Bromance

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Research Question

How does the emergence of the term “bromance” reflect societal expectations of masculinity and male homosocial relationships?

Origins

It was not until late 2008 to early 2009 that the word “bromance” burst into the American consciousness. A combination of “bro” (a commonly used abbreviation of “brother,” used among male friends) and “romance,” the word was suddenly everywhere. Seemingly overnight, magazines, newspapers, and even nightly news programs were filled with articles and stories detailing this latest trend in friendship. It is a simple enough term, merely giving a specific, modern name to a pre-existing concept while simultaneously taking it to the next level. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), a bromance is an “intimate and affectionate friendship between men [or] a relationship between two men which is characterized by this.” The earliest quotation that the OED gives for the term is a more casual definition from the April 2001 edition of a publication called TransWorld Surf and says, “Bromance—Romance between bros. Example: ‘It looks like there’s a bit of bromance between Ryan and Matt.”’ The Times of London claims the word goes back even further to skateboarding magazines in the 1990s, where it was used in a similar manner “to describe the affections of über-buddy boarders” (Maher 2009). Neither of these provide much further insight, but to put it all together very simply, a bromance is an especially close friendship between two men. The top definition on Urban Dictionary would go a step further and say a bromance is between two straight men, but that excludes the many homosexual or bisexual men who have been part of self-described bromances.

1 The UrbanDictionary.com top-voted definition for “bromance,” originally posted in 2005, is as follows: “Describes the complicated love and affection shared by two straight males.”
Media

The main impetus behind bromance’s rise to fame was a slew of movies released in 2008 and 2009 with an emphasis on male homosocial friendship, similar to the buddy-cop genre. The film I Love You, Man, starring Paul Rudd and Jason Segal as bromance partners, in particular caused the term to skyrocket in popularity. The Times provides a brief summary of what makes their characters’ relationship so special: “The men go to the beach, the bar, and the park together. They talk for hours on the phone. They have self-described ‘man dates,’ and discuss fine food and weepy movies. Though both officially heterosexual, they are also, it seems, somehow in love.” Essentially, the two are best friends and are unafraid to proclaim their platonic love for each other.
It proved to be an appealing concept to men, because around the time of the movie’s release in early 2009, worldwide Google searches for the term “bromance” suddenly spiked to their second highest point of all time.2

Of course, I Love You, Man was just one bromance films out of many that were released during that time period. Once producers realized how much money there was to be made in buddy flicks, the theaters were soon full of them (Callaghan 2010). The television channel MTV even aired a reality show called *Bromance* in which men competed to become best friends with TV personality Brody Jenner (Ogunnaike 2009). The bromantic attitude experienced a fast diffusion from screen to reality and men all across the nation were soon literally and figuratively embracing their closest male friends.

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2 As seen in the Google Trends graph on this page, displaying relative search volumes and interest over time for the query “bromance.”
Context

In the United States, bromance was frequently advertised as the male equivalent to female best-friend relationships (Hubbard 2008). Previously, men who were perceived as being too close were sometimes ridiculed by bigots and accused of being homosexual. Men were encouraged to keep their emotions repressed and confessing even a platonic love to another man was taboo. The macho attitude was prevalent, and while men could be friends, it was considered unusual if two men were as close as two women were. However, the bromance movement made these intimate, male homosocial relationships acceptable. Hugging, sharing of deep emotions, and spending extensive amounts of time together were no longer seen as strictly feminine activities. Two “bros” could have dinner together, go shopping, see a movie—anything. As long as it was under the title “bromance,” all would be well. Deep connections were encouraged, being half of a bromance was considered “cool,” and the situation allowed men to behave in what would usually be perceived as a “gay” manner. Not just in regards to closeness and hugging, but many bromance partners joked about marriage or being together for the rest of their lives. In a classic example, Matt Damon and Ben Affleck have publicly called themselves “hetero lifemates.”3 When men in the media were open about their self-proclaimed bromances, it showed that not only was it acceptable to be that intimate with another man, but that you could still be manly and heterosexual while doing so—something that was of great importance to the more insecure of bromance partners.

Reaction

This is where the dark side of bromance begins to emerge. While men were encouraged to be more open and caring towards their “bros,” there tended to be an air of (to borrow a very “bro” colloquial phrase) “no homo” that pervaded all their interactions and the relationship in general. This was, of course, highly offensive to the LGBT community as it suggested that there was something wrong with homosexuality and that male-male intimacy was only okay if it was completely heterosexual and if that heterosexuality was regularly reinforced with the use of words like “bro.” The fact that these bromantic relationships were being lauded by the media and adopted by men all over the country was highly frustrating to some (Callaghan 2010). To experience such progress in the acceptance of homosocial relations and yet maintain such a backwards perception of homosexual relations, from which bromance participators were perhaps ironically drawing much of their inspiration, was insulting. Although some men treated their bromance with less of a “don’t worry, it’s not gay” attitude and more of a “so what if we are?” attitude, it was not as common as its homophobic counterpart.

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3 As seen in Matt Donnelly’s 2011 Los Angeles Times article, "Matt Damon: Ben Affleck Is His ‘Hetero Lifemate.’"
Today

As seen on the previous Google Trends graph, interest in the word “bromance” has more or less leveled out. After years of constant use, the term has fallen out of vogue, and articles discussing the latest bromances are harder to come by. Such stories and articles do still exist, but the word does not carry the buzz it used to and is most often used by misguided older writers trying to connect with today’s youth. One of the highest profile recent cases of a media-declared “bromance” comes from around the time of the 2012 American elections (and again earlier in 2013) when news outlets began reporting on President Barack Obama’s supposed bromance with Governor Chris Christie of New Jersey (Epstein 2012). Clearly, it is not quite the hip, young term it used to be when reporters are applying it to middle-aged politicians of opposing political parties.

Conclusion

I began this project by asking what the usage of “bromance” has to do with masculine ideals and male-male platonic relations. According to my research, the emergence of the word “bromance” prompted a wave of men to become closer than ever before to their “bros.” While previously it was frowned upon and unusual for two men to be too personal and open with each other due to such behaviors being perceived as effeminate and thus supposedly inappropriate in our society, this new fad allowed them to be openly affectionate with their friends. It represented an interesting shift in societal expectations of masculinity. The spread of “bromance” broke down some of the more rigid masculine ideals but it also brought with it further homophobia and merely
exacerbated intolerance for homosexual relationships as bromance participators repeatedly emphasized that what they were doing was not gay. The fact that this was how bromances were sometimes interpreted—that the actions were “gayer” and not simply those of good friends—is troublesome. While it is lamentable that there had to be a special word to allow for the full acceptance of deeper male friendships and that it was something that could not develop on its own under the classic label of “best friends,” it is even more lamentable that it was accompanied by cries of “don’t worry, it’s not gay,” because apparently that is where the line has to be drawn. Bromances are acceptable, but they will never let you forget that that is all it is, and that anything more would be crossing the line. “I love you, man. But no homo.”

References


