

“I Kiss Them Because I Love Them”:

The Emergence of Straight Men Kissing in British Institutes of Education

## **ABSTRACT**

In this article, we combined data from 145 interviews and three ethnographic investigations of heterosexual male students in the U.K. from multiple educational settings. Our results indicate that 89 per cent have at some point kissed another male on the lips which they reported as being non-sexual: a means of expressing platonic affection among heterosexual friends. Moreover, 37 per cent reported also engaging in sustained same-sex kissing, something they construed as non-sexual and non-homosexual. Although the students in our study understood that this type of kissing remains somewhat culturally symbolized as a taboo sexual behavior, they nonetheless reconstructed it, making it compatible with heteromascularity by recoding it as homosocial. We hypothesize that both these types of kissing behaviors are increasingly permissible due to rapidly decreasing levels of cultural homophobia. Furthermore, we argue that there has been a loosening of the restricted physical and emotional boundaries of traditional heteromascularity in these educational settings, something which may also gradually assist in the erosion of prevailing heterosexual hegemony.

**Keywords:** heteromascularity; students; kissing; affection; male

## INTRODUCTION

Heterosexual masculinity has long maintained hegemonic dominance in Western-European and North American cultures (Kimmel, 1994; Rich, 1980). Here, it is traditionally constructed against a backdrop of homophobic social stigma. But the stigma associated with men's homosexuality (as an identity or behavior) reflects more than just the dislike of men having sex with other men: male homosexuality is also disparaged by others because it has been conflated with a perceived lack of maleness and the adoption of feminine traits. Because of this conflation, both boys and men wishing to be perceived as masculine by their peers must necessarily disengage from those behaviors that have been socially coded as gay. Consequently, homophobia has become a benchmark for masculinity.

Among British youth, Epstein, Kehily, Mac an Ghail, and Redman (2001) have argued that, "Even little boys are required to prove that they are 'real boys' in ways that mark them as masculine, even macho, and therefore (by definition) heterosexual" (p. 135). Accordingly, homophobia does more than marginalize gay boys and men; it limits their gendered behaviors too. Schwartz and Rutter (2000) described this conflation of gender and sexual identities as the gender of sexuality; however, in the context of this article, we refer to it as *heteromascularity*.

The desire to be perceived as heteromasculine is understandable in a culture that distributes sexuality and gender privilege unequally. In her seminal work, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick (1990) explored the relationship between the homosocial and homoerotic, arguing that the suppression of emotional behaviors among men facilitated the maintenance of heterosexual power. Furthermore, Bourdieu (2001) posited that suppression of such emotional behaviors maintains the status quo, the subjugation of women. This hegemonic dominance is further accomplished through the codification of same-sex sexual behaviors as being consistent

with a homosexual identity (Anderson, 2008; Lancaster, 1988). Almaguer (1991) has suggested that (in an Anglo-American context) same-sex sex historically carries with it, “a blanket condemnation of all same sex behavior...because it is at odds with a rigid, compulsory heterosexual norm” (p. 77). Furthermore, according to Butler (1990), the only cultural model of heterosexuality we have is predicated upon the avoidance of any sexual desire, thought, or action associated with homosexuality. This is something Messner (2002) described as being “100 per cent straight” (p. 422).

Borrowing from Harris’ (1964) one-drop theory of race, in which a dominant white culture once viewed anyone with even a portion of black genetic ancestry as wholly black, Anderson (2008) has argued that a single same-sex sexual experience traditionally renders the public perception of an individual’s sexual orientation as gay. Calling this *the one-time rule of homosexuality*, Anderson described how, in most Western cultures, this imperative serves as a cultural mechanism to conflate the complex issues of gender, sexual orientations, sexual desires, sexual identities (and the social construction of sexual acts themselves) into the singular polarized identities of gay and straight—simultaneously re-inscribing heterosexual power and privilege through heteromascularity while erasing bisexuality.

Furthermore, Schwartz (1995) has suggested that the inverse of this rule does not apply to homosexual men. Schwartz writes, “We have demonized the power of homosexuality so that we assume it to be the greater truth of our sexual self—as if one drop of homosexuality tells the truth of self, while one drop of heterosexuality in a homosexual life means nothing” (p. 12). This one-way application of the one-time rule traditionally creates a double jeopardy for heterosexual men who reveal an experience with any form of sexual behavior socially coded as gay: it both excludes them from achieving the requisites of heterosexuality and diminishes their masculine

capital. With few exceptions (cf. Klein, 1993; Reis, 1961), this rule implies that in Anglo-American cultures, men's socially constructed heteromasculine identities are framed upon exclusively opposite-sex sexual behaviors. Thus, a kiss on the lips has not been part of the historical repertoire of greetings or demonstrations of affection among men for centuries in Britain (Dinshaw, 1994). As Fox (2004) recently wrote, "With the possible exception of a father and a young son, English men do not embrace or kiss one another" (p. 191). In this research, however, we show that this social construction of heterosexuality is currently being contested.

### **The Stratification of Masculinities**

In British and North American society, masculinities have traditionally been hierarchically stratified in accordance with a hegemonic form of gender dominance (Connell 1995; Mac an Ghail 1994; Pronger 1990). Scholars have shown that, in times with elevated rates of homophobia, both boys and men are compelled to express homophobic and femphobic attitudes and display an orthodox form of masculinity (Anderson, 2008; Ibson, 2002; Plummer, 1999).

At such times and in such cultures, heterosexual men must also maintain emotional and physical distance from one another (Ibson, 2002), and any physical demonstrations of intimacy between males are generally confined to specific culturally approved activities, such as playing team sports (Anderson 2005a). Conversely, acts of soft tactility, such as holding hands, softly hugging, caressing, or non-sexual kissing are not permitted (Anderson 2009).

In such environments, men approximate hegemonic masculinity through activities such as sport, through the enhancement or maintenance of muscularity, and through displays of hyper-heterosexuality. In these cultural moments, boys and men who *do* display physical or emotional intimacy are socially stigmatized and thus homosexualized. They are stripped of their publicly

perceived heteromascularity and, by implication, their power (Kaplan 2006). It is in this institutional context that Kimmel (1994) suggests homophobia *is* masculinity.

In revealing the mechanisms that support this hierarchical stratification of masculinity, many scholars have argued that positive social change can occur with regard to the social ordering of men (Anderson 2009; McCormack & Anderson 2010). Indeed, as Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue, multiple masculinities co-exist within a complex model of gender hierarchy. They suggest that changing the dynamics of masculinity *is* possible: long-standing ideals of heteromascularity *are* subject to adjustment, change, renegotiation, and, ultimately, can be replaced. For example, Pascoe (2003) showed that while multiple masculinities are stratified in deference to an orthodox form of masculinity, many boys strategically adopted esteemed masculine behaviors, such as heterosexual prowess and intellectual competence, to allow them to act in ways socially-coded as feminine. Indeed, in what is often viewed as a bleak condition of heteromascularity, there remains a glimmer of optimism.

Anderson (2005b, 2009) embraced this optimism with his inclusive masculinity theory. Through intensive empirical ethnographic research, Anderson demonstrated the emergence of newer, more inclusive masculinities that challenge and have the capacity to replace older, more orthodox versions. Anderson's notion of homophobia explained the cultural context in which men's behaviors are used to demonstrate heterosexuality, and it explained how matters would change if homophobia decreased. This theory has also been supported by McCormack's ethnographic studies of the inclusive stratification of masculinities in British high schools (McCormack 2010, 2011, forthcoming). Indeed, foreshadowing this body of empirical research, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) suggested "that a more humane, less oppressive, means of being a man might become hegemonic, as part of a process leading toward an abolition of gender

hierarchies” (p. 833).

In this research we examined the kissing behaviors of young self-identified heterosexual men (which we determined by asking them if they identify as gay, straight, bisexual, or other) at college and university, and we considered how these behaviors work to contest the construction and reproduction of traditional, orthodox assumptions of hegemonic masculinity. In this case, we quite literally reflected upon the embodied practices of masculinities, as we examined the frequency, geographical location, types, and meanings of brief same-sex kisses (social kissing) as well as sustained, exaggerated and intentionally provocative, kissing.

## **METHODS**

### **Participants**

Participants in this study self-identified as heterosexual males at the time of their interviews. They were attending either one of two universities or one sixth-form college (Grades 11-12 in high school). Ages ranged between 16-25 years, with the majority of participants between 18-22 years.

#### *University in the South-West (n=107)*

Interview data were collected from four groups of students within a large, high ranking university in the South-West of England. Interviews were conducted with 22 undergraduates in a sport-related class (individual and team sports), 25 undergraduates from a non-sport related class (of which only a few were athletes), and seven graduate students who had received their degrees from other universities the previous year. A further 53 shorter interviews were conducted with every third male who exited the university library. Only 12 males declined to participate in the research.

#### *University in the Midlands*

16 interviews were conducted among members of the university's football (soccer) team. Most of the men on this team (14) were Caucasian, and most described their family's socioeconomic status as middle class.

### *Sixth Form College*

In addition to university students, we interviewed 22 young men attending a sixth form college (equivalent to school grades 11-12). The college was selected based upon its representativeness of the British population (90% Caucasian) and drawing its student body from primarily middle class families. In terms of scholastic achievement, students' grades in national examinations were average.

We divided this sample into two, evenly splitting athletes (mostly soccer/football players) and non-athletes in order to explore differences among those students who were highly masculinized because of their sporting prowess and those who were less masculinized.

### **Procedure**

All 145 interviews were collected over a period of two years. The majority of interviews (92) were semi-structured, with in-depth interviews averaging 45 minutes (range 20-70 minutes), and using a list of topics as an interview schedule. In order to maintain conversation and facilitate the flow of the interviews, we did not follow questions sequentially or word them precisely the same each time. However, all of the topics were covered in each of the interviews.

Interviews began by asking the participants to self identify as gay, straight, bisexual or other. We then asked informants to describe their attitudes towards homosexuality. We then asked them if they had ever briefly kissed another man. Positive answers were followed up with questions relating to the nature of the kiss (how they kissed the other man, how long it lasted, and whether or not they had engaged in any form of sustained same-sex kissing. We also asked



about the venue (location) in which the kiss/kissing took place and context in which it happened. Informants were then asked to describe, emotionally, what it was like to kiss another man, and what it meant to them intellectually and erotically. The interview also examined informants' perspectives of who they kiss. We asked questions about the criteria used in determining who will be the recipients of a same-sex kiss. We asked informants about their perceptions of men kissing today and why they thought it was acceptable. Also, we explored how they viewed homosexual men kissing in public. Finally, we asked questions relating to others' perceptions of men kissing (fathers, friends from home) and the role alcohol played in the initiation of kissing.

For the 53 shorter interviews, the schedule of questions was more tightly structured given time constraints. For those who met criteria for inclusion in the study, and in addition to demographic questions (sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, etc.), we asked questions relating to their participation in organized team sports, their attitudes toward homosexuality, and whether or not they had ever (even once) briefly kissed another man on the lips. Again, where a positive response was received, we followed up with a series of questions exploring the nature of the relationship informants had with the individual(s) they kissed, and if they had ever participated in extended kissing with another man.

### **Analytic Framework and Measures**

We conducted 2 x 2 chi-squares to determine if there were any discernable differences in kissing behaviors (simple and extended kissing) within and between our sample sub-groups. Comparisons were made within institutions as well as according to informants' athlete or non-athlete status, and level of educational attainment (denoted by their attendance at either university or sixth-form college). Concomitantly, using a constant-comparative method of open and axial coding, the researchers coded interviews from each of the three data sets. Following

initial coding, we compared 10 per cent of the transcriptions for inter-rater reliability and asked another researcher to moderate discrepancies. In conducting this study, we acknowledge that it was based on an interpretive framework, however, we argue that it is through the rigor of our interpretive inquiry and the richness and quality of our empirical descriptions that provides credibility to our analysis (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997).

## **RESULTS**

Eighty-nine per cent of the young heterosexual men we interviewed have, at least once, briefly kissed another heterosexual male friend on the lips. Of the seven graduate students who completed their undergraduate degrees elsewhere, all but one had kissed another male during their undergraduate degrees. Furthermore, all suggested that this behavior was a regular occurrence among undergraduate populations at their previous universities. Our results did not include kissing one's father, kissing other men on the cheek (which also happens with great frequency today and is also culturally avowed), or kissing other men through athletic-team initiation rituals or hazing incidents (cf. Neuwert, 2004). Of course, the circumstances under which these behaviors occurred, the recipients, and the meanings associated with these kisses, were multiple and varied. However, informants' kissing narratives predominantly revolved around issues of homosocial bonding and admiration for a friend.

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### **Statistical Analysis**

Firstly, we conducted within-subjects' analyses to determine if there were any discernable associations in kissing behaviors within institutions according to sample characteristics. Chi-square analyses indicated that simple kissing behavior was not associated significantly with any one group of students from the University in the South-West. Similarly, no

significant associations were found between simple kissing and students' athlete or non-athlete status within the sixth form college. However, in terms of extended kissing, at the University in the South-West, students in the sport-related class (95%) were more likely to report kissing another heterosexual male than those in the non sport-related class (84%),  $\chi^2_{(1)} = 4.62, p = .03$ . When we looked across institutions, we found that students in the sport-related class at the University in the South-West (95%) were also more likely to engage in sustained kissing than those students who were athletes at sixth form college (91%),  $\chi^2_{(1)} = 5.22, p = .02$ . Similarly, while we found no significant associations between students attending the two universities in our study (South-West vs. Midlands) and extended kissing, those students who were members of the Midlands university football team (63%) were more likely to report having engaged in a sustained kiss with another heterosexual man when compared to athletes in sixth form college (18%),  $\chi^2_{(1)} = 5.18, p = .02$ .

We then compared all students according to their athlete and non-athlete status. Our results showed that, in terms of simple kissing, athletes (including those sampled from a sport-related class) were more likely to report kissing another heterosexual male (95%) than non-athletes (81%),  $\chi^2_{(1)} = 5.87, p = .02$ . A significant association was also found between athlete/non-athlete status and extended kissing, with 45% of athletes reporting having engaged in a sustained kissing with another heterosexual male, compared to 18% among non-athletes,  $\chi^2_{(1)} = 11.55, p = .001$ .

Finally, we compared reports of simple and extended kissing according to level of education (which can be considered a proxy for age). Overall, while we found no significant difference in reports of simple kissing according to whether or not students were attending

universities or sixth form college, a significant association was found for extended kissing, with more university undergraduates (37%) reporting having engaged in a sustained kiss with another heterosexual male than sixth form college students (9%),  $\chi^2_{(1)} = 6.64, p = 0.001$ .

### **A Kiss for Sporting Glory**

Our statistical analysis indicated that the athletes in our study (including students attending a sport-related class and those in sixth form college) engaged in more kissing behaviors than non-athletes. We posit this is a result of the fact that they maintain high degrees of heterosexual capital, and because sport promotes increased camaraderie and emotionality.

Darren, a sixth form student, said, “Kissing happens all the time in football [soccer]. Loads of guys kiss on the lips after scoring a goal; you’ll see it on T.V., too.” Andy, who is a Judo player, reported it also occurs in his sport. Will, a hockey player, commented that all athletes do it: “It’s just part of sport now, isn’t it?”

All of the men on the football team at the Midlands University said they had kissed. Grant said, “Yes. I kiss guys on the pitch. Guys I don’t even know. And I’m not the only one.” Grant added that he also kisses men on recreational teams, including men he is not close to. He said, “The first time it happened to me, I was 17, and I scored a goal. This guy ran over to me—some guy I didn’t even know—and he just grabbed me and kissed me.” When asked why kissing occurs in sport, he answered, “It’s the energy of the moment. It’s something that happens in moments of high emotion. It’s normal in sport.” These responses were mirrored by a number of athletes: the rationale, location, and meaning behind these kisses did not substantially vary between them.

Several informants suggested that same-sex social kissing occurred among men in their community-based sports clubs, too. For example, when Alex (who played cricket for a

community club) was asked about kissing, he responded, “Yeah, we go out with all the older cricket lot, and they are always kissing each other.” He indicated, however, that he only kisses players that are his age. “Some of the older guys kiss each other, too; but I only kiss my mates.” Ryan also stated that while players on his team range from 16 to 35, kissing only occurs among those aged around 26 and under. While this does not serve as systematic evidence of kissing occurring with regular frequency in other sport settings, it suggests that research on kissing in other locales and among other demographics of men would be interesting.

### **Kissing Camaraderie**

Our interviews showed that kissing not only occurred on the pitch, but that social kissing also happened as part of a fraternal celebration (having a good time) off the playing field as well. This was true of both athletes and non-athletes. Thus, university men often kissed in public venues like dance clubs and house parties. Tom, a biology student, told us, “Kissing happens on nights out, yeah. It happens all the time. Just go to [names venue] tonight. You’ll see it.” Alex, a computer science student, agreed, “If you look for it, you’ll see it; every night, in any club.” Pat clarified, “It’s not like if you walk in you’re going to see wall-to-wall guys kissing....But, when you’re with your mates, yeah, you give ‘em a kiss. So I might kiss a few guys throughout the night.”

Those who did not kiss suggested that it was primarily because they did not socialize in these types of gatherings. Andrew said, “No. I don’t do that. I don’t really go out. I don’t have those kind of friends.” Matt commented, “I know everybody does it, but I just don’t have many friends here. I spend most of my time with my girlfriend...but I don’t have a problem with it.” This sentiment was reflected among the sixth form students who did not kiss, too. As Jon said, “The athletes do that, yeah. But I’m not an athlete, and I don’t go to their parties...but if I was

part of that scene, I wouldn't be upset if another guy kissed me.”

Of the 25 men who have not socially kissed in our research, none were opposed to it. Ricky joked, “When I tell my mates what this interview was about, and they find out that I've not kissed a guy, you know what's going to happen? [referring to his belief that one of his friends would kiss him]...I'm not bothered by it,” he said. “I'll let you know if it does, so that you can change your statistics.” The primary author received a text message from him later that night, reading, “I'm in the majority now.”

### **Mechanics and Meaning**

One factor most of the men in our study shared was that they did not consider their kissing a sexual act. Instead, participants likened these types of brief kisses to a strong embrace or other exuberant ways of showing affection for a close friend, at appropriate times. Tim, said, “It's no more a sexual act than kissing your father,” and Tom argued, “It's like shaking hands. Well, it's more than that, but it's the same attitude.”

For the young men in our study, this type of kiss has been socially stripped of sexual significance. Whereas kissing a male friend on the lips would once be coded as a sexual act, the symbolic meaning of kissing has been differently interpreted by our informants. Here, kissing was consistent with a normal operation of heteromale intimacy. Highlighting this, when Pete was asked about which friends he kisses and which he does not, he answered, “I wouldn't kiss just anyone. I kiss my good mates.” He continued, “You kiss a friend because there is no fear of being rejected; no fear of being knocked back.” And when Pete was asked about how he measured who was worthy of being kissed, he said, “It's not that there is a system to who gets it or not. Instead, it's a feeling, an expression of endearment, an act that happens to show they are important to you.”

A number of other informants spoke of loving their friends (“mates”), too: kissing became a symbol of that platonic love. Mark said, “They [the kisses] happen because you are the guy’s mate. It’s an, ‘I love you mate’ type of kiss.” Tim agreed, “Kissing others guys is a perfectly legitimate way of showing affection toward a friend.” Ollie, a third year engineering student, added, “You do it sometimes when out having a laugh with your mates, yeah. But I suppose it’s also a way to show how much we love each other, so we do it at home, too.” When asked if these kisses were performed any different in private, he said, “Not really. No... You are more likely to pose for a camera when out and to perhaps play it up. But the meaning is the same. It means you love him.”

Another student, Matt, highlighted how important emotional intimacy was to him, telling a story about breaking up with his girlfriend. “I was really lonely,” he said. “Really depressed. So one night I asked my housemate who is one of my best friends if I could sleep in the bed with him. He looked at me, smiled, and said, ‘Come on,’ opening the covers to invite me in.” Matt continued, “He kissed me, and then held me. It was nice... I sent him a text the next day saying, ‘I’ve got the best friend in the world.’” Matt’s story highlighted not only the intimacy he shared with his friend but that a kiss can also transcend the spatial context of partying.

### **Spatial Considerations**

While the sixth form students in our study tended to kiss at parties or sporting events, about half of the undergraduates reported that they also kissed friends away from university parties and sport settings. Pete described his same-sex kisses as occurring “everywhere.” Adding, “I don’t know, maybe it’s just where I grew up, but it’s just no big deal.” He told us that he was kissing men before coming to university, and listed a host of locations in which he had kissed them: a sixth form dance, the university library, and a variety of non-student dominated bars and

clubs. He has never been harassed and added that his kissing has had no negative impact on his relationship with the men he kisses either. Evidence of this also comes through examination of student Facebook profiles. Here, one sees photos of men kissing mostly in pubs and clubs, but we have also seen men kissing on a train, at a beach, a music festival, and a multitude of other locations.

Harry said, “No. It’s not just when we’re out. It’s not just because we’re drunk. I probably kiss my housemates [at home] more than I do guys out on the lash [when going out and drinking alcohol].” He continued, “Like, I’ll go into John’s room and maybe he’s lying on his bed reading. I’ll bend over or lie down on top of him and kiss him; just to let him know I care about him.” Similarly, Jim recalled that although his first off-the-field social kisses were performed, “just for banter,” lately he has been giving his friends more “endearing kisses” in non-partying locations. “It is just nice to kiss a mate,” he said. Explicating this, Jim illustrated that he and a friend returned from a meaningful holiday together. “We were good friends before, but this trip just brought us together. We shared some real close emotional things and ended up great friends.” He added, “So I looked at him and we just grabbed each other for a big kiss. I guess it was kind of a thank you to each other for making the summer what it was.”

However, kissing other men is not yet acceptable in all social circles outside university and college settings. While most of these men suggested that they have kissed friends in other cultural contexts, when Ben was asked if he had ever kissed his friends back home, he answered, “No way. People would definitely think we were gay.” Thus, while these men are accepting same-sex intimacy, some of these men still remained fearful of being thought gay themselves. Thus, we acknowledge that, for some men in particular social groups and particular spaces, kissing other men is still stigmatized.



While we accept that further research is required to tease out the particulars of socio-economic and educational differences in men who participate in kissing, some of our informants touched upon these points. Sam suggested that much of the reason there was so much more kissing at the university was because of the liberal environment: “I never kiss any of my friends back home,” he said. “And I can't imagine it going down too well.” When asked about how his friends showed him affection back home, he said, “Punching and rubbing their knuckles into my head.” Comparing the two cultures, he said, “I much prefer a kiss and a cuddle!”

Contrary to heterosexual men having to physically and emotionally distance themselves from one another, our informants seemed to appreciate emotional intimacy. For those we interviewed, a same-sex kiss has been stripped of its homosexualizing significance and been re-coded as a symbol of platonic, heteromasculine affection (see McCormack & Anderson 2010). A brief kiss, for the majority of these British men, is now a heterosexual symbol of homophilic intimacy.

### **Extended Kissing**

Many of the students said that they also engaged in *sustained* kissing with other men. Of the 145 heterosexual men we interviewed, 48 said that they have (and sometimes regularly) engaged in provocative displays of same-sex kissing, which they described as being part of the repertory of jocular banter among friends. This extended kissing may be enacted for shock value, even though our data suggest that this type of intimacy between heterosexual young men is now so common that it does not seem to elicit the desired effect.

Overall, 12 (55%) of the 22 sport-related students and six (24%) of the 25 non sport-related students from the university in the South-West said they had engaged in a sustained kiss with other men. By way of contrast, 17 (32%) of the 53 students interviewed exiting the library

at the South-West university and one of the seven graduate students reported similarly. At the Midlands university, 10 (63%) of the 16 footballers, and two (9%) of the 22 sixth form students, said they had engaged in sustained kissing with another male.

Discussing his first extended kissing experience, Robin, a hockey player, recalled that he and his friend once tried to pull two women in a club: “We got rejected, so we just turned to each other and started going at it.” Jon, a runner, recalled doing something similar: “I kissed a guy with tongues for about three or four seconds, so that some girls would do the same. You know like in the movie *American Pie 2* [where two young heterosexual college-aged men kiss to elicit a same-sex act from two college-aged women], you go, we go, you go, we go!” And, when Alex, a footballer, was asked about this type of kissing behavior, he said, “I’ve kissed about three other lads that way.” However, most of the men who engaged in this type of kissing did not do it in order to influence women to do the same.

Grant recalled unexpectedly seeing one of his mates in a club. “I came running over to him and pulled him,” he said. “Like properly.” When asked what properly meant, he answered, “Like a proper pull...tongues and everything.” And, when he was asked about the duration of the kissing, he answered, “Maybe 10 seconds or so.” Similarly, Chris, a rugby player, said, “I’ve kissed over 10 of my lad mates; and made out with some, too.” Simon commented that he has one friend who gets particularly “kissy” when he is drunk. “I kiss him quite often,” he laughed. And when Simon was asked if he considered this making out, he answered, “No. Not really. I mean, you can call it that if you want. I don’t care. But it’s not a sexual thing.” Others we interviewed concur; they did not, personally, see this as a sexual act. Pat said, “No. It’s not sexual. You just do it for fun.” Matt agreed, “Even if you’re pulling another guy: it’s just something you do for banter. But it’s not sexual.”

While these men stripped the sexual significance out of prolonged kissing through homogenous banter, they nonetheless understood that *others* might view their kissing as a sexual behavior. “Of course,” Simon acknowledged. “Yeah, two guys with their tongues in each other’s mouths. But I guess it just doesn’t matter.” Matt said, “When I do it, I don’t see it as making out. But I can see how others might.” Conversely, Chris seemed confused about how to define it. He said that kissing a guy was, “A bit different. But apart from the stubble, it feels the same as kissing a girl.” He continued, “But while it feels the same as kissing a girl, it’s not the same as kissing a girl.” He said whether it is in celebration, out of affection, or performed as banter, kissing other men was strictly non-sexual: “I mean it is sexual, but it’s not sexy [read erotic].”

Key to this form of intimacy, and relevant to this work, the informants in our study demonstrated a shared understanding that while they were not erotically attracted to the men they kissed, they used kissing as a means of establishing intimacy, a close bond of friendship. It is this type of shared meaning that permits sustained kissing (within a semi-public sphere) to remain acceptable within a heterosexual framework, regardless of how those outside their network understood this meaning. Highlighting this, Jon said, “Did you see those two rugby players pulling in [names dance club on campus]? They were really going at it.” However, when asked whether the men were gay or straight, he answered, “Dunno.”

The shared understanding that kissing does not have to be erotic permitted the young men in our study to avoid being thought gay for kissing—at least within university and college culture. This was sometimes even the case when engaging in sustained kissing with *gay* men. Rory recalled kissing a gay mate, “just for fun.” Mark disclosed that he engaged in prolonged kissing with two of his gay friends as well. “Just for laughs,” he said. Both of these men indicated that they were drunk at the time.

## **Alcohol: Influence or Excuse?**

Sustained kissing was performed usually on nights out, when informants were under the influence of alcohol. This is consistent with literature that shows men frequently use alcohol in their homosocial bonding (Peralta, 2007; West, 2001), and this is particularly true in England. Here the age of consumption is just 18, and drinking is an integral part of social life among British university students.

Justin, a sixth form student, explained that sixth form kissing behaviors emerged at the same time as drinking. “I didn’t see much kissing among my friends last year [in secondary school, where students are aged under 16] but now that we’re in sixth form it happens all the time.” When asked why he thought this was, he answered, “I think a lot of it has to do with drinking. You don’t really drink at parties until sixth form.” When asked about whether alcohol was necessary for creating a social environment conducive for men to engage in sustained banter kissing, Grant confirmed, “Yeah, I guess we kiss more often that way when we’re drunk. But that’s because we’re out having a good time. Obviously, you are going to do it more when you’re out having fun.”

Iain, however, argued that men did not kiss *because* of alcohol. “It’s not like you wake up the next day going, ‘What did I do? You don’t regret it or anything.’” He added, “Look on Facebook, you’ll see that we don’t regret it,” referring to the almost ubiquitous phenomenon of heterosexual men posting photos of themselves kissing other men. Pete clarified the need for alcohol with humor. “I kiss guys when drunk,” he said. “But I have to be *really* lashed [drunk] to work up the guts to try and pull women.” Pete also indicated that when he kisses a mate, it is not because he is drunk. “Alcohol might make it easier for some guys, I guess. But I don’t think that’s why guys kiss.” He added, “I can tell you why I kiss my friends. I kiss them because I love

them.”

## DISCUSSION

Most of the participants we interviewed in this research have kissed another man on the lips. That these young men, regardless of their athletic participation, were able to kiss without being homosexualized by their actions suggests that either kissing has been stripped of its sexual significance and/or the sexual significance of two men kissing has been accepted within the terrain of heterosexual behaviors, at least within educational cultures in this part of the country.

We categorized and contextualized social kisses according to how they seem to have emerged. We first suggested that social kissing was determined as acceptable in sports (particularly football) as a celebration of athletic glory. Invasion team sport athletes (as opposed to ice-skaters or male cheerleaders) were permitted to engage in kissing because of the heteromasculinizing nature of their competitive team sports. This is a consistent finding in sport and masculinity literature (Anderson, 2005a; Pronger, 1990), as it reflects the increased bravado, camaraderie, and acceptable heightened sense of emotional intimacy that comes with team sport participation.

Kissing then merged into the social spaces university athletes mutually occupy with other students (dance clubs, classrooms, and pubs), concomitantly creating a spatial acceptance of kissing among non-athletes. Thus, we find that the same-sex kiss has temporally and spatially shifted from the sporting context, into drunken, celebratory behaviors on nights out. Here, it was widely made available to men with various degrees of heteromasculine capital. Parenthetically, it is also made available to gay men—within these same student contexts (Anderson, 2009)—as the behavior seems to have removed the stigma from homosexual kissing: a same-sex kiss no longer marks one as gay in certain venues.

We also found that a large number of students have engaged in sustained kissing in these mixed student spaces. We again argue that this may be the result of a temporal-spatial shift that first began with athletes. However, unlike the simple kisses which emerged on the playing field, prolonged kissing seems to have been generated in and mostly restricted to pubs and nightclubs. Sustained kissing does not occur on playing fields or in other aspects of students private lives.

Although many of our informants maintained that the simple kisses have been stripped of all sexual connotations, this is not always the case with sustained kissing. Although the students who engaged in this behavior maintained that they were not sexually attracted to, nor did they receive sexual pleasure from this type of kissing, they were nonetheless aware that others could interpret the meanings of such behavior differently in their shared public space. Perhaps it is because of this awareness that these men played up their kissing, exaggerating it, *performing* it for heterosexualizing attention in the form of homosocial banter. Their performance can be seen as a way of using semi-arbitrary ambivalent language and behavior to produce homosocial intimacy (Emerson, 1969). Thus, it follows the same principle as the mock homosexual acts that heterosexual male athletes (and men in other homosocial institutions) have engaged in for the purpose of homosocial bonding; it demonstrates that homoerotic behaviors sometimes serve as an ironic proclamation of one's heteromascularity (McCormack & Anderson, 2010). Accordingly, heterosexual men who engage in prolonged kissing can be viewed in terms of a juxtaposition of a semi-public performance with a semi-private meaning. Because of the concurrence of public and private associations, it can be sexual, but is not always publicly coded this way because it is symbolized by homosocial joking and repartee.

There is, of course, much we cannot know about whether informants receive any sexual gratification from their kissing behaviors. The commonly described mantra is to publicly declare

that one does not, but this does not preclude certain individuals from taking private enjoyment. While the question of erotic pleasure was inconsequential in this research, there nonetheless exists an eroding of the one-time rule of homosexuality, and a stretching of acceptable heterosexual behaviors. This is because the behaviors of the men in this study *are* ambivalent: informants themselves were sometimes unsure whether the men they kissed were gay, bisexual, or heterosexual. Accordingly, it can be argued that there has been a subsequent slippage in the veracity with which the one-time rule of homosexuality for sustained same-sex kissing as applied in this context.

Still, there are limits to the extent to which dominant ideals about heterosexuality stretch. There are three types of sustained kissing that can occur with these men. The first, reported widely in this research, is the exaggeration of extended kissing. This type of kissing is performed for the public. The second, found less in this research, is an inter-personal expression of heterosexual intimacy among the two men. This kiss is performed, as an expression of intimacy but it is absent of erotic intent. Finally, there exists erotic same-sex kissing. Here the intention is to derive personal pleasure in the act, as well as displaying emotional intimacy. While these men indicate a tolerance for this type of kissing among homosexual men, there is no indication that the heterosexual men studied here desired to engage in or accept as heterosexual this form of extended kissing. The condition of heterosexual acceptability is that there is no sexual gratification from a kiss. It is therefore doubtful that, in this particular cultural context at this particular point in time, further same-sex sexual activities would be understood as heterosexualizing. This does not mean that these men might not engage in same-sex sex, in fact, recent research on another group of university athletes shows that 40% have (Anderson, 2008). However, it suggests that further same-sex behaviors are not marked as heterosexualizing

endeavours.

Finally, the contestation of orthodox notions of heteromascularity occurs in multiple ways. First, because the simple kisses reported here represent an endearing expression of homophilic intimacy, they challenge notions of hegemonic masculinity by reconstructing the once-feminized nature of intimacy. Because their kissing is based in intimacy, intimacy is made compatible with heteromascularity. This is both an effect of decreasing levels of homophobia (McCormack, 2010; Van de Ven, 1994), while simultaneously reproducing homophobia as unacceptable among youth in these educational cultures (McCormack, 2011).

The findings presented in this study are consistent with Anderson's (2009) inclusive masculinity theory, which postulates a drastic reduction in cultural homophobia among youth in Britain and American educational settings today (cf. McCormack, 2010; McCormack & Anderson, 2010). Quite simply put, young men in these geographical contexts are not as bothered by homosexuality as they once were, and this means that they are less likely to police gendered behaviors with homophobia. This is something McCormack (2011) has also found among sixth form boys in the United Kingdom. He shows that boys are no longer stratified in hierarchal, dominating fashion.

It is difficult to say whether these men intend to contest orthodox notions of heteromascularity politically, or whether they simply do so implicitly. The performance of simple kisses does not seem to reflect political intent. Instead, simple kisses reflect a mastery of their homosocial bonding in a more inclusive regional context. However, when it concerns extended kissing, respondents indicated that they knew they were actively and intentionally contesting older versions of acceptable heteromasculine behaviors. Furthermore, placing photos of both types of behaviors on Facebook enacts political agency, again whether intended or not.



Claiming a same-sex kiss on Facebook is a means to extending cultural values beyond an immediate cohort of university or college friends. Most students have Facebook friends that include their teachers, parents, relatives, or others who may not understand the meanings of the portrayed kisses. Intentional or not, kissing and boasting of their kissing helps erode what has traditionally been a highly regulated culture for heterosexuals. In kissing these men, with or without understanding the potential implications of their actions it seems these heterosexual men have also challenged heteronormativity and homophobia.

## Appendix 1: Initiative interview questions, long surveys

- 1) How do you identify, straight, gay, bisexual or other?
- 2) Are you a member of any organized team sports?
- 3) Can you describe for me, quickly, what your general attitude is toward homosexuality?
- 4) I notice that straight men now kiss each other on nights out or in pubs. Have you ever kissed another friend, even just once this way?
- 5) Can you tell me about that kiss? How did it emerge? Who did you kiss? How long did it last?
- 6) I've also noticed that sometimes straight men pull one another, oftentimes at clubs, and oftentimes as a joke. Have you ever seen this?
- 7) Have you ever kissed a guy in this fashion?
- 8) How did it emerge? Who did you kiss? How long did it last?
- 9) Can you tell me what it is like kissing a guy, emotionally?
- 10) Do you derive any sexual or erotic pleasure from it?
- 11) Are there rules as to who you kiss?
- 12) Why do you think guys can do this these days?
- 13) What do you think your father might say if he knew you have kissed other guys this way?  
Your brother? Friends back home?
- 14) Do you see gay men also kissing this way? Do you have problems with gay men kissing in public? Would you kiss a gay friend in the same way you kiss a straight friend?

## Appendix 2: Indicative interview questions, short surveys

- 1) How do you identify, straight, gay, bisexual or other?
- 2) Are you a member of any organized team sports?
- 3) Can you describe for me, quickly, what your general attitude is toward homosexuality?
- 4) I notice that straight men now kiss each other on nights out or in pubs. Have you ever kissed another friend, even just once this way?
- 5) Can you tell me about the person you kissed. Why him?
- 6) I've also noticed that sometimes straight men pull one another, oftentimes at clubs, and oftentimes as a joke. Have you ever kissed a guy in this fashion?

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Table 1: Kissing among heterosexual male students

Institution	N	Simple kiss (%)	Banter kiss (%)
University in the South-West	107	96 (90)	36 (34)
- Students in sport-related class	22	21 (95)	12 (55)
- Students in non sport-related class	25	21 (84)	6 (24)
- Students selected from library	53	48 (91)	17 (32)
- Graduate students	7	6 (86)	1 (14)
University in the Midlands			
- Football (soccer) players	16	16 (100)	10 (63)
Sixth Form College	22	17(77)	2 (9)
- Students who are athletes	11	10 (91)	2 (18)
- Students who are non-athletes	11	7 (64)	0