

*I Love You, Bro: The [Mis]Representation of  
Male-Bonding in Boy Bands through their Music*

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**Abstract**

The intricacies of defining a relationship between the same sex often yield to misperceptions of gender preference of that individual who is living in a heteronormative society. The so-called male-bond or ‘bromance’ which typically exists in boy bands have ample time to stay together and to get attached. With this, an inevitable question has been raised about their sexual orientation and gender identity creating misrepresentations in public sphere. The paper aimed to analyze specifically the music of One Direction and how they represent male-bonding in terms of the lyrics of their songs and the nonverbal communication of their music videos. It can be observed in their music that their songs suggest ‘bromance’ relationships particularly in their song “Little Things.” In order to get a deeper perspective, this paper traced back the development of boy bands; when and how boy bands emerged and their representation of masculinity. Eve K. Sedgwick’s Theory of Homosociality was used to explain how this special kind of friendship among males exists without being coined as homosexuals. Sedgwick explained that the homosocial desires existing among males were not necessarily romantic. However, when an interpretative textual analysis was used to examine the lyrics of ‘Little Things’ and its music video, the study revealed that One Direction had set a different perception of ‘masculinity.’ Thus, it creates a new trend of boy bands.

Keywords: bromance, boy bands, homosociality, music

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## **Introduction**

According to wisegeek.com, a boy band is defined as a musical act composed of at least three young men who can sing and dance. They do not necessarily play instruments which set them apart from a 'band' we typically know. They fall into different genres like rhythm and blues, pop and hip hop. Young female audiences are the usual target market of boy bands.

Boy bands started during the mid-1950s though the term 'boy band' was then called the hep harmony singing group. Famous boy bands since then are: the Beatles (1960s), the Monkees (1966-1971), the Jackson 5 (1970s), the Osmonds (1970s), Menudo (1977), New Edition (1980s), New Kids on the Block (mid 1980s), Boyz II Men (early 1990s), Backstreet Boys (mid 1990s), Nsync (mid 1990s), Hanson (late 1990s), Jonas Brothers (2005), Big Time Rush (2009) and One Direction (2010).

There are templates incorporated with these boy bands why they called as such. In cleverworkarounds.com, some characteristics a boy band has are: (1) pretty faces, (2) five members, (3) can dance, (4) playing instruments are not permitted, (5) fashion-setter, (6) do not write their own songs, and (7) under the supervision of a record company. Most of the definitions if not all are seen with the boy bands mentioned above.

### **The Formation of One Direction**

One Direction started their career when Niall Horan (19), Zayn Malik (20), Liam Payne (19), Harry Styles (19), and Louis Tomlinson (21) individually joined the seventh season of X Factor in United Kingdom. They were not qualified in the solo performer category but instead they were brought back to form as a group under Simon Cowell, house judge for X Factor. With their talents and charm, they had captured not only the judges but also the British crowd. They won third in the finals and eventually invaded the Europe through their music.

Since 2010, they had already produced four albums: *Up All Night* (2011), *Take Me Home* (2012), *Midnight Memories* (2013), and *Four* (2014) where they received several awards, topped hit charts and sold out albums worldwide. Their music styles are variations of pop and rock.

### **Theory of Homosociality**

The concept of masculinity and male friendship is not static during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In American culture, there existed a continuum between homosocial and homosexual bonds. During the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, men could express emotions with fervor and openness. Upon the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, intimacy between men became indistinguishable from the images and language of love (Rolf, 2011). It is also important to note that during the Victorian America, homosexuality was a taboo. However, on the duration of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, what is acceptable and unacceptable forms of male friendship changed.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, an American academic scholar, who specialized on queer studies, coined the term 'homosocial' and made a distinction between homosocial and

homosexual desire. In her book, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), she explains that there is a male homosocial desire existing among males (be it overt heterosexual to overt homosexual) that is not necessarily romantic. She coined the term homo- to challenge the existing concept of hetero- and bi- and be able to distinguish from one another.

Male bonding is not a new term to be exact. Even Aristotle wrote a classical description of friendship around 330 BC saying, “It is those who desire the good of their friends for the friends’ sake that are most truly friends, because each loves the other for what he is, and not for any incidental quality.” This definition is the counterpart of what we called “bromance.”

Bromance is a portmanteau of the words brother and romance. Coined by Dave Carnie, editor of *Big Brother* (American Skateboarding magazine), in 1990s. He referred it to the relationship developed between skaters who spent a great time together. Bromance is a non-sexual relationship between two or more men.

### **The Homosocial on the Little Things Lyrics**

Boy bands have been criticized even before that homosexuality is being suggested in their songs and music videos. The effeminate image of Nick Carter of Backstreet Boys, the song writing partnership of John Lennon and Paul McCartney of Beatles and the revelation of Ricky Martin of Menudo being gay—these are some indications of the imagery and the realities happening within the boy band world.

One Direction, a British boy band, is setting a new trend in terms of male bonding in the boy band culture that is prevalent in their songs and music videos. Songs like *What Makes You Beautiful*, *One Thing*, *Live While You We’re Young* and *Kiss You* hit the UK music hit chart.

*Little Things* is one of the songs from their second album *Take Me Home*. There are a lot of critical responses and reviews from the music critics. It is perceived as problematic especially from the boy band’s target audience who are females in their teens, according to Grady Smith of Entertainment Weekly. Fantasizing female body is not appropriate at an early age which may also affect One Direction’s image.

*Little Things* is a song about overseeing the imperfections of a person and loving her despite of. Flaws like freckles on the cheeks, crinkles in the eyes when smiling, sleep-talking, and even weight concerns—these little things do not matter for people who are in love.

On a heteronormative perspective, this is a song of a man who loves his girlfriend enough for him to disregard her flaws, that despite of these little things, he still loves the girl endlessly, (as what the lyrics say). On the other side, a queer reading about the song will create a totally different meaning. Instead of a song of a man to his girlfriend, it can be a song of a man to his man. In case of One Direction, this can be their song for themselves.

Analysing the text closely, it reveals a subtext emanating among the members. That is, it is a song that refers actually to their co-members. Boy bands live closer together

due to their tight schedules and various commitments. With this proximity, it is possible that each one of them can notice even the tiniest details of their co-band members.

First point of this song is that each member has a part sang individually. This suggests that every one of them has a say—a chance of expressing themselves. Second point, ‘little things’ are enumerated in the lyrics: size of the hand, freckles on the cheeks, crinkles in the eyes, dimples near the butt, sleep mannerisms and even the body weight. Here, space and time play a major role. The context implied a closed proximity between the two individuals—a scenario that is applicable among boy band members. That scenario may look like this: men living together in a single roof or even sharing a room (space); they are always together during rehearsals, shows, or tours (time); thus, the level of knowledge for personality differences are high.

### ***Little Things* Music Video**

The music video of *Little Things* also reveals a subtext based from a queer perspective. Factors which had presupposed to a queer reading include space and time, gestures and facial expression, and editing style.

### **Space and Time**

Coincide with the lyrics of the song, the way the music video is made used only one space—the recording studio. This is the only music video of One Direction that has no attempt to change the space or the milieu. Prior to the analysis of the lyrics of the song where men can be living together under a single roof or sharing a room, the music video substantiates that interpretation. In addition, no other individual exists in the entire video aside from them. A sense of territoriality (space) and belongingness happened among male friendship.

### **Gestures and Facial Expression**

There are also gestures, facial expression and eye contact that would indicate a homosocial desire—an explicit act of male-to-male fondness for each other. Zayn Mallik is tweaking Harry Styles on the cheek. Contrary to the previous music videos of boy bands especially during the 1990s, no such act of ‘intimacy’ was shown to the public. Louis Tomlinson’s gaze and smile to Liam Payne and their physical distance would suggest ‘comfortability’ with each other.

### **Editing Styles**

The editing—relations between shots—speaks so much in making the music videos. The way juxtaposition is applied to create a narrative or non-narrative gives meaning and a lot of interpretation.

The first sequence of the music video is an instrumental. Among the series of shots shown, Zayn is smiling (Shot A) followed by Harry Styles (Shot B) looking. Shot B is considered a reverse shot of Shot A for it follows the 180 degree rule to achieve continuity. That is Zayn is on the right side of the frame while Harry is on the left side of the frame.

Another example is Louis and Zayn having a shot/reverse shot with the audio *and it's you* paralleled to the video. Below is Niall singing *as I love you* followed by the shots of Zayn and Harry in a rack-focus technique (deep focus on a foreground while blurred on the background and vice versa).

## **Conclusion**

Over the years, the perception of masculinity and male friendship has changed over time. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century American culture characterized three themes of masculinity. These are: American men are trying to control themselves; American men are projecting their fears to others; and American men are attempting to escape when feeling pressured. The result is that they fear that American culture is being too feminized, too over-civilized, and too Europeanised (Kimmel, 2006).

Homosociality at present is more conspicuous than before particular among men. Boy bands is just one discourse among others where homosocial desires do exist. One Direction has set a different trend from the list of boy bands before where masculinity is one of the show-offs. They show a new perspective showing a different side of sexuality that is social; and different direction by One Direction.

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