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**MALE FRIENDSHIPS IN BOHEMIAN
RHAPSODY**
Bromance and Male Sexuality in Popular Culture

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ABSTRACT

Riikka Savela: Male friendships in *Bohemian Rhapsody* – Bromance and Male Sexuality in Popular Culture
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The primary goal of my thesis was to explore how friendships between male characters are depicted in modern Hollywood films. My secondary goal was to analyse how friendships between heterosexual and LGBTQ+ men are presented in Hollywood. The depiction of fictional bromances has begun to change over the years, and supportive and intimate friendships have become more common. Fictional friendships between heterosexual and LGBTQ+ men have also become more prominent. Due to these changes, analysing the variations between fictional bromances is topical.

I based my analysis on *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018), directed by Bryan Singer and Dexter Fletcher. My research questions were as follows: How does *Bohemian Rhapsody* portray the male bonds in the film? How do those dynamics in *Bohemian Rhapsody* compare to other modern bromances? How does Freddie Mercury's sexuality affect the friendships?

My primary theoretical sources were studies on fictional male friendships by Michael DeAngelis and Heather Brook. *I Love You Man* (2009) and *Wedding Crashers* (2006) were some of the films I used for comparison. Key terms were bromance and homosociality. My approach consisted of analysing scenes from *Bohemian Rhapsody* with help from theoretical sources, as well as comparing it to other bromance-centric productions.

I divided my analysis into two sections. In the first section, I explored the film from a homosocial point of view. In the second, I analysed how Freddie Mercury's sexuality affects the friendships in the film, and how these dynamics compare to their contemporaries.

I concluded that *Bohemian Rhapsody* differs from other bromance-films, for example by presenting physical and emotional closeness between male friends as natural. Mercury's sexuality does not affect the friendships, nor does it cause heterosexual panic for the other men. Mercury's sexuality is overall depicted in a less flamboyant way than in many other productions, though his sexuality is not the focus of the film to begin with.

Keywords: Bromance, homosociality, film, male friendship, male bonds, LGBTQ+

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

TIIVISTELMÄ

Riikka Savela: Miestenväliset ystävyysuhteet *Bohemian Rhapsodyssa* – kaveruus ja seksuaalisuus Hollywoodissa
Kandidaatintutkielma
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Tutkielmani päätavoitteena oli perehtyä siihen, miten miestenvälisiä ystävyysuhteita kuvataan nykyajan Hollywood-elokuvissa. Lisätavoitteenani oli tutkia miten ystävyysuhteita heteroiden ja LGBTQ+ miesten välillä kuvataan näissä elokuvissa. Kuvitteellisten miesten ystävyysuhteiden kuvaus Hollywoodissa on alkanut muuttua vuosien varrella, ja olemme alkaneet nähdä ystävyysuhteita, jotka ovat kannustavampia ja tunteellisempia kuin tavanomaisissa kaveruuselokuvissa (engl. bromance films). Tämän lisäksi kuvitteelliset ystävyysuhteet heteroseksuaalien ja LGBTQ+-miesten välillä ovat yleistyneet. Näiden muutosten takia on aiheellista verrata, kuinka nämä viimeaikaiset elokuvat eroavat miestenvälisen kaveruusuhteen yleisestä kuvauksesta Hollywoodissa.

Valitsin tutkimuskohteekseni vuonna 2018 julkaistun *Bohemian Rhapsodyn*, jonka ohjasivat Bryan Singer ja Dexter Fletcher. Tutkimuskysymykseni olivat seuraavat: Kuinka *Bohemian Rhapsody* kuvastaa miesten välisiä siteitä? Kuinka nämä dynamiikat *Bohemian Rhapsodyssa* vertautuvat muihin moderneihin kaveruuselokuviin? Kuinka Freddie Mercuryyn seksuaalisuus vaikuttaa näihin elokuvan miestenvälisiin suhteisiin?

Tärkeimmät teoreettiset lähteeni olivat Michael DeAngelisin ja Heather Brookin fiktiivisiin miestenvälisiin ystävyysuhteisiin kohdistuneet tutkimukset. Käytin vertausmateriaalina mm. seuraavia Hollywood-elokuvia: *Love You Man* (2009), *Wedding Crashers* (2006). Analyysini tärkeimmät termit olivat "bromance" (suomeksi "kaveruus") ja homososiaalisuus. Lähestymistapani oli analysoida kohtauksia *Bohemian Rhapsodysta* käyttäen apunani aiempia miestenvälisiin ystävyysuhteisiin kohdistuvia tutkimuksia. Tämän lisäksi vertasin *Bohemian Rhapsodya* muihin Hollywood-tuotantoihin, jotka keskittyvät miestenvälisiin ystävyysuhteisiin.

Jaoin analyysini kahteen osioon. Ensimmäisessä osiossa lähestyin elokuvan ystävyysuhteita homososiaalisesta näkökulmasta ja analysoin, kuinka nämä ystävyysuhteet eroavat muiden samankaltaisten elokuvien ystävyysuhteista. Toisessa osiossa keskityin siihen, kuinka Freddie Mercuryyn seksuaalisuus vaikuttaa elokuvan ystävyysuhteisiin ja kuinka nämä toimivat verrattuna muihin Hollywood-tuotantojen ystävyysuhteisiin.

Päädyin siihen johtopäätökseen, että *Bohemian Rhapsody* eroaa monilla tavoilla muista Hollywoodin kaveruuselokuvista. Erot tulevat ilmi esimerkiksi siten, että fyysinen ja emotionaalinen läheisyys miesystävien välillä kuvataan täysin luonnollisena. Mercuryyn seksuaalisuus ei muuta miesten läheisiä ystävyysuhteita, eikä aiheuta heterohahmoille paniikkia. Mercuryyn seksuaalisuus kuvataan kaiken kaikkiaan vähemmän teatraalisesti kuin monissa muissa samankaltaisissa elokuvissa, vaikka hänen seksuaalisuuteensa ei elokuvassa juurikaan keskitytä.

Avainsanat: bromance, kaveruus, homososiaalisuus, LGBTQ+, filmi, miestenväliset ystävyysuhteet

Tämän julkaisun alkuperäisyys on tarkastettu Turnitin Originality Check -ohjelmalla.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	5
2. Key Terms and Background	6
3. Friendship in Bohemian Rhapsody	9
4. Sexuality in Bohemian Rhapsody	14
5. Conclusion	18
Bibliography	21

1. Introduction

Bohemian Rhapsody (2018), directed by Bryan Singer and Dexter Fletcher, is a biographical film about the band Queen. The film follows Freddie Mercury and his bandmates from the inception of Queen in 1970 until their renowned performance at Live Aid in 1985. The primary focus of the film is the dynamic between the four members of the band, consisting of Freddie Mercury (Rami Malek), Roger Taylor (Ben Hardy), Brian May (Gwilym Lee) and John Deacon (Joe Mazzello). Additionally, the film is about Mercury's personal life and his struggles with his fame, sexuality and personal relationships. *Bohemian Rhapsody* is one of the few films to focus on friendships between men of different sexualities, and in doing so presents a slightly different, modern take on male dynamics. In this thesis I will analyse the film's friendships, focusing on how the characters' sexualities and identities affect these relationships. The primary goal of the thesis is to study the way in which the film's main male relationships are depicted in comparison to many of the film's bromance-focused contemporaries. The secondary goal is to analyse how *Bohemian Rhapsody* presents friendships between male characters of different sexualities.

While *Bohemian Rhapsody* was a financial success, earning 900 million US dollars at the box office (Rubin), the film has received some backlash from critics due to the inaccuracies in depicting Freddie Mercury's life. The controversy has come largely from the fact that the film spends most of the screen time on Mercury's other relationships instead of developing his romantic relationships with men (Ryan). However, my thesis focuses on *Bohemian Rhapsody* as a fictional film and to compare the movie to real-life events would distract me from my actual thesis questions. For this reason, I will not explore these topics of controversy, and will instead study *Bohemian Rhapsody* only as a work of fiction.

Previous research conducted on fictional male friendships includes works by Michael DeAngelis and Heather Brook, which will be used as my primary theoretical sources. According to

Brook, bromance films as a gender-bended genre have the potential to present “progressive or subversive masculinities” (250). As the idea behind bromance films is to focus on the bond between male characters, the lack of focus on heteronormative romantic relationships lends itself to the possibility of writing men in new ways. This makes *Bohemian Rhapsody*’s bromance-oriented storyline a very good candidate for analysing the current state of male friendships on screen. *Bohemian Rhapsody* is a recent film, and there have been no studies conducted of it as of yet, nor have I been able to find much research on the friendship dynamic between homosexual and heterosexual characters. When discussed, it is usually in relation to real life friendships – not fictional ones. I believe that studying these elements of *Bohemian Rhapsody* is useful, as the film is a recent example of a change in the way Hollywood is depicting male friendships, and male characters overall. The film is also relevant from the perspective of homosexual representation. According to JoAnne C. Juett, before slowly pushing into the mainstream in the early 1990s, gay cinema had been extremely rare (60). The twenty-first century has seen an increasing amount of LGBTQ+ representation in popular culture, with *Bohemian Rhapsody* being one of the most successful of these types of films. It is also because of the relevancy of LGBTQ+ matters that the topic of sexual identity in the film is worth exploring.

The analysis portion of my thesis will be split into two sections, the first of which discusses the core friendships of the film, and how these relationships are depicted in comparison to its contemporaries. Special attention will be given to the way *Bohemian Rhapsody* attempts to balance the film’s traditional family dynamics with the friendships. The second part of my analysis will focus on how Freddie Mercury’s LGBTQ+ status potentially affects these friendships, and how his sexuality is portrayed in the film overall.

2. Key Terms and Background

The friendships between the four main male characters in *Bohemian Rhapsody* could be classified as “bromances”, a term which, according to DeAngelis first gained traction as defining a “an edgy, risky version of a same-sex social intimacy” (2). The term is often used to describe platonic male relationships in various movies and television. Some recent examples of this include Archie and Jughead in *Riverdale* (2017–) and Elton and Bernie in *Rocketman* (2019). Much like DeAngelis, Elizabeth J. Chen defines bromances as follows: “They are restricted to men, the relationship is wholly asexual, and the relationship is an acceptable outlet for intimacy between men” (246). According to Peter Forster, while the bromance genre does acknowledge the recent attention given to male sexuality in popular culture, it simultaneously denies any possibility of gayification (192). All three definitions describe a bromance as a male-centered friendship that actively tries to deny any romantic implications in the relationship. The characters can have a strong bond, but their heterosexuality has to be established, usually by introducing a love interest for one or both of the men. It could be argued that it is partly because of the typical bromance-format that close fictional friendships between gay men and straight men are few and far between. *Bohemian Rhapsody* is one of the exceptions, with the movie focusing largely on Freddie Mercury’s relationships with his bandmates.

In addition to bromance, another significant concept used in my thesis is “homosociality”. Stefan Robinson et al. describe homosociality as “heterosexual men’s preference for same-sex socializing and friendship” (95). It seems to differ from bromance by showing a clear preference for male-male interactions, as opposed to male-female ones (be it romantic or platonic). This is a phenomenon present in bromance films, where the female characters are often pushed to the sidelines in favour of the male bonding experience. To an extent, this is also the case in *Bohemian Rhapsody*, where essentially every important aspect of the characters’ lives happens with their male companions. Nils Hammarén and Thomas Johansson define male bonding as being characterized by homosocial desire, as well as homosexual panic: “Homosocial desire refers to men turning their

attention to other men, and homosexual panic refers to the fear of this attention gliding over into homosexual desire” (2). In my analysis, I will explore both aspects of this, focusing on how *Bohemian Rhapsody* favours its male bonds over other forms of affection, as well as identifying how homosexual elements can play into these dynamics.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick defines the use of the word “homosocial” in historical context to mean “social bonds between persons of the same sex” (1). Sedgwick and many others associate homosociality with possible homoerotic undertones, with Sedgwick suggesting a continuum between homosociality and homosexuality (1). This element of homosociality and its connections to homosexual desire make it a fitting concept to explore in my thesis, as one of my goals is to explore how Freddie’s sexuality affects his friendships. A different definition comes from Nils Hammarén and Thomas Johansson with their concept of horizontal homosociality, which they define as a more inclusive, emotionally intimate form of homosociality (1). This contrasts with their concept of hierarchical homosociality, which they define as creating homosocial bonds for the purpose of maintaining hegemony (5). While my goal is to explore the parts of homosociality that specifically connect to sexuality and the preference towards same-sex company, it is my hypothesis that the interactions in *Bohemian Rhapsody* resemble those befitting horizontal homosociality the most.

DeAngelis defines a bromance as a bond between heterosexual men (16). *Bohemian Rhapsody* does not fit in this definition, as the story is centred around Freddie, who is part of the LGBTQ+ community. Due to the lack of previous research on fictional friendships between gay and straight men, I will focus on theories largely meant for bromances between heterosexual men. However, as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, Freddie does not necessarily have similar experiences with heterosexual marriage and heterosexual male bonding as many other male characters do. These things are considered in my research, but I would argue that they are not an obstacle for the relationships in *Bohemian Rhapsody* to be analysed and interpreted as bromances, or homosocial bonds.

When exploring the dynamic between Freddie and his friends, it is notable that *Bohemian Rhapsody* is a period drama and does not reflect the ideals and habits of the present day. Ron Becker describes modern bromances in the context of “a new gay-inclusive world”, in which straight men are forced to establish their heterosexuality (239). *Bohemian Rhapsody* is not set in the context of a “gay-inclusive world”, but in the 1970s and 1980s England, where heterosexuality was still the norm. This combined with the then-current AIDS-crisis, homosexuality was a taboo in many circles. For this reason, I have to acknowledge the fact that it is likely that the affectionate relationships between the men in the film have much to do with the fact that being gay was not common at the time. No one would suspect the men of being homosexuals, so there is no point in establishing that they are not. However, I do believe that Freddie’s sexuality makes *Bohemian Rhapsody* relevant in this context. Additionally, the film is very recent, having been released in November 2018. Because of this, it works well as an example of how Hollywood is currently tackling the themes of bromance and homosexuality. Even when producing a period drama, I would argue that it is very difficult to escape the values of the era a film is produced in.

3. Friendship in *Bohemian Rhapsody*

Brook describes the typical narrative of bromance films as follows: “the male leads’ meeting/and or cementing their friendship, a separation or estrangement from each other, and the negotiation of obstacles in order to secure their eventual reconciliation” (253). This description fits *Bohemian Rhapsody* perfectly. The film begins with Freddie meeting the rest of his bandmates and them becoming friends and co-workers. Around halfway through the film, a rift begins to form between the members, and at the end, the four negotiate the terms of their reconciliation, and reunite both as a band and as friends.

Throughout the film, the friendships are depicted as affectionate and emotional, with much emphasis placed on developing the friendships rather than the film's romantic relationships. This is something that sets *Bohemian Rhapsody* apart from many bromance comedies. When it comes to these emotional moments between male characters, films such as *I Love You, Man* (2009) do provide some of this, but most of the time in a comedic context. Homosocial bonding between male friends is rarely treated as seriously as romantic scenes between men and women. Particularly in bromance comedies, there is often a lack of both emotional and physical intimacy. Most discussions between the male characters are often either arguments or revolving around the women in their lives. In *Bohemian Rhapsody*, the relationship between the band is established early on as very comfortable and supportive. From playful teasing to heartfelt apologies, the friendships are presented as authentic and genuine. The men seem physically comfortable around each other, and due to their work and social lives being intertwined, spend the large majority of their day-to-day lives with each other. The closeness between the band members comes through the most when they work on their songs. They are depicted as very supportive towards each other, taking the time to reassure each other:

FREDDIE: Oh, and then there's the operatic section. You're gonna love it!

BRIAN: The... operatic section?

FREDDIE: I know, it sounds-

BRIAN: I love it, Fred.

FREDDIE: I don't know, it could be a flop, it could-

BRIAN: I love it!

FREDDIE: [chuckles] What've we got to lose?

BRIAN: [smiles] Nothing.

(0:40:53-0:41:10)

Bohemian Rhapsody delves into the themes of maintaining an important friendship while going through changes in one's own life. Freddie is the one who suffers from this the most, doing his best to keep his friends close while diving deeper into a lifestyle none of them approve of. As Freddie's new lifestyle, consisting of excessive amounts of drugs and alcohol, starts to deviate from the others, their working relationship becomes more strained. This is showcased, for example, in an exchange between Roger and Freddie:

FREDDIE: Stay for dinner. Anything you fancy.

ROGER: ...I can't. Wife, kids, you know.

FREDDIE: Of course.

FREDDIE: Oh, come on! We'll eat off the floor. It's clean enough.

ROGER: Another time, Fred.

(0:57:39-0:57:55)

Though the interaction is warm, their facial expressions and body language show that there is a rift forming between the two friends. This distance depicted within the relationship fits well with David Greven's description of preserving male friendships in films as being "unwieldy and challenging" (104), with many films presenting it as an "either or" situation between a happy domestic life and a wild, unpredictable life with male friends. In *Bohemian Rhapsody*, part of why the relationship between Freddie and his bandmates becomes strained as the years go by is because the rest of the men start families of their own. Freddie's sexuality is no doubt the reason for his disinterest in settling down with a wife, but this attitude is not unheard of in heterosexual bromance films (*I Love You, Man*). In Freddie's case, him not settling down has less to do with him not wanting a loving relationship, and more to do with the fact that he cannot seem to find anyone to have this relationship with. Much of the later part of the film is about Freddie feeling isolated and attempting to rid himself of the feeling by surrounding himself with people who do not genuinely care about him. The steady lifestyle of his friends is clearly troubling Freddie, and this escalates to a point

when he isolates himself from his friends completely. The resolution to this rift comes at the end of the film, when Freddie cites the band's creative differences as the very reason that they work so well as a group: "I went to Munich, I hired a bunch of guys and I told them exactly what I wanted them to do, and the problem was... they did it. No pushback from Roger. None of your [Brian's] rewrites. None of his [John's] funny looks" (1:39:47-1:40:09). As a result of this reconciliation, the band reunites in time to perform at the 1985 Live Aid concert.

DeAngelis describes the concept of "home" manifesting in the form of women and children in many bromance films (12). An example of this is *I Love You, Man*, where the main character eventually abandons his friendship with the other male lead to go back to the security of his future wife. While the film is supposed to be about the friendship between two men, it portrays the male relationship as unstable while painting the straight romance as the safe harbour for the male character. In *Bohemian Rhapsody*, however, it is established from very early on that the friendship between the four men is the concept of home. According to Brian May, the relationship between the four men is at the heart of the film: "It's about all the stuff that happens in a family – some good, some bad, the going away, the searching for independence and then the nurture of the family" (Yates). The band is often described as a family, and Freddie even refers to it as "the mother ship". It is Roger, Brian and John who Freddie spends most of his time with, and similarly it is those three with whom Freddie has the biggest confrontation as he begins making changes to his life. Additionally, it is the band that Freddie has a heart-to-heart with, explaining: "I need you. And you need me" (1:40:09-1:40:19). Thus, instead of the concept of a romantic relationship serving as the home and heart of the protagonist, it is the platonic male relationships he shares with his bandmates. The idea of a character finding a second home in a group of misfits is not uncommon, some examples including *Stranger Things* (2016-) and *Brooklyn 99* (2013-). However, in both instances, the group of misfits includes both male and female members.

The friendships in *Bohemian Rhapsody* differ from many others, particularly in the bromance comedy genre. In my opinion, this has much to do with the way the film avoids stereotypical depictions of masculinity, and in doing so, it avoids hierarchical homosociality – a term introduced in the theory section of this thesis. Hammarén and Johansson describe it as follows:

This common use of the concept – which refers to how men, through their relations to other men, uphold and maintain patriarchy, in terms of emotional detachment, competitiveness, homophobia and sexual objectification of women – tends to reduce homosociality exclusively to a heteronormative, androcentric, and hierarchical term used to show how heterosexual men bond and defend their privileges and positions (6).

This interpretation of homosociality can be seen influencing works of fiction as well. For example, films such as *Wedding Crashers* (2005) and *Ted* (2012) depict their respective bromances as competitive, devoid of physical or emotional affection, as well as devices to help the men pursue the women in the films. In instances like these, the homosocial bonds seem to serve more to uphold a specific image of masculinity and sexuality, similar to the one described by Hammarén and Johansson (6). With films like these, it is difficult to see how the situation would play out if one of the primary male characters was anything but straight. As these dynamics rely heavily on these stereotypical depictions of masculinity as hierarchical and dominant, and are often homophobic, the inclusion of an LGBTQ+ protagonist seems impossible. Films like *Bohemian Rhapsody* challenge these kinds of dynamics not only by having an LGBTQ+ protagonist, but also by depicting the male friendships in a way that does not cater to Hammarén and Johansson's definition of hierarchical homosociality. Instead, the friendships in *Bohemian Rhapsody* resemble more Hammarén and Johansson's use of horizontal homosociality, which they define as follows: "This concept is used to point toward relations between, for example, men – relations that are based on emotional closeness, intimacy and a non-profitable form of friendship" (5). Unlike hierarchical homosociality, horizontal

homosociality seems to be more open-minded towards different sexualities and identities and encourages emotional vulnerability and is therefore more fitting for the friendships in *Bohemian Rhapsody*.

4. Sexuality in *Bohemian Rhapsody*

Bohemian Rhapsody rarely draws any attention to the possible homoerotic undertones within the friendships, which are often brought to the surface in friendships between people of different sexualities. One might even expect something similar to what happened on *The O.C.* (2003-2007) when Marissa Cooper tells her best friend, Summer Roberts, that she is dating a woman. The two discuss it and hug, the emotional impact of the embrace being diminished by Summer's joke: "This isn't turning you on, right?" However, in *Bohemian Rhapsody*, no such moment occurs. The closest instance would be when Roger makes a comment about Freddie's moustache making him look "gayer". The men seem no less comfortable around Freddie after his coming out than they did before, and the physical aspect of their relationships seems relatively the same. It is exactly this lack of focus on Freddie's LGBTQ+ identity that, to me, makes the friendships seem less hostile towards the story's LGBTQ+ character. In cases like *The O.C.*, sometimes the focus on the possibility of homoerotic tension can make the heterosexual characters seem homophobic.

According to Ken Feil, many bromance comedies depict gay desire as ridiculous and repulsive (168). While this attitude towards homosexuality is lessening in cinema, it is still present, mostly in comedies. In the words of Jenna Weinman, fictional bromances often include "the comedic treatment of queer antics between purportedly straight men" (30). A few examples of this include a scene in *Friends* (1994-2004) where the group walks in on Joey and Ross having a nap together, and in *Riverdale*, when Jughead's mother mistakes his and Archie's friendship for a

romance. Both scenes result in the men denying any romantic implications behind their actions. In *Bohemian Rhapsody*, there are some moments that could be classified as queer antics. Out of the four, Freddie and Roger seem most physically comfortable around each other, an example of this being when Roger speaks into a microphone Freddie is holding between his legs. However, moments like these are treated as mundane, and are not drawn any more attention to than the non-queer antics between the band members. This depiction of male friendship lends itself well to the changing society, in which people no longer have to be one or the other.

Gay characters are often depicted as the comic relief, and the trope of the “gay best friend” is still visible even in recent shows and movies. When it comes to interactions with gay undertones between Freddie and his male friends in *Bohemian Rhapsody*, none of it is played for laughs, nor is any of it particularly highlighted. These moments also occur between the other members of the band, for example when John slaps a crossdressing Roger across the behind. Because of Freddie’s sexuality, *Bohemian Rhapsody* seems to be missing one key ingredient present in most bromance films: According to Karen Boyle and Susan Berridge, in bromance films, the homosocial relationships: “hinge, at least in part, on an at times violent repudiation of homosexuality” (361). As *Bohemian Rhapsody* is a film centered around an LGBTQ+ figure, this repudiation is not present, at least not in the same way. The film is told from the point of view of Freddie Mercury, and even though he experiences uncertainty about his sexuality, the attitude towards homosexuality is never hostile. The film has garnered some criticism (Ryan) for not focusing on Freddie’s homosexual relationships enough, but one could argue that by doing so, Freddie’s sexuality is represented in a more natural way, at least from a storytelling point of view. Freddie’s male friends never seem to judge him for his sexuality and display no signs of homophobia towards their friend. I would therefore argue that while not focusing on Freddie’s love life more is a disservice to Freddie Mercury, an LGBTQ+ icon, it makes the core platonic male relationships of the film seem more open-minded.

Brook draws attention to how, in many bromance films, the less physically and emotionally masculine characters are portrayed in a comedic way. She uses *The Hangover* (2009) to exemplify this, pointing out how the character of Alan is consistently feminized and queered in a humorous way (255). This is a contrast to the way the character of Freddie Mercury is portrayed, with no comedic tactics used against him or his sexuality. Freddie is colourful, expressive and charismatic, but much of this has to do with his stage persona. Off-stage Freddie is surprisingly quiet and shy and relies much on the support of his friends to lift him up in moments of insecurity. The flamboyance and theatrical personality are often present with fictional characterizations of gay characters, some examples including Kevin Keller in *Riverdale* and Cameron Tucker in *Modern Family* (2009-2020). While Freddie does embody some of this flamboyance, it is mostly present in his on-stage personality. In his day to day life, Freddie is expressive and uses words of endearment like “dear” and “darling”, but he is also calm and reserved – traits which are less common in gay stereotypes. With this in mind, it could be argued that the fact that Freddie is less flamboyant is part of why he is able to maintain close friendships with his heterosexual male friends. As Becker puts it, for straight and gay friendships to work on TV and film, one has to write a character who is not too gay, so he can better bond with his straight friends (252). It is difficult to say whether the dynamics in *Bohemian Rhapsody* would be different if Freddie’s on-stage personality was his true one. It is unlikely, because the band seems to have no problems with Freddie’s stage persona when they interact with him, even joining in on his antics.

Claire Mortimer discusses how, in many bromance films, the heterosexual relationships are marginalised to draw more attention to the bromance (135). This is very much the case in *Bohemian Rhapsody*, where Roger, Brian and John’s marriages are barely touched upon. For the most part, the primary reason for the inclusion of these heterosexual marriages is to showcase the difference in lifestyles between Freddie and his bandmates, and how, perhaps, him deviating from the heterosexual norm has resulted in him growing more distant with his friends. The heterosexual

relationships are inserted between Freddie and his straight bandmates, similarly to how marriages are used in other bromance films. Perhaps the best term to describe this phenomenon is Boyle and Berridge's use of the term "heterosexual alibi", which refers to how films employ heterosexual relationships to establish the characters' heterosexuality in largely bromance-focused films (361). In the case of *Bohemian Rhapsody*, the heterosexual relationships are also present to benefit the bromances, but not necessarily for the same reason. The heterosexual romances are used mostly to depict the growing distance between the four men as a side effect of growing older, rather than to establish the characters' heterosexuality.

Brook exemplifies the underlying heterosexual interest in most fictional bromances with a moment from *The Wedding Crashers*, where the male leads showcase affection towards each other by saying "I love you" to one another. Brook points out why the scene does not display affection in a genuine way: "The source of the friends' regard for each other lies in their facilitation of each other's heterosexual exploits, and their bromantic utterances underscore rather than contest their masculinity" (259). In other words, the affection between the male leads exists only to support and boost up each character's heterosexual romantic relationships, rather than to genuinely focus on the love between the men. This is something that often occurs in both female and male-focused fictional friendships, where the bonding often leads to a discussion about the characters' romantic lives. This results in the friendships serving more as soundboards for the characters to express their romantic frustrations to. Of course, this is not always the case, nor is it in *Bohemian Rhapsody*, either. The core friendships exist outside the characters' romantic lives, and never feel like background interactions that serve the romantic relationships. In fact, I would argue that it is the other way around. As Boyle and Berridge point out, the film *I Love You Man* goes to great lengths to establish the heterosexuality of the two male leads before diving too deeply into their friendship, and this is done by making the first few conversations between the men be about the prospect of heterosexual romances (364). While *Bohemian Rhapsody* does use some visual cues to indicate the

heterosexuality of its three other male leads, there is barely any female-related dialogue between the four men. Thus, one could conclude that *Bohemian Rhapsody* does feel the need to establish heterosexuality but does not deem it necessary to bring it up at every possible moment

5. Conclusion

When beginning this thesis, I was under the impression that *Bohemian Rhapsody* deviates from many of the typical plot elements used in bromance films. However, as I was introduced to previous research done on the bromance film genre, I was surprised to find that some of the storytelling methods used in them also appear in *Bohemian Rhapsody*. An example of this is the format of characters meeting, bonding, separating and reconciling at the last minute; this is also shared by most romantic comedies. The most noticeable difference is the fact most bromance films use these relationships to a comedic effect rather than depicting them as sincere. As established in my thesis, *Bohemian Rhapsody* differs from most bromance films by depicting the central male bonds as genuine and vulnerable. According to Mortimer, romantic comedies are generally targeted at women, while bromance films are catered towards a male audience as well (135). As *Bohemian Rhapsody* is likely to be most targeted at existing fans of Queen, there is no need to conform to the stereotypes present with either gender's target films. This results in a film that, while focusing primarily on bromance relationships, still includes many genuine moments of affection between the male leads – something more commonly seen in female-targeted films.

In *Millennial Masculinity: Men in Contemporary American Cinema*, Timothy Shary describes the way masculinity is depicted in modern bromance films:

In so many ways characters in bromance films enjoy themselves and face much lesser conflicts than those otherwise emotional men of previous genres and generations. I argue this is a positive, if perhaps still slight, advance in American men's appreciation

of gender malleability, since we witness in these films minimal transference of male-to-male affection into anti-homosexual denials and see more acceptance of sincere male bonding that had become so conflicted in previous generations. (XII)

Bohemian Rhapsody, along with its contemporaries, is one of the examples that embodies Shary's arguments towards a progressive form of male friendship bromance films. The film is not without its own issues, but the way in which male friendships are represented - as supportive, safe and affectionate – works towards establishing the possibility of affectionate male friendships being represented more often in media. *Bohemian Rhapsody* showcases friendship as not a distraction from the goal of home and family, but as the home and family itself.

Finally, the film's status as an LGBTQ+ film is worth addressing. According to Helene A. Shugart, the fact that representation of LGBTQ+ characters is still problematic has much to do with these films and shows being targeted at heterosexual people, and because of this, sometimes resulting in marginalized depictions of LGBTQ+ characters and relationships (70). The previously mentioned criticism of *Bohemian Rhapsody* could perhaps be partly explained by this phenomenon. A large amount of mainstream media is still consumed by presumably heterosexual audiences, so it is likely that studios are wary of including explicitly LGBTQ+ characters. This is somewhat exemplified by the fact that *Rocketman*, Dexter Fletcher's other musical biopic, did not perform as well as *Bohemian Rhapsody* did ("Rocketman"). *Rocketman* includes much more explicit representation of its gay protagonist than *Bohemian Rhapsody* does. With this in mind, *Bohemian Rhapsody* does not escape from a possibly problematic representation of its queer character. While Freddie Mercury's character is different from most stereotypical depictions of LGBTQ+ males, his sexuality is not brought into the spotlight enough to call it a completely well-rounded representation of the LGBTQ+ community. However, while *Bohemian Rhapsody* lacks in queer representation, it does showcase a well-rounded, supportive group of male friends. The friendships between the four male characters appear authentic, loving and unreserved in terms of both affectionate words and

deeds and represents one of the many new Hollywood productions that portray bromances in a new way.

Overall, *Bohemian Rhapsody* is a film that does well in representing a gay/straight friendship between a group of men, and making that friendship seem organic and natural without any sort of homophobia involved. Rather than any heterosexual relationship, the friendships between the male characters serve as the true family of the film.

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