



Angela Barajas

Breyer and Stone

Feed the Horse

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study is about model horse fans, the ways fans interact with fan products, and how those products help facilitate the boundaries of the horse girl identity. This work takes place in the US and is about a small fandom that collects, displays, and participates in shows of plastic scale model horses, whose fans produce their own stereotype that is replicated in popular culture as the iconic horse girl. My data was gathered through eight interviews with adult horse fans who are active in this fandom and through extensive analysis of content in 2,553 social media posts and 42 product catalogues for the models. My participants spoke of their fanship in interviews and through these posts. They spoke of their movements and changes in their perceptions over time within the fandom, as well as their perceptions on how to navigate both corporate and fan spaces to practice being a horse girl. In this sense, the model horse as a product is also a proxy for both ideology and identity. These participants identify as horse girls, among other fan identities. Fans navigate their own ethical values through such identities, which are challenged by the stereotype of the horse girl in mass culture. This transcendence of participatory culture (cf. Jenkins 2016) infers a cyclical dynamic to fan identity where fans influence fan culture through the use of fan products from corporations that market specifically to that fandom. My findings in this paper expand the preconceived notion of what a horse girl is and how they use the product to facilitate and express identity to the point of leveraging their own moral values to move corporate decisions. This kind of identity work shows how, along with the capacity to navigate fan networks, fans make a stand for their values to shape the meaning of fanship. As an expansion in the understanding of fan identity, I find that such an identity can also be built in response to products and as a practice of navigating fan-corporate spaces using constructed forms of value to promote the boundaries of the horse girl identity.

KEYWORDS

fanship, fandom, horse girl, identity, cultural studies, model horse

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Introduction: Horse Girls and Horse Girl Culture

The symbology of the horse is a complex one, embodying both powerful freedom and submissive domesticity. This dialectic attracts girls in its counteraction to traditional Western femininity. There is a narrative across horse girl media, like *Free Rein* (2017-2019) or *Heartland* (2007-), both TV series featuring horse girls, that typically places the protagonist, a teenage girl, as the only person able to form a relationship with a wild beast. These wild horses offer girls understanding, friendship, and power over social gender boundaries. On the backs of horses, girls could fall, get dirty, get hurt, but also stand back up, keep moving, heal, and succeed (cf. Halley 2019; Orman 2023). The relationship offered by the horse is one of dependence that allows the girl to be more independent (cf. Halley 2019), completing a rather paradoxical dichotomy. Understood from the media produced and consumed, horse girls are therefore undefined, and that seems to suit them. In fact, that is the point. As with many identities, what horse girls do and what people think they do is often in contrast. In this paper, I will discuss the complex and nuanced way the identity of the horse girl is navigated by using a central artifact, the model horse, produced by two companies. These companies are not in competition, yet they serve to represent this identity navigation through their interactions with the fandom.

Methods: On Data Collection

To investigate the ideas presented in this paper, I ventured into the field and gathered data directly from fans in both online and in-person fan spaces. I primarily gathered data through participant observation, digital ethnography (including textual analysis of at least 2,553 model horse specific social media posts with threads), and eight in-depth interviews to understand what practices take place in these fan spaces and how fans interact. During these interviews, I asked participants about their participatory habits, including shopping. I attended BreyerFest in 2019, in Lexington, Kentucky, and participated in fan-related events like the special run line and the Ninja Pit of Death (NPOD), a rather traumatizing free-for-all merch store. I participated in the Clarion Swap Meet, a secondary market hosted by fans. I did this not only to meet fans but also to experience what these fans are doing. The online spaces I visited for this fandom include the Breyer blog, Instagram, Reddit, and YouTube, as well as popular fan blogs that help document occurrences and reactions in the fandom. I've paid particular attention to the products in circulation around and within the fandom. In the case of the horse girl, this most commonly comes in the form of plastic model horses made to scale of real, living horse breeds.



Methodology, Background, and Theory: The Point and the Process

As Hebdige (1979) describes with subculture, fandom also can be anti-establishment yet finds itself enmeshed with corporations that produce fan goods. Santo (2023) establishes the centrality of consumption and fan artifacts within fandoms. Horse girls easily fit here, as the model horse is a central and key feature of the fandom. As both Woo (2018) and Affuso and Santo (2018) suggest, fans use fan products in nonlinear ways that establish a fan identity, not as simple consumers but as transformers of fan products. These simplistic toys are treated as, and so act like, living horses in the actions of horse girls, as “creatively appropriated cultural artifacts” (Heljakka 2018, 240). Because many horse girls cannot afford a living horse, the artifact here is the model horse specifically used as a stand-in for horse ownership and establishing the identity of a horse girl. This situation creates a relatively robust market space within the fandom. On the topic of market spaces, the horse girls I’ve met collect model horses, often found at large box retailers and small saddle and feed stores. Some of these fans have real horses, while some only have models. Both groups spend money on mass-produced plastic miniature horses. Much as in both Woo (2018) and Affuso and Santo (2018), sharing a market space and fan merchandise helps to unite them as a fandom, and with that unification comes a secondary and makers’ market as well as things to do with model horses (horse shows, miniature tack, and creating horse girl content). Heljakka (2025) describes this as the kind of play adults do with toys in fandom. In this article, I ask how fans, specifically horse girls, use a market-based fandom to create identity, how that identity influences fandom, and how fandom informs identity.

Social media portrayals of the horse girl identity frame them as outcasts who do not fit into any particular norm (cf. Halley 2019). This conclusion was emphasized by my analysis across the fandom’s digital forums, including Reddit and Breyer’s own fan blog. I coded phrases like “horse girl energy,” “stigma,” “horse girl trope,” and synonymous phrases. In mass media spaces like Netflix series or even BuzzFeed personality tests, horse girls are sometimes depicted as being horse-like themselves, while others are equestrians who find identity in their sport, coupled with a great love of horses. What all depictions can agree on is that horse girls are obsessed with horses and use this obsession to shape how they display their fan identity. The aesthetic of the horse girl is aligned with Girl Scouts and the American Girl doll in that it is a contained celebration of free femininity (cf. Halley 2019; Orman 2023). While each of these organizations is affiliated with girlhood and grounds the experience in some sort of girl culture, they also create boundaries as to what this experience looks like (a return to freedom and nature, finding unique yet predictable life paths). While these boundaries are larger than traditional boundaries of femininity, they are boundaries nonetheless. The horse girl is bound similarly in the expectations of what it means to be a horse girl and what that looks like.

Horse girls, like all fandoms, consume media and products within their interests, like reading *Calling All Horse Girls* magazine or collecting Breyer horses. Breyer horse fans purchase plastic horses that are valued within their group at prices that easily reach USD 90 per model. Fans are not passive consumers (cf. Geraghty 2014), but rather, they repurpose products to suit their interpretations of fandom (cf. Heljakka 2025). Because every fandom is involved in consumption, fan goods have specific fan values that do not necessarily hold outside of these spaces. These values come in diverse forms that extend beyond monetary, adding in affective values (cf. Geraghty 2014; Woo 2018), where they may not be based on any sort of use but rather on the reified understanding of that specific commodity in that specific fan space. Otherwise, Breyer horses or Stone horses would be no different from any other plastic

toy horse. The value lies more in the commodities' importance to both the fandom as a space and to how fans relate to one another within their group.

Much of my work is based on ideas from Butler (2011) on performative identity, how this links to Jenkins, Ito, and boyd (2016) for identity within fandom, and how that affects participation within that fandom. Butler (2011) describes identity as something performed. This idea is further explored in Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington's (2007) collection on fan identity. Fan identity can be expressed as performance through participatory culture (cf. Jenkins/Ito/boyd 2016). Participatory culture describes the idea that fans have a direct and impactful relationship with the culture industry. Further, this identity is a practiced form of ideology (cf. Hajer 2021), meaning that identity and ideology are intertwined, as expressed in my data. The ethical ideological values of a fandom are practiced by its fans. A primary way horse girls participate in their fandom and express their identity as horse girls is through the collection and display of model horses. As hinted at above, the fandom's product purchasing habits are centered on two main manufacturers of model horses: Breyer and Stone. Breyer has a more robust official social media presence, while Stone is primarily fan-driven, relying primarily on word-of-mouth, especially in online fan spaces. The following data is pulled from the official Breyer Instagram and from a short blog post on the Breyer site about BreyerFest attendance. BreyerFest in Lexington, Kentucky, is the premier horse girl convention, so horse girls, especially Breyer fans, from across the US come to attend workshops, get horse signatures, and shop. Breyer's website includes a blog for its members, including a blog for BreyerFest. It cites that, as of 2019, BreyerFest had over 30,000 attendees (cf. Breyer 2025). As per the Instagram data, the official Breyer account has 55,249 followers and an engagement rate of 2.6%. They get an average of 1,439 likes and eight comments per post. Of the accounts that follow Breyer, 73.7% identify as female and 26.3% identify as male. There is no data for non-binary identification.

Stone does not post demographic information about their fan base; however, they do post some information about their company on their website. They boast about being in business for over 29 years, having fewer than 30 employees, and having over 7,000 loyal customers. The website functions primarily as a marketplace for fans to buy limited-run editions and purchase verified second-hand models. The contact page offers a way to receive marketing texts and some links to private fan-run social media pages, an Instagram page, and a TikTok account. The Instagram account has 7,534 followers, and their posts receive about 130 likes per post, while the TikTok account has 1,025 followers with 2,588 likes (cf. Stone 2025). These scant demographics describe two things: there are quite a few horse girls, who are active in fan communities, and those fans are not necessarily media followers of the model manufacturers. Horse girls are doing something else, interacting with each other in primarily fan-created spaces, even though the fandom revolves around these institutionally-created models as major fan artifacts.

A Horse of My Very Own: On Breyer

Horse girls love horses and what they perceive as equestrian culture. Each girl wants to experience the magic of befriending a horse as depicted in horse girl media. Horses are, of course, cost-prohibitive and often a luxury most girls (or their parents) cannot afford. This is where the model horse can step in. Breyer released its first model horse in 1950, and since then, they have promised each fan "a horse of [their] very own" (Breyer 2025). This phrase is known as the Breyer Promise, where Breyer quite literally promised a horse-ownership-friendship experience through their product. Breyer hosts online clubs for their products through their website. Breyer fans pay a yearly subscription to join these clubs,



and this grants them access to Breyer's fandom forums and a discount on all products ordered through their online store. Their website features pictures of girls of various ages playing with Breyer horses, miniature tack, and stables, while focusing on caring for the Breyer horse as someone would care for a real horse. In this way, the model horse is a surrogate to satiate the desire for a real horse without the expense or time commitment. This is pivotal because the model horse moves to be just as central to the fan experience for the horse girl as real horse ownership, thus elevating the product and its fan value.

The forums on Breyer's site feature a blog that focuses on new products, fan photography and crafting, and convention news. The blog is moderated by Breyer employees, and fans must pay for a membership to view and comment on most posts. While a fan does not need to buy a membership to participate in the fandom, it is highly encouraged and a mark of honor, so much so that BreyerFest has a special rest area for members who can show their membership card with seating and social spaces. The official Breyer website features a page on member exclusivity (cf. Breyer 2025). Because this exclusive fan space is moderated by Breyer as a corporation, all member posts are subjected to review before publication. All posts on the blog are written using celebratory language praising the company and fan artistry as it pertains to their product. There is no room or invitation for critical fan feedback on the blog. Because of this, many fans have moved to other social media spaces to express their fanship (cf. Ito/Okabe/Tsuji 2012). Horse girl content creators across all types of platforms may use the models in their creations, but they can also be critical of things they have witnessed in their fandom and of the way model horse corporations operate (cf. Model Horse Madness 2020). Four horse girls I interviewed plainly stated that they feel that Breyer has no real sway over the thoughts and actions of the fandom and that most fans do not participate in the Breyer blog but do attend the conventions and other in-person social gatherings. Even in the Breyer-model-centric blogs, 32% of the posts I analyzed had nothing to do with Breyer models and were instead about either other model horses or living horses. This suggests that, while Breyer is an immense player, they are not the sole focus of the fandom. Further in this paper, I will address the other major producer in the model horse fandom, but even with these two large producers, the fandom encompasses more than just products, expanding into shared values that help to define the boundaries of the horse girl identity. Because much of that identity is wrapped up in both model and living horses, it is crucial to understand horse girl spaces, both digital and in-person.

BreyerFest, the main in-person social gathering for the fandom, has been held annually every summer since 1990 at the Kentucky Horse Park, where fans can meet and greet real horses located at the Kentucky Derby Park, including some that influenced Breyer model designs, and participate in horse culture while buying Breyer models. BreyerFest is hosted exclusively by Breyer. I attended BreyerFest 2019 for the entire three days it was running. The parking lot, a dusty field at the equestrian complex, was packed with minivans and SUVs, many decorated with car chalk reading, "Meet you at BreyerFest!" or "BreyerFest or Bust." License plates showed states from across the US. Alongside the BreyerFest attendees, the horse park had its normal patrons who were there to care for their horses and take part in their usual riding lessons or practices. The convention was marked with long lines out in the hot sun for special-release models or special Breyer pop-up store runs. I waited in line for almost two hours just to enter one of the stores. My line was not considered long according to other attendees.

One particularly daunting line experience was waiting for the Saturday Store, a Breyer pop-up store that sells exclusive BreyerFest merchandise in limited quantities. People spend the night outside in sleeping bags to be first in line to get in. Even after the initial opening, that specific store is jammed full of

people until there is nothing left in it. The Breyer fandom has dubbed the Saturday Store the Ninja Pit of Death (NPOD), and several blog posts on the subject do not recommend newcomers try to enter. A group of attendees had matching homemade shirts reading “I survived NPOD.” During my interviews, two of my participants regaled me with survivor stories from the NPOD, describing it as a shared bonding experience and rite of passage for horse girls.

Each three-day BreyerFest pass comes with a special-run ticket. These tickets allow an attendee to have an opportunity to purchase a special-run Breyer horse. Each ticket is numbered and allotted a date and time for the line. Half an hour before the special-run time is posted, the attendees with that time slot must line up in numerical order. Then, a BreyerFest employee draws a number randomly from a bowl. The person with that number will start the line. Anyone who was in line before that person will move to the back of the line and maintain the numerical order. Breyer uses this method to promote a sort of equality in getting a chance to buy certain, more limited, special-run models. Each special-run ticket holder is allowed to purchase up to two models, which usually range from USD 60 to USD 90. The special-run tent has several tables piled high with white opaque plastic bags. Behind them sit boxes opened with more of these bags. Each table is manned by a few employees who rush around delivering bags to ticket holders. Model horses are displayed to show the ticket holders which horses are available in which pile. At the end, another employee checks the ticket holders out and cuts the special-run ticket. Just outside the tent, people sit on an expanse of grass to open their white bags. Some special-run models have alternative finishes or colors (cf. Breyer 2025).

These two experiences described here underscore the importance of buying fan goods while attending the convention as a part of the fan experience, along with developing a collective fan identity. The experience of purchasing leaves the fan with stories to be commiserated with other fans. All of this surrounds not only the convention but the product that is being purchased. This is what fans do, and these actions portray their fanship. Conventions like BreyerFest serve as a place of mediation between the fandom and the corporate producer of fan products (cf. Kohnen/Parker/Woo 2023). BreyerFest is a place of consumption but also a place for negotiating the horse girl identity. It is not the model horse or the shopping, it is the actions and performance of existing and participating in the space that initiate this aspect of what a horse girl is. The enmeshment of a corporate product with fan practice is embodied in this space. The performativity of identity plays out in purchasing and the interactions horse girls have with one another, using the models as a medium.

More than Consumption: Practices of the Model Horse Fan

Other than shopping, Breyer horse fans have shows for their models. Outside of BreyerFest, there are local, state, and regional model horse shows put on by fans throughout the year, but by far, BreyerFest’s is the biggest show. The shows are divided into age categories of adult and youth, as well as horse sizes of traditional (1:9th scale), classic (1:12th scale), and stablemate (1:32nd scale). The models are judged by the quality of the mold, the condition of the model, and the accuracy of the model to the real horse. Much of this is left to the participant, who must closely observe the model for any defects, and to the judges, who will expect the model to be in pristine condition. While some participants in a show will submit their own custom work (often a more accurate painted representation of a living horse of the same breed as their model), most models are simply purchased outright. Placing horses receive ribbons, while the first place in each category wins a special edition prize unique to the singular BreyerFest show of



that year (cf. Breyer 2025). Breyer encourages its fandom to interact with their product like the owners of living horses might, harkening back to the Breyer promise. Unlike hobby horses (also called stick horses), which require a level of physical activity (cf. Heljakka/Mukherjee 2023), these model horses require very little input from the owner yet still portray a certain level of sportsmanlike behavior, linking this kind of horse culture to other forms of equestrianism.

These horse shows are comprised of fan participants and fan judges, meaning those who judge model horse shows are most often other fans, which gives the fandom agency over how exactly models are judged. In my interviews, fans spoke of judges who seemed harsh or biased, as may happen in all types of competitions, but in this case, there is no shared rubric for how models should be scored, so there is little consistency in judgment. This is not to say that judges do not try to be impartial. According to a couple of fan-judges I interviewed, they do their best to stick to a scale they have developed and have been using since they were first asked by other fans to judge. The scale is one they have tested themselves over time because they value impartiality and feel an ethical responsibility. These fans take on this ethical value of their judgments as a part of their identity as fans. They told me they value their community, so they want to give everyone a fair chance at winning the shows. Then, in a more conspiratorial tone, they told me a story of a competition taboo: the time someone showed the same model across multiple high-stakes competitions after it had already won.

In the model horse fandom, when a show-winning model is sold on the secondary market, it takes with it all of its prize ribbons. With this comes the understanding that the model cannot be shown again after it has won the top prize at a top competition. It is supposed to be retired, and the owner is expected to show other models instead. It is considered unethical and unfair for a top model to compete and win all higher-stakes competitions. The story I was told was about someone who bought a ranked show model and resubmitted it to multiple competitions under different names to win prize money. This scandal had the fandom up in arms, but by the time the offender had been caught, they had already faded away from the show scene to become a cautionary tale for other competitors.

This story, along with the reaction of the fandom and the more immediate reactions of the fans who told it to me, speaks volumes to the social standards, hereby referred to as ethics, held by the fandom and expected of fans (cf. Grey/Sandvoss/Harrington 2007). These ethical considerations and the trust the fandom has in one another are another ingredient that helps to comprise their fan identity. The group is held together by shared values, as in affective, ethical values placed upon the model horse as a representation of the affective values placed on living horses. The phrase 'shared values' has multiple meanings. As referenced above, values can refer to the monetary value of the models, as well as the shared social values of the group, especially when interacting with one another. When values are not shared, it can cause the fandom to fracture into more nuanced interpretations of what it means to be a horse girl.

Although models play a central part in the horse girl fandom, the primary motivation for all horse girls is their love of horses, driven by the identity associated with wild freedom (cf. Halley 2019). In 2020, Breyer announced that one of its special-run models for the 2021 convention would be based on the show horse Intuit, owned by Terry Bradshaw. This announcement sent the fandom up in arms as the horses bred by Bradshaw are known to suffer from a genetic disease, hyperkalemic periodic paralysis, that causes muscular pain and stiffness (cf. University of Minnesota 2021). This disease is detectable, and veterinarians from the University of Minnesota (2021) recommend not breeding horses that have this disease as it passes on to their young. The fan backlash was aimed at the well-being of Intuit and

Bradshaw's breeding program (cf. Breyer History Diva 2020; Hobby Drama 2021; Model Horse Madness 2020; Show Horse Today 2020). The fans perceived Breyer as supporting the continued breeding of sick horses. A blog poster writes:

Frankly, this horse represents everything that is wrong with halter showing, and I'm really disappointed that Breyer is supporting it by choosing this horse as their representative of their biggest event of the year. (Model Horse Madness 2020)

This led to not only Breyer cancelling their special-run, but also cast a spotlight on Bradshaw, causing his horses to drop out of several competitions (cf. Hobby Drama 2021; Model Horse Madness 2020; Breyer History Diva 2020; Show Horse Today 2020). Fans, interestingly, seemed to debate Breyer's complacency with the whole ordeal:

What I was hoping for was that [Breyer] would carefully thread this needle: we wouldn't just have colorful representatives of breeds known for their flashy looks, but also horses that didn't fit the "mold". That would have included not just rare colors on more common breeds (Pinto Trakehners!), but unusual patterns and oddities (Brindles and Chimeras), visually striking examples of rare breeds, and also horses or breeds that thrived or succeeded outside of their more usual or expected roles or overcame great obstacles or disabilities... There's also been some speculation that this incident proves that the Powers-That-Be at Reeves [Breyer] are 'not actually horsepeople.' I know for a fact that this is not true: some of our very own work for them on, [sic] by salary and by contract. (Breyer History Diva 2020)

This also brought forth fans protecting Breyer's choice in special run model, calling those who did not want the model bullies:

Instead the bullies won, Terry withdrew his phenomenal stallion from Breyer and now some little boy or girl will never fall in love with that stunning spotted model horse. She may have been a future ApHC president and he the vet that could have saved my horse many years from now. We will never know. (Show Horse Today 2020)

This interplay of fans using a product to create an argument about identity shows the nuanced interpretations of fan identity. This entire situation came forth because Breyer wanted to make a model of a horse owned by a controversial figure in the equestrian world. This catalyst drove self-identified horse girls to navigate a more complex interpretation of what it means to take on such a fan role. The arguments above are part of a web of complex identity-building that uses social media as a way to affirm identity through the approval of other fans, but also to place boundaries on personal definitions of the values that the fandom should uphold.

Standing Stone: The Conflicted Development of Another Model Horse

Stone model horses were actually born from Breyer. Peter Stone, the namesake of the brand, is the son of the owner of the Breyer Molding Company (as it was called in the late 1940s). Stone wanted to preserve the artistry of horse modeling and collectable model horses, so he branched off and began his own



elevated version of Breyer in 1996 (cf. Model Horse Collectability 2024). Stone horses are advertised as a more adult-centric collector's model that tries to move away from more stereotypical horse girl trappings. The website is more streamlined and has less on it than Breyer's. The imagery focuses on the models rather than children playing with them (cf. Breyer 2025; Stone 2025).

While the models are often made out of a similar plastic to those from Breyer, the runs are very limited, often only thirty pieces in each batch. The limited availability of these runs escalates the price, ranging from USD 100 to USD 400, and tends to exclude casual collectors. The appeal is that they consider themselves more accurate in depicting horse breeds than Breyer. This exclusivity is also appealing to discerning adult collectors. The precious and delicate presumption of these expensive models, as well as more valuable or rare Breyer models, gives rise to the idea that the models need to be displayed in a protective way and further shows the value placed on them. While I was at BreyerFest, shop stalls sold padded cases for the transportation of special models. In the fandom, buying such a valuable model indicates that the fan is probably a serious competitor in the shows or is a really committed fan.

According to one of my participants:

I would argue that Stone has kind of completely moved into the boutique model, you know, space where everything is low run. You can order a horse that you specify exactly how it looks. There's a lot more care put into the production of them because they're much more expensive. But, you know, they're the Gucci and the Louis Vuitton of the model horse community.

This speaks directly to the exclusivity and status ascribed to Stone models. Further, my participants go on to describe how Stone models elevated the entire industry, thus furthering the respect for Stone models:

[Stone] was head of production of horses and tack shops, too. And without going down a rabbit hole, he started transitioning to the smaller runs and higher prices, right? But then, they introduced a lot of innovation in the nineties into the hobby because Breyer had no competition and the quality was crap, frankly... So, I mean, Stone kind of forced Breyer's hand to, I mean, I don't think with that we would have the things we have now without Stone.

This reasoning is done within the idea that competition brings about a fairer fan economy. However, Stone models were and are still out of reach financially for most fans, and Stone horses are nearly unknown outside the Breyer fandom. Because Peter Stone is a product of Breyer, his products utilize what he learned from the Breyer manufacturing process, and so, Stone models would not exist as they are within the fandom without Breyer. This is further reflected in model accessibility as fans pass through Breyer models before they go to Stone. Even with the drama surrounding Breyer models, most fans could not afford the move to Stone, and, as a boutique manufacturer, the fandom would not get the same amount of product as they could through Breyer. This is why the critiques levelled against each producer are tempered with celebratory language. Being critical of a group so deeply embedded in the fandom does not make a fan popular and can clash with the fan identity (cf. Hogg/Ridgeway 2003), as demonstrated in the above quotes. This leaves the consideration that the criticality of product and fan corporations facilitates a structure of hierarchy where those who can afford more or better models not only use such connections to fan products to buy more, but also to guide moral interactions and leverage

boutique and exclusive access to product to sway corporate interests based on privately-held morality. This, in turn, serves as a construction and reproduction of the horse girl identity. The juxtaposition of the expensive and limited horses, unavailable to every horse girl, even if just from the limited production number, against the mass-produced Breyer models leaves a gap for positioning the companies in competition, even though this is not the case. This power dynamic is one that horse girls can still push to exploit and manipulate the outcomes of Breyer production. It is within this power struggle that identity is forged, creating the image of the horse girl because of their navigation through this kind of space.

Conclusion: Who Is a Horse Girl?

As demonstrated, much of a fandom's ingroup/outgroup dynamic carries into market spaces, and these market spaces can reflect the group's shared values. In this case, it is reflected in the ways a model horse fan navigates this identity through their support of manufacturers and purchases of model horses. These dynamics can facilitate a barrier to entry within the fandom for both financial and social reasons. Both Breyer and Stone models are pricey, although Stone models have more status, and Breyer has better availability, even if there are some controversies that a new fan could get tangled up in.

This relation between fan and fan product seems to be symbiotic in that fans use items to relay their fanship and thus demand new production of items. This dynamic leads to collecting fan items, thus Breyer fans buy lots of model horses. It may be an inseparable part of fanship at large and a way to form fan identities. Purchasing fan items, participating in fan spaces, and displaying them in a protective, valued way signals to the fandom that the purchaser is a fan. Some forums even allow fans to document their collections, allowing for a semi-competitive atmosphere for obtaining highly desirable models. This aligns with similar findings from Heljakka (2025) about the way adult fans use fan products and with Geraghty (2014) regarding how collectors interact with the fan products they collect. Like these works, horse girls go beyond the simple collection of a product by assigning affective value to the models, making them represent something important to the formation of the horse girl identity: the horse and the well-being of horses, both models and living animals. A horse girl identity is about living horses more so than a product.

Corporations that produce fan products are aware of how the fan identity and its relationship to the product operate. Breyer and Stone limit their model runs to increase the feeling of exclusivity, which then leads to hierarchy in the fandom as to who has access to the models. For Stone, a fan must be on a mailing list to know when models will be released (cf. Stone 2025), while Breyer hosts several paid-entrance clubs that allow access for special purchases (cf. Breyer 2025). While Breyer is closely affiliated with the identity of the horse girl, they also create boundaries as to what this experience looks like through the exclusivity of their product. The horse girl who buys Breyer is bound similarly in the expectation of access to the product, as well as navigating the personal interpretation of what it means to be a horse girl.

Identity can be created and maintained by social interactions and movement within and outside of social groups (cf. Hogg/Ridgeway 2003). For horse girls, some of this identity work means putting horses at the focal point of the group, as in this case, using the model horse as a proxy for living horses. How that looks can differ by fan, yet, as evident above, the connection to the essence of what it means to be a horse girl is pivotal in how the fandom acts and reacts, and how their values are shared. Horse girls here use the product to both facilitate and express identity, to the point of influencing a corporation's



actions, leveraging their own ethical considerations in response to a marketing decision the fandom did not wholly approve of. This kind of identity work is dynamic and uses shared perceptions of what a horse girl is, along with the capacity to navigate fan networks, to take a stand for their values. The identity of the horse girl is assumed sincerely and deeply. Further, this identity is shared by the group, not as a monolith (as seen by those who supported the modeling of Intuit) but as a collective of individuals who use their own understanding of what it means to be a horse girl and what the fandom represents for them to both participate in that fandom and to perform the identity of the horse girl.

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