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# AMERICAN MASCULINITY AND HOMOSOCIAL BEHAVIOR IN THE BROMANCE ERA

by

DIANA SARGENT

Under the Direction of Patricia Davis

## ABSTRACT

This study examines and reflects upon the current “bromance” culture that has emerged in American society and aims to conceptualize how media texts relate to masculine hegemony. Attention to current media portrayals, codes of conduct, rituals, homosocial interaction, and constructions of masculinity in American culture is essential for the evaluation of the current era of American masculinity. Mediated portrayals present an ironic position on male closeness, dictate how men should behave towards women and other men, and create real life situations in which these mediated expectations are fostered and put into practice. Textual analyses of the films *Superbad* and *I Love You, Man* and the television series *How I Met Your Mother* were conducted, as well as an ethnographic study of cult film audiences of *The Room* to better understand manifestations of homosocial environments in mediated texts and in real life settings.

INDEX WORDS: Masculinity, Bromance, American Media Portrayals, Rituals, Homosocial, Gender, Cult film, Comedy

AMERICAN MASCULINITY AND HOMOSOCIAL BEHAVIOR IN THE BROMANCE ERA

by

DIANA SARGENT

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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2013

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The way in which we understand gender actually changes the way we live gender. As we interpret ourselves differently, we also live ourselves differently. -Judith Butler

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The forces at play in the current era of mediated masculinity involve depictions of male friendships and bonding in popular texts, the codes and rituals of manhood portrayed in popular texts, and the enactment of these codes and rituals among males in real life. These three factors contribute to the tone of masculine hegemony, both producing new expectations and reinforcing existing norms. Homosociality plays a distinct role in all three instances, first presenting an ironic position on male closeness, second dictating how men should behave towards women and other men, and third creating real life situations in which these mediated expectations, codes, and perpetuations are fostered and put into practice. Each of these scenarios shares a basis in comedic portrayals and environments and all contain elements of male bonding or homosociality, most explicitly as representations of masculine hegemony within popular culture.

Popular media and popular culture at large are simultaneously influential of and influenced by social norms and practice, and both serve as touchstones for current hegemonic values in American culture. Hegemony may both be originated in popular culture, or may be reflected in it. Reflection and reinforcement of gender roles and ideals, masculinity in particular, can be traced through representations in popular film and television, media in which American masculinity is constantly constructed and reproduced. With particular focus on the aftermath of the feminist movement, American masculinity at large experienced a veritable crisis of identity as a result of challenges to normative heterosexual assumptions and an unprecedented disruption of patriarchal structure within American culture. With such a widespread sociocultural phenomenon, it is difficult to ignore such an upheaval within a popular culture context. As a result, fictional media texts contain various attempts to reconstruct a sense of masculine identity that rein-

states male power, or in some cases establishes new types of manhood as models for the masculine ideal.

One such new construction of masculinity is evident in the “bromance” comedy films that emerged early in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It is important to begin the study of the bromance and this era of masculinity starting after the historical shifts in gendered culture (i.e. after the feminist movements) because this is where the major crisis in masculinity began, and the bromance is the latest reflection of American masculinity in crisis. Films and other media have negotiated new-found gender roles and power structures in a variety of ways, and each new representation of masculinity contains nuances and differentiations as hegemonic masculine values shift over time.

In addition to reflecting shifts and transitions in masculinity over time, media possess the power to transgress norms, though this power becomes less viable in popularly marketed film and television. Because a mass marketed film or television show will ideally appeal to the largest audience, it seems impractical to incorporate potentially disruptive themes that may not be acceptable in the overarching hegemonic environment. In this way, the comic format serves as a buffer, both allowing for breached boundaries and easing any controversy that may manifest by veiling it as humorous. Comedy becomes an important site for research of bromance because of the genre’s inherent irony and the potential of humor to transgress societal norms.

A blend of the words bro/brother and romance, bromance is defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as “a close non-sexual friendship between men,” and also has reported origins in the skater-culture of the 1990s, used by writer David Carnie of the skater magazine *Big Brother* to describe the relationship of skater-buddies who spent a lot of time together (Elliott, 2007). Though the precise date of origin is debated, the popularity of this term seems to have risen around 2004. There is very little current research that focuses on the development of this new

type of masculinity under the bromance moniker, though much previous research focuses on the dynamic of male duos on screen, including analysis of the buddy film genre and its relationship with hegemonic masculinity. For this project, I conducted a case study focusing on the films *Superbad* (Mottola, 2007) and *I Love You, Man* (Hamburg, 2009) as film portrayals highly indicative and typical of the bromance genre. With traditionally rigid gender boundaries still present in American culture, the notion that a seemingly normative text could contain notions of a more fluid gender identity is extremely significant. Overall, the influence of popular texts plays a paramount role: The selected films may reflect current constructions of masculinity in culture while still possessing the ability to transgress gender roles in their masculine portrayals. Further, I conducted an additional textual analysis of the television series *How I Met Your Mother* (2005-present) and the emergence of the “Bro Code” (a set of rules that more or less dictates normative male behavior) in order to situate male relationships in a rule-oriented context and to uncover a male identity that is based in terms of appropriate codes and conducts of masculinity. Last, I examined such codes and rituals put into practice in an ethnographic account of the homosocial atmosphere cultivated in cult film audiences with an observational study of audiences of the cult film *The Room* (Wiseau, 2003).

The primary focus of the bromance films is the development and maintenance of the relationships between the male protagonists; a large portion of *How I Met Your Mother* explores the limits of appropriate and acceptable male behavior, and Barney Stinson’s character revolves around treatment (or mistreatment) of females due to the establishment of these rules; audiences of *The Room* enter into a male dominated environment in which established practices are inherently catered toward men and at times may be interpreted as misogynistic. Each fosters an environment (whether fictional or real) in which male behavior may transgress or oppose certain so-

cietal norms. In a way, this makes them controversial and able to create new norms to contradict prescribed hegemony.

In order to better understand the rise of the bromance genre, codes of conduct, and relation to hegemonic masculinity, the subsequent proposal and review of the literature will focus on the crisis of American masculinity, social constructions of masculinity in film and culture, the homosocial as it relates to male bonding, and the perpetuation of male-centered bonding in cult film audiences. I will also provide a review of literature of Queer Theory as the theoretical basis of my analysis and interpretation, as well as a discussion of theories of humor as they relate to comedic film and gender portrayals.

## **1.1 Literature Review**

### *Masculinity in Crisis*

Historically, American culture has dictated relatively strict ideals of acceptable gendered behavior and defines what the acceptable gendered roles are within the social structure. As a result of feminist challenges to traditional patriarchal structure, it appears that American culture at large has struggled to provide an infallible ideal of what it means to be a man, particularly a middle-class, white, heterosexual man, in the past several decades. Strict dichotomies of male/female are perhaps too binding in the aftermath of the feminist movement in which previously established gendered roles and functions experienced a total upheaval. Resulting was a veritable crisis of masculinity, a notion encompassing the belief that traditionally valued roles of masculinity are no longer valid, leading men to feel an uncertainty about their individual manhood and their worth in the social sphere.

The initial crisis of American masculinity was arguably the result of the rise of feminist and gay/lesbian movements, as well as the civil rights movement, that challenged heterosexual

assumptions about traditional gender roles and social arrangements (Kimmel & Kaufman, 1994, p. 262). Patriarchal power and strict gender norms were called into question and overturned, especially constructions of white heterosexual masculinity as the standard of manhood. The feminist movement, alongside the civil rights movement, posed threats to heterosexual assumptions and disruptions to the established social structure primarily as oppositions to white masculinity through reclaiming power for both females and minorities. Thus, the claiming of social and cultural influence by females and African-Americans contributed to the perception that power was being taken away from those in more dominant social positions, namely white, middle-class men. Women became less economically dependent on their male counterparts, and civil rights and feminist groups demanded social and cultural voices equal to white men, diminishing the distance between the dominant white male and the previously subordinate “other(s).”

These threats to normativity and a masculinity that had previously been unquestioned led to a fragmentation of masculinity in which a model for manhood was shattered, and also acted as a catalyst for a backlash from men. The first “men’s movement” is a response to the fragmentation of masculinity felt as a result of the feminist/gay/civil rights movements, and is primarily centered around middle-class, middle-aged, white, heterosexual men. This backlash from men occurred (or perhaps still is occurring) as a response to challenges of the previously unquestioned patriarchal social structure and an insurgence against feminist ideology. The problem for men lies in the “slow deterioration of patriarchy and patriarchal privilege” in which men experience powerlessness, confusion, and alienation (Kahn, 2009, p. 235). A transcendent and unequivocal masculine identity had been rendered obsolete; therefore men as individuals lost a basis for identity on a smaller scale as they negotiated between relinquishing some social power to other groups and maintaining their own positions as the dominant group. As Kimmel and Kaufman

assert, this men's movement expresses "a cry for certainty about the meaning of manhood in a society where both men's power and rigid gender definitions are being challenged by feminism" (p. 263). As a result, white, heterosexual masculinity has attempted and is still attempting to reconstruct itself in terms of its opposition: femininity, black masculinity, and homosexuality (Willis, 1997).

One way in which these reconstructions manifest themselves is through representations in popular film, television, and other mediated texts. Each depiction, each trope, each stereotype of manhood in these texts may point to an attempt to reinstate a definition of manhood for the masses. Whether the characterizations are hypermasculinized to compensate for lost masculinity or stripped of the "alpha-male" typification altogether to directly address masculine anxieties and vulnerabilities, the films, television series, and behaviors they imitate and inspire convey a reaction to a fractured manhood and/or an attempt at restoration (futile or not) of previously established male dominance. Interestingly, there are complications to the notion that white manhood attempts to construct itself in terms of the "other," that is, in opposition to stereotypes of feminine or black culture, especially as depicted in recent television and film. Instead it seems that current constructions may branch in either extreme direction, male characters that are hyper-masculine or hyper-feminine, or that middle-class white males are adopting popular elements of black culture such as hip-hop, constantly negotiating between whether to reassert their own social and cultural norms or to adapt to the norms of their opposing groups.

### *Social Constructions of Masculinity*

Reassertions of power and efforts to reclaim identity in fictional representations lead to discussion of the performative nature of gender. Many scholars argue that masculinity itself is a performance, a social construction, a symbolic gesture to society (Alexander, 2006; Butler, 1990;

Conway-Long, 1994). Therefore, a notion of dominant masculinity is only defined as such within the social structure and dependent upon specific cultures. One thing to note is the interpretation of behavioral acts is fully dependent on time and place and in defining conceptions, shaping understandings, and constructing (and reconstructing) meanings and representations of gender within any social structure. Judith Butler (1990) notes in *Gender Trouble* that “gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (p. 140). Under these assumptions, masculinity and accompanying identities have never been stable or consistent. The notion that there are essential qualities of manhood is merely an illusion perpetuated in the social sphere. As Boudreau (2011) points out, “if masculinity is a display...it is also vulnerable to being revealed as false; if it can be worn, it can also be stripped away, demonstrating the tenuousness of masculinity” (p. 38), which may add to the crisis of masculinity, or at least help explain the cause of the crisis. A construction of manhood that appears so irrefutable and permanent may also be exposed as artificial and manufactured, vulnerable to criticism and collapse. An effect of this is that categories of men and masculinity are constantly produced and reproduced (Hearn & Collinson, 1994) within American society, and both culturally and socially constructed (Kimmel & Kaufman, 1994). Portrayals of masculinity in the bromance genre serve as the newest construction of manhood in popular culture that react to previous and current attacks on masculinity.

Nonetheless, there is perhaps a more optimistic approach to analyzing the fragmentation and social construction of male identity. Kimmel (2007) argues that socially constructed manhood provides an opportunity for agency, despite a constantly changing masculine hegemony. This agency for expression, this acknowledgement of a never ending evolution of masculine identity, delivers an occasion to move away from restrictive stereotypes and essentialisms.

Bromance itself is a construction, a new category of masculinity that may perhaps allow for freer expression in male/male relationships, particularly evident in friendships between heterosexual men, at least on screen. Further, each rule and code of masculinity is a social construction of how men should behave, not innate and certainly not binding.

### *Masculinity in Film*

The preponderance of a male pair in film is nothing new; much research has been conducted regarding depictions of manhood in popular culture, specifically the buddy films of the late 1980s and the 1990s. The *Lethal Weapon* or *Rush Hour* movies, for example, prioritize a hypermasculine vision of manhood centered on action and violence, while simultaneously housing comedic elements. To contribute to further discussion of manhood in popular culture, I define three eras of post-feminist comedy films in which a male duo drives the action: the buddy film, the prototypical bromance, and the bromance. Within each era, I identify distinct ways in which males are typified and distinct from constructions of masculinity in other eras.

Prior to the era of post-feminism and the modern buddy film, Hollywood's depiction of male duos was not entirely dissimilar. There was still an apparent desire to watch male duos on-screen before the crisis of American masculinity occurred, most notably in the form of male comedy teams. Laurel and Hardy beginning in the silent era, Martin and Lewis in the 1950s, Abbott and Costello in the 1940s and 50s, and the Hope and Crosby "Road" films spanning from 1940 to 1962 are just a few prominent examples of popular male/male acts in American culture. Interestingly, in each of these duos, one man was usually more feminized than the other, and the male relationship was privileged over relationships with females who were often only in the periphery, trends that continue into the modern era of male comedy duos. In the 1980s and into the 1990s, the buddy film emerged as one trope and narrative device contributing to the depiction of



male friendship. In these films, there is a distinct homoerotic tension that allows for a freer and perhaps more queer expression of masculinity, though these themes are little more than latent (Greven, 2009; Wyatt, 2001). Leslie Fiedler's contribution to literature on homosociality in his essay "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!" (first published in 1948) points to the expression of homoerotic bonds between male characters and repressed desires between them as a recurrent theme in American literature, exemplifying that a latent tension between men (or male characters in film, literature, and other popular texts) is also an ongoing theme in American History. During the era of the buddy film, the alpha-male stereotype emerged as the idealized and sought after version of American masculinity. Take, for example, the films in the *Lethal Weapon* franchise. The characterization of the two male protagonists is hypermasculinized and couched in action and violence. Any interaction between the male partners that is potentially affectionate or indicative of a non-alpha male role is homoerotic and latent at best, not addressed directly as a point of concern. Instead, these moments are fleeting and dismissed through elements of comedy.

In the next era of male friendship films, into the late 1990s and early 2000s, there arises a new type of buddy film, one that begins to explore the proliferation of what David Greven (2002) calls the "beta-male," and a shift from highly action-oriented buddy films to comedic and self-conscious portrayals of male friendships. Starting in the 1990s and continuing today, there developed an "ironic knowledge" of manhood, a self-awareness of masculinity, a "meta-manhood" (Greven, 2009, p. 16) that is perfectly suited to the comic genre. Most recently, David Greven (2002) draws explicit attention to the changing roles of masculinity in contemporary teen comedies such as *American Pie* (1999) and *Dude, Where's My Car?* (2000) in which we see emergent and shifting notions of gender and sexuality and the evolution of the beta-male. A tran-

sition of buddy portrayals from action to comedy in this era provided more room for male imperfection and depiction of “real” men who are less sure of themselves, which is precisely what exemplifies the beta-male prototype. While the aforementioned films were made in a “pre-bromance” era, the more self-aware bromance films appeared only a few years later. These new male representations depict masculinity as unsure with a severe lack of confidence, especially concerning women, with a desperate need to compensate for what they are lacking in supposed “normal” and desirable masculinity. These are what I regard as “prototypical bromances,” still negotiating masculine identity with a need to assert male dominance through homosocial bonding and sexual prowess over women, but with a clear departure from the tough guy version of masculinity.

This beta-male trope continues into the current era of male friendships in film, but with yet another distinction. With this era comes an ironic knowledge of the more intimate interactions between men, a self-awareness and self-consciousness of the restrictions on male friendships and the need for men, too, to be able to express affection toward each other. Bromances completely move away from an alpha-male mentality, wholly adopting the perspective of the beta. The most important distinction here is that the films themselves are nods to the broader cultural development of bromances, with the title *I Love You, Man* itself serving as a prime example of the self-conscious display this new era of male friendships. Furthermore, these films share an element of homosocial bonding that runs through each era, important not only to the discussion of bromance in film, but also to the proliferation of bro culture in general.

### *Homosocial Theory*

The term “homosocial” is used to describe relationships between people of the same sex and is explicitly dichotomized with the “homosexual” in description of male friendships (Sedg-

wick, 1985). Significantly, the more closely men associate, the more they are apt to express a hatred and fear of homosexuality; male homosociality seems to require extreme homophobia (Sedgwick, 1985). Though not necessarily overtly homophobic, buddy films and even bromances are only able to portray close male friendships representative of a larger masculinity by constantly denying elements of homosexuality that may emerge in the films and similar television portrayals. This is accomplished through dismissal of intimate moments through comedy or action, or perhaps by incorporating homophobic dialogue. Wyatt's (2001) research on the homosocial points to a distinct need for "boundaries drawn between the homosocial and the homosexual" (p. 51) in descriptions of male relationships in order to clearly demarcate what is normative and what is not. Homosociality is contradictorily located on two extremes of the spectrum, with the allowance of either explicit homosexual desire on one end or homophobia on the other, and the spaces in which this occurs are inherently segregated boys clubs (Creekmur & Doty, 1995).

Further, it is important to emphasize that these same sex social interactions are not of a sexual nature, but that these intense male bonds are often appropriated in sexual expression toward females and often act as defenses to the alternative homosexuality. However, such turns to the homosocial do not remain unchecked as the film and television portrayals privilege the realization of male heterosexuality over any homosocial ties (Greven, 2002). In this sense, masculine homosocial relationships seem to foster an environment in which vulgarity thrives. For example, the characterization of the male best friends in *Superbad* leaves the pair isolated within their own male sphere, spending most of their time with only each other. In order to compensate for the large portion of time they spend with another male (in other words, to deflect any assumption of homosexuality between the two), the boys must enact an explicit display of desire for females,

either through vulgar and sexualized dialogue referring to females or through completion of sexual acts with females. Still, in earlier, prototypical versions of the bromance film such as *Dude, Where's My Car?* or any of the *American Pie* films, the movies suggest that bonds between men are the most important and that females are mere threats to their homosocial world and a colossal source of fear and anxiety (Greven, 2002). While fear of the uncertainty of the female realm does exist, these fears must be squelched through either verbal exploitation or sexual prowess to maintain an overarching sense of male dominance and assert male power.

### *Cult Film and the Homosocial*

Historically, a homosocial environment is also fostered within the realm of cult film audiences, and the same could be said for audiences of *The Room*. The viewing space creates an environment in which any semblance of political correctness goes out the window, especially in terms of gendered stereotypes and degradation. Jancovich (2002) notes the significance of cult film's existence in direct opposition to the mainstream, and research by Church (2011) indicates that cult film viewers are usually devoted audiences who attend repeated screenings and engage in routines and rituals that align them with the other members of the privileged club and allow them to gain subcultural capital. Such rituals, including those practiced by *The Room* audiences, require group participation in rituals that objectify women's bodies on screen, contribute to the "othering" of women both on screen and in the audience, and reassert masculine dominance in order to become (or remain) part of the in-group. Further, the need to conform to such rituals and practices may encourage behavior that otherwise may be deemed inappropriate (McCulloch, 2011). Hollows' (2003) research on cult film emphasizes that the masculine construction of rituals developed by cult film audiences works to exclude women and distances the viewers from the feminine, and also highlights the development of a misogynist viewing environment through cul-

tivation of the homosocial. Radical cult subculture is situated as transgressive and subversive compared to the mainstream and thus more traditional culture, which Hollows equates with femininity. Due to this position, I find it interesting that a genre and viewing audience with such potential to transgress seems to regress into outdated and inappropriate treatment of women, if only in this specific viewing environment. Moreover, these movies are not inherently masculine, but many of the fan practices and rituals seem to privilege “masculine competencies and dispositions” (Hollows, 2003, p. 38). Seemingly, the transgressive nature of cult film reaffirms preexisting cultural norms and hierarchies and reproduces existing masculine dominated power structures rather than challenge them, despite any inherent radicalism within the subculture (Hollows, 2003; Feasey, 2003).

### *Queer Theory*

The portrayals of homosocial bonding in the bromance texts, whether intended or not, provide opportunity for alternate interpretation of films presumably meant to appeal to a “straight” male audience. To “queer” something (in this case, a film text) is to apply an interpretation that reflects oppositions to the norm, and queer readings may be applied to situations or text that may be viewed as normative. A queer text is situated in opposition to “normality” or what is considered to be “straight” in the hegemonic sense, and implementation of queer readings allows for a challenge to basic tropes that organize society and rejects rigid male/female binaries (Dilley, 2010). All of this leads to an examination of the non-heterosexual, a juxtaposition of the non-heterosexual with what is considered normal, and an examination of why these things are considered to be outside the norm.

Queer theorists note that recent shifts in gender representations in popular culture allow for freer expressions of gender and sexuality and call for more fluid categorizations of sexual

identity (Doty, 1995; Wyatt, 2001). In this way, bromances may provide an example of a more fluid masculinity through their intentional and genuine depictions of male intimacy. Further, potentially queer readings are now more than ever accommodated by conventional media texts (Wyatt, 2001), and these texts have the capacity to reach broader audiences. Ultimately, popular texts have the ability to subvert hegemonic gender values and affirm that heterosexual texts may indeed harbor queer images, readings, and ideologies (Creekmur & Doty, 1995, p. 3). Therefore, there are indeed mainstream texts capable of disrupting the status quo because of their immense popularity and platform in popular culture without appearing too radical or transgressive, with portrayals of bromance at the forefront of potential opposition.

### *Humor Theory*

Perhaps most influential to the notion that these films, television episodes, and fan practices can appear normative while simultaneously housing oppositional forces is their platform in the comic genre. Humor is a ubiquitous force, and comedies have a history of appealing to large audiences. Comic form has the ability to “overturn (at least momentarily) official institutions and hierarchies of power” (Matthews, 2000, p. 2), and works hand in hand with the previously discussed queer reading of the texts.

Humor theories that are most helpful for analysis of the motives for and reactions to comedy in the bromance films are Henri Bergson’s (2008) theory of incongruity and Sigmund Freud’s (1960) theory regarding laughter as catharsis. According to Bergson, incongruous (surprising) humor is the effect and laughter the response to such incongruity. A surprising act becomes comic due to its unexpectedness and its departure from the “norm,” and a departure from the norm is precisely the site at which incongruity and bromance intersect. Males expressing that they love one another or going on “man dates” would certainly be considered alternative to tradi-

tional male interaction, and surprise at these depictions and their incongruity arises due to previously formed expectations for male behavior, creating the comic effect and presumably laughter. Interestingly, departures from the norm may lead to fears and anxiety about disruption of established social structure. Freud argues that laughter provides a physically manifested release from tensions produced by opposition to norms (and, specific to bromance, opposition to rigid gender categorizations and heteronormativity). Discomfort felt by viewers as a result of potentially queer texts is released and simultaneously denied. While this might seem contradictory, the release and denial are able to coexist. As Willis (1997) points out, “jokes seem to highlight the ways that the threats of miscegenation and homoeroticism tend to slide into each other. But the joke structures end up strictly compartmentalizing and containing those threats” (p.37), indicative of both relief from threats through laughter and denial through dismissal of the notion that the ideas presented are imminent threats.

Thus, the comic genre is simultaneously oppositional and reinforcing of hegemonic masculinity. The expectation of laughter and ironic representation in these comedies makes physically and verbally intimate behaviors between men appear less threatening to hegemonic masculinity. Comedy, then, mediates between representations of non-normative sexuality and anxieties felt about threats toward heteronormativity. Humor may ease tensions felt about male/male physicality when it is not legitimized by other hypermasculine portrayals (as in war, action, or sports movies) and serves to expand what is acceptable behavior. Because the male on male physical actions are amusing (and, at certain points ironic) in addition to being sincere manifestations of affection, the directors, actors, and scripts are able to further push the limits of what is standard acceptable behavior between two men.

## 1.2 Research Questions

After reviewing the previous literature and connecting past analyses to an expansion of the current era of American masculinity as portrayed in and perpetuated by media texts, I have formulated the following research questions to better understand how media texts relate to masculine hegemony and homosocial interaction.

*RQ1:* What are the moments in portrayals of “bromances” in popular film and television that reinforce and resist hegemonic masculine values?

*RQ2:* What roles do rule making, rituals, and codes of homosociality play in the reinforcement and/or transgression of hegemonic masculinity?

*RQ3:* What role does humor play in the reinforcement and resistance of hegemonic masculinity?

## 1.3 Method

### *Case selection*

For the study of bromances in popular media, I focus on the films *Superbad* (Mottola, 2007) and *I Love You, Man* (Hamburg, 2009). I chose these films based on four criteria: time period, presence of two male protagonists equal in salience and that specifically revolve around their friendship, box office numbers, and genre. First, I wanted to focus on films released since 2004. The term “bromance” (coined in the 1990s in reference to males involved in “skater” culture) first became salient in mainstream culture in the early 2000s as a type of rebranding of the “buddy film” popular in the 1990s. I start in 2004 specifically because this is the first year the term “bromance” is listed in the Merriam-Webster dictionary, though other sources cite anywhere from 2000-2005 as the year of origin in popular culture. Further, films such as *Dude, Where’s My Car?* (2000) and the *American Pie* franchise (the first three films of the series re-



leased from 1999-2003) are examples of what I categorize as the prototypical bromance films, precursors to the explicit, self-aware portrayals of a bromance in film, which appear in the early 2000s. Next, I narrowed the selection of cases for study based on genre, with specific interest in comedies in order to examine the ways in which humor specifically contributes to portrayals of these friendships. Similarly, I also drew a distinction between films portraying two men with other more salient narrative themes where the friendship is incidental to the plot and those films with narratives that rely heavily (if not solely) on the representation of the male friendship itself. Also important to note, films such as *Due Date* (2010) or *Wedding Crashers* (2005) that do indeed fall into the comic category and focus on the male friendship as a major thematic device are not in the scope of this study because the friendship is peripheral to the narrative. For example, the narratives rely heavily on other gimmicks to move the friendship forward. Jeremy (Vince Vaughn) and John (Owen Wilson) in *Wedding Crashers* are lifelong friends who crash weddings together, but the major revelation at the end has less to do with solidification of their friendship and more to do with coming to terms with their history of deceit and manipulation of women. In *Due Date*, the friendship between Peter (Robert Downey, Jr.) and Ethan (Zach Galifianakis), though it develops into a mutual friendship over time, is more forced than voluntary in its inception. Films of interest are those that contain a male duo with a lifelong history of friendship (Seth and Evan in *Superbad*) or those which portray a voluntary and mutually established friendship, but also must contain moments of ironic or self-reflexive male intimacy, and must formulate the friendship as the primary narrative focus. Finally, I am interested in films that opened in wide release (600 or more screens) and that were seen by a significant portion of the population (this based on box office numbers) in order to be considered influential in popular culture. *Superbad* opened at #1 at the box office, *I Love You, Man* at #2, each grossing more than 70 mil-

lion dollars during the course of release (\$121,463,226 in 10 weeks, and \$71,440,011 in 11 weeks, respectively).

For analysis of codes and rules of masculinity set forth in popular media, I conducted a case study of the television series *How I Met Your Mother* (2005-present). Similar to my case selection of the aforementioned films, I wanted to choose a media text that was comedic and that aired after 2004, again due to the transgressive power of humor and the development of a new and prominent “bro” culture during this time. Additionally, the distinct presence of what is known as the “Bro Code” originated in this series and has since been adapted into a book which provides artfully crafted “Articles” dictating male behavior—a constitution of masculinity, if you will. Further, the television series maintains consistently high ratings, among the highest rated sitcoms on network television, making it suitable for inclusion as a text of popular culture.

Finally, accurate analysis of masculine homosociality could not be fully achieved without exposure to such situations in real life. In order to research male homosocial environments in a non-fictional environment, I conducted an ethnographic study of audience members attending screenings of *The Room*. There are limited screenings of cult movies, for one, and *The Room* is one of very few options in the Atlanta area. I chose to study audiences of this film rather than *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (which also holds regular screenings at the Plaza Theater in Atlanta), for example, because I am more concerned with homosocial environments produced and maintained in the past ten years. Coincidentally, *The Room* was released in 2004 (the same year the rise of bromance began) and has steadily gained attention in the cult circuit since its utter and devastating flop as a feature film.

### *Procedure*

My analysis of bromance in film relied heavily on detailed textual analysis of each movie. I watched each film three times with specific goals for each screening. Upon the first viewing, I identified major themes that emerged from each text, especially those that directly contribute or relate to the bromance narrative (to be elaborated on in the next section). Secondly, I specified certain instances or scenes between the main male duos that exhibit signs of affection between the characters (either verbal or physical) or those that reference or connote appropriate social interaction between men, with particular focus on scenes or instances which disrupt these interactional boundaries. Third, and similar to the second viewing, I specified certain instances or scenes in which one or both members of the male pair are shown interacting with or discussing one or more female characters. This was to establish a comparison between homosocial relationships and heterosocial relationships within each film.

My examination of homosocial interaction in real life took the form of an ethnographic study of audiences of *The Room*. This film is shown monthly at the Plaza Theater in Atlanta, Georgia, on the last Tuesday of each month. For study of cult audiences of *The Room*, I attended two screenings, first on February 26, 2013, and second on April 30, 2013, with an additional midnight observation of *The Room* audience in Athens, Georgia, on March 29, 2013. The first screening at the Plaza in February was for preparation purposes only, and no data was recorded. Each of the other screenings consisted of observing behaviors, practices, conversations, rituals, and interactions of audience members enacted within the theater screening room. Upon each viewing, I completed field notes on index cards during the actual screenings of the film, taking particular note of phrases, behaviors, or rituals that contributed to a male-dominated homosocial environment. Following the screenings, I composed a typed version of my field notes, making

additional comments and interpretations as needed. This led to an eventual comparison of observations from each screening in the same setting and across settings, paying particular attention to practices, rituals, interactions, and behaviors of audience members (and the audience as a whole) that were similar or identical across screenings, as well as those that differed at each viewing.

### *Major Themes*

There are at least four major themes I identified within each film, television episode, or cult film interaction/ritual. Instances of homophobia emerged as particularly significant, either directed toward a specific character or referencing a discomfort with male intimacy in general. In my analysis, I explore how these fears are expressed, by which characters (or audience members), and in which scenarios they are more likely to occur. I also indicate how affection (verbal or physical) is expressed between the males (particularly in the case of the male duos in the films) and in which instances this is most likely to occur. Further, I explore scenarios in which women are either hypersexualized or treated with vulgarity, and examine whether these emerge solely in male company or amongst females as well. Finally, I focus on social codes of masculinity that dictate appropriate behavior within each text and audience and determine whether they differ or are portrayed/enacted similarly across contexts, both within each film/episode and across the films/episodes, as well as within each film screening and across each screening of *The Room*. Particularly important to analysis of *The Room* audiences was the development and maintenance of power structures in male dominated environments, and specific attention was given to who the participants are within each screening and what behaviors they enacted to gain attention within the viewing environment.

*Analysis/Theoretical Lens*

Analysis of interactions between men, especially those coded as affectionate and those considered disruptive of normative masculinity, draw heavily from Queer theory, particularly from those theorizations that point to changing, fluid categorizations of gender roles and freedom of expression, especially in “straight” culture (Doty, for example). Affection expressed between the male protagonists, either verbal or physical, may not be intended to disrupt gender boundaries, but application of a queer reading may provide further insight into how the films incorporate oppositional behavior and in what circumstances. Further, discussion of appropriate social conduct and codes derive from Sedgwick (and other literature on the homosocial) to determine which interactions and behaviors, including settings in which these occur, may be deemed as such. Also, analysis of prevailing and changing norms of masculinity rely on past and current literature on Masculinity Theory, especially drawing from historical constructions of masculinity in American culture and other historical influences such as the feminist movement. Using these theories, I categorize themes/scenes/interactions/quotes extracted from the texts at each stage based on the themes indicated in the previous section. Subsequently, I analyze and interpret in detail the formation of, relationship between, and implications of each theme based on its significance in current popular culture, and contextualize the newer distinctions within previous male-friendship portrayals and interactions.

**1.4 Expectations**

Through exploration of a fragmented masculinity in crisis, socially constructed masculinity, and analysis of portrayals of male friendship in fictional media texts, this project could lead to a richer understanding of American masculinity, past and present. Analysis of bromance as the newest attempt at reclaiming male identity and agency could aid in explanation of the current

state of hegemonic masculinity. Further, this research could extend research and contextualize portrayals of masculinity in popular film, television, and culture within the broader traditions of American manhood.

As a result of this project, I hoped to identify major themes within these texts and audiences including evidence of homophobia, varying treatment of females within a male homosocial sphere, and more overt, yet frequently qualified, intimate interaction between males. My expectation was that the films pose threats to heteronormativity, while the films, television episodes, and cult audiences present simultaneous reinforcements of a patriarchal social structure. Overall, I view the potential for more fluid, varied, and contradictory versions of masculinity to be the most significant development as a result of analysis and interpretation of these films. Each new and shifting depiction of manhood in popular culture is equally as worthy and valuable for study and interpretations of constructions of masculinity in a wider cultural context. The constantly increasing influence of media and the proliferation of the mass audience to both form and adapt cultural codes point to the importance of popular texts in influencing and shaping social ideals and constructions. Bromance is one type (and perhaps one of the newest and one of the more salient) of masculine construction particularly important to the study of gender that points to a historically and ever-shifting masculine hegemony within American culture.

## 2 ARE YOU MAN ENOUGH?: AMERICAN MASCULINITY AND THE HOLLYWOOD BROMANCE

*“I love you. I love you. I’m not even embarrassed to say it...I just want to go to the rooftops and scream ‘I love my best friend Evan!’” –Seth, Superbad*

As mentioned in the introduction, the term bromance can be most succinctly defined as “a close non-sexual friendship between men.” On the most basic level, the word is a clever combination of the words brother (or bro) and romance. To break it down further, the inclusion of the word “close” to describe the relationship suggests intimacy, but also leaves wiggle room as far as depictions of partnership are concerned. How close is close? Does this imply physical closeness or emotional closeness...or both? These questions are partially answered with the second section of the denotation. “Non-sexual” and “friendship” seem to suggest the same thing, that these relationships are inherently and invariably platonic. The third portion, and perhaps the most telling, signifies the inclusion of men in these relationships and the importance of shared experiences “between” them. Also, by including only men, the term and associated behaviors automatically exclude women, and support a “boys club” mentality.

In relation to American culture, the term bromance describes both a new and ironic categorization of a relationship between men, as well as an emergent phenomenon of American masculinity, both of which are perpetuated by and reflected in popular media texts. As direct indications of the influence of the word and its development in white male culture, the films *Superbad* (Mottola, 2007) and *I Love You, Man* (Hamburg, 2009), which focus mainly on the relationships of two male leads, are ripe for analysis of the development of current portrayals of masculinity in recent popular texts. Notably, the emergence of the bromance theme seems to be majorly a phenomenon of white male culture either reflected in or perpetuated by portrayals in these films.

Though each film treats homosocial relationships between men differently, both texts simultaneously undermine and reinforce hegemonic masculinity in the wake of shifting gender norms. Thus, these depictions “can be seen as an attack on the very forces they reflect” (Greven, 2002) as they negotiate homosocial relationships that are perhaps threatening to heteronormative culture.

To put it concisely, bromance films are about “men growing up and men helping men grow up and men being just shy of gay as they tease one another about being gay as they help one another grow up” (Morton, 2009). Judd Apatow, a prominent figure in the arena of bromance films, has directed, produced or directly influenced many films of the bromance era. Earlier Apatow films (*The 40 Year-Old Virgin*, *Knocked Up*) subscribe to the same themes, but don’t quite fit the bill as far as this particular analysis is concerned. The aforementioned films revolve around men as they negotiate their love lives with women and friendships with one another, and, as John Alberti (2013) has noted in his analysis of Apatow’s brand of bromance:

The Apatow-influenced bromance explores “other types of relationships” and other constructions of masculinity within the ostensibly heteronormative structure of the romantic comedy. That these films reach ambiguous and even contradictory conclusions suggests the ongoing nature of this evolutionary process and why these movies provoke such conflicting critical reactions. (p. 160)

Even with the inclusion of these themes, the earlier Apatow productions do not focus most heavily on just one male/male friendship, but on groups of men who still play second-fiddles to the heterosexual romantic relationships. Even so, the emergent themes in his earlier films are a staple of bro culture and of Apatow culture in general. Yet, interviews with Apatow leave the impression that he is not promoting a culture dominated by men and dismissive of women, but that



he is (or was at one point) in the same state of confusion about his male identity as his male characters. In one interview, Apatow relates his experiences growing up as a “kid who was picked last” stating that such rejection “builds up your sensitivity to other people’s suffering” and causes you to “think about other people’s emotional lives,” contributing to a vulnerability and honesty in his characters and films (J. Apatow, December 18, 2012). Concurrently, his films highlight the beta-male as the new Hollywood leading man, recognizing that not every man lives up to the idealistic, Old Hollywood, Gable/Bogart standard, and further allows men feel secure about fitting into this category, finally portraying “real” men.

As mentioned earlier, proliferation of the beta-male transforms a typically strong and confident connotation of masculinity into one that displays a severe lack of confidence, especially concerning women, and a desperate need to compensate for inadequacies in traditional masculinity. Apatow and other “Apatow inspired” films, at their cores, are negotiations of current white, American masculinity and do handle their characters sensitively. There is heart at the foundation of these movies among all the vulgarities, and Apatow was aptly once quoted as saying, “I like movies that are, you know, up-lifting and hopeful ... and I like filth.” (“King of Bromance,” 2009). Essentially, gender identity and surrounding issues are at the forefront of bromance: how relationships are negotiated man to man, woman to woman, and man to woman, everyone suffering or triumphing equally in their confusion about life, but with men still at the helm. Managing editor of online women’s magazine *Double X* Jessica Grose considers the irony of the marketing of bromance films as “rom-coms” due to their filthy content and humor, but recognizes the appeal to both men and women: “Because the emotional content has a patina of dirty humor, guys feel comfortable with it. Apatow focuses more on male relationships than

male-female relationships, but he provides an honest lens into that world, so women are interested, too” (“King of Bromance,” 2009).

Judd Apatow’s visitation of potentially feminist themes and narratives becomes even more apparent in recent projects, the most noteworthy being the blockbuster hit *Bridesmaids* (2011), with an opening weekend box office earning of over 26.2 million dollars. In an article published in *The New Republic* (Franklin, 2011), Apatow is given some credit for producing a film that portrays “real” women, especially considering his past endeavors that “reek of the frat house.” Notably, even though *Bridesmaids* was lauded for its modern girl power, the article points out that it “still feels manipulative and misogynist even when women are doing the writing. And the fact that it’s a big deal when a character like this [Kristin Wiig’s Annie Walker] appears in a mainstream comedy says a lot less about *Bridesmaids*—a funny, adventurous, but ultimately conventional film—than it does about the culture that created it.” If misogyny reigns in even the most overtly female-centered comedies, what does this really say about its application to the Apatow-supported bromance films? No matter how progressive they may seem, the underlying sentiment remains that the boys club rules.

The more typical male-centered films of the Apatow/bromance era *Superbad* and *I Love You, Man* opened in wide release (600 or more screens), at number one and number two and the box office, respectively, each grossing more than 70 million dollars during the course of their releases (Box Office Mojo, 2013). These numbers alone are indicative of the large scope of influence held by these films in popular culture. *Superbad*, the first of the two films to be released, centers around the friendship of two high school seniors, Seth (Jonah Hill) and Evan (Michael Cera), on their final night of youthful abandon before college, and their last chance to prove themselves to their love interests and classmates, Jules and Becca. Evan, the more sensitive and

reserved of the two boys, struggles with the insensitivities and brashness of his long time best friend Seth, who is in many ways his opposite. Constant vulgarities spew from Seth's mouth, and his verbal treatment of women is borderline sociopathic. Even so, we are to view them as typical teenage boys, sex-obsessed and irreverent. Softer sides do emerge, and the attention to the foundation of true loyalty and friendship does propel the bromance forward.

The film *I Love You, Man* (not a direct Apatow project, but one that “shares a genealogy with Apatow’s films through director John Hamburg’s work on Apatow’s cult television series *Undeclared*”) (Alberti, 2013, p. 167) is an even more overt homage to the bromance genre released in 2009 that serves as an interesting parallel to *Superbad* and shares many of the themes discussed here, but seems to place even more importance on the solidification of the male/male relationship. Sydney, played by Jason Segel, is typical man-boy—he drives a scooter, frequently dresses in swim trunks and has failed to commit to any woman with no express desire to do so. We find out that all of Sydney’s close friends have moved on with their lives and have wives, children, and job responsibilities, while Sydney continues to have casual encounters with women and operates out of a “man cave” (a popular phrase used to describe a physical space a man sets aside for himself in the home, garage, etc., free from the influence of women). Sydney’s partner in bromance, Peter (Paul Rudd) is in many ways his complete opposite, especially in the sense that he has embraced adulthood, monogamy, and even some of his more feminine qualities. Ultimately, however, it is immature Sydney who is standing at the altar with Peter on his wedding day, an odd parallel drawn between bromance and traditional romantic comedies that points to a running theme in most “bromantic” comedies.

With new representations of male relationships, the themes presented in these films are potentially progressive and regressive at the same time and thus indicative of the cultural confu-

sion of masculinity in this time period. The 1990s and 2000s saw an “explosion of films that foregrounded non-normative gendered identity and sexualities” that “transformed Hollywood film’s representation of gender and sexuality” (Greven, 2009, 4). As Breda Boudreau (2010) points out, “men have been facing a crisis since the mid-1980s because society no longer offers them a clear sense of what manhood means” (p. 37), and this crisis continues, particularly for white men as detailed in the introduction, in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. We see such an explosion of films in this era and such wide ranging representations of masculinity as responses and attempts to reconstruct a hegemonic male identity at a time that also provided a window for more queer representations because a stable sense of masculinity had been disrupted. The rise of these films may also be marketing and genre based. Alberti (2013) attributes this emergence of men-centered romances to the need to re-market the traditional romantic comedy to men. Previously, and not surprisingly, the romantic comedy was marketed heavily and primarily toward women. Important to note is the connection Alberti makes between the shift in marketing of romantic comedies to the crisis of masculinity:

[The] marketing turn towards predominantly women viewers resulted not from any essential qualities of male viewers that prevented them from connecting emotionally with romantic comedies but from an ongoing crisis involving the construction of masculinity within the genre. This increasingly gendered marketing of romantic comedies in the last two decades of the twentieth century begged a question directly connected to this crisis: if (people coded as) men don’t need to be in the audience, why do they need to be in the story? (p. 161)

As far as representations of men in the “new” romantic comedy format are concerned, bromance films, specifically *Superbad* and *I Love You, Man*, typify the crisis of masculinity in several

ways. First, the hypersexualization of females in *Superbad* manifests itself in order to compensate for a blurry sense of masculinity. Second, even within the films themselves there is confusion as to what constitutes manhood, as the characters constantly negotiate between respect and degradation of women and their own feminine characteristics. Finally, the emergence of two protagonists within each film “suggest[s] that manhood’s center cannot hold, that manhood is split, that the warring elements of manhood spill out beyond the individual subjectivity of the star-protagonist, and that the burden of male representation must be carried by two stars rather than one” (Greven, 2009, 125).

One perspective on the bromance proposes the inadequate level or even complete absence of intimacy in contemporary American male friendships, particularly when compared with friendships between females, and a failure to develop and express emotions (Strikwerda & May, 1992). In the pop culture formula for bromance, “crudeness [becomes] a cover for sensitivity.” This is especially descriptive of Seth in *Superbad*, but also holds true for most of the male characters in this teen-centered movie (Morton, 2009). In this sense, masculine relationships seem to foster an environment in which vulgarity thrives. To draw from Eve Sedgwick’s theories of the homosocial in her work *Between Men* (1985), the more closely men associate, the more they are apt to express a hatred and fear of homosexuality; male homosociality seems to require extreme homophobia. “Homosocial” is used to describe relationships and social interaction between people of the same sex and is frequently dichotomized with “homosexual” in description of male friendships explicitly (Sedgwick, 1985). There is a distinct need for “boundaries drawn between the homosocial and the homosexual” (Wyatt, 2001, p. 51) in descriptions of male relationships, but these categorizations are perhaps too binding in a definition of masculinity that is becoming increasingly blurred and fluid.

David Greven (2009) conceptualizes the “homoerotic themes emergent in 1990s Hollywood cinema as an expression of queerness and shifting portrayals of gender and sexuality” (p. 4), and the bromance genre is able to develop in its own comic niche once non-normative representations of gender are established. In this way, incorporation of bromance is seemingly genre dependent. Comedy lends itself perfectly to the ironic and self-aware attitude required for incorporation of bromance; humor is inherent and prerequisite for depictions of bromance. Therefore, the comic genre moves away from latent homoerotic portrayals of straight men (usually more apparent in action films) toward blatant, knowing depictions of close male friendships. Such homoerotic tension remains in action films, making allowances for contact between the male duos (Wyatt, 2001), even by current standards. In the realm of comedy, however, the focus of the male relationship is all too self-aware to be considered homoerotic. Further, the male relationships in these films are not necessarily either sexualized or homophobic (though at times, we get a bit of both for comedic effect). As for other generic forms, bromance derives heavily from romantic comedy traditions, with the plot hinging on the premise of boy meets boy, boy loses boy, boys reunite happily in the end. Here we have the traditional conventions of a boy/girl romantic comedy with bromantic elements intertwined. The running jokes of “man dates” and the feminization of at least one of the male characters (and sometimes both) are effective at eliciting laughter, but they also serve to transform these relationships into something more socially normative and acceptable.

Significantly, neither *I Love You, Man* nor *Superbad* suggests that “homosociality is threatened by an underlying current of homosexuality” (Wyatt, 2001, p. 62). There is no serious underlying apprehension that the two male characters will develop romantic and/or sexual feelings for one another. However, certain male-male encounters in *I Love You, Man* complicate the

assumption that heterosexual men are “safe” from homosexual forces. Doug, one of Peter’s first man-dates, reads Peter’s charm and receptiveness as an invitation to kiss him, and, true to form, Peter does not lose his composure or reject this advance as a more traditional masculine figure would be expected to do. Further, Peter’s brother, Robbie, who happens to be gay, somehow “turns” a straight, married man into a romantic date and shows up with him at Peter’s engagement party. The reactions to homosexuality in the film are understated; they do not suggest fear of homosexuality, especially in the more mature world (at least in age) of *I Love You, Man*. The films address these fears directly, consciously alluding to a commonly felt anxiety toward homosexuality and homophobic tendencies of straight men traditionally expressed in popular culture, and comically deflect these worries to their straight male friendships or their relationships with women.

Importantly, the comic genre in itself is simultaneously oppositional and reinforcing of hegemonic masculinity. Earlier teen comedies, at least in the earliest years of the twenty-first century, fall into a genre that “affirms homosocial ardor while suggesting that it must ultimately be renounced, repudiated, and transcended in order for teen boys to achieve coherent, properly heterosexual manhood” (Greven, 2002, p. 17). At the same time, and specific to these versions of bromance, the “potential for homosocial bonding is not diffused by institutional and generic frameworks” (Wyatt, 2001, p. 55). In other words, male friendship is allowed to develop freely and openly outside of the constraints of a sports team, fraternity, or other all male social group that could facilitate and harness such male bonding appropriately; comic form has the ability to “overturn (at least momentarily) official institutions and hierarchies of power” (Matthews, 2000, p. 2). The expectation of laughter and ironic representation in these comedies make physically and verbally intimate behaviors between men appear less threatening to hegemonic masculinity.

Comedy, then, mediates between representations of non-normative sexuality and anxieties felt about threats toward heteronormativity. Humor may ease tensions felt about male/male physicality when it is not legitimized by other hypermasculine portrayals (as in war/action/sports movies) and serves to expand what is acceptable behavior. Because the male on male physical actions are amusing in addition to being sincere manifestations of affection, the directors, actors, and scripts are able to further push the limits of what is standard acceptable behavior between two men.

Absurdly, it is just this expectation of ironic representation that may also reinforce hegemonic masculinity and heteronormative values through portrayals of close male friendships. Vulgar, hypersexualized dialogue permeates the scenes in *Superbad*, representative of both adolescent tendencies and compensation for not being “masculine enough.” The language and pre-occupations with sex and drinking in *Superbad* may be more a reflection of the insecurities of adolescence than of men in general, but they still provide insight into how masculinity is enacted in younger men. The men in *Superbad* represent typical “misogynistic characters who enact exaggerated performances of masculine virility,” and these behaviors are just that—performative (Boudreau, 2011, p. 38). The first conversation between Seth and Evan in the opening scene is about pornography, and the two (mostly Seth) continue with graphic descriptions of girls and sexual behavior, all the while wishing “girls weren’t weirded out by [their] boners.” As Boudreau (2011) points out, though, “if masculinity is a display...it is also vulnerable to being revealed as false; if it can be worn, it can also be stripped away, demonstrating the tenuousness of masculinity” (p. 38). Michael Kimmel (2007) takes this idea further by noting that the notion that “manhood is socially constructed and historically shifting should not be understood as a loss, that something is being taken away from men. In fact, [this fluidity] gives us something extraor-



dinarily valuable—agency, the capacity to act” and move away from stereotypes and “essentialisms” (p. 74). This is not to suggest that these comedies are operating under a progressive agenda, though producer Judd Apatow, known for his involvement in the guy comedies of this era, also contributes to other projects that could be considered feminist by some (*Bridesmaids*, *Girls*). Rather, it demonstrates that the films are capable of disrupting the status quo because of their immense popularity and platform in popular culture. Now more than ever, “queerness can be accommodated openly within increasingly conventional media texts” (Wyatt, 2001, p. 52), and these texts have the capacity to reach broader audiences.

In both *Superbad* and *I Love You, Man*, the main male duos are allowed to express physical and verbal affection without apprehension or deep regret following such intimate displays toward another male. *Superbad* skirts around the issue for a while, mostly due to the fact that the adolescent duo does not fully come to terms with the intensity of their bromance until the latter half of the film. There are countless parallels formed between the worlds of heterosexual relationships and bromantic relationships, and when combined with comedy, the similarities between bromantic and more traditional relationships are more apparent. Seth and Evan’s friendship becomes genuinely intimate after they have achieved both of their goals of the night (getting drunk and getting girls...sort of), and more importantly, once they are able to openly express their feelings for each other both verbally and physically. They make their grandest and yet most sincere declarations of appreciation and love for each other during the sleeping bag scene, and their pillow talk sets up an environment where “the teen boys are both cut off from the world...deliberately sequestered in a zone of intimacy in which they are safe to be themselves” (Greven, 2002, p. 15). Seth’s moment of clarity, revealed through the expression of shock on his face, comes as they are lying next to each other in an inherently vulnerable physical position that

enables them to be vulnerable emotionally as well (though their high levels of intoxication surely contribute to some extent, this is not the point). Many “I love you’s” are exchanged between the two, free of shame as they acknowledge the restrictions of heterosexual male friendship (“Why can’t we say it every day? I love you!”). A “boop” on the nose, clearly intended for comic effect, is also indicative of a sweet familiarity between the two friends—all of which is ultimately sealed with a hug, bodies still wrapped in separate sleeping bags. Even with this profound and somewhat touching epiphany, the following morning the scene is played as if the two are experiencing an awkward morning after a sexual encounter in which they wake up to find a stranger lying next to them. This follow-up denies much of the intimacy that was achieved in the previous scene, though we assume Seth and Evan still remember what transpired.

Such situational factors contribute to the parallels between bromance and romance, but the personalities and characterizations of each male also figure into the bromantic comedy formula. At one time or another during each of the films, one male of the pair becomes situated in what may traditionally be thought of as a female role in the relationship, again adopting a more acceptable (heteronormative) stance on the relationships. The characterizations of Seth and Evan in *Superbad* and Peter and Sydney in *I Love You, Man* are actually the opposite of hypermasculine and sexually dominant alpha males. Presumably meant to be funny and certainly self-aware, the feminization of at least one of the characters constitutes an acceptable way in which two men may express closeness. Rather than both displaying hyper-masculine traits as seen in previous male-dominated films, one character is often portrayed as more feminine than the other. Seth valiantly rescues Evan from the cops at the party and breathlessly carries him off in his arms. When Peter decides to call Sydney for the first time, he calls and hangs up several times before actually working up the nerve to talk to him. Both pairs are shown shopping to-

gether, Seth getting Evan's opinion on some astoundingly tight jeans and Peter receiving advice on a tuxedo for his wedding. Peter rides on the back of Sydney's scooter, arms around his torso as they ride through the streets singing Rush songs, and Peter's fiancée Zooney is relegated to third-wheel status when the men get lost in each other's air guitar solos at a concert. On one hand, portraying a close bond with one man as a masculine figure and the other as feminine could be viewed as an adherence to the values of traditional heterosexual relationships. Conversely, feminization of a male character that is not clearly designated as homosexual opposes any notion that members of the male sex are inherently and invariably masculine.

In *I Love You, Man*, Peter's characterization is dichotomized first with that of his gay brother, Robbie. Robbie seems to have the ability to develop more male friendships than Peter and even dubs their father an "honorary homo" as a declaration of their close bond with each other—a bond that Peter has failed to establish even with his own male relatives. Because he has never had the desire to form male relationships (or been aware of his deficiency in male friendships, for that matter), he has been deemed the "girlfriend guy." His proclivity for connecting with women is emphasized as he tells only the women at his office of his recent engagement, and it is clear he has easily established a rapport with his coworkers and Zooney's group of girlfriends. Women appreciate and like him simply because he is a nice guy, but this is somehow viewed as a shortcoming by other men. He values the time spent with his fiancé, prefers Sunday nights at home watching HBO over hanging with the guys, and delights in catering girls' nights for Zooney and her friends, providing the treat of root beer floats garnished with chocolate straws. The looming question becomes whether viewers are meant to see these qualities as shortcomings in masculinity or as attributes all men should strive to possess.

As much effort (and alcohol) as it takes for the *Superbad* boys to express affection toward each other, it appears even more unlikely that this type of exchange could occur with a member of the opposite sex. In earlier, prototypical versions of the bromance film (before they came to be known as such) such as *American Pie* or *Dude, Where's My Car?* the narratives suggest that “boys just want each other—females represent an alien mystery that threatens to disrupt the boys’ bonds,” and at times this is still true in the bromance era. The common threat only serves to bring the boys closer together and further excludes them from the female world. However, this turn to the homosocial does not remain unchecked as these films “self-reflexively ensure that sexual relations surpass the ardent homosocial ties” (Greven, 2002, p. 16). The teen comedy both “foregrounds male sexual-performance anxieties and resolves them through a final realization of ‘manly’ sexual prowess” (Greven, 2002, p. 17). However, while this may hold true for resolution of bromances in the early 2000s, the treatment of female characters and the resolution of masculine anxieties are strikingly different in *Superbad* and *I Love You, Man*. While the *Superbad* duo use vulgar descriptions of females and are utterly obsessed with sex, it becomes apparent that they are just as eager to establish emotional or at least personal connections with their female counterparts. Nonetheless, sex and females outwardly serve as both an unequivocal goal and a crippling source of fear for Seth and Evan (Greven, 2002). In this way, male friendship could be viewed as a source of comfort in the face of these anxieties, but this is not a device strictly adhered to in the world of bromance comedies. It is telling that even though the boys in *Superbad* “relentlessly strive toward the procurement of boy-girl sex” (Greven, 2002, p. 15), this goal is never achieved. Females express sexual power and agency, as Becca is the sexual aggressor toward a more timid Evan (an actual sexual act never comes to fruition), while Jules rejects sex with a drunken Seth. This might traditionally be read as an emasculation of the male

characters due to their failure to live up to a male ideal of sexual competence, but because they both establish personal (and perhaps more meaningful) relationships with the girls in the last scene of the movie, we are to view their sexual failures as rejections of masculine dominance and removal from a culture in which females are only present for objectification.

In other circumstances, even other men may prevent the maintenance of successful bromance, as Fogell (perhaps better known as McLovin) consistently provides a source of tension in Evan and Seth's relationship as Evan's future college roommate. Seth expresses such hatred toward Fogell because he is threatened by another male presence encroaching on his best male friend, and even the thought of going to separate colleges produces anxiety and a sense of abandonment felt by Seth. The fight between Evan and Seth is the turning point in their friendship where they experience mutual self-disclosure and speak explicitly about their frustrations, free of all the "bull shit" they constantly toss around (Strikwerda & May, 1992). It takes a sense of abandonment to bring Seth to this point, and, clearly depicted as the more vulgar of the two, he is criticized for his selfishness and immaturity as Evan blames his otherwise friendless high school experience on him. Until this point, the two are unable to hold a conversation about anything other than sex, and, without this argument, further intimate expression would be impossible to produce.

Alternately, *I Love You, Man* positions male relationships as the primary source of anxiety for the main character, as Peter has a distinct inability to interact naturally with other men who are direct representations of hegemonic masculinity. Rather than finding it difficult to become intimately connected with the opposite sex, Peter finds it painfully and awkwardly difficult to be one of the guys. The struggles Peter encounters in his search for male friends is equated with frustration and disappointment with what is considered "normal" dating. His mother, brother,

and fiancée Zoey all make attempts to set him up on what are termed “man-dates” along with suggestions that he try to meet guy friends on internet dating websites. On a man-date that becomes particularly and unexpectedly intimate as the evening progresses, Peter even proclaims that it is “nice to meet someone [he] can actually have a conversation with.” This remark is especially revealing considering the interactions he has with other men in previous scenes. Most other men are portrayed as vulgar, rude, or demeaning, especially in regards to the treatment of women, and this is something that repels Peter, who is an “entirely lovable and normal guy who happens to be socially awkward, self-conscious and insecure only when it comes to hangin' with the dudes” (Toumarkine, 2009). Sydney attempts to verse Peter in what it means to be a man, even though he is not the paragon of masculinity himself. The fact that Sydney is truthful and straightforward without being overly aggressive makes him appear to possess a sensitivity and understanding that Peter has not encountered in other straight men. At Sydney’s first real sign of masculine behavior (yelling aggressively, albeit crazily, at strangers on the sidewalk), Peter is shocked. Sydney simply responds, “I’m a man. I have an ocean of testosterone flowing inside of me” and urges Peter to “let it out” sometimes because, after all, we are animals. Aside from this particular display of aggression, prominent exhibitions of testosterone are some of the rarer occurrences in these films.

Ironically, the female homosocial group seems to dominate the discourse in much of *I Love You, Man*. For much of the first half of the film, Zoey’s relationships are privileged, and we see a rare depiction of a female group of friends without the influence of a male. The women are not hypersexualized by men but seem to take on a masculine group identity when they share and recall intimate details of their own and each other’s sex lives, something that Peter finds very off-putting and subsequently difficult to do himself when he eventually becomes friends with

Sydney. There is an emphasis on love and romance, especially from Peter's point of view, and there is no latent anxiety about the need for or inability of men to develop heterosexual relationships because Peter has already committed to Zooney. The question here becomes whether women and men can coexist in a bromantic world. Seth and Evan are physically separated in the closing scene of *Superbad*, suggesting that close male friendships cannot be maintained when one or both of the men has a significant female relationship, and setting the stage for reintegration into heteronormative relationships. *I Love You, Man*, on the other hand, seems to suggest the opposite as Sydney disrupts Peter and Zooney's relationship more than Zooney disrupts the bromance; in fact, it is Zooney who reunites Peter and Sydney after their own breakup-like fallout.

Ultimately, it seems as though these films are commenting on both the social restrictions placed on male friendships and the plea for men to "grow up" and accept their place in a heteronormal environment. Sydney's man-boy tendencies, down to his mode of transportation, wardrobe, residence, and relationship status, all signify a denial of growing up and fitting into the prescribed mold of heteronormal happiness. Significantly, the only tensions that arise in Zooney and Peter's relationship are influenced by Sydney, especially when he directly causes Peter to question his decision to marry Zooney. As Greven (2009) argues, "dyadic manhood threatens to topple the reign of the heterosexual relationship presumably central to Hollywood film" (p. 127). The narrative establishes Sydney as a force disruptive and threatening to heteronormativity, even setting his homosocial relationship with Peter aside, because he has not accepted heteronormativity for himself. This theme also emerges in the younger *Superbad* characters. Seth and Evan are at their most mature (relative to their almost non-existent maturity level in the rest of the film) when they decide to break away from each other and pursue romantic relation-

ships, departing with the deeply voiced words “I have your information – put ‘er there” and sealing them with a firm handshake.

These instances seem to suggest first that heteronormativity is threatened by close male relationships, and second that maturity is not fully realized until acceptance of a heteronormative lifestyle, and thus a rejection of a serious bromance, is achieved. The men are not rewarded for becoming emotionally or physically vulnerable, only for their adherence to traditional masculinity, setting the stage for integration into a heteronormative world. Still, even with the many examples that do reinforce hegemonic masculinity and traditionally heteronormative values, there is something to be said for the oppositional gender portrayals in these films, especially in regards to a greater freedom of expression in male homosocial environments. If anything, the bromance culture has begun (or in some cases continued) to portray masculinity as “varied, open, relative, contradictory, and fluid” (Shaw & Watson, 2011, p. 1), leaving room for interpretation of differing masculinities and levels of bromances and boundary pushing, some portrayals being more radical than others. Though it is difficult to assess which depictions of bromances are more or less radical, it is fair to assume that these narratives fall on a spectrum, ranging from more conventional to progressive. Those films that do ascribe a sense of extremism, that are not couched in denial and repression of male intimacy, would certainly be considered as more radical than those that reassert a dominant heteronormativity. Ideally, this would be more than a mere imagined achievement presented through the lens of popular media (Douglas, 2010). There is undoubtedly an increasing awareness and portrayal of re-negotiated hegemonic masculinity, with conflicting masculinities pushing forward and backward simultaneously. Without placing too much pressure on the value of popular texts, they do indeed represent a departure from restrictive binaries of gender and provide a starting point for less essentialized versions of masculinity.



### 3 THE BRO CODE AND RULES OF MANHOOD IN *HOW I MET YOUR MOTHER*

*“Whether we know it or not, each of us lives a life governed by an internalized code of conduct. Some call it morality. Others call it religion. I call it ‘the Bro Code’.”* –Barney Stinson,

Introduction to *The Bro Code*, p. ix

In addition to film’s depiction of homosocial relationships, television has offered many examples of bromantic interaction and references to the “bro culture” in America. Most noteworthy of these is perhaps the emergence of the bro code, both among men as a theoretical guideline for appropriate treatment of and interaction with other men, and most recently as an actual written set of rules, presented as a constitution of manhood for white men in America. Though the code itself is presented humorously and, as with the bromance, with a tone of self-awareness and irony, there are obvious connections to real life situations that do indeed hold weight for certain male relationships. If the bromance is indicative of a more intimate male bond, the bro code is the glue that holds it together. The code’s most direct connection to the era of bromance comes in its emphasis on male interaction and the creation of homosocial ties. The code itself does propel male relationships one step further, however, by incorporating strict rules and a means to actually police these homosocial connections. The most tangible manifestation of this code in television is the fictional (albeit applicable to real life) Bro Code, developed and referenced in detail by the character of Barney Stinson in the television series *How I Met Your Mother*.

Here, I will examine the television series *How I Met Your Mother* (2005-present) as a show that not only popularized and perhaps even legitimized the Bro Code, but as a show that is also representative of many of the other staples of bro culture in America. For one, Barney Stinson’s character (played by Neil Patrick Harris) should be understood and analyzed as an iconic

and representative figure, both reflective of a preexisting masculine hegemony and a model for perpetuation or expansion of a masculine ideal. In addition to a profile of Barney's character, it is also important to note the power of Neil Patrick Harris's star persona in cultivating and maintaining an audience for a character that may not otherwise be likable. How Barney Stinson functions as a character, how his detestable personality traits actually make him more humorous, as well as how the character typifies a standard of American masculinity are all significant factors that explain how the comic representation both transgresses heteronormative values and simultaneously reinforces them. To unpack the many layers, I will focus on the show as a text, examining the narrative threads that contribute to or draw from masculine hegemony as well as the development of Barney's character over many seasons. Taking into account the cultural context for both the show and Barney's character, I will analyze reception of the show, Neil Patrick Harris's star power, and the cultural expectations that are both reinforced in the show and borne from it. Looking through a humorous lens, the Bro Code and Barney's overall characterization could be interpreted as satire, critiquing socially acceptable behavior for men. Even so, these representations may also act as devices that perpetuate hegemonic masculinity by creating new codes of conduct and making them more salient for a large audience.

*How I Met Your Mother* is currently in its eighth season in the Monday night lineup on CBS and was recently renewed for a ninth and final season for 2013-2014. Popular with audiences from the beginning, the show frequently ranks in the top five in ratings for scripted broadcasts with close to 7 million viewers per week, with the most recent numbers coming from April, 2013 ("CBS Wins in Viewers," 2013). The show is also currently in syndication, and, true to form, often ranks in the top 25 of syndicated shows as well. *How I Met Your Mother* has averaged at least 8 million viewers in each of the first seven seasons, with a low average of 8.21 mil-

lion for season three and peaking at a 9.67 million average viewership for season seven, and with averages for season eight yet to be released (Gorman, 2012). At its core, this is a sitcom that depicts the romantic, professional, and social lives of a group of five friends living in New York City. While this premise is certainly nothing new to the sitcom world (think *Friends*, *Will and Grace*, anything with a group of 20-30-somethings living in an urban setting), it does contribute some fresh material to the primetime landscape. The show's narrative contains numerous flash-forwards and flashbacks as Ted, main character and narrator, explains to his children in the year 2030 the events leading up to when he met their mother. Overall, the tone of the show is light-hearted, with moments of genuine reflection on love and relationships and a hopefulness, mostly seen in Ted, that love does exist and will prevail. Cheesy as it may seem, this foundation is interspersed with plenty of bawdiness as well (as much as is allowed in primetime network television), and quests for love often intermingle with ridiculous escapades to "score chicks" with plenty of overt sexual humor. The five main characters include Lily and Marshall, who represent a couple in a functional, long-term relationship; Ted, the main character who is on an endless and earnest quest to revive romance in an era where attractions are meaningless or at best superficial, with the ultimate goal of meeting "the One" woman of his dreams; Robin, a Canadian news anchor who can hang with the guys; and Barney, a wealthy, womanizing (yet lovable) manipulator and competitor with a strong attachment to his code of honor, the Bro Code.

The Bro Code is a set of rules of conduct between men that dictates the appropriate and acceptable behaviors between true bros (i.e. best friends) and not only exists in the fictional world of *How I Met Your Mother*, but also as a published book written by Matt Kuhn (who is also a writer for the show) and aptly titled *The Bro Code*. It is both guidebook and reference tool for young men seeking to attain or maintain bro status in American culture, a touchstone and ba-

sis for interaction with other men and successful attainment of women. The purpose is quite clear, both in its televised and published formats: The Bro Code is meant to solidify and “strengthen the bonds of brotherhood,” an altruistic and pure goal, it may seem, seeking to enrich the lives of men. Looking further, however, the fundamental reason for even wanting to become better “bros” in the first place is, to quote the Introduction of the book, “to work together as one to accomplish perhaps the most important challenge society faces—getting laid” (Kuhn, 2008, p. x). The Introduction goes on to categorize sex (i.e. “banging chicks”) as a sport, setting the stage for relationships as a game, with women as the game pieces or prizes to be won after successful pursuit. Therefore, the “moral” code implemented is really in place for the most immoral reasons, objectification and manipulation masked in camaraderie and fraternity.

The Bro Code is first mentioned in season one, episode six, “Slutty Pumpkin” (Article 107: Never leave a Bro hanging). References to specific Articles and the Bro Code at large continue to appear throughout the series, and these were eventually expanded upon and compiled into a published version (appropriately titled *The Bro Code*) in October of 2008, just as the fourth season was underway. The published book itself is demarcated into sections—the Introduction, which I have outlined above, explanation of what constitutes a Bro (a proper noun in the book) and exactly who qualifies as a Bro in the section “What is a Bro?” There is a list of “Brocabulary,” supplemented by a glossary in the back of the book explaining the many words in the “Bronacular,” the origin of the Bro Code, which actually alludes to the origins of the Constitution of the United States, along with other derivations attributed to the men of ancient Greece and Biblical figures Cain and Abel, “the world’s first Bros” (p. 5). The book also includes a pictorial version of the preamble to the Bro Code, followed by 150 articles laying out the do’s and don’ts of brotherhood in great detail. The Articles serve as the meat of the book, and each article

fits into one or more of the following categories: male relationships/interactions with women, male relationships/interactions with each other, and male behavior involving other objects, usually in an attempt to prove manliness or define themselves in opposition to women. Others are simply intended for humor's sake, important in emphasizing the entertainment value of the book, though all of them are written in a humorous tone.

The first rule, Article 1, in the book states, "The bond between two men is stronger than the bond between a man and a woman because, on average, men are stronger than women. That's just science." There are several interesting points to note from this assertion. Most apparent are the implication that women are inferior to men and the reduction of this statement to a harmless joke (a trend that can be traced throughout the Code), chalking it up to "science." Further, there is an emphasis on the bonds between men, which complicates the notion and purpose of the code itself: to obtain women, or merely to obtain sex *from* women. Male relationships supposedly trump romantic relationships, and the only relationship with a woman worth working towards is a sexual one. Listed as expansion of Article 92: "A Bro keeps his booty calls at a safe distance," a man should never refer to his booty call as a "booty call" because "some human beings—particularly women—like to think there's more to sex than sex" (p. 121). This and other Articles imply a secret world of male intimacy in which men are in on the joke and women are not. Moreover, men are privy to the fact that they are all using women for sex, and women are diminished to foolish, desperate, relationship-seeking pawns with no agency in their relationships with men—they only *think* they know what is going on, and, according to the Code, men actively lead women to believe so, prefer this secretly dominant role, and are really the ones in control.

Bros are also defined in their opposition to women. Article 30 states, “A Bro doesn’t comparison shop,” (p. 45) and Article 101, “If a Bro asks another Bro to keep a secret, he shall take that secret to his grave. This is what makes them Bros, not chicks” (p. 131). This theme is apparent in so many Articles that it becomes downright offensive: Article 14 states “If a chick inquires about another Bro’s sexual history, a Bro shall honor the **Brode of Silence** and play dumb. Better to have women think all men are stupid than to tell the truth.” Other examples abound, including “A Bro never wears pink. Not even in Europe” and “A Bro never dances with his hands above his head” that further reinforce the notion that some activities are reserved for women and therefore should not be practiced by a true Bro.

Redemptive in some fashion, there is at least a hint of respect shown and articulated for women deemed “important” in other men’s lives. For example, Article 19: “A Bro shall not sleep with another Bro’s sister,” Article 104: “The mom of a Bro is always off limits,” and Article 21: “A Bro never shares observations about another Bro’s smoking-hot girlfriend.” Further, women actually may be allowed “bro status” themselves, according to Article 22, if only for the benefit of translating the “Chick Code” (a similar moral code, described as “confusing and contradictory”). The Bro Code is meant to be funny, of course, and admittedly actually *is* worthy of a laugh at certain points, but it is exactly what makes it laughable that makes it potentially offensive.

The Bro Code’s origins are first detailed in an episode of *How I Met Your Mother* in season three entitled “The Goat.” Here, we learn that the code was created in 1776 due to a disagreement between George Washington and Benjamin Franklin. Franklin supposedly accused Washington of “codpiece blocking” him (preventing him from “scoring” with a woman), to which his reply was “There’s no rule against it!” Franklin ponders, “There should be a set of

rules that govern the way Bros comport themselves among other Bros.” Thus, the Bro Code was invented. The narrative arc across three episodes from season three (“The Goat,” “The Rebound Bro,” and “Everything Must Go”) provides examples of putting the Bro Code into practice, exposes its flaws, and contains parallels between comparisons of Barney and Ted’s friendship to a romantic relationship. Before examining these in detail, however, Barney Stinson’s character must be examined more closely.

Perhaps the most stereotypically portrayed character of the group, Barney Stinson is arguably the most memorable and multi-dimensional character of them all. As contradictory as this statement may seem, his multi-dimensionality does not surface until later seasons, especially in season four when he reveals he has feelings for Robin. His clichéd characteristics, repetitive woman hunting, and memorable catch phrases (“legen—wait for it—dary!”) comprise his essential Barney-ness throughout the series. His mistreatment of women is a constant implication that they are nothing more than disposable; his unflinching adherence to the Bro Code (appallingly sexist and exclusive to men) and seeming disregard and inconsideration for the feelings of even his closest friends at times are his worst and yet most salient qualities. These are the essential, most basic of Barney Stinson’s characteristics, and yet his character seems to be the most beloved (certainly the most recognizable) of the show.

The dismantling of cultural expectations and disruption of social norms may play a large part in the humor surrounding Barney Stinson in *How I Met Your Mother*, and it is just this humor that makes him likable. For instance, there is an expectation in the show (and in middle-class, white American culture at large) that normal masculine behavior and values will be fulfilled due to the historically “straight” and narrow nature of the sitcom. Traditionally, the structure of the American sitcom is predicated on the notion that it is a commodity, “constructed dec-

ade after decade on the same safe, reliable pattern, yet allowing enough surface variations to be resold as a new product every few years” (Jones, 1992, p. 4). Gerard Jones also argues that the sitcom is a “mirror,” showing Americans (families, for Jones, society at large for my argument) an image of themselves, to “stop and check ourselves over before we step back outside into the winds of change.” Jones even remembers that he used to “search domestic comedies for clues to how the grown-up world functioned outside” of his own home. Sitcoms, in short, teach through reinforcement, by “reflecting and dramatically reconfirming that which we already wish to believe. They may not change our behavior, but they may strengthen our confidence in continuing as we are” (p. 5).

The Bro Code and Barney’s character are fulfillments of certain societal expectations, but the tone of a show offers an unclear sense of which side it advocates, as Barney’s pursuits are often criticized by other characters and constantly disrupted within the narrative. Barney is the only character who believes in an unflinching adherence to these rules, while dismissals by his friends Ted and Marshall (and Lily and Robin) make his loyalty to the code seem that much more absurd. Henri Bergson’s (2008) theory surrounding the mechanical rigidity of some comical figures and the humor derived from these absentminded characters is useful in unpacking Barney’s likability. Barney is not absentminded in the sense that he is forgetful, only in the sense that he is so focused on one goal (usually going home with a woman) at the expense of everything else, leading him to disregard other people or obligations in the meantime. Bergson’s notion that mechanical rigidity may provoke laughter is also important when examining Barney’s character, which seems to function on autopilot with one goal (or many goals, but leading to the same result). Barney’s actions are unfailingly predictable and his character ridiculous in its extremity. It is the unexpected and involuntary disruption of Barney’s plans that drives the laugh-



ter, according to Bergson, especially when considering the more extreme structured, rigid characters like Barney. Barney's actions become automated and repetitious, making him a mechanical figure, but also allowing for more humor when his plans are foiled, bringing in Bergson's notion that surprise produces a comic effect due to the unexpected and departure from the "norm." The situations come to be predictable over the progression of the series, but remain funny when considering the extremity of Barney's structure and unflinching focus and adherence to the Bro Code. Even when his predicaments play out unpredictably, the humor remains because the rigid character's plans are foiled. The comic character, at least in Bergson's view, is one who is unconscious and unaware of what makes him laughable, and Barney fits easily into this role.

Furthermore, star-persona may play a role in Barney's popularity and likability. Neil Patrick Harris, who plays Barney in *How I Met Your Mother*, is a popular and critically acclaimed actor, probably most noted for his role in this sitcom (or maybe better known by some for his previous television role as title character Doogie Howser during his teenage years). Harris has garnered 15 major award nominations during *How I Met Your Mother*'s first seven seasons, ranging from People's Choice to Critics' Choice to the Emmy Awards, for his portrayal of the conniving Barney Stinson, most often nominated for and most often winning the People's Choice Award. These accolades, especially those voted on by "the people" become significant when considering the despicable nature of his character, and when examined from the perspective of hegemonic American masculinity and ideals of manhood. Barney's primary plot points revolve around manipulation, seduction, and subsequent dismissal of as many women as possible as frequently as possible. Hatfield (2010) argues that "dominant masculinities within hegemonic masculinity subordinate both women and other men—allowing men who perform this ideal masculinity to retain high social status and control" (p. 528). The question then becomes whether Bar-

ney's control is legitimate or only part of his delusions of grandeur. So how could such a detestable character be considered funny, likable, or even popular, especially to the extent that he consistently receives positive public reception? As Staiger (2000) notes, the sitcom has the capacity to "reflect rapidly the interests of the contemporary audience" (p. 2). Under this assumption, it would seem that a character so popular must reflect at least some aspect of general public interest. So does this mean that by embracing a sleazy character the public accepts his behavior as appropriate, or is there something else at work? Contemporary male characters in the sitcom are often portrayed as "competitive and emotionless," bonding only over sports, porn, and sexual conquests (Feasey, 2008, p. 24). Barney Stinson is typical of this characterization, but there may be deeper layers to him if examined more closely. Barney and the Bro Code could be further surveyed by interpreting this character and his moral code as social/cultural satire, though due to the nature of the sitcom, these elements are probably not meant to shock the audience or intended to display overt criticism. Moreover, Barney's portrayal mocks a male character type that may contain fundamental truths, but the absurdity and over-the-top nature make it passable as fiction. Perhaps even more ironic and supportive of a potentially satiric portrayal is Neil Patrick Harris's public position as an openly gay actor. Harris's portrayal of Barney could be considered as further acknowledgement of the performative nature of gender, clearly indicating that Barney is a stereotypical, exaggerated trope of what is supposed to be a fairly typical white, American male, and that male cultural identity is nothing more than socially constructed.

Though perhaps not explicit or complete satire, the show certainly contains an element of mockery when male friendships and appropriate social boundaries between men are addressed, and the tone of the show contributes to this mockery. Though it is played fairly similarly to the standard sitcom format, the narrative often relies on pointing out the absurdity in rules of man-

hood, especially when exhibited through Barney's character, and also through parody of traditional relationships. For instance, in the episode "World's Greatest Couple" (season two, episode 5), Marshall and his law school buddy, Brad, quickly go from Bros to "more than Bros" when a casual lunch turns into what seems to be a typical dating relationship. Similar to the "man dates" discussed in the first chapter, *How I Met Your Mother* draws parallels between male friendship and what are thought of to be traditional romantic relationships, addressing the existence and irrelevance of restrictive rules of manhood. Humor is derived from absurdity, parody, and derision toward these values, and is meant to be detected by the audience as a whole.

Not only are there traces of ridicule of the characters and some of their values, but there is also at least a hint of criticism of overarching traditional patriarchal values, especially those embedded in young male culture and directed toward middle-class white males in their 20s and 30s. The Bro Code itself could be considered satire of unnecessary rules and restrictions enforced by Bros in order to maintain a sense of male dominance and order in society. It is an ironic portrayal that allows the Code a humorous function; the show positions the audience to assume the absurdity of a male code for practical use, not only because the notion of a rule book for appropriate behavior is farcical, but also because the rules contained in it take it to an extreme and absurd level. There are no other characters on the show that share Barney's blind devotion to the code, or who share in his relentless pursuit of women and sex, but this may also serve as a reinforcement of hegemony as "hegemonic masculinity relies on other masculinities to maintain power;" (Hatfield, 2010, p. 531). Marshall is and has only ever been with one woman, Ted's pursuits are more romantically focused than purely sexual, and these characters are certainly played more straight (in the non-sexual sense) than Barney's over-the-top stereotypical womanizer. Historically, "portrayal of bachelor masculinity offered an acceptable, alternative masculin-

ity that reinterpreted the male patriarchal stereotype of the macho and the wimp, again situating alternative forms of masculinity as ‘other’” (Hatfield, 2010, p. 528). For *How I Met Your Mother*, this would mean that Marshall, married and happy about it, and Ted, the romantic starry-eyed male, would be constituted as “other”, but this is not what the narrative actually suggests. Instead, it is Barney who is criticized (though still accepted by his friends) for his uncouth behavior, but he remains the dominant force of humor for the audience.

Freud, quoted in Staiger (2000), suggests that the importance of studying humor is “an intimate connection between all mental happenings,” and that a new joke is an “event of universal interest; it is passed from one person to another like the news of the latest victory” (p. 1). This is particularly important when examining an element of culture that seems to encompass and define what it means to be a man. The “typical” or “ideal” male identity in this case may be reflected and perpetuated in popular media texts, and it is important to determine “why some programs and movies produce a widespread cultural awareness of their fictional worlds” and what discursive impact is created as a result (p. 2). In her book *Masculinity and Popular Television* (2008), Rebecca Feasey discusses the representations of various contemporary masculinities portrayed in popular television and how these identities are constructed in relation to male hegemony. According to Feasey, “different models on masculinity have been said to form a hierarchy of acceptable, unacceptable, and marginalized models for the male” (p. 2), and the Bro Code is a fictional and comic manifestation of and metaphor for an ideal masculinity. The danger lies in the perpetuation of a negative value system, i.e. a dominant masculinity that embraces misogynist behaviors. Hatfield (2010) argues that “men who embody hegemonic masculinity may be fantasy figures needed to sustain the cultural ideal, an ideal likely to be displayed and promoted by the

mass media” (p. 528). Barney Stinson may portray just such an ideal, promoted on a popular platform. Furthermore, according to Hatfield:

Fictional television can be seen either as an influence on, or reflection of, culture—the shared norms, values, and beliefs held by a society. Yet many groups exist within a society and multiple value systems may be at play; therefore, television ultimately offers a site of struggle for creating legitimized meaning for those groups. (p. 529)

In this vein, sitcoms are “illustrating cultural myths about male roles that do not actually exist in the real world” (Hatfield, 2010, p. 529). So, while Barney’s loyalty to his male friends and objectification of women seem to be the masculine ideal to strive for, a model for the way men are supposed to interact with women and other men, this is merely an imagined role that becomes all too real through media portrayals.

Although sitcoms must at times “exploit dominant cultural ideologies regarding male friendship, it is worth noting the ways in which they also depict potentially empowering representations of male bonding and homosociality for the mainstream audience” (Feasey, 2008, p. 31). Feasey also argues that “representation of male friendship, homosociality and homosexuality are as important if not more important than heterosexual relations in the contemporary sitcom” (p. 21). This is interesting, especially when examining the homosocial relations in *How I Met Your Mother*, because the dynamics of male friendship are handled quite often within the context of the narrative, almost as much as the normative heterosexual relationship. While these relationships may appear to lack depth, particularly when most interaction is based on a seemingly superficial and silly code of conduct, Feasey argues that “heterosexual men do seem to value such [facile] friendships, to the point where they will prioritize homosociality and homosocial

bonding, with male friendships taking priority over male-female relations” (p. 24). In essence, this is exactly what the Bro Code enforces. It has no strict guidelines regarding respectable and appropriate treatment of women (aside from the aforementioned cases of mothers and sisters that are few and far between), only rules to cultivate respect between men. At first glance, the rules and relationships cultivated under their power are inherently superficial, with no real indication of a moral leaning or an established bond between men. However, as evidenced by episodes of *How I Met Your Mother*, these codes may run deeper than they seem.

In season three, there is a three episode arc in which Barney and Ted, for all intents and purposes, break up, fight, miss each other, and get back together, all in the traditional romantic comedy format for heterosexual couples. Also important to these three episodes in particular is the implementation of the Bro Code, the explanation of its origins (for those that have not yet purchased the published *Bro Code*), and an atypical attempt by Barney to bend the rules of his never failing code. The conflict between Ted and Barney begins after Barney sleeps with Robin, who also happens to be Ted’s ex-girlfriend, and the episode entitled “The Goat” traces Barney’s attempts to evade the rules and hide his misdeeds and betrayal from his best friend. The rule “No sex with your Bro’s ex” is the grounding force for Barney’s frantic realization that he has broken his own solemn code of honor and for his subsequent desperate attempt to find a loophole to make “the bad feeling to go away.” He even calls upon a lawyer (Marshall) to find a way out of his moral dilemma. In his desperation to avoid confrontation, he racks his brain to remember a time that Ted may have previously violated the Code as a way to validate his own misdeed. The rules “A Bro shall at all times say yes,” and “A Bro will, in a timely manner, alert his Bro of the existence of a girl fight” seem to be unbroken by Ted, and Barney is left to confess his mistake. Ultimately, adherence to parts of the Code seem to be more of a moral issue than a fabri-

cated set of socially acceptable and performed behaviors. In this case, Ted is not upset by the rule breaking but by the disruption of trust between friends. “You’re always spouting off rules for Bros... was this not one?” Ted asks of Barney as the episode takes a rather dramatic turn. “Are you saying you don’t want to be Bros anymore?” “I’m saying I don’t want to be friends anymore.” Here, breaking the code becomes a reality that is not funny at all. The rule in itself is exposed for more than a cute rhyme and is shown to hold great weight when it is not followed. Additionally, Ted draws an interesting distinction drawn between “Bros” and “friends,” a distinction that is also handled in the Bro Code itself. To quote the book: “Just because a guy is a dude, doesn’t mean that dude is a Bro” (Kuhn, 2008, p. 1). Ultimately, to become a full-fledged Bro, one must “faithfully uphold one or more of the codes in the Bro Code” and strive to aid in a Bro’s pursuit of getting laid (apparently life’s only worthwhile pursuit), but just because a “guy” or “dude” is a Bro to someone “does not make him *your* Bro.” Becoming a Bro, then, means attaining the highest level of friendship; it is classified as something greater than friendship. In the case of Barney and Ted, Barney knows that he has not upheld his moral code and therefore must be stripped of his Bro status, demoted to mere friend. Ted takes this breach of trust more seriously, relinquishing his acquaintance with Barney altogether.

Another facet of the Bro Code, brought forth in the episode “The Rebound Bro,” highlights what it means to be a “good” Bro, involving more than simply following the Code. As Barney auditions new Bros to replace Ted, the frontrunner is a man who serves as the antithesis to Barney’s confidence and represents a display of masculinity deemed to be ineffective in Barney’s realm. The new recruit, Randy, is shy and needs a pep talk to approach a woman, and even after he receives encouraging words, he hides under a table in fear. Humor here is derived from an unexpected twist in established male behavior, a depiction of masculinity that deviates from

the ideal Barney has established. Barney imparts his three beginner techniques for picking up women at bar to his newest protégé. The first, “isolate her from her friends,” second “repeat her name in conversation” and third “subtly put her down” are all further displays of male dominance and sly manipulations of women. Instead of practicing this lesson coolly, Randy instead blurts out what was supposed to be a subtle put-down, “You are a fat ugly whore!” an intense insult that is recited perfunctorily. Made clear from all of these interactions, a true Bro is at least comfortable speaking to women, whether they “seal the deal” or not. This construction of “correct” and “incorrect” displays of masculinity within the narrative are only humorous because the viewer is expected to subscribe to the belief that there are, in fact, correct and incorrect ways to be a man.

From these examples, we see that the narrative element that allows Barney to be a beloved character is the audience acknowledgment that his rarely well-intentioned behavior is portrayed self-consciously, nodding to a cultural and social model in contemporary American society for “appropriate” and “correct” masculinity. The resulting comedic effect is derived from an awareness of preexisting norms and values in heterosexual masculine culture, as well as from recognition of the absurdity and extremity of Barney’s behavior as a critique on socially acceptable masculine behavior. Without a hegemonic masculine model as a point of comparison for Barney’s character, the humor would not be successful. The satire exposes flaws in the social system and points to the performative nature of gender, but may also reproduce the more negative facets of constructed male identity. By acknowledging that these performances and homosocial structures hold validity through perpetuation of social standards such as those contained in the Bro Code, and especially within a humorous context, the underlying issues of mi-



sogyny are easily dismissed, leading to the adoption of a standard of manhood that may not be appropriate outside of a fictional world.

#### 4 “BECAUSE YOU’RE A WOMAN!”: HOMOSOCIAL BEHAVIOR IN AUDIENCES OF *THE ROOM*

“...the atmosphere hovers somewhere between rambunctious and mildly terrifying.”

-*Entertainment Weekly* on *The Room*

A line starts to form in the lobby of an iconic Atlanta movie theater at 9:20 on a Tuesday night. The crowd begins to thicken as 9:30 approaches, and conversation reaches a loud, lively murmur. Normally, moviegoers are allowed directly into their designated theaters, but this group of patrons is held in the lobby until exactly 9:30 p.m., and once the doors to the screening room open, fans eagerly spill into the large theater. The theater itself is newly renovated, but maintains the old theater feel with plush curtains in the doorways tied back with rope. Another massive version of the smaller doorway curtains can be seen covering the projection screen as you enter the large screening room. The formerly creaky and at times unstable blue seats are now bright red, sturdy and luxuriously equipped with cup holders in the armrests. Fans quote lines from the imminent film as they file down the aisles, referencing favorite moments, anticipating the spectacle to come: *The Room*.

*The Room* (2003), a feature film directed and produced by (and starring) oddball Tommy Wiseau, saw humble beginnings, only to transform into perhaps the “unintentional greatest movie of all time” (Delaney, 2013). After its limited release in 2003 and its eventual prized status as “the *Citizen Kane* of bad movies,” *The Room* has gone on to develop international fan followings and has inspired late night monthly screenings in dozens of cities, Atlanta, Georgia, included. Classifying it as a film worthy of study is questionable, at best, and not the intention of this analysis, though the emergent themes in the film do prove to be of significance. What is important here is the response of the audience, and the traditions, rituals, behaviors, and practices that *The*

*Room* inspires. Starting as a reception study, this particular project evolved into something greater. This ethnography has implications and provides insight into a, though very distinct and specific, homosocial world that directly relates to the current bro culture discussed in the previous chapters. The film itself contains a latent misogyny and distrust of women which is perceived by the audience and subsequently repeated and mocked during each viewing, and a privileging of male identities and allegiances tends to consume the audiences. Overall, these constructions of masculinities become apparent both onscreen and off, as audience members perform according to the rituals of *The Room*, mocking or otherwise. After the first screening and an eventual comparison of my experiences and observations across three separate viewings, several prominent themes emerged. First, there is a distinctly masculine presence, not only in the make-up of the audience itself, but also in the content of the jokes and audience behavior. Much like the presumed audience of the bromance comedies, the attendees of *The Room* (at least in my limited experience), are primarily young, white, middle class males, though females make up a large portion of audiences at these screenings as well. I found both the tone of the film and the tone of the viewing experience to have many similarities to the specific type of bro culture discussed in the previous chapters, most obviously the facilitation of male homosociality. Also, there is a clear sense of participatory etiquette which led me to examine the ways in which ritualized behavior plays a role in defining the fan community within the screening, as well as dictating who holds the most power amongst the audience members. It is clear from *The Room* audiences that “cult films acquire a select but devoted group of fans who engage in repeated screenings, ritual behaviors, and specific reading strategies” and gain approval from other fans through appropriate execution of such behaviors and readings (Church, 2011, p. 3).

So what is *The Room*, exactly? The premise of the film revolves around main characters Johnny, his “future wife” Lisa, and Johnny’s best friend (a designation mentioned constantly throughout the film) Mark. The three are entangled in a passionate love triangle, as Lisa decides she no longer wants to marry Johnny, who has become “boring,” while Mark struggles with betraying his best friend, and Johnny discovers that he has been manipulated and deceived by everyone he knows. Other characters include innocent neighbor boy Denny, who briefly encounters trouble with a drug dealer to whom he owes money, and Lisa’s mother Claudette, who frequently urges Lisa to see things through with Johnny (for financial support) and casually mentions her recent diagnosis with breast cancer. These and other subplots of the film are never addressed again or resolved within the film. Narrative flaws along with technical mishaps abound, making this turgid romance more comical than dramatic. According to an online article in *Entertainment Weekly* (Collis, 2008), writer, director, producer, and star “[Tommy] Wiseau insists he always intended *The Room* to be partly comedic, and that the movie's perceived faults — including the out-of-focus scenes — are deliberate” (the article subsequently quotes anonymous actors from the film who believe otherwise). *The Room* first opened in Los Angeles in June of 2003 to an audience enticed to attend by free soundtracks offered by Wiseau. Wiseau, who made the film independently, promoted it throughout Los Angeles on television and one infamously creepy billboard featuring his “glowering visage” (which remained prominent in the same spot for five years), with some advertisements comparing *The Room* to the “work of Tennessee Williams” (Collis, 2008). Reportedly, attendees of the premier in L.A. asked for their money back a mere 30 minutes into the film, while others laughed at the melodrama. Despite a disappointing \$1,900 gross over a two-week run in L.A., the film has since gained exponential momentum, thanks in part to one early fan, screenwriter Michael Rousselet, who, upon first seeing the film in “an ‘ab-

solutely empty' theater," excitedly urged friends to return with him and mock the terribly amusing movie in groups. Allegedly, *The Room* has since gained a following of celebrities including Paul Rudd and Jonah Hill (as mentioned in chapter one's discussion of *I Love You, Man* and *Superbad*), Kristen Bell of *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, and Will Arnett and David Cross of *Arrested Development*. With *The Room*'s celebrity following and eventual development into a national cult phenomenon, fans continue to attend monthly late night screenings across the United States and internationally in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (Collis, 2008).

Due to such a widespread cult interest, *The Room* may be classified and understood in terms of a subcultural ideology that surrounds it. Cult films, according to Jancovich (2002), are "specifically defined according to a subcultural ideology in which it is their supposed difference from the 'mainstream' which is significant, rather than any other unifying feature" (p. 308). Cult exists almost purely as an opposition to the mainstream, and these films are venerated because "they exist to be laughed at" (Jancovich, Reboll, Stringer, & Willis, 2003, p. 2). The film is bad, so bad, in fact, that it has been re-appropriated through the cult circuit, fitting into the "so bad it's good," category and not necessarily intended for all audiences, perhaps only for the knowing audiences who "get it." Even so, through my work on this project, an inherent opposition to the mainstream is complicated through the development of fan communities and rituals in screenings of the film *The Room*. Instead, we see some conformation to a hegemonic mentality, which will be discussed more fully later. The gathering itself may be secretive, available only to those privy to the information, but the behaviors inherent in the gathering foster a male dominated space and outlook. Even without this added complexity, bad movies are "appropriated as fun because they operate as objects of ridicule," and *The Room* is no exception (Feasey, 2003, p. 173). Nothing is

off limits for mockery in the context of each viewing. Audience members with cultural capital can draw from “knowledge of film history, form, and style” at the same time as they “attempt to distinguish themselves from middle-class conformity and highbrow aestheticism by privileging culturally low content as a source of subcultural capital” (Church, 2011, p. 9).

Audience members accomplish this in the context of a “bad” film through attention to flaws in the script, acting, and cinematography. Some rituals inherent in viewings of *The Room* involve making fun of the horrible dialogue and acting as the audience recites Johnny’s famous and dramatically delivered line “You’re tearing me apart, Lisa!” or responses to particularly cheesy lines: The line “If a lot of people love each other, the world would be a better place to live” is met with uproarious audience applause to mock the script. Transitions between scenes are also laughable, and the audiences have invented ways to entertain themselves during these shots as well. At least twice, the camera pans the entire span of the Golden Gate Bridge with cars driving across, and the audience chants “Go, go, go, go, go!” getting faster as the camera moves faster. Another especially entertaining aspect is noticing the reactions of first-timers who clearly have no idea what to expect. One obvious new comer, toward the end of the film, exploded with laughter “What is going on? I can’t take it anymore!” Again, at least half way through the movie, an audience member began to take issue with the morality of the cheating main characters, saying in disbelief, “This is so disrespectful!” Most of the others respond with sheer shock and confusion at the cinematic debacle taking place in front of them.

I attended screenings of *The Room* at the Plaza Theatre in Atlanta, Georgia, on February 26, 2013, and again on April 30, 2013. In between my viewings in Atlanta, I made a trip to Cine, a small theater in Athens, Georgia, which helped to contextualize each showing over not only time, but place as well. Much like the Plaza, the Athens theater holds monthly late night show-

ings of *The Room*, usually the last Friday of every month at midnight, and I attended the screening held on March 29, 2013. From each viewing in both cities, I was able to draw several conclusions. First, it is clear that even across cities, locations, and dates, fans of the film and supporters of the film experience cultivated around this particular movie remain quite similar overall. Fans are required, whether they realize it or not, to actively engage in the viewing experience regardless of how or what they contribute. Whether a seasoned veteran or naïve first timer (and there are plenty of both), all audience members seem to find something to say. For the former group, phrases, quotes, and additional adlibs relating to the film are practiced over multiple viewings and seem to be second nature. Even so, this does not seem to detract from the humor of the experience for those who have seen the film too many times to remember. In some parts, novice viewers catch on quickly throwing spoons with the rest of the audience on cue (a framed picture of a spoon coming into shot) and by the latter half of the film frequently inserting commentary of their own. Though not as rehearsed or intentional as the other dialogue permeating the theater, their sheer disbelief of the spectacle could be considered equally as humorous as the poor quality of the film or the other humorous participatory acts. Shouts of “Really? What is happening?!” are not unusual and immediately label the individuals as “newcomers.”

The similarities in viewings across time and place are what make the experience cohesive. There are elements that transcend each entrance into the weirdness of *The Room*, which helps build fan communities across the country. Even so, there are noticeable differences in the overall tone of the audiences, even such a short distance apart (about 70 miles from theater to theater) as Atlanta to Athens. One thing that could account for such differences is the demographic make-up of the audience—in Athens, the spectators were predominantly white, in their early to mid twenties, and most likely students at the University of Georgia, either current or re-

cently graduated. While some of this is only assumption, I will argue that the Athens audience was a more homogenous group than the frequenters of the Plaza Theatre in Atlanta. Ages of audience members vary more in the Atlanta audience, ranging from late teens (with the majority consisting of twenty or thirty-somethings) to several middle-aged attendees. The participants here are not bound by a certain neighborhood or university as in the case of the smaller community in Athens. Many people do seem to know each other in both locations, whether they flock to the theater in large groups, remember others from previous screenings, or know each other from the “real world” outside of the seclusion of the theater, maintaining a sense of sociality that is necessary for the success of a participatory event. Even so, there is enough diversity and improvisation to keep the experience fresh.

Downtown Athens, especially on a Friday night, is lively and crawling with young college students, which is why I was initially surprised at the low turnout at the midnight screening. At 11:55 p.m., five minutes before the scheduled start time, there were only 11 people in the small theater including myself and my boyfriend, who accompanied me on my research excursion. At 12:00 a.m. on the dot, larger groups of people began to trickle in the theater, with about 30 people total by the start of the film. At 12:05, the opening credits began to roll, and I immediately noticed a difference in participation, both in tone and in frequency. Spoiled by my seemingly more-invested Atlanta film-goers, I have grown accustomed to hearing uproarious applause as the lights go down in the theater and the flicker of the credit “Wiseau Productions” appears on the screen. In Athens, people seem to behave as if they actually came to *watch* the film, especially alarming considering the poor quality, though this changed as the film progressed. The initial hesitation to participate in the Athens audience may have been due to reluctance to be the first to break the silence or doubt about what to say or do. Lots of giggles trickled through the crowd



throughout, mostly in response to the cheesy dialogue or inconsistent plot points of the film. The audiences here seemed to be more enthralled with the spectacle of the horrible filmmaking similar to the phenomenon of watching a car crash...you can't take your eyes away. With all of these differences considered, the most marked and significant conclusion I drew from the viewing in Athens was that there *is* some consistent and obvious similarity between audience behaviors. Plastic spoon throwing, of course, is seen across the board. More crucially, though, is that each audience as a whole maintained a tone of disgust toward women (created and spurred on by the theme in the movie that pegs women as manipulative, especially in opposition to innocent, unknowing men). This misogynist tone was manifested through consistent verbal attention to the women characters in the film and the unification of the audience as a body against them.

So what is it about the movie-going experience that keeps people coming back? What is it about cult film, or *The Room* in particular? As I described to the friends I brought with me each time who were rather curious about exactly what they were going to witness, "It cannot be explained, only experienced." A large part of the appeal is indeed the social experience, and as McCulloch (2011) argues, such gatherings:

demonstrate that comedy acts as the foundation for the audience to form temporary communities, with attendees collectively displaying a strong pedagogical imperative that works to delineate "right" and "wrong" ways to behave during screenings. Audiences collectively but unconsciously establish etiquette and social norms, resulting in the creation of a comedy experience that is far removed from the experience of watching the film alone. (p. 190)

I would argue that the value of *The Room* is entirely dependent on place, at least in the sense that the phenomenon *is* the viewing experience due to the creation of "cinematic spectacle, an event

that goes beyond the mere screening of a film to include audience participation and exhibitionism” (DeVille, 2011, p. 1). The theater, the spoons, the snarky audience commentary are what make the movie worth seeing – otherwise there would be little reason to watch the film (unless you prefer to mock in the privacy of your own home). Almost certainly, the fans who attend screenings are “there to celebrate and take pleasure from its ‘bad’ qualities, to laugh at it rather than with it” (McCulloch, 2011, p. 190), and under most circumstances, talking, and loud, obnoxious laughter (much less throwing spoons) would not be tolerated in a movie theater or other public arena. An important point to make is that the sense of community that develops is entirely dependent on space and is fleeting. As McCulloch (2011) points out, “each time the film is screened in a cinema, individual attendees (almost always in small groups) effectively become part of a temporary community, one that exists only in that place and until the cinema has emptied” (p. 203).

Viewing *The Room*, then, is not the “single focus of the evening and often just serves as a backdrop” to the temporary community that develops (DeVille, 2011, p. 3). In Atlanta at the Plaza, the last Tuesday of every month is *The Room* night, and something that I, and presumably many other viewers of this film, have come to anticipate with simultaneous excitement and fear (mostly due to the projectile plastic spoons). The lobby of the Plaza Theatre is lined with movie posters from French films and other non-mainstream fare. From this, audience members begin to develop expectations “based solely on the identity/personality of the theater” (DeVille, 2011, p. 5). For the first screening, I bought tickets early to ensure that we didn’t have to wait, and the line nearly stretched the length of the lobby and out the front door. Participants are encouraged to bring new viewers each time, and the emcee asks whether there are any “newbies” in the crowd beforehand (to which some more seasoned and therefore somewhat snobbish audience

members respond with booing). For the second screening, I managed to gather a group of five such newbies for the occasion and built up the anticipation accordingly. I actually found myself making some of the same jokes I overheard before to assert myself as a previously initiated member of *The Room* culture. The same announcer/emcee/employee introduces the film each time and makes various references to the movie that new viewers would not yet be able to understand. Non-members of the culture (or those who are not yet initiated) are isolated in these moments.

The rituals and overall tone of the experience become clear almost immediately, as members begin interjecting their own commentary as soon as the opening credits roll. It also becomes immediately apparent that this is a space in which passive, polite viewers do not reap any rewards and where masculine aggressive qualities earn respect (Feasey, 2003). As Hollows (2003) argues, these movies are not inherently masculine, but many of the fan practices and rituals privilege “masculine competencies and dispositions” (p. 38). Historically and similarly to the specific case of *The Room*, cult films are shown at night in urban settings, conditions that may evoke fear about the personal safety of women, and some of the most prominent rituals developed in response to the film work to exclude women from participation (Hollows, 2003). There is constant backlash directed toward the female character in the film, Lisa (played by Juliette Danielle). As the actress’s name appears on the screen in the opening credits, it is met with emphatic cries of “bitch!” and “whore!” by those who are already acquainted with her manipulative character in the film, and one audience member at the second screening made vomiting sounds at her first appearance on screen. Her attractiveness is also an ongoing joke among the audience, spurred by the constant assertion within the film that Lisa is “beautiful,” “sexy,” “hot,” etc. Clearly the audience does not agree and finds ways to express this across each viewing, either by

laughing at the film's suggestion that she is attractive, or by inserting commentary such as "LI-AR!" when one character comments on her "sexiness." Significantly, it is not only male audience members who engage in Lisa's degradation, but women as well.

Another highlight of the film is the emphasis on Mark as Johnny's "best friend." This fact is mentioned excessively, by many different characters, within the film. To make fun of this, audience members have adopted the tradition of shouting as though in pained disbelief (conjuring the rules of the Bro Code) "HE'S YOUR BEST FRIEND!!!" each time this is mentioned, and to also emphasize the painful betrayal Johnny experiences as his best friend cheats with his future wife. While the audience shows disdain at Mark's behavior, their outright hatred and contempt is primarily directed at Lisa. Mark, though also clearly in the wrong, still manages to obtain collective audience forgiveness by the close of the film, justified by Lisa's apparent manipulation of him, tricking him into having the affair in the first place. Johnny's eventual discovery of the affair causes him to lash out, destroy the home he shares with Lisa, and (spoiler alert) meet an untimely and abrupt end by killing himself. Ultimately, Johnny is situated as the literal victim of a woman's deceit, as is Mark who proclaims he wants nothing to do with Lisa after discovering Johnny in a pool of blood. The plot melodramatically portrays the both men as victims, and the audience shares this sentiment (ironically or otherwise). The expression of dislike for Lisa, the allegiance to Johnny and his best friend Mark, and degrading remarks about Lisa's physical appearance and womanhood in general are specific practices that may not seem inviting to a female viewer, but the boys' club may be open to women who "seek to distance themselves from the negative associations of femininity" (Hollows, 2003, p. 39). In this way, women and men alike may actually be encouraged to participate in demeaning the female character and aligning with Johnny, and are integrated into the audience by doing so.

Screenings of *The Room* and complementary practices “are not simply premised on a rejection of the mainstream but also on a rejection of ‘improper’ cult fans” (Hollows, 2003, p. 48). Hollows argues that proper fandom is based on a “form of homosocial bonding” and the rewards of cult fandom are available to those who “have the most mastery of its masculine dispositions” (p. 48). New gags and jokes are accepted with laughter or rejected with silence or further snarky commentary, and there seems to be an establishment of main “players” in the audience, male or female, early on. During the first viewing, the most commanding female presence served a subversive role to the usually male dominated space as she mocked the male characters’ ability to perform sexually, as well as their physical appearances, ironically saying “Ow ow!” as Johnny’s mostly naked body appeared on screen. Some jokes are met with laughter, others silence or less appreciative laughs. A particularly effective female interjection at the second screening occurred during a graphic sex scene in which we see a little too much of Johnny; the audience member responded with a long, drawn out, horrified scream, met with clapping and laughter from other audience members.

An important point is that “the participatory behavior that takes place at *The Room*’s theatrical screenings is always the result of negotiation and compromise” (McCulloch, 2011, p. 203). The audience members do build on each other’s jokes/participation and interact with each other, with laughter at others’ adlibs as a sign of approval. The in-rhythm clapping to an R&B song during one of the many gratuitous sex scenes got off track during one viewing, and others purposefully built on the out-of-sync clapping, making it worse and therefore funnier than before. One female at the second screening (perhaps the same subversive figure from the first) made anti-male remarks with a favorable response at first, but her lack of creativity and use of the same joke several times seemed to turn the audience off to further jokes. It became interac-

tive when, for at least the sixth time, the subversive female made a remark about Lisa not having an orgasm for five years (the length of the main characters' relationship) and everyone else responded as if on cue "Seven!" (A running joke is that at some points in the movie, the characters reference their five-year relationship met with shouts of "Seven!" from the audience, and at other times reference their seven-year relationship, met with shouts of "Five!" pointing again to the inconsistencies in the script.) Some members who throw their spoons prematurely are shunned by the group with silence, boos, or other snarky remarks – clearly they know not what they do. It seems best to sit back and wait to participate when you realize the full consequence of your contributions. There are other references to spoon throwing and consistent emphasis on the need for proper technique. In one particularly spoon-heavy scene, one audience member proclaimed "It's hard to maintain this level of spooning!"

It becomes clear after several viewings that certain audience members plan their adlibs in advance. Some are pointed and articulated too precisely, as if they have been waiting the whole month to debut the new joke/gag. Others clearly develop their jokes and mocking remarks on the spot. There does not seem to be a difference in approval based on these categorizations as they do not determine the quality of the joke—the key is full commitment. Value lies in the unexpected because "in fan cultures, to be a fan is to be interesting and different, not simply a 'normal' cultural consumer" (Jancovich, 2002, p. 308). There is also clapping from the audience for particularly good commentary. Sometimes the unexpected commentary is the most effective in eliciting laughter – this is achieved through theatrics of the audience members themselves. In one shot, Mark (the best friend) is shown wearing a visor that disappears in the next shot (one of many goofs). The amusement, however, comes from one audience member's full commitment and feigned disdain, exclaiming "WHERE IS YOUR VISOR?!?!?" Others incorporate never be-

fore seen physical participation and commitment. In both screenings, audience members ran up the aisle to the front of the theater, waved at the screen during a shot in which Johnny appears to be looking down and out into the audience, and shouted “Johnny, I came for your birthday!” and the rest of the audience approved with outbursts of laughter.

Actually, as Elizabeth Bird (2003) notes, “the issue becomes not whether an object or text is good or bad, but how it functions within a society” (p. 119). I would argue that the growth of *The Room* in popularity may have started due to its poor quality and sheer disbelief at its absurdity, but that it has maintained a significant cult following as a result of its *function* in its formation of fan communities. However, it is also *The Room*’s social function that contributes to a unified mindset, perhaps enhanced by repeated viewings. As Church (2011) argues of cult film audiences:

Even as they deflect potential accusations of prejudice by invoking their ironic distance from the films, viewing political correctness as a sort of mainstream/majority viewpoint that is playfully rejected in order to gain subcultural capital. This assertion of bad taste becomes seen within the subculture as an active and empowering show of oppositionality, allowing cultists to resist the external suggestion that their subcultural difference marks them as pitiable and disempowered. (p. 14)

In this way, acting in politically incorrect or otherwise offensive ways becomes the norm in the environment of these screenings. Misogyny becomes acceptable because it allows entrance into the fan community and shows opposition to mainstream views, even if individual audience members do not subscribe to such principles in “reality.” This is not to suggest that the film changes audience members’ values regarding the appropriate treatment of and behavior toward

others in “real life,” but that the cult film environment fosters a space in which otherwise unaccepted behaviors are welcomed and encouraged.

Church further asserts that “the cult-viewer demographic was and is primarily white, male, middle-class, moderately to well-educated, and roughly between the ages of fifteen and thirty” (p. 9). Although they exist as oppositional texts and create transgressive spaces for cultural expression, the environments created by cult film fan cultures “reaffirm rather than challenge bourgeois taste and masculine dispositions” and foster the “Othering of specific social groups” (Jancovich, Reboll, Stringer, & Willis, 2003, p. 2). This is interesting for two reasons: it seems as though the subversive cult audiences are actually succumbing to the mainstream, and also, if this is the case, that the mainstream may be more supportive of misogyny than we believe. Also, this is potentially the same group of people influenced by bromance comedies and bro culture in general. As Hollows (2003) argues, attributes of the mainstream such as domesticity and the passive reproduction of dominant culture can be likened to typically feminine characteristics, which the radical subculture with attention to transgression and subversion of popular culture are argued to be more traditionally masculine qualities. Celebration of bad movies such as *The Room* “relies on and reaffirms existing cultural hierarchies” (Feasey, 2003, p. 173) and the viewers set themselves in privileged positions. Therefore, the subversive subculture actually reproduces existing power structures and models of hegemony rather than challenges them (Hollows, 2003). While the audience members at the three screenings I attended seemed to be mostly white with a few exceptions, and the ratio of men to women was only slightly in favor of the men, the environment and rituals themselves are what serve to perpetuate a typically young, white, male ideology. “Fan practices in cult are constructed as masculine” (Hollows, 2003, p. 36) which makes the participation itself a gendered practice.



This gendering is reflected not only in the content of the film (despite the holes in the script)—there are several highly sexualized scenes with gratuitous nudity, and the main female character, Lisa, is portrayed as manipulative and philandering to the detriment of her loving boyfriend Johnny—but also in the ritual of the audience. These anti-female sentiments are only amplified and extended in the audience participation. There are countless jokes about Lisa’s physical appearance and weight (as previously mentioned): “She looks like a veggie tale.” “She’s been beached.” “Look at those sausage fingers!” As Lisa’s mom makes the point that she can’t support herself financially, the audience responds with (in unison) “Because you’re a woman!” and repeats this later when Lisa states “No one listens to me.” The need to conform in order to participate in this case may “act as a tool for encouraging and justifying tastes that may otherwise be deemed illegitimate” (McCulloch, 2011, p. 206), but seems perfectly appropriate and acceptable within the confines of this experience.

There are many rituals that remain consistent across viewings, and some that change month to month, but audience members seem to accept new and old equally as long as they adhere to previously established rules of the fan community. Furthermore, the mostly educated, middle-class fans realize that some actions are “politically incorrect but still take pleasure in such otherwise disreputable spectacle” (Church, 2011, p. 14). It is infinitely fascinating that a film within a specific context that promotes outrageous behavior (and a misogynist undertone) that would be deplorable in any other setting is endlessly amusing in the confines of the theater. Perhaps adherence to these rituals in the context of cult film viewing speaks to a need for peer approval and a desire to gain admittance to an exclusive community, despite otherwise questionable behaviors. There is an underlying pressure to adapt to the homosocial space of *The Room* and to adopt its practices, all of which contribute to the formation of a specific site for male bonding

and an evident extension of a preexisting bro culture. Still, while there is opportunity for subversion by the audience, especially in terms of gender, my experiences with *The Room* in particular confirm that the subversive nature of subculture itself ends up having to conform to its own standards, and each subculture eventually develops new versions of “acceptable” and “appropriate” practices.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

These are a mere sampling of the now ubiquitous references to bromance bro culture in American popular culture. In a recent episode of *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart* which originally aired on January 28, 2013, one of the show's "female correspondents" Samantha Bee narrated a segment in which members of the military and other political officials were attempting to prevent women from serving on the front lines. To quote Bee's satire, the decision to allow women to serve alongside men in this way would "screw up the 'gynamic'" and "interfere with bromance" of an all male tradition. The tone automatically evokes a sense of homosociality and the notion that a female presence would disrupt a private boys club and sphere for bonding. *The Daily Show*, of course, is another text that founds itself on mocking the inconsistencies in culture, critiquing through satire, and also shares an inherent ironic tone that is so evident in and essential to depictions of bromance and the proliferation of bro culture. This and other examples also propel the notion that bromance, or reference to it, must be housed in humor in order to be understood. Humor's function as both dismissive of the subtexts of bromance (whether focusing on the queerness of such intimate male relationships or the vulgarities and misogyny on the other end of the spectrum) and as a force that highlights the existence and magnitude of such relationships and environments in American culture is at its core inconsistent. The contradictions in the humor serve as a greater representation of the contradictions of bromance and this era of masculine construction. There is a constant struggle of binaries, male and female, straight and gay, feminist or sexist, a negotiation of power and impotence, as if these are the only choices with no space for interpretation in between. However, because these contradictions are present and increasingly salient and self-aware, there is more opportunity for expression of fluidity and varied constructions of masculinity.

The most important thing to draw from this analysis is that masculinity is not fixed, stable, or constant. Portrayals of masculinities in the bromance era, from the beta-male of bromance films to the exaggerated trope that is Barney Stinson, are only a few specific types of constructions, but they represent new masculine identities that have emerged in American popular culture in the past 10 to 15 years. In this way, bromance is more than a silly term to describe guys who may have previously been called “best friends,” just as bro culture is more than a fabrication in fictional film and television shows. They are both concepts grounded in reality that represent a current American masculine hegemony. Each of the analyses in this thesis are connected by three recurring ties: a comedic foundation that both transgresses and reinforces existing norms, the notion that gender is a socially constructed concept, both performative and variable, and an element of homosociality. There is perhaps a never ceasing pressure to conform to a certain group or culture within the social structure, with bro culture as a prime example, amplified by its homosocial nature. The bromance paradigm, a way of thinking about male relationships in the current culture, produces social ideals and new assumptions about what it means to be a man, and the examples contained in this thesis show that there is a relationship between such representations in popular culture and masculine hegemony. The relationship might not directly correlated, one as cause and other as effect, but there is indeed an inextricable interplay of words and meanings and frames that shape our thinking about masculinity and femininity alike.

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