



(SUB)CULTURE

Do Bronies Have a 'Nazi Problem'? FedEx Shooting Shines Light on Faction of Subculture

Since it was revealed that the FedEx shooter had a love for Applejack, questions have been raised about the fandom

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it's important to note that while there is undeniably a component of the fandom that skews extremist — as is arguably the case with any fandom — it would be unfair to use the FedEx shooting as an excuse to slander bronies as a whole, or to paint the subculture as inherently problematic. **ANDREW CABALLERO-REYNOLDS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES**

IT IS A sad reflection of the times we live in that mass shootings in the United States tend to follow a specific pattern. In the hours after a shooting, reporters tend to comb through the shooter's social media presence, usually revealing a lengthy history of

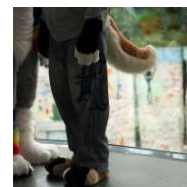
of nine people including the gunman, there was a slight variation on this pattern: The 19-year-old gunman was revealed to be affiliated with the brony subculture.

According to *The Wall Street Journal* — which cited internal memos circulated by Facebook in the wake of the attack — the gunman primarily used his Facebook accounts to discuss his love for *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, a children's cartoon series featuring magical ponies; male fans of the show are often referred to as “bronies.”

Though the memo was quick to state that there was no indication that brony culture played a role in the attack, the gunman posted about his love of a tawny pony named Applejack, one of the main characters of the franchise, less than an hour before the rampage. “I hope that I can be with Applejack in the afterlife, my life has no meaning without her,” he wrote. “If there's no afterlife and she isn't real then my life never mattered anyway.” The gunman also reportedly had a history of posting far-right content, such as a meme suggesting Jesus had been reincarnated as Hitler, the memo stated.

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It's important to note that the brony fandom is highly misunderstood, and it is not inherently racist or white supremacist; the majority of members of the fandom are simply fans of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*. Members of the community have also rallied to raise money for the victims with various GoFundMe campaigns circulating on social media. Yet the shooter's social-media presence has drawn renewed attention to a disturbing trend within the community, which has been infiltrated by far-right forces since its beginning.

What are bronies?

years after the series started airing, says Lauren Orsini, a journalist who has covered the roots of the fandom. Though it might seem an unorthodox obsession for adult men, many would share their non-ironic love for the series and the messages it imparted.

“Like a lot of modern kids’ media, *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic* is designed with multiple audiences in mind: to engage kids without boring parents to death,” says Orsini. “By appealing to adults who would watch alongside kids, it makes more sense how it developed an adult-fan following.”

Much like the furry fandom, there is an indisputable erotic component to the community, and those interested in *My Little Pony* erotica are traditionally known as “cloppers,” a play on “fappers.” But also like the furry fandom, many of the members of the *My Little Pony* fandom do not eroticize the franchise’s characters, and take offense to the mainstream conception of the fandom as purely sexual.

“It says a lot about us that we are so uncomfortable with men actually liking a show for little girls about ponies and friendship,” says Anne Gilbert, a media studies professor who has studied brony culture. It has since blossomed into a bona fide online subculture, spawning an annual convention called BronyCon as well as numerous documentaries portraying the fandom.

What is the relationship between the brony fandom and the far-right?

Because the community took root on 4chan, which tends to be a bastion of unfettered misogyny and hate speech, there has always been a small sliver of the MLP fandom that has skewed far-right extremist, says Orsini. “Even in the mid-2010s, you were seeing fringe groups come out. People whose involvement in the fandom was designed to shock and disgust (like photos of ponies with swastikas or pony figures covered in cum),” she says. “You were also seeing positive fringe elements, like brony fan artists and musicians who were creatively building on MLP fandom in more appealing ways. But the unpleasant stuff has been there alongside it for a decade.”

In recent years, these extremist elements have been getting more mainstream attention. Last year, in the wake of the George Floyd killing and the rash of BLM protests that swept the country, *Atlantic* reporter Kaitlyn Tiffany wrote that an internal battle had erupted on the fan-art community Derpibooru, with many aggressively downvoting BLM-themed *My Little Pony* fan art on the grounds that the platform should not be used to spread political messages. This was in spite of the fact that it had been a trend for members of the fandom to submit MAGA- or Nazi-inspired

resistant to being seen as curbing freedom of expression, eventually settled on updating its rules by “clearly forbidding images which seem to promote racism or that seem to only exist to rile people up.”)

In response to reports that the FedEx shooter was involved in the fandom, many within the community are taking steps to actively disavow the far-right-extremist contingent of the subculture. “Right-wing bronies now have a body-count. They have to continue to be pushed out of our community and spaces. None of that wishy washy both-sides shit Derpibooru pulled. These people must be ACTIVELY rejected,” one person active in the community tweeted. Given how widely misrepresented the fandom has historically been in mainstream culture, members of the community also responded by expressing concerns for how they would be portrayed by the media: “Be prepared for some potential blowback once the news starts breaking out into the wider internet,” the MLP fandom website Equestria Daily wrote.

In light of the news, it’s important to note that while there is undeniably a component of the fandom that skews extremist — as is arguably the case with any fandom — it would be unfair to use the FedEx shooting as an excuse to slander bronies as a whole, or to paint the subculture as inherently problematic. “I am reluctant to paint any particular ties between attraction to bronies and attraction to any particular ideology. I think of it more as a correlation of circumstance,” says Gilbert. “The spaces of the internet that have made a home for bronies have also made a home for more explicitly ideological communities to flourish. I think it’s more explicable that people who are attracted to those spaces are more likely to be attracted to both bronies and to other communities that are present there.” She also points out that a “largely masculine space emphasizing male perspectives, where a lot of the participants are middle class, white, straight, single men, might appeal to a particular mindset.”

Orsini also warns against painting bronies with a broad brush. “The vast majority of bronies are regular people who enjoy a colorful cartoon with a positive message,” says Orsini, adding that such views as apparently harbored by the FedEx shooter are “antithetical to the values that bronies claim to appreciate above everything else,” such as love, friendship, and acceptance.

IN THIS ARTICLE: brony culture, extremism, far right
