talks about in his answer, is framed as an attempt for a joke. The reportage uses a particular Brony image for that. In this image, we can see the distinction between body and mind, where mind is marked as nonadult while body is fully grown up. This incoherence is encoded as a “psychological flaw” that leads to pathologization. The pathologization is based on the behavior deviation that originates from the incoherence between body and mind. At the beginning, being the man-child is not problematized, because it is just an “inborn” characteristic. The problem is caused by its generalization. At first, the reportage is described as a joke. Later the description changes into being a joke and diminishment of Bronies. And finally, the diminishment is supplemented by the spreading moral panic. The figure of the man-child is connected to Bronies as a group (all Bronies are supposed to be men-children) and to the end of humanity which they cause. And as Link and Phelan (2001) suggest, labeling someone as a deviant can cause that one is seen as a threat to social order or to himself. What also appears in this extract is a motive of pointing out to one’s sexuality. The fact that the phrase “chance to be homosexuals” is lined up with the ways of how to mock Bronies implies that it is not welcome. On the same scale as homosexuality, but way stronger, is pedophilia. We can apply the figure of disaffiliate here. Goffman’s term disaffiliate means that stigma evolves from inappropriate behavior in regard to basic social institutions, to which Goffman files the gender rules (1963). In this extract, we can see Bronies both as a thread to social order and as a thread to themselves. Such an attribution makes one disqualified from the “normals” (Goffman 1963).
The discrepancy between body and mind is not the only one that showed up. Another participant talks about the discrepancy between the innocence of the show and the pornographic content based on MLP:

Most people think that making a pornographic content of something that was originally intended for children, like MLP, despite the fact how weird that may sound at the beginning however; it exists. Most people think that it is that it is how they call it that it is just gross, and that man totally loses the respect towards the series innocence. And me, although I am not a fan I will say it straight I am not a fan of pornographic content related to MLP, but I can understand people (...), human sexuality is inborn, and it is only repressed by society. And actually the thing that makes us think that making MLP porn is gross and that it is something that destroys innocence is just one of the manifestations of that society represses human sexuality. On the internet, when a man loses boundaries, the limitations are pretty much disappearing too, that is the precise reason, what a man can venture when he feels safe behind his computer monitor, that is exactly where even this limitation breaks, even the socially construer barriers that human sexuality is simply a taboo. And that is exactly where one of the basic of what I call because after all, sexuality is one of the basic instincts of human kind without which it just wouldn’t survive, and it’s logical, and right here appears the socially repressed, the sidelined... of human mind that a man actually makes sexual content on something like this. On something I am quoting now “innocent” as MLP.

Again, we can see the distinction between others, in this case “most people”, and the participant himself. He joins them in distancing from such things as a pornographic content based on MLP. Although the participant also does not consider himselfs as a fan of pornographic content, he uses a different strategy. He uses very brief explanations (“just gross”) for describing other people’s opinions, but he elaborates much more on his own arguments. He builds his argument on the presumption of shared humanity, which is based on sexuality. Simultaneously, sexuality exists in everyone. A few dichotomies can be followed here. One of them is similar to the one in the previous extract. In the former case, there was a distinction between body and mind. In the latter one, there is a distinction between instincts and society limits, but the effects are opposite. In the former case, the inborn “flaw” was encoded in mind that was losing to the body development. Here, the problematic attribute – pornography - originates in the body. The psychical “flaw” in the previous case is presented only as a dissonance between body and mind. In the latter excerpt, the problem originates in the collision between the inborn instincts and the society barriers. In both situations, the inborn state is problematic, but in the latter case, the societal restrictions are considered as the real issue. The problematic inborn state comes to its manifestation right at the spot where nature meets society, which is also a spot where “grossness” originates. The collision
between the world of children, symptom of which is innocence, is seemingly spoiled, “destroyed” with sexuality of the adult world.

In this subchapter I presented two incoherencies, the one between body and mind and the one between instincts and society limits. It the first case, the inborn “psychological flaw” makes the behavior deviation happen. The problem is not this “flaw” itself, but the false accusation of all Bronies to have the same “flaw”. The accusation from being childish is perceived as unfair—when a grown-up man is diagnosed as childish, he can be accused from being non-heterosexual. The supposed childishness of an adult male can make his sexuality suspicious. In the second case, the distinction can be found between instincts and society limits. The problem lies in society perception of “natural” sexuality. In the former case, the childish spoils the normal sexuality. In the latter, the sexuality spoils the childish. In the previous subchapter, I mentioned that the second step of labeling is attribution of negative characteristics on the base of the label (Link and Phelan 2001). Problematic generalization is symptomatic for this phase. The phase can be seen in a more detailed manner here. A negative attention given to Bronies reinforces the power of gender rules. What is now in stake is “normal sexuality” (=compulsory heterosexuality) (Connell 2005). The attribution of negative characteristics on the base of the label is evolving from incoherence between sex and gender role and can be expanded even to the area of mis-functioning sexuality.

4.2 Masculinity

There are many ways of how people can relate themselves, even indirectly, to some kind of an ideal type. Even if we do not talk about something directly, we can still evaluate the subject of our speech by evaluating its attributes. When we want to find out the relationship of people to flowers, we have basically two ways of finding out. One way is to ask directly what people think about flowers; the problematic thing is that by that, we are bringing this topic to the discourse, so it can affect our finding more than asking indirectly. When we want to find out someone’s relation to flowers indirectly, first we have to define its characteristics. It can be said that they can bloom, they can cause allergies, they have leaves and they come in different colors. Then we can talk about single characteristics and find out which of the flower attributes are considered as desirable and undesirable and what relationship our interviewees have to every single attribute of flowers. Here I work with the assumption of the non-essentialist point of view. That means, I claim that there is no essence that defines flowers. There is just a list of definitions that are negotiated in discourse and their applicability is limited by many things. Along with Connell (2005),
Wetherell and Edley (1999) and others, I do not consider masculinity (or someone’s relationship to masculinity) as a single performance and only one type of behavior. The first thing to do when we want to analyze this kind of relationing is to define the attributes. I use hegemonic masculinity as an ideal type in this thesis.

In this chapter, I will not work with extracts that deal with direct questions about masculinity, because I do not want to thematize Bronies as a potentially problematic group in the question of gender. The only question(s) asked directly about gender was the question of how Bronies explain the big difference between the percentage of girls and boys in the community and whether they think boys and girls perceive the show differently. I am not searching for types of masculine identities, but for identity discourses that I will relate to masculinity later. In other words, now I will describe the ways of how Bronies are relating to the attributes of masculinity.

Wetherell and Edley (1999) depict three different positions to masculinity. For I did not find discourses related to all these positions, I will talk straight about the rebellious one. Revolt is a common motive for some Bronies. The revolt, so to speak, is based on protest against social prejudices or conventions that are seen as being based on gender stereotypes. Those are structured by gender dualism. In this structure, the masculine is always hierarchically higher than the feminine. This is applicable not only to explicitly “masculine” versus “feminine”. When you put two terms next to each other, you will be probably able to code one of the terms as feminine and the other one as masculine while the “masculine” word will be evaluated better or hierarchically higher or stronger (Gergen 1999 cited in Locke 2002: 13). The rebellious position, when taken by Bronies, contains both the power implied by the ability to break the rules and both the weakness implied in the acceptance of the feminine. In interviews, the basis of this position was often manifested in the motive of being in opposition-to old, to stereotypes and to society rules. In the schema of relationship between masculinity and stigma, which I developed in the chapter on masculinity, the first two types, heroic and ordinary men, lie in the less stigmatized positions. That means that they are less likely to be problematized and stigmatized as nonfunctional “males”. The rebellious position lies on the outside because it dissociates from gender prejudices and masculine attributes that are built around it. But the distance can be shortened through usage of the discourse of revolt.
In the next extract, the participant aligns with the ability to stand up against prejudices:

It makes me feel like I am a member of a big community of people, who were able to stand up against social prejudices. And also creative inspiration, in case I would decide to engage in fan arts.

Standing up against social prejudices is here constructed as an achievement. The ability to “stand up against something” can work very contradictory, depending on context. Its connotations are active and contentious, which are characteristics attributed to masculinity. The courage (crucial for the ability to stand up against something) is essential for the hegemonic masculinity, one of the structuring schemas of gender dualism. When practiced by men, standing up against gender prejudices is thus one of the positions of subversion and confirmation at the same time. Bronies are using one of the core attributes of hegemonic position - the courage and independence - to actually stand up against the hegemonic position itself.

These are thus the gender stereotypes that allow Bronies to take a gender transgressive position. The transgression is certainly not the only position to be taken. In the next extract, the participant answers a question on the number of women in the fandom. We can see the gender dualism applied:

MLP: FiM is targeted above all on little girls, and they usually watch it as a normal kids TV, so they can know nothing about the fandom. For males it probably also has more appeal than for older girls-probably, a part of it will be the feeling of standing up against norms, some kind of “rebellion”, or also hipsterism.

It is not surprising that the praxis that can be normal for girls turns out to be problematic for boys and men. In case of MLP, the audience’s gender is supposed to change during the phase of growing up. Girls, when they are little, are not considered as being part of the fandom, because they do not know about it. When they are about to grow up, the show becomes appealing for boys more likely than for girls. The participant’s answer suggests that for girls, the rebellion is not as important as for boys. Older girls may not keep watching (or start watching) MLP, because for them, watching MLP does not imply the task of overcoming troubles. In the phase of growing up, at least for older boys, the attraction can be caused by the offer of possibility for rebellion. Rebellion, hipsterism and standing up against norms s can thus be seen as a part of the appeal of the show.
The revolt, mixed together with feelings of sadness, can also function as a strengtheners of the bonds inside the community:

Well, that is interesting, well, I would automatically guess that there will be more girls, still those ponies are a little girly topic, but it just seems to be little… just because of that controversy of this topic, simply… a lot of people started to watch ponies from the reason that they were a little sad about their lives, that… to fit in somewhere. And because there was this kind of an absurd group, which more or less fights together, against everyone else, so that connected them together pretty much. So- and with the boys, I feel like there is some kind of stronger… maybe the feeling that they are alone and that…. That they do not fit than with the girls (…) I think it is kind of controversial.

The argumentation that we can follow in the previous extract is, again, that controversy is seen as an appealing factor of MLP. The participant approaches this from a slightly different angle than the previous one. He suggests that being in opposition to the outside of the community can provide higher bonding potential for the members of the community. The participant describes Bronies as an absurd group conjoined by fight against the others. The fact that they share the same fight can bring them closer. The initial motivation for becoming a group member is thus not the revolt itself, but the fact that it can help the person to overcome some of the negative feelings. Sadness, as he talks about it, is based on the feelings of loneliness, and this loneliness can be overcome by a shared fight. In the interviews, boys were often described as being more troubled with the feelings of loneliness, and as being out casted more than girls. Therefore it is obvious that boys are those who incline more strongly to be part of various groups. To be more precise - “masculine groups”, if based on hegemonic masculinity, should more likely function as college fraternities or armies. They would be based on exclusivity such as rites of passages, and hierarchization. That is not a case of Bronies, who define themselves as a group that “loves and tolerates” and that is able to accept anyone. Therefore, the goals of masculine-based activities, such as) fight and rebellion, are connected with both egalitarianism and with connecting people.
The sincerity of “love and tolerance” is being taken seriously. This stands in opposition to the nowadays pop-culture ironicity and self-distancing, factors, which accompany the nowadays concept of masculinity (Koroborov 2008).

Q: What do you like about the show? I mean, I assume you like it.
A: Yeah, yeah, of course I don’t know about a single Brony that would like ponies just for a laugh. Truly, most of the people I know, I mean, that I know personally, I hope, I think there is not a single one of us who would watch the show not because he likes that, but just to show adults that look at me, ha ha, I watch something I should not. As far as I know, they really, really like the show. I surely do.

By repeating various reassuring phrases (of course, really, truly, surely), the participant uses persuading manner when saying that Bronies are sincere about their object of interest. When talking about the possibility that someone might not like the show in a sincere way, he expresses the hope that there is “none of us like that”. The ironic, distancing Brony, watching MLP just to prove something may exist, but the person who becomes a Brony just to revolt against “grown-ups” is not wanted. The fondness has to be taken seriously and it should not be just the showing of one’s attitude - the purity of intentions is important. Koroborov says that “being vulnerable breaks with canonical hegemonic ideals” (2008: 10). The purity of intentions and distancing from ironicity provides a dangerous place. Koroborov (2008) suggests that when multivocality of messages is present, it allows men to appear “sensitive, intimate, and vulnerable“, and at the same time does not protest against traditional ideals of hegemonic masculinity (2008: 3). With disappearance of irony and distancing, the possibility to keep two messages present disappears too. Thus it can heighten the potential for vulnerability.

The rebel Brony, especially when “honest”, is a position that connects the power embodied in rule-breakage with the weakness embodied in the acceptance of feminine. The power implied in this position is the ability to break up with canonical ideals. For that, one has to be brave and independent to a certain level. Since this position is characterized by dissociation from hegemonic position, the weakness lies in the distinction from the stereotypical hegemonic norm. Also, important factor is one’s sincerity and lack of self-distancing, which makes it harder to perform “cool toughness”, one of the crucial characteristics of hegemonic masculinity according to Wetherell and Edley (1999: 351). And by that, the rebel Brony is a figure that transgresses the distance between masculinities in the centre of masculinity scale and masculinities on the outside of the scale. The shortcut this figure makes is built upon the dual character of a revolt position. That means that the position
of the Brony-rebel is closer to a heroic masculinity than it seems to be. Although the position is based on a protest against (gender) stereotypes and prejudices, it is still a powerful position for it is constructed with the potential to break rules. On the other hand, the more one plays emotional/sincerity card, the more vulnerable he gets.

The sincerity of intentions and the ability to be loyal to one’s personality do not cause only weaknesses. It is important in order to gain trust of other group members:

It probably seems naïve, to say he will believe in it because he watches it…. But mmmm the thing is, what kind of person, in a matter of fact, what kind of person will watch that, probably not some kind of tough guy in a bar, who cares about his image…. His image and stuff, he, even if he would like it he would say he simply will not watch it on principle. And that is probably that kind of person, kind of person whom you don’t trust, who more or less only cares about what others think about him, and who’s been adrift by trends and so on, with opinion as a windmill, and if everyone would show some kind of integrity, that they haven’t been shaken in their convictions. Because in this respect, sometimes others are really intolerant.

On the extract above, we can see the figure of a person who probably won’t become a Brony. He is tough, he goes to a bar, and more importantly, he is less resistant against popular believes. He cares more about trends than about expressing his own opinions and thus he has less integrity. On the basis of the term “integrity” the participant expresses what could heighten the number of Bronies. Since it is difficult to keep one’s convictions, as others are in this particular respect (in watching MLP) intolerant, person who keeps watching MLP is also trustworthy because one knows that the concerned person is able to stay loyal to one’s convictions. Thus, by watching MLP, one can gain a certain amount of personal integrity. Usually, related characteristics, like independence and autonomy can be associated with hegemonic values (Wetherell and Edley 1999: 350). In this case, those attributes serve to challenge it. The personal integrity is taken by Bronies into their own concept of a man, a man who does not care about what other people think. Transition of this particular attribute (integrity) to context of presenting love to something feminine is one of the key points of a rebellious position in context of Bronies. Ponies are stereotypically considered as both childish and feminine, especially in the animated TV show version with ponies propagating friendship, love and tolerance. The point is that the hegemonic attribute - independence from other people’s thoughts - is connected to the attribute of feminine. In the extract, the shift was based on the characteristic that can be ascribed to masculinity, but its object is femininity. The object to which the attribute is related is crucial. If the symptom of one’s sense to be loyal to oneself is man’s want to stay single, the impression probably would not be as unexpected.
Similarly, we can see the shift of the expression “trying something new”, originally infused with fearlessness. In the previous extract, the integrity (connected with specific kind of bravery - with the ability to break up with canonical expectations) was used to stay true to watching MLP. In the next case, I will show a similar change of the object:

Q: Why do you think that the show became so popular so quickly?
A: I would say that it happened because it actually was a change. A big change, because before that, there was the pressure that every boy must be a man that goes, chops wood, then drinks vodka and he goes to dance into a pub, and eventually the things he watches must be terribly brutal, that it has to have blood splashes in it and so on and it already was too much. It was everywhere, and nothing had an impact on a person anymore. And then the exact opposite came, something new. Something that no one tried or seen before. Also... it was some kind of forbidden fruits, so I would say that it was a very decent show, and also something new.

As the participant says, there was some kind of change that suddenly allowed men to feel less ashamed for being fans of MLP. The extract above adds the theme of “forbidden fruits”, which strengthen the motive of rebellion. Therefore, one of the types of identity based on the relationship with social order and/or masculinity is the rebellious one. This type evolved thanks to less strict rules for masculinity compared to the previous tradition. At the same time, without the previous limitations, this type would not exist. Some of the attributes evaluated as masculine, such as chopping wood, drinking alcohol and watching violent movies, did reach its limits and they no longer have an impact, which is the reason why there opens a space for creation of a new type of identity. This new identity, based on its revolutionary relation to attributes of traditional masculinity, stands partly in opposition to conservative (traditional masculinity, stereotypes, and prejudices) while at the same time, it often emphasizes hegemonic strategies (bravery).

The revolt itself was a huge topic for many Bronies. Since they can to some extend defy stereotypes, they can also feel that they are being denied or misunderstood:

Q: How would you explain this situation?20
A: Stereotypes. This is actually a big disruption of stereotypes, and it’s some kind of... our revolt, against the whole... let’s say, order, and it is actually an order that many people like, it is the one in which it is a guy, he is supposed to eat two dumplings and gulp down bottle of vodka and go ride the tractor, while this actually shows a different option- people don’t like that different option, it ruins their vision of the world. And when it is ruining their vision of the world, they try to keep it under wraps, deny it.

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20 When one is being made fun of.
The participant explains such reactions as that Bronies stand against the rules of gender stereotypes. Gender division is one of the basic society institutions and defiance of social order might be seen as dangerous (Goffman 1963). The rebellion discourse appears in the context of revolt against the social order. The social order is closely connected both to stereotypes and to attributes previously linked with traditional masculinity. Bronies, while voluntarily defying those rules, become, again, Goffman’s (1963) “disaffiliate”. They are voluntarily breaking gender rules and thus they can be seen as both surprising and dangerous. They are making rules visible (and thus potentially unstable) through disrupting them. By that, they indicate counteraction in a form of negative attention.

There are a few points I would like to emphasize. Society functions as a provider/prohibitor of certain tastes. The gendered restriction of allowed tastes creates a space in which rebellion can find its place. The previous strictness of rules is looser now and along with it, the shame is less intense. The feelings of “trying something new” would not appear when there would not be a society previously restricting it. The rebellious position is here based on several standpoints. The first one is the re-coding of “personal integrity” as of a characteristic attribute of this new position. The ability to keep one’s opinion is being used to express something unmasculine. The stronger one shows his will to stand against “the order”, the more personal integrity he is supposed to have. That means shift for the “feminine”, which is extracted from the marginalized area for it becomes something that is worth fighting about. This situation evolved thanks to society and its rules. For participants, society and its rules are expressed by “the order” - social prejudices, stereotypes and expectations, or the “vision of the world”. This is, in this case, connected to rules and stereotypes about being masculine. This order has both restrictive and creative powers. It can regulate identities in a sense that it provides prohibitions. Breakage of those prohibitions can provoke surprise or denial, but the same prohibitions give the rebellious positions the place to exist.
4.3 Relationships with “outside”

In the last chapter I will be devoted to Bronies’ relationships to the world outside the community. The first part of the analysis was dedicated to the stigma and stigmatization. I examined the negative connotations of Brony attributes, its gender level and the risks of stigmatization and inclination to pathologization. In the previous subchapter I depicted the ways of how Bronies can relate to the attributes of masculinity. Now I will take a closer look on Bronies’ relation to others. The chapter will be divided into two parts. In the first one I will focus on the community feelings, how natural discourse is used and on the dilemmatic nature of bronyhood. Then I will turn back to the topic of revolting against society. While in the subchapter dedicated to masculinity I paid attention to what that means for one’s identity, now I will focus on the group identity. I will end this chapter by taking a closer look on how Bronies deal with “othering” (see Connell, 2005; McCann 2010; Wetherell and Edley 1999). That means, how they react to the mockery and suspicion they can encounter.

4.3.1 Community feeling

The first subtopic to analyze is the reason why, according to Bronies, one becomes a fan and/or joins the community. For Bronies, the need to belong to community is encoded as normal. It is normal to be part of a community, to want to belong somewhere, and it is also normal to be connected and to be part of the whole. Community directed by rules of hegemonic masculinity would be more rigid, hierarchical and exclusive (Connell 2005) than the “brotherhood” as presented by Bronies. Bronies present themselves as a tolerant group, willing to accept everyone who wants to participate. The discourse of human nature takes a big part here, for being a part of a group is encoded as a human need:

Q: How do you explain the different counts of girls and boys in the community?
A: Well I am not surprised at all but… well, why… (…) well. It might be caused by that that boys have pretty much, I am kind of interested in psychology so I have heard that boys or men in general have kind of a stronger need to belong to certain groups, and if it is a case of boys who are not accepted by various groups of people, then it is logical they will try to fit in this one.

In the extract above, the participant comes with the scientific, psychological answer to the question about the ratio of men and women in the community. For him, the answer lies in the gender difference between boys and girls. He states that boys have stronger need to unite - the “inner” psychological needs are described through explanations of psychology
as a science. We can also see the appearances of the discourse of naturalness and age-oldness. What people have in common is the instinctive demand to belong somewhere. Therefore they are searching for a community they can join. The discourse of naturalness is also an explanation of why trouble in other collectives can lead to people joining Bronies.

In the next extract, the participant answers the question of why people in general become fans:

Because human is a social being, he, that is why we have been making made groups since prehistoric times right, that is why we have not lived on one’s own since the beginning, because it is better for people, today there is an infinite number of those groups. So where you join, they don’t want you there, you do not like it here, so in the end, you will find one and you will join. It is cohesiveness.

Natural discourse is often used in order to legitimize gender differences. In other words, biological essentialism often serves to establish conservative ideas about gender and ideal behavior of men and women (see Bem 1993). In the extract above, the sociability of human beings is considered as factual and it remains unquestioned. This sociability manifests itself in the group creation. Besides the sociability, there are also other reasons for group formation. The justification lies also in the argument of historical development that proved itself right because of its effectiveness. The inner need for joining a group is presented non-problematically, as existing for ages. Nowadays, the number of groups people can join is really big, so people do not have to be outcasts when they are not accepted in the first group they pick. When this happens, they have the possibility to find someplace else. Because signature of Bronies community is their proclaimed love and tolerance to everyone, it seems to be a reasonable choice.

This participant answers the question whether there is something like typical non-Brony:

A: Typical non-Brony… well the creed of that community is love and tolerance so I think it doesn’t exist.
Q: So there is a wide specter of both Bronies and nonBronies.
A: Well, it is more like that non-Brony, the community present itself like it will accept everyone.

The participant says that the community creed is love and tolerance. The community image here is built upon acceptance, so there really is not a person that would not be allowed to join. There is no mention about unofficial (and definitely no official) tests whether one can
or cannot become a member of this group member. Typical man-based groups, such as armies or (taking the American context into account) fraternities can often test their future members by rites of passage. Brony community provides the last shelter for people who did not find “their group” somewhere else without such exclusive, hierarchical demands. The absence of testing does not imply the absence of a moral code. Bronies use the one presented by the show. They often quote moral lec tions demonstrated in the show and the rules of the community. Such rules and moral lessons are basically evolving from their motto, which says “love and tolerate”. Lutz argues that talking about emotions reveals both “control, weakness and strength” (Lutz 1996: 158). She also notes that “any discourse on emotion is also, at least implicitly, a discourse on gender” (Lutz 1996: 152). The motto itself is thus implicitly gendered, because it brings out the topic on emotions (love) and the passive state of being (tolerate). The “personality traits” that are cultivated by such a code are coded as mostly interpersonal. As I wrote earlier, emotions are part of the registry of femininity, while rationality is a male domain, and the latter is hierarchically higher (Gergen 1999 cited in Locke 2002).

In the following extract, we can see the transition of the field of emotional work. It has been shifted from the domain of feminine “lacking”21, into an array in which men are the “lacking” ones:

I don’t know, maybe it can be caused by the fact that the show invokes feelings that are lacked more likely by men than women, such as that we emphasize the thoughtfulness and good manners and friendship and those everyday kindness that friends do, and I think that men are lacking this far more because man has to be strong, tough, independents, fearless and so on and there is no place for that /favors etc/ in the mainstream. (…) and in the moment when one gets mature and encounters something that gives him feedback and he is able to align with it, he is able to display those things. In the group, the point is that people that can ventilate, internally, what they are lacking. I saw it in fandom many times that people arrive that did not develop social skills, how to function with a group of people, and they learn it there, it is not a case of everyone but I’ve seen it many times.

As the participant puts it, the feelings induced by the show are the “feminine” feelings, to which he sorts characteristics such as thoughtfulness and good manners. Men are asked to be strong, tough, independent and fearless. Thus, he suggests that for men, the possibility of displaying some emotions is suppressed. It is the absence of emotions that is described as a lack. In the mainstream, there is no place for kindness. Mainstream characteristics are

21 Feminine sphere as a sphere of lacking is symptomatic for pre-feminist psychoanalysis (Connell 2005).
strength, independence, and fearlessness. Others, such as thoughtfulness and kindness are “feminine”, and therefore problematic for men to show. Again, society functions as an element that can have both suppressing and enabling function. At the moment when one grows mature, he can recognize the society imperatives and he can decide to embrace it and thus be able to display the “feminine” manners. Then, the fandom is a place where the suppressed feelings can be manifested. Also, fandom functions as a place where learning soft skills can take place. The essential dualism between men and women is expressed through the structure of behavior that is allowed/encouraged and repressed/less advanced. The “feminine” shifts from something to avoid to something that is worth accomplishing. When talking about hegemonic masculinity, it is usually the feminine that is in a state of lacking (Connell 2005). The appreciation of “feminine” attributes allows men to be in the position that can be characterized by deficiency. This lacking of social skills is caused by society imperatives.

I will continue with another extract that thematizes the topic of social skills and group belonging:

Q: What I mean now is a person that says that he is a fan of something.
A: It could be that people try to show their loved ones, their family, friends, that they belong to some group. Maybe (…) human is a social being and tries to have good relationships with his surroundings, and part of that is, logically, to be part of a social group. And a person that does belong somewhere can sometimes struggle with accepting it (…) and sometimes he is even proud that he belongs somewhere, and sometimes he is very vocal about that and he tells it to the whole world. (…) Then there are Bronies that are ashamed of that because they think it is something they should not watch because it is not a TV show for them (…) I can partly understand that, because if they would come out, there is a possibility that they would be bullied and their parents would think they are homosexuals (…).”

Thus being a member of Brony fandom can result in either shame or pride. In the extract above, the participant describes the process of gaining group identity. Being a member of a group is one of the inner needs. At the same time, good relationships with people are constructed as a result of effort you have to make to fulfill your needs. The effort is also needed on letting people know that you succeeded and you actually became part of a group. And so when one is a member of a stigmatized group and wants to present his social skills and the ability to fulfill his inner needs (to be part of a group), he can have a dilemma. The perception of Bronies (or, more precisely, of the information that someone is a Brony) is often accompanied with confusion and suspicion. Bronies can thus be in contact
with suspicion about their sexuality or their intentions (they are not trusted that they are serious). Once one acknowledges that a group is stigmatized, he can have troubles accepting that he is a member of such a group. Reasons for this are in accordance with the stigma chapter - it can cause shame and the fear of bullying and of being labeled as homosexuals. But one does not have only one way of how to deal with that. This potentially problematic situation can be approached in a different manner. The state of things that can cause someone a shame can be the opportunity for showing the pride for someone else.

Being a Brony has a dualistic nature. Firstly, the community itself is seen as very inclusive, while for hegemonic masculinity, exclusivity and hierarchy are essential (Donaldson 1993; Connell 2005). Secondly, the need for acceptance and belonging is coded as natural, scientifically approved and inborn. On the other hand, it can be problematic to fully present such a group identity, because it is burdened by the feelings of doing something inappropriate. Being a Brony therefore shows a subversive possibility for expressing the “inborn, natural, male” need for collectivity when simultaneously it gives the option of joining the inclusive community. The important thing is that society recommendations to keep emotions hidden are not presented as a way to get stronger, but as some kind of lacking. The power aspect emerging here is the pride with which anyone can deal with the potential stigma. I will elaborate on that in the next chapter.
4.3.2 Dealing with “othering”

The last part of this section will be dedicated to reactions of Bronies to a negative reception (if they encountered it), such as mockery or negative comments. Dominic McCann, Plummer and Minichiello (2010) say that humor is a way that allows hegemonic masculinity to distance the “other”. Humor serves as a demarcation line between the heterosexual masculinity that does not deserve to be laughed at and “failed” masculinities than need to be excluded and devaluated. This type of humor functions as a strategy that distances the “other” (2010: 506). That means the feminine, the childish and the non-heterosexual.\(^{22}\) As shown in previous chapters, Bronies answers were generally in accordance to this principle.

There are several implications of potential to be “othered”. One of them is being subjected to the stronger supervision, as I mentioned in the stigma chapter. One of the participants described how Bronies face much bigger difficulties than fans of other programs originally for kids. He talks about the power of society to maintain boundaries:

Q: Why do you think that… I mean, this is interesting…

A: Maybe it is because, mmm, maybe it is because of that MLP is in person’s mind encoded as something that is strictly for little children, for little girls, nothing more, nothing less, in short, nobody else is allowed to watch it, because everybody will point their fingers, and he just don’t want that, and this is the way society maintain its dominance over, I don’t know, over, what you can and cannot do in public. Right, because I still don’t understand the reason why. Why should we sort out people, why should we put labels on their foreheads? Why?”

The participant here states that society has the power to set the limits for what you “can and cannot do in public”. He talks about what is allowed “in public”, which implies that it applies to places where one can meet other people or where one can be exposed to possibility of interaction. The activity in the extract shifts from “everybody” (pointing their fingers) to the society (maintaining its dominance). Society finds its basis in people’s minds and acts through actions of individuals. When a person breaks expectations he gets the unwanted form of attention. Through this, society has power to keep control

\(^{22}\) One of the methods is emphasizing that MLP is not necessarily focused on little girls:

A: (...)or they see the funny part, that the show really isn’t only for little girls and that it makes an appeal on the age, that there are jokes hidden.

Other tactic is to use images connected to more classic masculinity to describe Brony activities.

A: I would compare it to the football, that people watch football, they wear those dresses, and they don’t fight other teams, and I just watch a good TV show.

Both examples copy the gender structure in a sense that they are both operating on the basis of separating the feminine. While the first example indicates the differentiation between (little) girls and the participant by saying that the TV show is supposed to be for wider audience than little girls, the second one asserts Bronies “back” into the masculine sphere when using a football metaphor.
over individuals. The method to maintain such a state is society surveillance, or as the participant puts it, the method of “pointing fingers”. This helps to set up the tastes that are allowed. Such tastes are embedded in people’s heads and one of them is the rule of acting one’s gender and acting one’s age. For men, enjoying products connected to female childhood is not allowed, because doing such activities implies disrespect to such an order and can bring attention. Thus, it might be stigmatizing to show such a thing as being fond of a child TV show, or at least showing it in public, because one can be labeled on the base of disrespect to age/gender rule. That might lead to the question whether to reveal one’s fanhood or not. Apart from Bronies’ breaking of the gender/age imperative, what is characteristic as well is the fact that their stigmatizing attribute can be hidden.

If we consider being a Brony as a stigmatizing element, we have to distinguish, according to Goffman (1963), between a person that is discreditable and a person that is discredited. In the case of Bronies, it is necessary to rework the definition of whether stigma is visible or not, for Bronies themselves decide whether they will reveal their fan identity. Therefore Brony can embody both identities, the one of the discreditable person and the one of the discredited. They can, as participanted in fandom that often communicates online, live like discreditable people in offline interactions and as discredited ones in online interactions. Factors that can decide whether one will reveal fan identity or not, are fear, willingness to take the risk, and others on a similar vein as I showed in the stigma chapter.

The following answer shows the fear as a criterion whether to come out or not. The next participant was asked about how he would sort Bronies into categories. He mentioned the topic of presenting one’s Brony side in front of others:

Well, it is probably based on how much they fear reaction of the public. Someone doesn’t pay attention to negative reactions, on the contrary, someone else fears it so he rather does not risk the revelation. That, again, depends on individuals and their characters.

As with the previous extract, this one also thematizes reactions of others when one is making the decision whether to come out or not. The decision of how to present one’s Brony side to others is encoded as a choice of an individual and thus this choice is based on characteristics attributed to particular people. The decision is based primarily on one’s attitude towards negative reactions. In the extract, the participant allows two possibilities. They are described through the stance one adopts to reactions. The participant suggests that one can either not pay attention to it or he can fear it. The first variant refers
to the indifferent position; I will talk about it later in this chapter. What is important now is that willingness to take a risk, one of the attributes that is characteristic for hegemonic masculinity, is mentioned. In this case, by risk is meant getting into potentially uncomfortable situation induced by reactions of others. Thus, the revelation of one’s membership in fandom also implies that one can react in a way that requires some kind of skills, in this case, the ability to overcome the fear (from uncomfortable situations).

Although I showed the figure of the revolting Brony in the previous chapter, not only this figure is unnecessarily supported by provocation rhetoric, but the emphasis is often put on the idea that Bronies do not want to bother their surroundings and people around them. Sometimes, the revolt does not have to be defined in terms of active rebellion. More precise word would be “resistance”, for it is not based on provocations or conflict seeking. Here, we can apply Goffman’s (1963) stigma rules. He says that discreditable people are using methods of information management so that their stigma won’t be visible. Discredited people are then asked to restrict the demonstration of stigma. Bronies’ stigma management consists of two parts: precautions and self-control. On the scale of self-control, first, there would be the pre-coming out moment, in which the person takes precautions in order not to be revealed. The second position can occurs after one comes out. This is basically the resistance phase. Resistance starts at a point at which the person stops practicing precautions that prevent exposition. This happens when one lets others know that he is a Brony, but he controls its “symptoms” in order not to be annoying. The person who comes out but does not want to bother others with his distinctiveness would use self-control as a method of getting along with others. Bronies can take precautions with the goal of not being identified as Bronies, or with the goal of eliminating the reasons for why they could be seen as a source of conflict.

I will demonstrate this on the following extract. One of the participants told a story about a situation that resulted in removing regular appointments of getting together to a different place than it used to be:

They announced on forum that it is, how would I put it, I don’t mean to say it is no longer safe to go to --- but basically it came out that way. It is just, like if someone was kicking us out of the public space because of… I mean, yeah, we are… We do not disturb anyone, we talk relatively quietly, we cannot annoy anyone, because in the (name of a pub), I was there, it was noisy as hell anyway, we cannot actually bother anyone, but someone just told us that if simply no, because no. Because spaghetti 23, as I said.

23 The saying has no meaning.
In this story, the participant describes Bronies as striving for not being a disturbance to other people. He anticipates what could bother others and he says that Bronies are avoiding such a behavior; they are talking quietly etc. He implies that others would be bothered by “being disturbed”. Thus, he expects that Bronies will avoid attention when following particular rules, but the ban comes anyway. Motivations of people responsible for the exclusion are not actually explained (“no because no”, “no because spaghetti”). The implied misunderstanding between Bronies and “others” is thus based on the dissonance between expectations and the reality as he perceives it. In his story, the participant and “others” have a different vision of the level of invisibility that is required. The level of invisibility required from others, as presented in this extract, is higher.

The topic of self-control is not to be seen only in a form of self-discipline to meet expectation of others. What also appears is the control of one’s own reactions. In the next extract, the participant talks about the difference between Bronies and other fans:

A: It is, it is actually one of the differences between Bronies and those other fandoms, and that lies in that Bronies present themselves as untrollable. It is actually because, when another fan makes a negative comment, ten people can be found immediately who are like, he is an idiot and that sort of stuff, but Bronies either completely ignore that, or they quote arguments why it is not so. They do it calmly and that they are not to be provoked. And on the internet, it mostly goes in a different way.

The extract above says that the one thing that distinguishes Bronies from the other fandoms is that they present themselves as “untrollable”. The participant explains the basis of this adjective as ignoring comments, using arguments, being calm and not letting others to provoke the person.. The emphasis is put on control and rationality. It as argued (see Lutz 1996) that speaking about emotion control means practicing power in a sense that emotions, as being implicitly feminine, provide an area over which the power can be exercised. Emotions can be controlled or managed, while such a management makes the practicing subject more “in charge” over one’s personality. Emotions, as a part of a realm of nature, can be disciplined (Lutz 1996). To sum up, using the discourse on emotion control serves for gaining the power over oneself. In this case, the situation of being teased becomes also a situation of practicing power. Thus Bronies are practicing self-discipline at two levels. First type of self-discipline appears as a stigma management. This type appears when Bronies strive to attain some level of invisibility to eliminate the potential for unwanted

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24 Trolling is the phenomenon that is common on social networks. Its goal is to confuse or attack other user (or group of users) in order to ridicule them or their ideas.
attention. Second type appears as a reaction to situations in which the invisibility is not attained (voluntarily or involuntarily) and Bronies are facing negative reactions. Then, they are “untrollable”.

As I showed in the theoretical part, we can consider humor as a demarcation line between the failed and not failed/successfully accomplished masculinity (Dominic McCann, Plummer and Minichiello 2010). Bronies, considering the situations in which they are mocked for not being “men enough”, would generally lie outside of the area of successfully fulfilled masculinity. That means they have higher potential to be doubted as males. The imperative of acting according to one’s gender and age is kept alive through “othering techniques”. Generally, “othering techniques” in case of Bronies work through expressing surprise or amusement (in a negative manner) to one’s identity or attributes of identity. By those techniques, society can maintain its power over people who are breaking those rules (in this case, rules of gender and age). This attention can be performed through comments, mocking etc. Such a situation confirms the hierarchy between those who are the objects and those who are the subjects of such an attention. On the other hand, acknowledging the situation provides space for reaction. There are several methods of stigma management Bronies do. They can take precautions because they attempt to get rid of the attention. As far as these precautions are concerned, the person can either decide not to come out, or he comes out but decides to occupy the position of resistance (that means, he blocks the symptoms that can potentially annoy someone). Such an exposure of stigmatizing attribute can induce a fear. The fear, as an unpleasant feeling, provides also an area for its overcoming (for which hegemonic attributes such as bravery are needed). Thus after the coming out, Bronies can practice self-control on two levels. Firstly, when they decide to come out, they can perform self-control in order to eliminate potentially annoying behavior. Secondly, they can use self-control in situations when they are teased, with the rational rhetoric of emotion discipline.

25 Lopes, deriving from Goffman (1963), says that usual stigma management can consist from defensive claims, stigma management, or alternative theories (Lopes 2001: 392). There are several methods used by Bronies.
5. Discussion of findings

5.1 Maintaining the hegemonic

In the last part of the thesis I would like to conclude my findings. The subject of this thesis was to elaborate further on the connections between the masculinity and stigmatization in pop culture and its implication for (masculine) identity. I started with discussion of stigma and stigmatization. So that an attribute can function as a source of stigma, it has to be recognized as distinctive and problematic first. In case of Bronies, the main source of stigma is lack of fulfillment of the expectations of what men should be like. To conceptualize those expectations, I worked with the term hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005). Wetherell and Edley’s (1999) imaginary positions capture the ways of how men can approach this ideal type. With this theory, I could create a map of borderlines between single positions and thus identify moments where those borderlines shift or are being transgressed by discourses. It showed up that some discourses can be used in a way that has several different effects or that they can “steal” attributes, transmit them and thus rearrange the settings.

In the interviews, the picture of hegemonic masculinity, or more precisely, its traditional, conservative version, often appeared along with the principle of exclusion of the childish and the feminine. Some attributes of what men should be like, such as that men should not be girlish, were constructed as prejudices. Others, such as a need to be part of a group, were ascribed as natural. Men who do not fit into this image are distinctive from other people of their gender, which creates the feelings of being suspected from others because their identity can be seen as sexually dangerous or dangerous to social order. This suspicion creates the feelings of shame and strengthens surveillance. For that reason, the information management appears. Thanks to the possibility of online participation, a Brony can embody both discreditable and discredited identity. A Brony can voluntarily switch from discreditable to discredited people and thus become Goffman’s (1963) “disaffiliate” - social deviant who is accused of defying the social order (1963: 143).

The gender-based stigmatization can cause several dilemmatic moments. The first one is caused by the dilemma whether other people’s opinions are important and whether one should care about what other people think. This has gender implications in a sense that one of the hegemonic values in the independence. Simultaneously, both caring and not caring are risky for Bronies. In one case, he is the one who breaks the rules and therefore he can expect mockery. In another case, he is the one who bothers himself with other people’s opinions.
On the other hand, integrity may be ascribed to those who do not fulfill the public expectations and weaker resistance against popular beliefs may be ascribed to those who care about people’s opinions. Men who are not worried about showing non-hegemonic attributes are ascribed bigger integrity. In the case of Bronies, personal integrity is used for representing the feminine. But the exclusion of the feminine (and childish) is still present. The topic whether the show is really for little girls keeps appearing; so are the defensive claims that the show is really partially for grown-ups.

For its dualistic nature, being a Brony can give one space for both shame and pride. The good relationships with people are constructed as a result of trying; that applies also on letting people know that one succeeded and actually became part of a group. When one needs his social identity to be fulfilled, he has to present it to others successfully. The dilemma appears when the group, one decided to be part of, is stigmatized, because it can cause troubles accepting oneself as being part of such a group. However, the state of things that can cause shame for someone can be the opportunity for showing both the resistance against fear and the pride.

Society functions as both provider and prohibitor of certain tastes. In interviews, the motive of society as of a bearer of gender prejudices appeared quite often. Society has a power of making individuals feel uncomfortable by giving them much attention or by giving unwanted labels to individuals. By this, society has power to determine what men can and cannot do, or more precisely, what they can and cannot display. In case of Bronies, the attention is based on the stereotype that men should not watch TV show with ponies because that is effeminate; thus men who are doing that must be weird somehow. The proud position, the “revolt”, is based on a protest against such social prejudices or conventions that are structured by gender dualism. Nevertheless, the restriction of allowed tastes (that is based by gender-based stigmatization) creates a space in which rebellion can find its place. The feelings of “trying something new” would not appear if there was not a society previously restricting it. One of the reasons why females are seen as less interested in fandom than males is that for males, the experience is more “dangerous”. The previous ban thus causes current popularity amongst males.
Therefore, the Brony-rebel figure connects the power embodied in rule-breakage with the weakness embodied in the voluntary acceptance of childish/feminine. And by that, it is a figure that transgresses the distance between the central masculinity (the hegemonic one) and masculinity on the outside (the rebellious one). Earlier in the thesis I described the shortcuts-discourses, which are bringing the outsided, “failed” masculinities much closer to the standard, ideal masculine type by taking the hegemonic characteristics and used them in different contexts. The shortcut this figure takes is built by the dual character of such a revolt position.

3. Rebellious position

In this picture please note the distance shortened via rebellion discourse between point A, the outsided masculinity, and the hegemonic masculinity that lies in the centre of the zone. The manner, emphasizing the danger and rule-breakage, used in combination with the childish and feminine, is exactly the meaning twist that expresses the dualistic identity of Bronies’ gender characteristics.

5.2 Dilemmatic nature of community

Another dilemma comes with a group membership. Groups based on rules of hegemonic masculinity would tend to be more exclusive and hierarchical than Bronies. In this field, there is not only one discourse. On one hand, being part of a group is seen as a natural need and achievement. On the other hand, confessing that you are part of a stigmatized group can cause a conflict between the need for self-expression that stands in opposition to caring for other people’s opinions. Again, there is no really safe position.
Either you are misfit (=fail) or Brony (=fail). Bronies’ attitude towards mockery consists basically from two parts: precautions and self-control.

The label coming from outside of the community can be based on distinctions between body and mind and between instincts and society limits. While dealing with “othering techniques”, one of the discourses Bronies use is rationality connected with the picture of a gentleman. Bronies can employ the rational discourse which maintains their dignity. Also, when describing Brony activities, Bronies can use comparisons to more stereotypically masculine areas or explain why the show is not (only) for kids and little girls after all.

Being a Brony thus has a dualistic nature. Bronies present themselves as an inclusive group, willing to accept everyone who wants to participate. The discourse of human nature takes a big part here, for being a part of a group is encoded as a human need. The community itself is seen as very tolerant and inclusive. To the “unmasculine” person, Connell (2005) ascribes characteristics as “being peaceable rather than violent” or “conciliatory rather than dominating” (2005: 67); community is thus more in accordance with the characteristics of “unmasculine person” than the hegemonic one. On the other hand, it can be problematic to fully present one’s group identity, because it is burdened by stigma, by the feeling of doing something inappropriate. Being a Brony therefore shows a subversive possibility of expression of the “inborn, natural, male” need for collectivity when giving the option of joining the all-accepting, inclusive community. The “feminine” attributes such as social skills and being allowed to express one’s feeling are suddenly not a weakness, but the strength. The power that can be gained here emerges from pride with which anyone can deal with the potential stigma.

5.3 Further implications of the study

This study discovers new connections between masculinity, stigma and pop-culture. In the study, I contributed to the academic research of male fandoms, with a non-stereotypical object of interest\(^\text{26}\), and to studies thematizing discourses of masculinities.\(^\text{27}\) The context of my research is a wider discussion on masculinities and the possibilities of coping with changing picture of ideal masculine behavior and the contradictory messages on what it means to be a man. I provided further material to studying masculinities by choosing the subject of Bronies, the community academically almost unexplored at the time.

\(^{26}\) See e. g. Click at al. (2015)
\(^{27}\) E.g. Koroborov (2008), Kendall (1999; 2008)
This theme is now understudied, although it provides a great area of topics to be examined, not only in terms of masculinity, but also in terms of how the gender factor can work in subcultures in general. In the thesis I showed how some implications of imaginary positions towards hegemonic masculinity provided by Wetherell and Edley (1999) can function in conditions that do not thematize gender explicitly, as it did in their study. Wetherell and Edley (1999) confronted their participants with direct questions and pictures on masculinity. In case of this study, questions regarding masculinity did not have to be asked. As I showed earlier, the character of Bronies and the community is at some points opposed to the character of hegemonic masculinity so in this case, gender is already implied in the topic.

Wetherell and Edley noted that “what is being celebrated in this discourse [by the rebellious position] is not so much knitting, cooking and crying per se, but the courage, strength and determination of these men as men to engage in these potentially demeaning activities” (1999: 350). In my study I widen their research by the factor of what can happen when the “demeaning activity” is done collectively. We learned from the study that Bronies use similar strategy as presented by Wetherell and Edley (1999), but they combine it with embracing of the feminine skills, such as emotionality and appreciation of interpersonal relationships. However, masculinity is still an important referential point, since the discourse of rebellion is still of significance. Since the meanings are established in discourses and discourses are present in interactions, newly-emerged communities can participate in the new discursive environment. In case of Bronies, the discourse of rebellion as shown by Wetherell and Edley (1999) is broadened by the discourses related to community. Individual revolt can transform to the collective overcoming of loneliness; shared stigma can lead to the possibility of articulation of what seems to be forbidden and/or desired. The analysis shows that Bronies, while being gender transgressive at first sight, can also employ hegemonic codes, such as discourse of rationality and discourse of independence and rebellion. The subversive potential is situated in the discourse of appreciating the interpersonal skills, such as kindness, as a space for development of one’s personality. The study confirms that subversive and conformational practices can be carried by the same subjects.

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28 They concentrated „on responses to interview questions such as ‘Would you describe yourself as a masculine man?’ and ‘Are there moments in everyday life when you feel more masculine than at other times?’, and on men’s responses to magazine photographs of possible role models.” (Wetherell, Edley 1999: 335).
Potential limitation of the study is that my research does not cover everyday practices and interactions. What is said in interviews can be biased by memory of participants, their willingness to speak honestly or many other circumstances. Therefore some of the aspects might be missing. Also, in qualitative research, the results are not generalizable to bigger samples as they are in quantitative studies. On the other hand, the great contribution of qualitative studies is their potential to capture things that cannot be easily discovered by quantitative studies. I examined discursive strategies invested in the social world by study participants. That provides a higher level of understanding of how their particular discursive environment works. Besides that, the detailed picture of what discourses are in play and how the meanings can interact and change can help us to identify understudied spots that need to be researched further. The thesis thus gives evidence only for data gained from interview settings, but provides a detailed picture of discursive environment and implications for further research as well. Also, some of the topics remained uncovered because of they would be worthy of more detailed examination enriched by wider contexts of research.²⁹

From all possible directions to which any further research could go, I would like to mention neo-sincerity. Since there are no sociological resources on this topic available, I was not able to cover it in my thesis. It is a topic now debated on blogs and in pop-cultural magazines and Bronies are seen as one of the representatives. Simply said, neo-sincerity in a cultural way³⁰ means that you sincerely like something. To use an example, try to imagine a magician and everything that this image usually involves, including the magic tricks and a glittery costume. It can be approached in many ways. One of them could be a distant position. We make fun of the tricks or the magician’s sparkling dress, or, alternatively, we can approach it in the neo-sincere way. In that case, we can be fascinated by the illusions and think of the dress as it is simply awesome. Neo-sincerity is the shift from “it is so bad it is good” to “it is awesome”. I think that this turn to subtle meanings, sincerity and/or distancing is also symptomatic for some of the works I have quoted – Edley and Wetherell’s (1999) talk on positioning to masculinity, Koroborov’s (2008) ideas on the negotiation of hegemonic through incorporating the “sensitive” behavior etc. The neo-sincerity poses the question of honesty and intentions and the vulnerability implied

²⁹ I think that the tension present between the argument that particular object of enjoyment is not “feminine” and the argument that there is nothing wrong about having a “feminine” object of enjoyment appear in many different setting and it would be understudied if put in this thesis. Nonetheless, it suggests another hegemonic strategy from Bronies, the exclusion of the feminine.

³⁰ The term „neo sincerity” (also “new sincerity”) generally refers to the tendencies in arts to avoid cynicism and irony.
in authenticity. Bronies are considered an exemplary case of neo-sincerity because of their involvement and non-ironic attitude. I do not claim that neo-sincerity will defeat ironic ethos, and either I do not claim that irony is necessarily the key characteristic of nowadays pop-culture. Nonetheless, I believe that one of nowadays tendencies in perception of one’s identity is the emphasis on authenticity. This authenticity has its core in reflection of social demands, not fulfilling them and thus becoming sort of authentic antiheroes. In neo-sincerity, naive perception of the world, which wins over irony and playfulness is more crucial than competitiveness. The emphasis on not behaving according to societal canon, the lack of self-distancing from objects of passion and incorporating of niceness and sincerity, even though it is risky are some of the crucial points I have shown in my thesis. The question is to what extent is one supposed not to meet social demands to be still able to attain this particular quality of antiheroic authenticity.
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List of figures

1. Characters of MLP ....................................................7
2. Stigma and masculinity ..............................................19
3. Rebellious position ..................................................60

Name index

Allen ........................................................ 15, 65
Barnes ...................................................... 18-19
Bem ............................................................... 49
Billig .............................................................. 25
Connel 13, 15,18, 26, 29, 32, 36, 40, 48, 50-52, 61
Cruickshank ......................................................24
Demetriou ......................................................15
Díaz-Bone ......................................................26
Dominic McCann ............18-19, 29, 53, 57
Donaldson ......................................................13
Edley ...................................................... 14, 17-18, 22-23, 41, 58
Fairelough ......................................................21
Foucault ......................................................9, 21
Gergen ..........................................................17
Goffman ......................................................9-12, 18, 33, 36- 38, 54-55
Harding ......................................................17
Kendall ......................................................6, 16
Koroborov .................................................. 44, 61, 63
Link ...................................................... 12, 26, 38, 40
Locke ...................................................... 9, 17
Lopes ....................................................... 12
Lutz ...................................................... 17, 50, 56
McArthur ..................................................... 15
McCann ...................................................... 18, 53
Minichiello ............18-19, 29, 53, 57
Peräkylä ...................................................... 7
Phelan ...................................................... 12, 26, 38, 40
Plummer ..................18-19, 29, 53, 57
Potter ...................................................... 22, 25-26
Ruddick ......................................................17
Segal .......................................................... 6
Speer ......................................................14-15, 22-23
Talja ...................................................... 7, 24, 25-27, 30
Wetherell 14, 17, 18, 19, 22, 23, 25, 26, 41, 58
Abstract

This thesis is dedicated to Bronies. Bronies are a community of (mostly) adult men who consider themselves fans of the TV series “My Little Pony-Friendship is Magic.” They call themselves Bronies, as a combination of words “Bro” and “Pony.” Since the TV show seems to be targeted at little girls, the thesis will focus on masculinity and the stigma originating from non-fulfillment of the stereotypical picture of what men should be like. To conceptualize masculinity, the term hegemonic masculinity is used as an ideal form of manhood and subsequently with three types of men’s approach to such an ideal as described by Wetherell and Edley. In the thesis, discourse analysis is used in order to capture the paradoxical nature of masculine identity stigmatized through the non-fulfillment of gender expectations. Bronies deal with feelings of strengthened surveillance and mockery in various ways. They can control “symptoms” of being a fan in order not to reveal their bronyhood. If they decide to reveal, they can continue with self-control through monitoring their behavior. Generally, Bronies are in the situation of strengthened attention that is based on them doing something inappropriate for men. Such a stigma can be overcome through declared rebellion against stereotypes. That is carried by a character best described as a rebel Brony. This character, partly evolving from research of Wetherell and Edley on imaginary positions towards masculinity (1999), combines the power implied in potential to break rules with the weakness implied in integrating of the “feminine” into ones identity.

Key words: stigma, masculinity, Bronies, discourse analysis

Number of characters: 161 928
Anotace


Klíčová slova: stigma, maskulinita, Bronies, diskurzivní analýza

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