

The Bromance: Undergraduate Male Friendships and the Expansion of Contemporary

Homosocial Boundaries

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### Abstract

The present study provides the first known qualitative examination of heterosexual undergraduate men's conceptualization and experiences of the bromance, outside research on cinematic representations. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 30 undergraduate men enrolled in one of four undergraduate sport-degree programs at one university in the United Kingdom, we find these heterosexual men to be less reliant on traditional homosocial boundaries, which have previously limited male same-sex friendships. Contrary to the repressive homosociality of the 1980s and 1990s, these men embrace a significantly more inclusive, tactile, and emotionally diverse approach to their homosocial relationships. All participants provided comparable definitions of what a bromance is and how it operates, all had at least one bromantic friend, and all suggested that bromances had more to offer than a standard friendship.

Participants described a bromance as being more emotionally intimate, physically demonstrative, and based upon unrivalled trust and cohesion compared to their other friendships. Participants used their experiences with romances and familial relations as a reference point for considering the conditions of a bromance. Results support the view that declining homophobia and its internalization has had significantly positive implications for male expression and intimacy. Conclusions are made about the bromance's potential to improve men's mental health and social well-being because participants indicate these relationships provide a space for emotional disclosure and the discussion of potentially traumatic and sensitive issues.

*Keywords:* bromance, homosocial, homophobia, masculinity, men, stoicism, suicide.

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The concept of friendship between both heterosexual (Ibson 2002) and gay men (Nardi 1999) is well-examined in the social sciences (Hruschka 2010). Although friendship is primarily experienced by individuals as a complex psychological phenomenon (Poplawski 1989), its dimensions, behavioral requisites, and prohibitions are nonetheless socially defined and regulated (Van Duijn et al. 2003). The present research contributes to the sociological research on male friendships by examining the contemporary notion of “bromance.”

Whereas most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century investigations of male friendship explicitly focused on missing emotional and physical intimacy, compared to what exists in women’s friendships (Lewis 1978; Pleck 1975), the concept of the bromance has been recently used to describe a new form of friendship between men: one based in intimacy. The term has been used, variably, by scholars (DeAngelis 2014; Thompson 2015), normally as a cultural discourse on friendship. DeAngelis (2014, p. 1) describes a *bromance* as “a term denoting an emotionally intense bond between straight men,” and Davies (2014) goes as far to say that a bromance often surpasses the romantic closeness that men share with their wives and girlfriends.

Although recent research has discussed the emergence of bromances and how they connect to homosociality (Anderson 2014; Chen 2011; Hammarén and Johansson 2014), there are no known systematic examinations of its conceptualization, behavioral requisites, or limitations. Instead, its meanings have been culturally mapped through recent comedy movies and television programs popular with the 16–25 year-old male demographic (Boyle and Berridge 2012; DeAngelis 2014; Hansen-Miller and Gill 2011).

For its comedic connotations and depiction, social scientists have failed to consider the bromance as a serious and legitimate relationship type and have ignored its importance in the lives of everyday young men (Emslie et al. 2007; Way 2013). However, increasingly, new studies suggest that young men's same-sex relationships are becoming more emotionally nuanced and intimate, owing to a shift in masculine socialization processes (Anderson 2014; Emslie et al. 2007; McCormack 2012; Samaritons 2012; Way 2013). In order to address: (a) the lack of definitional literature on bromances and (b) the implications of having such relationships, we carried out in-depth interviews 30 male university students in the United Kingdom who identified as heterosexual or mostly heterosexual.

### **Male Friendship: Non-Intimate Connections**

The level of physical and emotional intimacy expressed between men in a given context is highly contingent on their awareness and inclusion or rejection of homosexuality. When examining heterosexual men's preference for same-sex socializing and friendship—known as *homosociality*—in the past 50 years, significant regulation of masculinity related to men's socially perceived sexuality is evident (Lipman-Blumen 1976; Sedgwick 1985). This is despite men's same-sex friendships being described as highly intimate (Deitcher 2001), even romantic (Rotundo 1989), before the modern era. A century ago, men not only posed for staged photography in physically intimate ways (Ibson 2002), but also wrote endearing letters to one another and slept in the same beds. Exemplifying this history, Tripp (2005) highlights that, for 4 years, President Abraham Lincoln shared a bed with his male partner, Joshua Speed, and President George Washington wrote endearing letters to other men.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the western population's awareness of homosexuality grew (Miller 1995). At the same time, Sigmund Freud published three influential essays on the

*Theory of Sexuality* (1905). His works proposed that young men were being converted to homosexuality as a consequence of a feminine upbringing and socialization process. He further suggested that absent fathers, as well as a lack of male role models, contributed to the homosexualization of children. Cancian (1986) explains that these concerns were propagated by certain social, economic, and geographic shifts that occurred during the second industrial revolution. The mass migration of workers from the agrarian to industrial lifestyle destined men to work extended shifts away from home, contributing to the demise of rural and family life.

At this time, the general public broadly believed that sexuality was socially constructed as part of a child's upbringing and was widely understood to be a permanent, "other" sexuality (Foucault 1984). Simply, Anglo-American societies believed that the embodiment of femininity caused homosexuality (Weeks et al. 2003). Although not intending to stigmatize homosexuality, Freud inadvertently promoted the structure of the nuclear family, something for which homosexuality was a direct threat (Anderson 2009).

Consequently, the late Victorian era is described as a homophobic one (Kimmel 1994). The same-sex intimacy that Tripp (2005) describes began to be socially policed as awareness of homosexuality grew in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By the 1980s, the romantic friendships that Rotundo (1989) highlighted became entirely limited to gay men and lesbians (Diamond et al. 1999). In other words, straight men feared being socially perceived as gay for displaying physical or emotional intimacy with other men. This constriction had significant implications for the development of close friendships between men (Morin and Garfinkle 1978; Komarovsky 1974; Pleck 1975). Lewis (1978, p. 108) wrote that men "have not known what it means to love and care for a friend without the shadow of some guilt and fear of peer ridicule." Jourard (1971) showed that self-disclosure, a vital component of emotional intimacy, was largely lacking

between men in their friendships. Instead, young men knew that they had a friendship with another man when they engaged in activities together, like playing sports, drinking, fixing things, or gambling (Seiden and Bart 1975). However, by the 1990s some research showed that men began to share feelings with other men (Walker 1994).

Anderson's (2009) concept of *homohysteria* explains the shift in the physical and emotional dispositions of men before the first half of the 20th century and the decades of the latter half. McCormack and Anderson (2014) define *homohysteria* as the fear of being socially perceived as gay—something made possible because heterosexuality cannot be definitively proven among straight men in a culture that is both aware and fearful of homosexuality. Subsequently, men were culturally compelled both to perform certain overtly heterosexual behaviors and to avoid engaging in those that would feminize them.

It is important to understand that this cultural landscape has left a generation of heterosexual men with a life of non-intimate connections, as well as with friendships that may never achieve the level of intimacy to which they should have been entitled (Collins and Sroufe 1999; Connolly et al. 2000). We cannot say for certain that men are inherently predisposed to be less emotive and expressive than women, but scholars would argue that 20<sup>th</sup> century culture has certainly predisposed men's emotional boundaries to be more rigid and distant (Anderson 2014; Connell 1995; Hruschka 2010; McCormack 2012). As Fehr (1996) explains, men have traditionally chosen to align with orthodox masculine archetypes, even when they may internally desire open, emotional, and tactile contact with other men. Importantly for our study, cultural restrictions on male emotionality have drastically affected men's ability to emote and confide (Bowman 2008), significantly reducing their coping strategies to deal with internal conflicts such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts (Cleary 2012; Scourfield 2005).

Contrasting with traditional notions of male friendship, women have been said to emphasize their same-sex friendships through emotionality and the disclosure of personal secrets. Wright (1982) is commonly cited for his suggestion that male friendships operate side-by-side whereas female friendships are more face-to-face, distinguishing that women prefer to bond through closeness in the dialogue. Indeed, broader socialization processes have also exaggerated a dualistic and naturalistic perspective on the emotionality of women and stoicism of men (Beasley 2008 Cancian 1986; Hruschka 2010). Hence, women have been socially permitted to display a broader range of gendered behaviors than men have (Kring and Gordon 1998).

### **Inclusive Masculinity Theory**

In recent years, scholars have noted a rapid decline in the prevalence of cultural homophobia (Anderson 2014; McCormack 2012; Savin-Williams 2005) and a consequent expansion of social landscapes for not only gay men, but also young men altogether, esteeming more inclusive and emotive masculine identities than previously observed (Anderson 2005; McCormack 2012; Murray and White 2015; Murray et al. 2016; Weeks 2007; White and Hobson 2015; White and Robinson 2016). Anderson (2010, p. 115) says that young men are “rapidly running from the hegemonic type of masculinity that has been privileged for the past twenty-five years.” (Anderson & White 2017) Recent research has shown support for Anderson’s (2010) supposition, highlighting that men are engaging in more affectionate, emotional, and physical relationships with their same-sex friends (Magrath et al. 2013; Peterson and Anderson 2012). Indeed, as well as young men’s relationships, scholars have also found that affection and emotional support is increasingly being esteemed between fathers and their sons,

evolving to be much more engaged and involved relationships than in previous decades (Morman and Floyd 2006).

Inclusive masculinity is based on the social inclusion of those traditionally marginalized by hegemonic masculinity. Inclusive masculinity can now be observed with prominence in major social institutions including education (McCormack 2011), sport (Adams 2011; Magrath et al. 2013) and social media (Morris and Anderson 2015). Young men in these forums have progressively aligned themselves away from orthodox tropes of masculinity and are less concerned about whether others perceive them to be gay or straight, masculine or feminine (Anderson 2014; Savin-Williams 2005). Because of the campaigning of oppressed gay men and lesbians, among others, a dramatic shift in attitudes was stimulated in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century that recognized and accepted homosexuality as a legitimate orientation. Anderson (2009) argues that this has permitted young men to embrace feminine, inclusive, and intimate behaviors because they have far less fear of being labelled as gay.

Building on the growing body of work on decreasing homophobia and the changing nature of adolescent masculinities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Anderson, McCormack, and Lee 2012; McCormack 2012; Murray and White 2015), young men today are now able to have highly intimate homosocial relationships, alongside casual friends. The decline of cultural homophobia has relinquished men's burden to police their gendered behaviors. Like men of the 1980s, they still make friends through sports, drinking, and exercising, but they can now also bond over shopping or dining together. Unlike men of the 1980s, they form deep emotional relationships, based on emotional disclosure with one another. Thus, whereas Bank and Hansford (2000) previously found that male friendships struggle due to emotional restraint, masculine hierarchies and homophobia, many scholars now suggest that the millennial generation espouses a culture



that is much more inclusive and cohesive (Adams 2011; McCormack 2012; Thurnell-Read 2012). With the present research, we build on this body of evidence and explore homosociality in the form of a bromance. We seek to know how men conceptualize a bromance, how a bromance differs from a friendship, and the roles that physical and emotional intimacy play in these classifications.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Over a 3-month period, between August 2014 and November 2014, we conducted semi-structured interviews into the friendship experiences of 30 undergraduate men who identified as heterosexual or mostly heterosexual and who were enrolled in one of four undergraduate sport-degree programs at one university in the United Kingdom. To be part of the research, participants needed to identify as either exclusively heterosexual or mostly heterosexual on Vrangalova and Savin-Williams's (2012) 5-point scale of sexual identity: exclusively heterosexual, mostly heterosexual, bisexual, mostly homosexual, or exclusively homosexual. Thus, sexuality was presented to participants as a continuous variable. This screening was part of the demographic information that participants filled out alongside their ethics form. The sample comprised men aged 18–22 years (18 years,  $n = 1$ ; 19 years,  $n = 15$ ; 20 years,  $n = 9$ ; 21 years,  $n = 4$ ; 22 years,  $n = 1$ ), and although not selected for race, the near-exclusively White student body of this British university limited our analysis to that of only White men. Our sample was also populated by participants from self-identified, middle-class backgrounds. Thus our findings are limited to a somewhat homogeneous sample of young, largely White, heterosexual men.

In order to assure that the men we interviewed were not strategically presenting positive or overly-exaggerated support for gay men and male homosexuality (a prerequisite for inclusive masculinities), 18 months prior to these interviews we distributed Herek's (1988) Attitudes Towards Gays and Lesbians scale to a cohort of over 100 incoming first-year university students. This annual survey of all sports students was administered anonymously upon the students' first day of arrival at the university; the cohort from which our sample was taken averaged extraordinarily high support of male homosexuality. Accordingly, and consistent with other research on undergraduates in British sport departments (Bush et al. 2011), our participants espoused pro-gay attitudes on arrival at university.

We limited participation to second-year students so that we measured men who had time to develop friendships with their university peers. We recruited all 30 of the students from various majors within a sports department through advertising in lectures and word of mouth, with all of the participants presenting themselves to the researchers. We stopped interviewing at 30 because we had reached a strong degree of data saturation.

### **Procedures**

We used a guided interview that aimed to determine the characteristics of this sample's bromance relationships. The interviewer was selected because he already had a good rapport with the collective student body surveyed on homophobia 18 months earlier. This is evidenced by outstanding, anonymous, teacher evaluations performed on this 46-year-old White, gay man at the end of the class he taught in the first semester (which all student were compelled to take). The benefit of this method was that students had already developed a level of rapport with the interviewer, allowing sensitive topics to be more easily discussed (Hutchinson et al. 2002).

The one-on-one interviews began by verbally briefing participants about the nature of the study and then furnishing them with a participant information sheet and copy of ethics approval. Participants were then required to sign a consent form, and simultaneously verbally reminded of their rights to withdraw from the study, to refuse to answer questions, and to review transcripts from the interview. All ethical procedures of the British Sociological Association have been followed. Participants were provided with an information sheet with the investigators' contact information, aims of the study, consent forms, and indication that there was no penalty for not participating.

Through a variety of questions (available as an **on-line supplement**), participants were then asked to discuss their understandings and experiences of bromances and the homosocial aspects of their same-sex friendships. For the purposes of our research, questions concerned real experiences and not hypothetical situations. The line of questioning broadly intended to tease out what the men understood bromances to be, whether they existed in their lives, and how they were enacted. For example, questions were asked about the differences between a friendship and a bromance; and questions were also asked about the differences and similarities between a heterosexual romance (girlfriend) and a bromance. Questions were asked about how men know they have a bromance, and what sort of behaviors manifest in them. For example, men were specifically asked about their involvement in, and openness to: bed sharing, nudity, kissing, emotional intimacy, and secret sharing within bromances. We then compared these answers to friendships that they do not consider to be bromances.

### **Analytic Methods**

Given that our aim was to understand the operational definition of what a bromance is, and how they are embodied within the participants' lives, we used an inductive approach

concerned with extracting thematic categories based on consistent, repetitive, and recurring experiences of related data (Braun and Clarke 2006). We intended to draw out the key patterns in data that express a level of consensus and unanimity in the views expressed (Joffe 2012). This approach was also valued for its theoretical flexibility and roundedness in data (Braun and Clarke 2006).

After transcribing the digitally recorded interviews, data analysis occurred in a three-step processes. First, participants' narratives were coded by the first and third authors for themes relating to their views about bromances and same-sex friendships, as well as their perception of the boundaries of such friendships. This step utilized broad codes of "emotional disclosure," "body comfort," and "similarities." The second round of coding added more detail, producing more complex codes, including: "Expressions of Physical Tactility," "Love," and "Emotional Vulnerability." At this point, the codes identified were collated in order to develop the themes that emerge in the data presented here: (a) bromantic intimacy as unique compared to friendships and romances, (b) the embodiment of a bromance (coded into three sections on kissing, cuddling, and nudity), and (c) the bromance as being inclusive of polyamorous (albeit non-sexual) affection. An external academic was independently consulted because of his expertise in the area. Codes were discussed between these two authors until interpretations were agreed (Goetz and LeCompte 1984). For that reason, the process permitted a level of mutual consistency, principally generating more valid data (Denscombe 2002).

As is consistent with the intentional design of our study, we prompted for and selected accounts of the personal over the general. In cases where participants provided both an example of how others do, view, or enact a bromance, as well as how they themselves do, view and enact a bromance, we always took the personal account (Kerrick and Henry 2017). We should

acknowledged that participants deployed the bromance term in a grammatically unconventional way. Participants variably used the word “bromance(s)” as both a way of identifying their close friend(s) and their relationship with that person, invoking the word awkwardly at times as a pronoun. The authors have left these inconsistencies as stated by the participants so as not to skew the accuracy of the data. For clarity, the authors invoke the term “bromance” to describe a relationship type and “bromantic friend” to describe the people in those relationships.

### **Results**

During interviews, it was revealed that each of the 30 men had at least one bromantic friend, either in the past or at the present time. This was true regardless of whether one defined as exclusively or mostly heterosexual (see Table 1 for information about individual men, listed by assigned pseudonym, who are quoted here). There was high level of consistency and confirmation between the men on what bromances were and how they impacted on their lives. The principal characteristics of a bromance concerned having shared interests as well as maintaining emotional and physical intimacy.

### **Defining the Bromance**

Before trying to unpack the bromance for its detailed constituent parts and characteristics, and with respect to the fluid and holistic nature of relationships, it is worthwhile briefly setting out the overarching insights that the men had in defining the bromance. In presenting his definition of a bromance, Patrick, for example, said:

A bromances is someone who is literally there for you all the time. Someone you can relate to on an emotional level. Someone you can share secrets and pain with, and love, but there is no sort of sexual attraction. It can be intimate though.

(Patrick)

Similarly, Mark said:

I've got really good friends that are guys and we call it a bromance. You can fully discuss your fears and problems with them, all of that. We are completely comfortable with each other and kiss and hug every now and then. You know they will always be there to back you up if you need it. (Mark)

And Henry said:

I have one [bromance] with my best friend. Like, he will do something for me and I'll feel really sentimental, like you really shouldn't have done that, but you did. He does more for me than a normal friend would. It creates a love feeling for me, not sexual though. (Henry)

These extracts provide rich examples of how our participants experience and define their bromances. When asked about the difference between a friendship and a bromance, participants were clear to differentiate between the two, arguing that bromances were more important. Luke said: "You have people that you are really close to, and get on with really well, but a bromance is closer." He added: "With a bromance you can talk about anything, with friends you can't." Aaron said: "They are a lot more than just a mate." Bruce compared his experience of a bromance to a romance: "We are basically like a couple...we get called like husband and wife all the time." Martin agreed: "It's like having a girlfriend, but then not a girlfriend."

Just as a bromance was compared by some to having a romantic relationship with a girlfriend, many said it was like having a brother. Mark said: "You always hear guys say they are brothers-from-another-mother. It shows that they are close, like family." Many of the other participants were familiar with this term. Chris added: "You look out for each other, like brothers." This comparison to family members and romances conveys the profound connection

that is definitional to bromances. Illustrating this connectedness, Robbie said: “We pretty much know each other’s minds inside-out.” Jason added: “With the guy it’s like you can relate straight to each other, and know what each other is thinking. You are always on the same wavelength.” Thus, we highlight that the participants situate bromances somewhere within the dimensions of romance, friendship, and family relationships.

Unlike a heterosexual romance, a bromance need not be predicated in monogamy. Participants unanimously suggested that men are permitted to have more than one bromance. Some of our participants have several. Ivan said: “It’s so easy to have bromances.” Dan said: “I’m in probably seven or eight bromances which I will cuddle with.” George said: “I have about four,” and Chris said: “I’ve got lots.” These men show us not only that they are permitted to have multiple bromantic friendships, but that there is acceptance among peers for whom having another bromance is not a betrayal to other bromantic relationships.

### **Characteristics of a Bromance**

**Shared interests.** All participants believed that having shared interests is a necessary requisite for having a bromance. Sharing the same context of being students involved in sport was it not itself enough to develop a bromance. Regi explained: “A bromance works best when those involved share similar interests and personalities.” Samuel agreed: “For me, you have to have extremely similar interest and it has to build from that.” Harvey said a bromance is formed “when two boys meet and they get on well and have similar interests. They bounce off one another...they will be similar in personality.” Hamish said: “We share interests and like the same things.”

Team sports served as one space where males could meet to develop emotional bonds (Anderson, McCormack, and Lee 2012; Baker and Hotek 2011). Martin, for example, was a member of the university rugby team, and he suggested that most of his relationships with teammates are also bromances: “I have lots of bromances...I’ve never seen more penises and bollocks in one space, it’s very much more open.” Gavin also thought rugby was a catalyst for bonding: “I went from a school where touching guys was stigmatized, to men’s rugby where they are all in the showers intentionally dropping soap. I think the stigma is changing with youth.” Jay agreed: “I think the fact that I play rugby encourages it... they [bromances] are a lot more common among rugby players.” Jack has a bromance with his housemates who all share an interest in rugby:

Sometimes, like three of us will have a lecture that finishes at 6 pm on a Monday, and the fourth lad will have dinner ready for us: it’s cute, it’s thoughtful... when I finish [lectures] before them, and we go clubbing, I have pizzas ready for them. It benefits all of us. (Jack)

Although there is a clear recognition that sport provides men with a social space for accelerated social bonding, as well as homosocial and bromantic development (see also Adams 2011; Anderson and McCormack 2014), it is having shared interests that normally leads to the friendship creation (Parks and Floyd 1996; Seiden and Bart 1975) that then advances into a bromance. This was an absolute requisite for the development of a bromance. Samuel said: “Quite honestly, it can only work with someone who shares the exact same interests on the exact same level: whether you’re into sport, films, studying the same stuff, or whatever.” This emphasis on interests and shared experiences was articulated by participants as being pivotal to the start of a bromance and, as Ben said, “Before you know it, you are doing everything



together.” Through sharing interests and social spaces, these men were able to cultivate close and intimate friendships with their analogous peers.

**Emotional intimacy.** All participants suggested that bromances differ from friendships through the level of emotional disclosure that is permissible to one another. This included sharing secrets and confiding exclusively with their bromantic friend(s). They were clear that a bromance offers a deep sense of unburdened disclosure and emotionality based on trust and love. Hence, these undergraduate men inform us that they desire to develop relationships with other men premised on companionship and intimacy where complete emotional disclosure is possible.

The vulnerability and connection expressed by these men toward their bromantic friends was so profound that many spoke of their love for one another in endearing terms. Jack said: “I love him to bits, he’s my man crush,” and Theo said: “I can happily say, ‘oh I love him.’” This declaration of love contravenes the heterosexual vocabulary of previous decades when men even avoided using the word “like” because it was perceived as being too affectionate (Lewis 1978). Conversely, men in our sample expressed a much more affectionate sentiment. Max, for example, said: “I feel free to tell him I love him, because I do. There is no attraction, but also no embarrassment.”

Although he does not use the word homosocial, Jason made clear that there is a difference between homosocial attraction and homosexual desire. He argued that “There is no sort of sexual attraction in this love.” This is the feeling expressed by all the men we interviewed, whereby they separate emotional desire from physical desire. The absence of sexual attraction distinguishes these men as heterosexual to both themselves and others. More importantly, these men share a progressive understanding that love can exist between two people without the need or requirement for sex with each other. Harvey said: “The only difference [between a romance

and bromance] is the sexual desire.” Sam said: “Everything is close in a bromance, just not the sexual stuff.” Aaron said: “When you have a bromance with a friend, it’s motivated by your interest in that person, love and friendship, and not because you want sex [unlike with a woman].”

It is not just the ability to express love in a bromance that is valued, but also the reaction that one is likely to receive from that disclosure. Our participants were able to express vulnerability in their bromances and divulge their most personal issues, without social ridicule. “You can say stuff to him without offending him,” Harvey said, “...and it feels like there are no boundaries between us and what we can say.” Jay said: “I trust him with a lot more than I trust a normal friend. We tell each other everything.” Joe had the same experience, saying “...you just click. You tell them stuff you don’t tell other people. Everything is generally closer.” George explained: “It’s that guy or two that you need, who is always there for you. You can talk to him about anything. It doesn’t matter what you tell him, he is always there to listen.” George even gave an example where he spoke of his desire to for his girlfriend to finger him—an increasingly common phenomenon among this cohort of men (Branfman et al. in press). However, knowing his girlfriend had hinted at being opposed to this activity, he had only told his bromantic friend and not his girlfriend about his sexual desires. Gavin similarly reserved the disclosure of certain intimacies to his bromantic friend, modifying the number of sexual conquests he had depending on the person to whom he was speaking. “My bro is the only person that knows the exact amount,” Gavin said.

Many others identified sexual desires and health issues as subjects that could only be fully discussed with their bromantic friends. When asked how one defines the difference between a friend and a bromantic friend, Regi summarized: “It’s in the ability to completely confide.”

Beck believed that this heightened capacity for disclosure was because “A bromance will never judge you... you’re just so relaxed around each other.” Jay felt more free to act, suggesting that he does not need to “keep up a figure of masculinity; a bromance isn’t going to care.” Dan said: “I hold nothing back in my bromance.” Finally, speaking about emotionality and what emotions were not permissible to share, Regi said: “In my bromance nothing is off limits.”

The emotional intimacy expressed by these young men represents a core foundation of what it means to have a bromance. When these men feel so relaxed with each other and free to divulge all, they are invoking a profound trust and dependence in their bromantic relationships. Whereas this openness emanated as the primary underpinning characteristic of a bromance, there were other, more physical behaviors that were typical too.

**Physical intimacy.** While being emotionally intimate, these men also valued physical intimacy as an integral benefit of having a bromance. Although this was viewed as nonessential to the creation or maintenance of a bromance, physical intimacy was routine and enjoyed by these men. They spoke about their desire to cuddle and hug with their bromantic friends. Some agreed that this was the case when asked, whereas others offered it unsolicited as part of their definition of a bromance. For example, Robbie said: “You can lie in bed with your bromance, have a cuddle and just talk.” Patrick said: “Part of my understanding of it [a bromance] is having a cuddle buddy.” Martin also thought physical embracement was a core part of a bromantic friendship. “It’s cuddling, hugging, sex jokes...you have the emotions, feelings and the hugging [again].” This research, therefore, confirms Anderson and McCormack’s (2014) earlier findings of men (at a different British University) where they found 37 of 40 undergraduate heterosexual male sportsmen had cuddled in bed with their male friends. In the

present research, cuddling occurred with 29 of the 30 men. For Lee, who had not cuddled with his bromantic friend, he said: “It’s not that I wouldn’t; I just don’t feel the need to.”

Also consistent with other research on British undergraduate men at other universities, where 89% of 145 undergraduate heterosexual men had kissed on the lips (Anderson, Adams, and Rivers 2012), men in our study readily talked about kissing their bromantic friends. Tony said: “I kiss him all the time.” Derek said: “You see guys kissing and cuddling loads. It’s never an issue to anyone.” Beck agreed: “Guys nowadays, in my generation, there is so much kissing between guys because it’s showing affection.” Max said that with his bromantic friend, “I hug him and kiss him and tell him I love him.”

Participants also discussed being comfortable when they are physically naked around their bromantic friends. They indicated that it is not common to appear nude in front of other men, that they do not regularly shower in the presence of other men, and that nudity is generally considered a private issue. However, men in bromances appear naked more easily around one another. Jack said:

I live in a house with three other guys, and there are massive bromances going on between us. We walk around naked. I got no problems standing naked in a room with my housemates. We feel comfortable being naked around each other. (Jack)

Liam, who has bromantic friendships with several of his housemates, said: “I can come out of the shower naked and nobody bats an eyelash.” These men did not describe casual nudity among peers as a finite requirement for having a successful bromance, but they did identify it as a useful bonding mechanism. However, there did seem to be an implication that nudity around each other was a step, and perhaps served as a form of symbolic proof, of heterosexuality, social comfort, and bromantic interest.

Explicating this finding, George suggested that casual nudity in bromantic friendships also “...frees up the opportunity for shared sexual experiences.” When talking about his experience of a male-male-female threesome, he said: “We’re best mates, so we’ve seen each other naked before, so that wasn’t much of a bother. You’re both not shy about it at all, and it’s a good way to bond with him in that sort of way.” For Jack, this occurred in reverse; he had a foursome with another male and two women (Scoats et al. 2017). “We weren’t good friends, but now [after the foursome], we are good friends and play for the same football team. I guess he is a bromance to me.” This is again resonant of the requisite for shared interests and experiences in a bromance—whether it is liking the same football team or sharing sexual partners. This is consistent with research on male-male-female sexual threesomes which finds that heterosexual men are more likely to engage in such with a bromantic friend (Scoats et al. 2017). Like others who had a threesome with their bromantic friend, or say that if the opportunity arose they would, Jim explained how it can occur without it homosexualizing its participants:

A bro is someone that you genuinely don’t have any boundaries with. So when you are having a threesome with your bro and a girl, it’s something that you high five each other about, and not something that you’d feel awkward about, even if one of you did come out as gay, it’s no different. (Jim)

The participants made clear that the affection they feel for one another was not restricted to the private realm. When discussing whether a bromance is something that is broadcast to others, all participants agreed that a bromance did not need to be silenced. On the contrary, the men we interviewed suggested that there is *no* desire to shield their bromantic love or how they feel for each other. The physically intimate activities in which they engage were socially permissible in the public realm. Evidencing this, Alan said: “There’s a great photo of me and

[bro] on Facebook cuddling,” and Reese said: “We hug when we meet, and we sleep in the same bed when we have sleepovers. Everyone knows it, and nobody is bothered by it because they do it as well.”

Gavin spoke about public displays of affection between bromantic friends as a source of publicly declaring one’s homosociality: “If you need a hug he will be there for you. It doesn’t matter if it’s in public ’cause no one will judge; it just shows you care.” Chris, like many heterosexual men in other studies (Anderson 2014; Morris and Anderson 2015), also expressed his love for his bromantic friend through multiple modalities, including Facebook and other forms of social media. Ben spoke about when he goes clubbing with his friends, he, even if inadvertently, makes his bromance publicly visible: “We will drink quite a bit and sometimes kiss when we’re out; no one thinks much of it.” Like Ben, many of the men in our study engaged in public kissing behaviors and were unmindful of what others thought, largely because they say others do not judge it. In other research, Peterson and Anderson (2012) highlight that the university dancefloor has become a popular space for homosocial touch and kissing, and Scoats (2015) shows that pictures of such intimate acts are generously available on students’ Facebook accounts, without shame or regulation.

### **Discussion**

With the present research, we addressed the lack of definitional literature on bromances and the implications of having such relationships. There is little research that explores the bromance’s conceptual underpinnings and its position is a legitimate relationship within the literature (Thompson 2015). Our results show that bromances have achieved a deep resonance in UK university culture and that men interpret these relationships as real and important, and not as a fantasy or as comedic like depicted in popular television programs and films (Boyle and

Berridge 2012. We found no variance in how they defined or experienced a bromance based upon their self-definition as either exclusively heterosexual or mostly heterosexual.

The most salient feature these 30 men described about a bromance—even if overly idealized—was that they were free of judgment, which permits them to push the cultural margins of traditional masculinity toward more intimate and expressive behaviors than previously occurred between male friends (Lewis 1978; Williams 1985). In fact, it was the degree of emotional disclosure that differentiates a friendship from a bromance. Emotional intimacy was articulated to be of great importance in bromances, and the unburdened disclosure possible in these relationships enabled men to profess love for one another.

This intimacy was not limited to the emotional realm, however. The use of cuddling was recognized by many to be a benefit of having a bromance, and it was a physically demonstrative way of showing affection for each other. This was supplemented by other experiences of kissing, casual nudity, and shared sexual encounters, such as threesomes, which have been suggested elsewhere to improve bonding in male-male friendships (Flood 2008; Scoats et al. 2017). Same-sex sexuality outside the presence of women, however, does not seem to be a normal component of the bromance. These men have thus enjoyed homosocial physical affection, disassociating the intimacies of same-sex touch from homosexuality. We found that this distinction had freed up the opportunity for both emotional and physical intimacies to be shown in public spaces between bromantic friends, and this freedom highlights the significant value that these relationships hold in their social world.

The lack of physical and emotional boundaries in these friendships represents a significant sequential shift in permissible masculine identity. Ward (2015) draws upon Anderson's body of research (cf. Anderson 2014) to suggest that straight, White men are even

able to have sex with one another without jeopardising their heterosexual identity. This is not to say that men no longer police their gendered behaviors, but rather that they are permitted more flexibility to socialize and relate in a way that would have been formerly branded as feminine, and as gay, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Limitations**

As part of the coding process, it became clear that the participants in our study were not asked to what degree their bromantic relationships were formally constituted or simply assumed. When we consider the way in which romantic relationships are constituted, there is usually an explicit commitment and labelling of being in a formal relationship. We recognize that our presentation structure lends itself to suggest that the bromance is a developmental process, but in this instance, more qualitative work would be welcomed around the establishment of bromances, in terms of their official or assumed constitution.

Our conclusion concerning the definition and significance of the bromance are limited to our sample; we do not claim that our results are generalizable to those who are not of our participants' age, race, and social class. However, the dialogue and narrative of the young men's accounts of same-sex relations are broadly consistent with other research on heterosexual, university-aged British men (aged 18–22 years-old).

We consider the breadth and depth of bromances to be just as complex and vast as romantic relationships. To this end, we were compelled to be very selective and discerning in the themes that are featured in the present paper. Indeed, although there was a wealth of data brought forward here, we felt it necessary to unpack the foundational elements of the relationship rather than complicate and confuse the research with multiple avenues of sub-interests. Accordingly,



we consider our study to be a high-level investigation into these young men's definitions and experiences of the bromance, not a systematic account of all elements of the relationship.

### **Future Research Directions**

Many of our participants had multiple bromances, bringing with it questions around the number of bromances one is permitted to have and expected to be able to maintain. Indeed, research in this area would benefit from considering the polyamorous nature of bromances, their alignment and cohesion with romances, and issues of jealousy and emotional monogamy. Although these bromances permit more inclusive, liberal, and tactile behaviors between men, as well as represent improved liberality in contemporary masculinity, they may not altogether benefit cross-sex relations.

Also, throughout our results, there was no indication that these men's increased appreciation for femininity and expressiveness strengthened their relationships with women. On the contrary, the ability to emote, confide and cuddle with male friends may in fact reduce men's appetite for interaction with women and intensify the exclusivity of male friendships. More research into how bromances affect heterosexual men's understandings of and views of women, as well as their romantic relationships, is needed. Although the men in our study made some interesting suggestions about how bromance and romances conflict, reflect, and impact one another, this area was not fully addressed in our paper. For example, given that the young men in our study can have heterosexual sex and emotional support without romantic commitment (Anderson 2014; Bogle 2008), further research is required to assess whether this has reduced their desire to find early romantic attachment.

This point raises further implications around the potential for men to privilege their same-sex friendships over their cross-sex friendships and romances. Mehta and Strough (2009) suggest

that the reinforcement and strengthening of homosocial bonds may contribute to the devaluing and discouraging of cross-sex socialization, although, this is not necessarily a problem given the importance of same-sex friendships for socio-emotional development. However, because data increasingly show a delayed onset into family life for Anglo-American men (Arnett 2004), it is worthwhile considering that bromantic co-habitations may already be happening in larger numbers than expected, although more research is needed.

### **Practice Implications**

The overarching implication of our research, beyond defining and situating the bromance in the context of contemporary masculinity, hinges on the impact that these bromances may be having on men's emotional well-being. We are encouraged to see that these men are engaging on a deep emotional level with their bromances to better theirs, and their significant others', emotional well-being. We recognize that sharing emotional and physical closeness with others serves an important purpose in maintaining one's mental well-being (Hruschka 2010; Scourfield 2005). Mental health practitioners should recognize bromances as legitimate influential relationships in the everyday lives of young men. For instance, these men often suggested that they could only fully discuss concerns over their health and sexual lives with their bromances, not with their families or romantic partners. Practitioners should recognize the implicit benefit of these relationships, having almost unbound limits in what can be disclosed. For those who are dealing with depressive symptoms or social anxieties, bromances may offer a way forward and a coping strategy.

### **Cultural Implications**

The present research shows that these heterosexual undergraduate men, enrolled in one of four undergraduate sport-degree programs at one university in the United Kingdom, developed

attachment bonds premised on self-disclosure and intimacy with other men. This likely occurs for two reasons. First, intimate bonding helps men achieve independence from their parents because they may receive advice and companionship elsewhere (Collins and Repinski 1994; Collins and Sroufe 1999). Second, adolescent masculinity has undergone substantial change in relation to multiple social structures (Kozloski 2010; Luttrell 2012; McCormack 2012) as the decline of homophobia has eroded some traditional conceptions of orthodox masculinity. This shift has created a space in which young men have re-evaluated and reinvented masculinity and friendships to be more emotionally and physically intimate. Zorn and Gregory (2005, p. 211) conclude that men now swiftly develop close friendships at university, offering them “valuable, tangible and socioemotional support.” Although most of these friendships likely will not be enduring, some will become highly intimate with a small minority of friends providing a safe haven for full emotional disclosure (Kobak et al. 2007).

We found that, in light of the research on homosocial male intimacy in recent decades, the adoption of the bromance (both in term and concept) represents an increased recognition that at least these young men are permitted to have more diverse and homosocial masculine identities. Their behavior shows that, contrasting to research conducted in the 1970s (Olstad 1975), 1980s (Askew and Ross 1988), and 1990s (Kimmel 1994, 2004; Pollack 1999), these young heterosexual men are now able to confide in each other. They are not only permitted, but socially encouraged, to develop and maintain deep emotional friendships based on intimacy and the expression of once-taboo emotional sentimentality. Their behaviors thus achieve the kind of closeness that men have known in other times and other cultures (Sherrod 1987).

We argue that the decrease in cultural homophobia recently documented in studies of males aged 16–24 years-old (Channon and Matthews 2015; McCormack 2012) has enabled our

participants to both emotionally disclose their fears and anxieties, as well as be physically intimate with other men. Moreover, they do so without fear of social judgment or peer-ridicule. The bromance has been deeply situated within homosociality with an emphasis on trust, longevity and mutual love. They are not one-off temporal experiences; rather, they are relationships that are dependent on both men being entirely open and supportive of one another. These relationships embody the kind of emotional support and intimacy that young men need as part of healthy development (Courtenay 2000; Floyd et al. 2005; Way 2011, 2013).

Given the socio-economic differences between the present generation and the last, particularly concerning significantly delayed entry into professional occupations, higher education, fatherhood, and marriage (Arnett 2004; Dermott 2008; Hagestad and Call 2007; Office for National Statistics 2012), the idea that these college men might maintain their bromantic relationships in their current manner well beyond their university years is tenable. However, as a *New York Times* article which recently featured American men doing (Howard 2012), our participants might carry on privileging bromances long into their adult lives.

This could be possible for several reasons. Young men in the United Kingdom today are not afforded the same economic solidarity that their fathers were granted. For example, they are experiencing a housing affordability crisis, whereby the equity of co-habitation with friends has become more appealing (Hilber and Vermeulen 2016). Indeed, the recent passing of same-sex marriage legislation in the United Kingdom would suggest that improved social attitudes exist toward same-sex co-habitation, making the reality of living with friends altogether more normative. Moreover, because young men in the 21st century, unlike in previous generations, can have unsanctioned heterosexual sex without romantic commitment (Bogle 2008), as well as emotional disclosure with male friends (McCormack 2012), they are less pressed to find early

attachment with romantic partners. Certainly, because data consistently show a delayed onset into family life for Anglo-American men (Arnett 2004), it is worthwhile considering that these bromantic co-habitations may already be happening in larger numbers than expected, although more research is needed.

### **Conclusion**

Our study set out to respond to a deficit in the research literature around the prospect of Hollywood-depicted bromances occurring in everyday life (Thompson 2015). In recognizing the lack of definitional literature on bromances, we have unpacked the term and concept by asking if and how college men understand and live out these relationships. They clarify that these relationships are real, highly important to them, and lack any criticism. In exploring how these relationships are constituted, we found that bromances were likely to develop in an environment where interests could be shared, where emotional intimacy flourished, and physical intimacy could be enjoyed. The men we interviewed show consistency in attitudes with other research on young men in esteeming more emotionally charged and physically tactile same-sex friendships compared to recent decades (Magrath et al. 2013; McCormack 2012). Crucially, we recognize a great willingness among these heterosexual-identified men to disassociate with previous modes of masculinity that would have sanctioned such interactions.

The social freedoms the bromance permits are undoubtedly productive towards fostering a more emotive and expressive masculine culture that is more in line with women's modes of interaction. Results support the view that declining homophobia and its internalization has had significant positive implications for men's expressiveness and intimacy. This change has the potential to affect the ways in which data showing threats to well-being are interpreted because scholars regularly blame outdated hegemonic literature for men's refusal to emote. In our study,

however, men were emoting widely and with great trust in their bromances. Therefore, we conclude firstly that the bromance term has been widely invoked within the university community to characterize the new deeply intimate, emotive, and trusting nature of close male friendships in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Secondly, we find that bromances are offering a legitimate and important space for college men to broaden their emotional coping strategies and manage their personal lives.

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Table 1

*Participants' Characteristics*

Pseudonym	Age	Sexual Orientation	Ethnicity
Aaron	19	Heterosexual	White
Alan	21	Mostly Heterosexual	White
Beck	20	Heterosexual	White
Ben	20	Heterosexual	White
Bruce	20	Heterosexual	White
Chris	19	Heterosexual	White
Dan	21	Mostly Heterosexual	White
Derek	19	Heterosexual	White
Gavin	19	Mostly Heterosexual	White
George	19	Heterosexual	White
Hamish	19	Mostly Heterosexual	White
Harvey	20	Heterosexual	White
Henry	19	Heterosexual	White
Ivan	20	Heterosexual	Eastern European
Jay	22	Heterosexual	White
Jack	19	Mostly Heterosexual	White
Jason	20	Mostly Heterosexual	White
Jim	19	Heterosexual	White
Liam	20	Heterosexual	White
Luke	19	Mostly Heterosexual	White
Mark	21	Heterosexual	White
Martin	19	Heterosexual	White
Max	19	Mostly Heterosexual	White
Patrick	19	Heterosexual	White
Reese	21	Heterosexual	White
Regi	19	Mostly Heterosexual	White
Robbie	20	Heterosexual	White
Samuel	20	Mostly Heterosexual	White
Theo	18	Heterosexual	White
Tony	19	Heterosexual	White

**Online supplement** for Robinson, S., Anderson, E., and White, A. (2017). The bromance: Undergraduate male friendships and the expansion of contemporary homosocial boundaries. Sex Roles. Adam White, University of Winchester. Email: Adam.White@winchester.ac.uk

### **Original Bromance Interview Schedule**

Have you heard the term bromance?

Is it a term you use?

Can you tell me what a bromance is? define it for me?

How does your definition compare with how your friends might define it?

How does one know when they have a bromance?

Do you have any bromances?

Tell me how that bromance developed?

Describe for me how you feel about your bromance(s)?

How does a bromance differ from a friend?

Describe some of those differences?

Are there any emotional differences that you have with a bromance compared to a friendship?

Tell me about disclosing deep emotional issues to your girlfriend (if has one) your bromance(s), and your friend(s). What sort of stuff do you disclose to each of these three?

Tell me about kissing your bromance

Tell me about being nude with your bromance

Tell me about threesomes, have or would you do one with your bromance?

Are there limits to what one can do sexually with a bromance?

Are there any emotional differences that you have with a bromance compared to a friendship?

What about things you might do with a bromance compared to a friend?

Can you compare for me, likes and differences, between having a bromance and having a romance (girlfriend)?

If you have a girlfriend, what does she think of your bromance?

### **Modified Bromance Interview Schedule (after 10 interviews)**

Define for me what a bromance is?

Tell me about your best bromance. Start at the beginning, please.

Why is this person so important in your life?

How is a bromance, for you, the same and different than a friendship?

Are there any actions you might take to show your bromance how you feel about him? Things you might do for him?

What about deep emotional issues, what do you discuss with your girlfriend and what do you discuss with your bromance?

What about physical things you might do with a bromance compared to a friend?

Tell me about hugging and cuddling in bed with a bromance

Tell me about kissing your bromance

Tell me about being nude with your bromance

Tell me about threesomes, have or would you do one with your bromance?

Are there limits to what one can sexually do with a bromance?

What about banter? How does that compare between a bromance and a friendship?

What aspects of the bromance can be shown publicly, and what aspects cannot be shown publicly?

Can you have more than one bromance?

Do guys get jealous if their bromance is having another bromance?

How is a bromance, for you, the same and different than a romance with a girlfriend?