

Bromances: The Road to Outdated Masculinity

Cartoons and adolescent TV shows are fertile ground for childhood fantasies and extravagant imaginations. A talking sponge, crime fighting sewer turtles, and 12 year old ninjas contribute to silly make-believe, but although these cartoons may seem childish, when looked at from a different perspective, messages about friendship, having fun, and growing up can be uncovered in almost all adolescent TV shows. Many of these shows focus on the relationships created among characters that allow them to overcome obstacles and learn valuable life lessons. A specific kind of relationship referred to as the bromance is a non-sexual relationship between two males of any age. Bromances have made themselves present in various adolescent on-screen programs. Oftentimes these relationships show male characters who form really tight bonds, allowing male viewers of various age ranges to imagine themselves in scenarios where bromantic emotions and actions are taking place. Ken Gillam and Shannon R. Wooden touch on “homosociality, intimacy, and emotion” of male characters, specifically in Pixar movies, in their essay “Post-Princess Models of Gender: The New Man in Disney/Pixar”. Gillam and Wooden address “same-sex (male) bonds” and the use of them to redirect the now out-of-date male protagonist role; when I encountered their argument, I was reminded of the anime (Japanese film and TV animation) and manga (Japanese comic book) *Naruto* that my siblings had so religiously watched during my adolescence. Despite the struggle I had to follow the plot, I specifically remember my siblings’ obsession with the characters Naruto and Sasuke - two rivals/best friends. Now that I have rewatched a good majority of the anime and can follow along with greater ease, it has become more apparent to me exactly how dependent on each other these two characters are for their own personal development and the overall driving force of the plot. Bromances in

adolescent TV such as *Naruto*, and the films *Gilliam* and *Wooden* analyze, suggest that close relationships between males are not only accepted but perhaps even the norm in children's media. Furthermore, studies of the relationships between adolescent males indicate that such media reflects a reality: boys want and value close male friendships. The normality of bromances in media and life might lead to the conclusion that the old gender binaries are fading, and boys are no longer just expected to be masculine. However further research complicates such a conclusion because as these boys get older, they claim that they feel rising pressure to follow a more stereotypical approach towards homosocial relationships. Therefore, the study of media suggests that while old ideas of male relationships are changing, the new portrayals of male characters are still clinging to aspects of the older alpha-male expectations.

The *Naruto* manga's influence over various childhood memories is made evident through its hard copy production. *Naruto* has sold over 235 million copies worldwide as of 2019, making it the third best-selling manga of all time (Best-selling). *Naruto* has an entire online encyclopedia dedicated to itself called "Narutopedia", with community pages, articles, and synopsis of episodes created entirely by fans. The wide popularity for the physical copy, despite the show's availability on streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu, or even anime streaming websites like Crunchyroll, demonstrates viewers' attachment to the manga. For the manga to have been released in 1997, and the anime in 2002, it has maintained a strong presence in many people's childhoods; even I, who was only two when it first started airing on TV, have a small collection of volumes in my bookshelf.

The first clear interaction between Naruto and Sasuke can be seen in the third episode, when the young ninjas are put into teams of three where they will have to train and accomplish

missions together in order to continue evolving as ninjas. Upon finding out that the two will be placed in the same team (named Team 7) along with Sakura, a pink-haired girl with an obsession for Sasuke, both of the boys are annoyed at the thought of having to work together (Narutopedia). Even though the Naruto and Sasuke bromance develops from their initial hatred towards each other, they have still been put in the same team where they will learn to work together in order to complete missions and go up in ranks. Similarly to the Pixar movies that Gillam and Wooden analyze in their article, “male/male relationships emerge that move the fallen alpha toward a new masculinity” (Gillam and Wooden). Naruto’s fallen alpha moment comes when he realizes that the reason he has been put on the same team as Sasuke is because he received the lowest score on his entrance exam, and Sasuke the highest. Naruto feels threatened by Sasuke due to his high praise from their fellow classmates, and makes it a point in the entire series that he wants to engage in a fight with Sasuke. Just as Naruto can learn from his relationship with Sasuke that he will not always be the strongest ninja around, young boys can take away from the anime that oftentimes the way to improve themselves is to have the determination and character to step back from their own position and allow themselves to learn things from others. In the manga it is not just the main protagonist who benefits from lessons learned in their bromance; in fact, Sasuke also learns from Naruto, and is inspired by his strong will to never give up even when he looks completely beat up.

However, engaging in a fight with each other to see who is the most competitive or strongest between the two is not the only method in which their bromance can evolve. Maybe there is more to a bromance than just friendly competition and slaps on the back. In the study “Close Friendships Among Adolescent Boys” published in 2012, developmental psychologist

Niobe Way explores the homosocial friendships of 135 adolescent males who have attended high school in the United States. Way discovered that for most of the boys' closest friendships, rather than viewing their friends as "worthy opponents in the competition for manhood", the "boys valued their male friendships greatly and saw them as essential components to their health", because these friends gave a platform on which "they were able to share their thoughts and feelings". Similarly, Naruto and Sasuke share a very intimate moment in Volume 26 when Sasuke is attempting to run away from the village to join a band of bad ninjas whose leader, named Orochimaru, convinces Sasuke that he will become extremely powerful if he joins them. In order to prevent him from going, Naruto engages in a battle with Sasuke. In a fit of rage and frustration from Naruto's evident losing, he gains an extreme amount of energy from his chakra (power source within the body) and begins to turn the tables with swift and powerful attacks against Sasuke. With much surprise at the immense strength coming from Naruto, Sasuke asks, "What... tell me what are you?" to which Naruto responds, "Your Friend" (Kishimoto). Up until this point neither of the characters has ever acknowledged the other as a true friend, whereas here, Naruto makes it evident that the only reason he puts so much effort into saving Sasuke is that he really cares for him. Once Sasuke has a chance to catch his breath, he tells Naruto that he could not possibly understand him and the pain he feels from loss because unlike him, Sasuke lost his parents at a young age, whereas Naruto's parents died when he was a baby, so he has no recollection of them. Even though Naruto understands that they do not share the same pain, he shares a really emotional thought. He tells Sasuke, "It's true I don't know a thing about having brothers, or real parents", but "whenever I'm with you... I imagine maybe that's what it's like to have a brother" (Kishimoto). Here Naruto is allowing himself to tell Sasuke how much he means

to him and the feelings he truly has towards him. As was shared between many of the boys in Way's study, their bromances allow them to share their thoughts and feelings that they would otherwise not make very public.

Spilling your guts to your best friend - emotionally of course- seems to be a prerequisite for friendship among many boys, even for those in later adolescence. In a study titled "The Bromance: Undergraduate Male Friendships and the Expansion of Contemporary Homosocial Boundaries", Stefan Robinson, Eric Anderson, and Adam White explore undergraduate men's idea and understanding of the bromance, in an age group just slightly older than Way's highschool subjects. Among the participants that were interviewed, when asked about emotional intimacy, "all participants suggested that bromances differ from friendships through the level of emotional disclosure that is permissible to one another. This included sharing secrets and confiding exclusively with their bromantic friend(s). They were clear that a bromance offers a deep sense of unburdened disclosure and is emotionality based on trust and love" (Robinson, Anderson, White). Way also discovered in her study with boys in earlier stages of adolescence that "secret sharing or talking intimately with best friends was how boys defined a best friend and betrayal of this confidence was the primary cause for terminating a close friendship". The things shared among these best friends ranged from "regular" or "not too deep" secrets about girls or girl-related topics to much deeper secrets related to conflicts at home or in the family. The ability these boys possess when opening themselves up to one another in complete comfort shows the trust and dependence they give and receive towards each other. Their ideas of what qualifies as a friend in the varying age groups shows that although boys can be perceived as unemotional, tough, and lone wolf-like, like the alpha model Gillam and Wooden see being

dismantled in Pixar movies, boys in fact seek attention, validation, and the chance to be heard whenever they feel they want to get something off their chest. This aligns with Gillam and Wooden's new man in Disney/Pixar, a male protagonist who presents a new form of masculinity and is accepting of more traditionally "feminine" aspects. For example in *Cars*, Lightning McQueen's relationship with Mater teaches him the foundational "responsibilities of friendship -demanding honesty, sensitivity, and care" (Gillam and Wooden). These typically "feminine" traits of sharing your hardships, and expressing true emotion are being reflected in TV and film as is in real life. This newfound openness towards a male companion suggests a shift from the old stereotypical isolated alpha-male model.

Naruto and Sasuke's relationship seems pretty reflective of what all these boys are describing as a trustworthy and meaningful bromance, and mirroring this relationship that boys experience in real life on TV and film can serve as reinforcement towards the normalization of an intimate male/male relationship. Although it is in their early adolescence (12-13 years old) where Naruto and Sasuke develop this strong relationship, it can be seen later in the second series *Naruto: Shippuden* that now that the characters have entered mid to late adolescence, their bromance has become more isolated. It seems obvious that Naruto and Sasuke, although slightly dramaticized, carry a very good bromance and can be influential on young boys' ideas of a bromance, such as opening up, pushing each other to do better, and never giving up. But if they played such a huge role in the other's life, why is it that as adults they once again become isolated from each other? When Naruto successfully manages to knock some sense into Sasuke, he thanks him and returns to the village, but only for a moment before he decides that he will not live in the village amongst the people but rather watch and protect from afar.

This separation of friendship is very typical in most real-life bromances despite the studies demonstrating that boys crave bromances not only in early to late adolescence but beyond that, because they later feel pressured by the gender stereotypes imposed on them to break the links they carried with past friendships. The boys in Way's study experience a loss of close male friendships as they enter late adolescence, and begin using phrases like "no homo" after any statement that sounds remotely intimate. "No homo" is a slang phrase that is used after saying something that someone fears will make them sound like they are gay. As my years in high school have taught me, the phrase "no homo" was used often after one of my male friends would tell his male friend that he looked good or dressed nicely that day; it does not seem gay to me to compliment your friend, but I assume it is because my female friends and I have never found it uncomfortable to publicly display affection and express our opinions about the others' outfit or appearance. Thus such behavior expressed typically in women is viewed as effeminate when acted on by men. Way states that the boys are in a period of loss at the ages of 16, 17, and 18 as "their minds are increasingly attuned to cultural messages about manhood and maturity", and "became more distrustful and less willing to be close with their male peers and believe that such behavior, and even their emotional acuity, put them at risk of being labeled girly, immature, or gay."

The boys in Way's study seem to use the preservation of masculinity as an anti-gay tactic. In order to understand why many males (growing or into adulthood) acquire this idea of masculinity, it must first be understood how American society first gained the notion of using masculinity as a form of homophobia. In Jeff Casey's doctoral dissertation, *Bachelor Parties, Bromances, and the Brokeback West: Male Friendship in Post-Closet American Culture*, he

places the construction of “dominant ideas about masculinity” from the late nineteenth century through the late twentieth century. At the turn of the twentieth century a conglomeration of social reform such as African Americans’ fight for basic civil rights, an influx of non-Anglo immigrants, the Second Industrial Revolution which modified working conditions and jump started the labor movement, and the feminist movement along with other social reform movements had all Americans questioning their position in society (Casey). During all this social turbulence, white middle class men were creating a new version of idolized manhood. Casey refers to Gail Bederman, the author of *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*, where she observed that Victorian manliness had lost its appeal as a working class manliness became more powerful. Manhood, which was once defined by “self-control, rationality, refinement, and sympathy”, had been reformed into a masculinity which openly opposed femininity, and could be classified by minor aggression and sexual desire (Casey). Gay male culture began to emerge from the late 1880’s to the 1930’s; around the 1930’s is when the definition “between ‘normal’ men and queer men became increasingly better defined” (Casey). Due to The Great Depression, The New Deal, and World War II, clusters of men were relocated mostly because of the military and other male-oriented occupations. This allowed urban gay subculture in the 1940’s to thrive, but provided an open invitation to paranoiac anxiety during the Cold War (Casey). Through all these social reforms masculinity came to be defined by the necessity to have heterosexual desires, and therefore male homosocial relationships came to represent the opposite of masculinity.

The evolution of Naruto and Sasuke’s relationship perfectly reflects the necessary measures many men believe they need to take in order to be classified as masculine, maybe even

without consciously knowing that they are doing so, only knowing that being masculine is what seems to define being a man. As stated previously, once Naruto brought Sasuke back to the village Sasuke decided to leave and live mostly in isolation. Not only does the physical separation of the two characters represent the breaking of ties between their homosocial relationship, but Naruto falls into the heterosexual desires Casey identifies have come to define masculinity. In the last episode of *Naruto: Shippuden*, Naruto marries Hinata, a very timid bashful girl who has always had feelings for Naruto since they were young but was always too afraid to tell him. Of course Naruto was too hung up in his relationship with Sasuke to even notice the feelings Hinata had for him. In *The Last: The Naruto Movie*, which is canon meaning that what happens in this movie is officially accepted as part of the story line, while on a mission to find Hinata's sister, Naruto realizes that he somehow now loves Hinata. In the storyline this movie can be dated somewhere in between the last ten episodes of *Naruto: Shippuden*. By the end of *Naruto: Shippuden* the nations have been brought to peace, Naruto manages to bring back Sasuke after what seems like a never-ending mission, and together along with the rest of their ninja friends they save the world from being destroyed. After all the hardships Naruto and Sasuke have gone through together, suddenly they are somehow at peace with no longer needing each other, and instead Naruto settles down with Hinata, whom he never shows much interest in until the very end of the series after Sasuke leaves. Whether Masashi Kishimoto was writing with Casey's ideas of what society has created to be the opposite of masculine in mind, Naruto and Sasuke's bromance follows a path that avoids further homosociality and embraces heterosexual intimacy.

Bromances can be a very educational example for many young boys to have in order to learn determination, teamwork, emotional expression, and ultimately how to love others, some of which these emotions are often seen as limited to only girls. *Naruto* is a great popular culture example that presents a bromance that serves as a learning lesson for the two boys directly involved in this friendship, and for those watching. With the rise of social movements geared towards acceptance of people of all sexualities, it could be inferred that shows like *Naruto*, and the fact that it focuses on a homosocial male relationship, would be a perfect example to teach kids, especially boys, that expressing themselves with typically more feminine qualities does not make them any more or less masculine. In fact gender is not quite a binary, but more of a spectrum where people can equally interact and there is not a definition for what makes someone more or less male or female. Despite *Naruto*'s positive aspects and the strides being made in cultural acceptance of the changing expectations for men, *Naruto* still depicts a bromance that clings to the older alpha-male archetype, an alpha-male that rejects femininity, and is defined as the polar opposite of anything homosexual. The hope is that future coming of age shows will completely disregard this archaic idea, and create homosocial storylines that last their lifetime.

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