

## **X-Men Bromance: Film, Audience and Promotion**

Richard Dyer's influential texts *Stars* and *Heavenly Bodies* posited the notion of celebrities, in his case film stars, as symbolically significant entities in the expression of cultural values and discourse. Contemporary celebrity culture and the rise of social media has seen a decline in the type of symbolically significant *film* stars first examined by Dyer, yet the notion of social substantiality still holds true. With varying levels of success, contemporary celebrities, by virtue of their online presence, constitute an influential factor in the ebb and flow of modern culture. They set trends, influence dialogue, and focus attention on issues. However, to compete for attention in the cluttered space of mediatised celebrity culture, group interaction has become key to going viral. Celebrity bromances in particular have increased in recent years and are now being used as a marketing technique.

Michael Fassbender and James McAvoy are among the large names attached to the X-Men film franchise. During the promotion of *Days of Future Past*, the bromance between the actors featured prominently in media interviews and audience commentary alike. Although the use of the celebrity bromance was not confirmed as a promotional strategy, it provided a means to generate interest and discussion. This paper will explore celebrity bromances in contemporary culture through a case study of the X-Men bromance, focusing on the analysis of a promotional video and the online response from audiences.

Keywords: X-Men, bromance, celebrity, junket, promotion

## Introduction

Celebrity culture is conceptualised as one that takes place between the private and public. Within this concept, the focus of attention from both media and audience is equally directed to the public spheres of a celebrity figure's profession, and the private spheres of their 'ordinary' lives. Indeed, the celebrity figure operates in dual terms; as a publicly constructed persona and (an imagined) private entity existing behind 'the manufactured mask of fame' (Holmes and Redmond 2006, p. 4). The private becomes a space where media and audiences speculate about the 'real' celebrity, constructing narratives that either reinforce or subvert the established public image of celebrity figures.

Narratives of the public facets of the celebrity figure – their public personas – play out through dispersed media outlets, wherein construction takes place through an intertextual web of images. These images most often serve the creation of individual celebrity persona, however occasionally fashion celebrities in plural: the celebrity couple. Increasingly a version of the celebrity couple, the celebrity bromance, is used to garner attention within a media saturated environment.

This paper explores the use of the bromance to combine the narratives of individual celebrity figures, and construct a celebrity bromance pair. It adopts Jonathan Gray's (2010) paratextual framework as a means to explore the role of the audience (and fan) in the popularisation of the off-screen bromance between Michael Fassbender and James McAvoy. This conceptualisation enables the celebrity figure to be explored as a text, and the activity of audiences as paratexts that engage with, extend, and shape the (celebrity) text.

Audience responses to a junket interview conducted with Fassbender and McAvoy (which was 'crashed' by Hugh Jackman) during the promotion run for *X-Men*:

*Days of Future Past* in 2014, forms the case study of this paper. The paratextual function of audience discussion is explored for its ability to draw attention to, and reinforce, the celebrity text. The function of humour to capture audience attention, and offer a means to negotiate, and react to, the dynamic of the celebrity couple, is highlighted as a key aspect of off-screen bromances. At the same time, the potential of the bromance as a promotional tool is examined from the perspective of audience recognition and propagation.

A discussion of fictional bromances facilitates the identification of themes of male homosocial intimacy that resonate in audience reactions to the off-screen bromance. As an exercise in the display of homosexual tropes with an accompanying disavowal of homosexuality, fictional bromances are performative, even within the context of a fictional narrative. Similarly, the display of off-screen bromances adopts highly performative elements that echo the performativity of celebrity figures enacting a public persona. Questions of authenticity thus arise, as audiences are required to establish a position from which to interpret the celebrity bromance, and evaluate its genuineness. Audience enjoyment, and the effectiveness of the bromance as a promotional tool, can be reliant on the believability of celebrity relationships. Authenticity is thus central to audience reaction to off-screen bromances. The exploration of bromance, performativity, authenticity and paratexts in the following sections provide the conceptual and theoretical framework for the case study of audience reaction to the off-screen bromance between Michael Fassbender and James McAvoy.

The case study demonstrates that audience discussion and fan works have an active role in the continued construction of the off-screen bromance. As a means to promote works, celebrity bromances are an effective way to capture audience attention

through the generation of discussion. Additionally, not only does humour in off-screen bromances serve to attract audience attention, the way in which humour is deployed differs from the on-screen. While the disavowal of romantic conclusions (elaborated below) is considered the primacy function of humour in on-screen bromances, the off-screen bromance deploys humour in more nuanced and performative ways. Both the bromance pair, and the audience adopt humour in order to enact (for the celebrities) and respond to (for the audience) the off-screen bromance.

### **The Bromance**

The conflated term ‘bromance’ (brother/romance) is first adopted by the popular press in 2005, following the release of Judd Apatow’s film *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*. (DeAngelis 2014). Conceptually, the term refers to an ‘emotionally intense bond between presumably straight males who demonstrate an openness to intimacy that they neither regard, acknowledge, avow, nor express sexually’ (2014, p. 1).

Scholarship of fictional bromances considers the broader thematic resonances of narrative-based bromances. which offer a means to explore the intimacy of close male friendships (Alberti 2013). They also reflect societal attitudes towards notions of masculinity (Chen 2012), and results in part from the increasing de-pathologising of representations of homosexuality in popular culture (DeAngelis 2014). Similarly, the bromance is considered a genre characterised by films such as *Superbad* (2007), *I love You, Man* (2009) and *The Hangover* trilogy (2009-2013) that owe a debt to early explorations of masculinity in the buddy films of the 1970s.

The ambiguity surrounding representations of male homosocial intimacy in film and television arises in part from normative attitudes in relational discourse. This attitude, suggests Michael DeAngelis, views ‘progression from “just friends” to “lovers”... [as] a naturalized “given”.’ (2014, p. 2) The presentation of intimacy

between close friends thus carries with it connotation – or expectations – of a romantic conclusion, thereby challenging heteronormative masculinity by flavouring the homosocial with homoerotic undertones. As social attitudes towards masculinity shifted and the notion itself became increasingly fluid, representations of male intimacy gained prevalence in American literature and popular culture, culminating in contemporary bromance films (2014, p. 4-6).

However, while there is increased representation of male homosocial intimacy, it is often utilised within narrative constructs that seek to reaffirm heteronormativity. In particular, humour is used to foreground and therefore disavow any homoerotic potentiality (2014). Homosexual tropes adopted in the service of exaggerated humour both highlights and downplay the *relational* significance of homosocial interactions. Male closeness is thereby expressed without the potential of the ‘naturalized “given”’ (2014, p. 2). Additionally, the presence of female characters attenuates the closeness of the male homosocial bond by offering heterosexual objects of desire (Alberti, 2013, p. 165). As a narrative device, they personify the heteronormative ‘conclusion’ for male characters whose desire for, pursuit of, and partnership with female characters reaffirms the convention of heterosexual union.

Concurrent to the thematic resonance of bromance as a genre is its function within wider culture as a form of discourse. DeAngelis (2014) suggests bromances offer discursive ways for masculinity to be explored and male intimacy to be expressed while maintaining heteronormativity and ensuring accessibility to both heterosexual and homosexual target markets.<sup>1</sup> In the words of Ron Becker, as a discourse, the bromance is ‘a way of talking and thinking about male friendships that helps produce specific

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<sup>1</sup> Jake Gyllenhaal and Heath Ledger played homosexual lovers in the 2005 film *Brokeback Mountain*, later sharing a real life bromance. The potential for broader audience appeal is thus doubled, with the nature of the relationships appealing to all audiences.

ways of feeling and experiencing homosocial intimacy and masculinity' (Becker 2014, p. 235). From this conceptual viewpoint, the bromance engages with the same notions of performativity that concerns celebrity identity, and by extension, engages with audience interpretation of degrees of authenticity.

### **Bromance, performativity and authenticity**

Performativity is a concept closely aligned with celebrity culture and studies thereof. Daniel Boorstin describes 'well-knownness' (1962, 1992 p. xli) as a primary characteristic of celebrity, suggesting that celebrities are publically visible entities. In turn, this public visibility involves the management of public personas and a degree of *performance*. Richard Dyer's seminal texts *Stars* (1979) and *Heavenly Bodies* (1986) further consolidate the notion that celebrity figures are a product of the society in which they operate and are ideologically, and practically, constructed to reflect or reinforce societal values.

Dyer's approach shaped celebrity studies as a way of exploring socially constructed notions of personhood. Specifically, the mediation of celebrity figures emphasises the highly performative context of celebrity culture and encourages investigation of the boundaries between private and public selves. The formation of public persona through which celebrity figures are articulated, managed and rendered symbolically potent, therefore becomes a primary step in achieving and maintaining public visibility. This step is achieved through broader industry processes Joshua Gamson terms 'celebrity making' (1994, p. 44), which involves a multiplicity of sub-industries to bring the celebrity figure to fruition. The public persona of a celebrity figure is thus one which is both constructed by the industry, and enacted – that is performed – by the celebrity figure in question.

Celebrities exist while they ‘move on the stage while the rest of us watch’ (Marshall 1997, p. ix). However, public and media interest is often equally, if not more, concerned with the figure behind the public ‘manufactured mask of fame’ (Holmes and Redmond 2006, p. 4). The production and consumption of celebrity gossip magazines and behind-the-scenes specials reveal consumer desire to uncover the *authentic* individual behind the public persona.

The term ‘authenticity’ is derived from the Late Latin *authenticus*, used in the early fourteenth century to mean ‘original’ and ‘primary’. The contemporary form of the term dates from the mid-seventeenth century and is used to denote genuineness and the factual representation of content (Oxford Dictionaries 2016). The notion of *authenticity* in a context of constructed persona and public performativity seems incompatible. Yet, it is precisely the audience’s awareness of the performativity of celebrity figures that nurtures curiosity of – and investigation into – the entity behind the persona. Gamson terms such audiences as ‘game player[s]’ (1994, p. 148) – that is, those who are fully aware of the constructed nature of media representations and derive pleasure from its deconstruction. In the highly mediated context of contemporary celebrity culture, authenticity is manifest less in notions of direct and factual representation, but rather in the perception of the genuine and consistent. Audiences who increasingly possess the media literacy of Gamson’s game players (1994) now also have the ability to access multiple sources contributing to the ‘structured polysemy’ (Dyer 1979, p. 3) of a star image archived online.

Additionally, contemporary celebrities increasingly display their ordinariness and present their private selves as a means to engage with audiences and create a sense of relatability, and authenticity. Celebrity figures can use the platform of social media to take control of their brand identities. While many rely on publicists and managers to

post on their behalf, audiences increasingly expect celebrities to display selfies and personalised posts to ‘prove’ their online authenticity.

In the words of P David Marshall, celebrity figures create a ‘public private self’ (2010, p. 44) wherein it is revealed ‘their versions of what parts of their lives they are willing to convey’ (p. 45). For the audience, the authenticity of the celebrity figure is gleaned from a cumulative account of their various *performances*. While audiences can never know for sure if a *real* entity exists, nor if that entity is the one displayed in the media, both audience and media nevertheless engage in speculation about the entity ‘behind the manufactured mask of fame’ (Holmes and Redmond 2006, p. 4). Authenticity, or more correctly the *perception* of authenticity, thus does not lie in revealing the *real* entity. Rather it is derived from a consistent display of selfhood across both public and private or ‘public private’ (Marshall 2010) spheres.

To express feelings and experiences associated with ‘homosocial intimacy and masculinity’ (DeAngelis 2014, p. 235), the bromance is also rendered highly performative as it engages with the nuances of a relationship as it is *enacted*, replete with aural and visual tropes that both explore and disavow homosexuality and sexual possibilities. In particular, the suggestive *are they?/aren’t they?* dynamic depend on audiences’ acknowledgement of the unspoken possibilities of the relationship, and their willingness not to take the relationship at face value. It is a viewing position that mimics engagement with diegetic texts, expressed by DeAngelis as a variation of ‘...“I know very well, but all the same...” that comprises such an essential characteristic of the suspension of disbelief’ (p. 3).

To enable the paradox to succeed and allow audiences to at once read the relationship as intimate and non-sexual, suggestive and unachieved, bromances frequently rely upon knowing audiences to offset the potentiality of a natural conclusion



to the relationship. Like Gamson's 'game players' (1994, p. 148), knowing audiences are aware of the performed nature of the bromance. However, they also demonstrate an ability to discern the purpose of the performance and the willingness and playfulness to read the display as is presented, with the knowledge what is presented is not what is actually meant.

Hence, the genuineness of the bromance is not in its factual representation, but in the ambiguity of the middle ground. It requires the two parties to convincingly display the homosocial intimacy, and occasionally homoerotic undertones, of their interaction with enough consistency to generate the perception of an authentic relationship. While this question is less applicable to fictional bromances, off-screen celebrity bromances, much like celebrity persona, are highly reliant on the creation of a persistent, consistent and seemingly genuine degree of interaction between the celebrities involved. The bromance therefore engages with the ambiguities of performed celebrity personas and relies on achieving a degree of authenticity to succeed.

### **Celebrity bromance and paratext**

If the viewer is the knowing audience who actively suspends disbelief when consuming fictional bromances, their role when engaging with celebrity bromances is potentially more multifaceted. The public personas of celebrity figures are formed through texts of 'secondary circulation' (O'Shaughnessy and Stadler 2012, p. 424) such as interviews, photo shoots, and red carpet appearances. Additionally, celebrity use of social media has resulted in the proliferation of images displaying the celebrities 'public private self' (Marshall 2010, p. 44). Thus, the celebrity figure leaves audio visual traces in the media, through screened works or images of profession or fame, and in the aforementioned public and 'private public' texts. For audiences, and in particular fans, these texts become materials for further production.

In *Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring participatory culture* Henry Jenkins

highlighted ways in which fan-created texts ‘appropriate’ (2006) media texts to enhance or extend fictional worlds. In particular, authors of fan fiction and vids (fan-created videos), appropriate the image of actors who play fictional characters to retell or expand the media text. These fan works align actor images with their on-screen fictional counterparts. Within these works of fan fiction, the image of the celebrity is adopted to signify the character, and any descriptions or plot development is imagined to apply to the character. These works of fan fiction are aimed primarily at exploring and extending the boundaries of the story, and remain firmly within the confines of *fictional* creation.

However, some fan texts draw inspiration from celebrity figures, viewing them as sites of speculation and embellishment within contexts that blur fictional and non-fictional boundaries. Such works are described as Real Person Fiction (RPF), or – if addressing homoerotic subject matter – Real Person Slash (RPS), by fans and scholars alike (Piper 2015, Busse 2006).

Scholarship of fan fiction has focused on its ability to extend and enhance canon (Jenkins 2006), or to subvert and resist it by creating specific types of fanon (fan fiction) (Busse 2006, Larsen and Zubernis 2012). When considering RPF/RPS, scholars often interrogate the distinctions between the *real* figure of the celebrity, and the celebrity-as-character (Lam 2014) who performs a fictional function within the fan text.

Melanie Piper’s (2015) exploration of slash fan fiction featuring the actors Jessie Eisenberg and Andrew Garfield from *The Social Network* (2010), considers the celebrity’s physical body as a framework upon which fictional texts are built. Specifically, it is the evocation of the image of the celebrity figure that gives the fan text some degree of accuracy. However, it is clear that the celebrity image is not a representation of the celebrity figure within the context of fiction. Rather the

‘appropriation is used to recontextualize the public image, but not to the extent that it is expected to be believed as a representation of reality’ (2015, 6.3).

Likewise, Larson and Zubernis’ (2012) interviews with the creators of *Supernatural* expound on the separation between *real* figures and the celebrity figure that becomes texts for fan reappropriation. Referring to his appearance in *Supernatural* fan fiction, series creator Eric Kripke describes his image as a façade that ‘belongs to the writer’ (p. 215). His physical body and professional narrative becomes material for fan creation that draws upon, but is distinctly separate from, the lived experiences of the celebrity figure. Lam (2014) terms this perception of the celebrity figure as ‘actor-as-character’ (p. 78), wherein the fan author views media representation of celebrities in the same way as canonical media texts. Rather than creating fictional embellishments of media texts narratives, the minutia of the celebrity figure (including their appearance and live experiences) becomes raw materials for fictionalisation (2014).

Fans who imagine the celebrity figure as a character embellish quasi real-world scenarios to explore issues, including media and fan culture. In these instances, as Busse explores in her examination of RPS involving \*NSYNC band members, the fictionalised celebrity becomes a proxy for the fan author. Writes Busse, the text ‘recounts not only the act of fannish writing, but also the complicated...ties it created between the slash readers and writers’ (2006, p. 217) thus revealing a fan’s ruminations over the act of writing fan fiction, as well as the anxieties of appropriating and speculating about the private lives of celebrity figures.

While not all fan fiction authors position themselves within their texts, fan fiction offers readily constituted evidence of viewer speculation about celebrity figures. Specifically, fan works illustrate how fans construct readings of celebrity relationships, and authenticate these by appropriating elements of reality such as physical

characteristics (Piper 2015). These readings may coincide with broader media representations of celebrity pairings, for instance *Harry Potter* fan fiction extrapolates on the off-screen bond between actors Daniel Radcliffe and Tom Felton, reported in the media, to create Drarry (Draco and Harry) fan works. However, these works all refer to fans who devote time to curating specific readings of celebrity figures or characters.

Audiences who do not actively create texts, but who may comment on media and celebrities do not feature within this framework. Nonetheless, their discursive practices do function to keep topics 'live' and relevant. Indeed, most users who comment on the video at the centre of this case study most likely fall into the latter category. Gray's paratextual framework offers a means to consolidate the works of fans who create texts, and audiences who talk about them.

Gray defines paratexts as materials that 'surround' a text, but which is also a part of the text. Rather than being peripheral, Gray argues paratexts create texts; 'manage them [and]...fill them with many of the meanings that we associate with them' (2010, p. 6). While this definition applies to media texts, the concept can be extended to celebrity figures. This is particularly the case when considering early scholarship of film stars. Richard Dyer defines film stardom as the construction of 'an image of the ways stars live' (1979, p. 39) away from their filmic works. Similarly, Allen and Gomery suggest stars are comprised of 'a duality between actor and character' and cite Edgar Morin to define stars as 'actors "with biographies"' (1985, p. 172 cited in Geraghty 2000, p. 184). These 'biographies' are constructed from media representation outside of the site of performance. This includes media reports circulating around the actor and their fictional works. These texts are constituted under conditions where, in the words of Christine Geraghty, 'intertextuality may be important since knowledge of the star's 'real' life is pieced together from gossip columns and celebrity interviews, establishing a range of

discourses in which the star features' (2002, p. 188). P David Marshall's definition of a 'presentational culture' (2010, p. 38) updates these sites to include social media platforms where celebrities offer additional insights into their private spaces. Thus, the narratives of celebrity figures are texts written through both official (media reporting) and unofficial (fan sites, celebrity social media) sources.

Geraghty's reference to the importance of intertextuality reinforces a conceptualisation of the celebrity's narrative as a text. Gray's paratextual framework can thus be applied to theorise the relationship between audiences and the celebrity narrative. Writing of media texts, Gray characterises fan works as unofficial paratexts circulating in an intertextual relationship to the source text (generally a film or television series). 'Viewer-created paratexts' (2010, p. 143) are, like fan fiction, works that extend narrative or draw attention to character relationships not given full attention in the main work. In addition, Gray suggests discussion between viewers 'will forever play a constitutive role in creating the text. How we talk about texts affects how others talk about and consume them...' (2010, p. 174). These discursive paratexts operate peripherally to the media text, however can gain sufficient momentum so as to influence the text's reception. Gray offers the example of discussion surrounding the production of *The Lord of the Rings* films that created anticipation for, and shaped the evaluation of, the adaptation from book to film. Mostly positively reaction to that adaptation subsequently shapes discussion of *The Chronicles of Narnia* film series, establishing a benchmark against which to assess the latter films. Writes Gray:

The entertainment industry can fashion a text at its outskirts, using paratexts to set the parameters of genre, style, address, value and meaning... audience members are involved in this fashioning of the text not simply as consumers of text and paratext, but as creator of their own paratexts. (2010, p. 173)

The 'biographies' of the celebrity can be viewed as a text, at the outskirts of which both viewer-created works and audience discussion operate in a paratextual fashion. Creating works enables viewers to inject their own framing strategies for how to navigate through a text (2010). When applied to the celebrity figures at the centre of this case study, the works literally frame how their relationship is 'read' through the creation of videos highlighting bromance behaviour. At the same time, discussion by audiences draws upon, and reinforces, this reading.

A paratextual framework offers three avenues through which to consider audience engagement with the celebrity bromance. Firstly, videos that highlight the bromance between the celebrities can be viewed in light of Gray's 'viewer-created paratexts' (2010, p. 143). They provide 'evidence of how viewers make sense of texts' (p. 146), in this case the reading of the celebrities as a couple. Secondly, audience comments constitute discursive paratexts that shape the context of how the bromance is viewed and evaluated. Through discussion, audiences also point intertextually to other known bromances within the *X-Men* film franchise (notably Ian McKellan and Patrick Stewart). Finally, the discussion creates a condition in which the off-screen bromance is perceived through the same playful 'suspension of disbelief' (2014, p. 3) characterised by DeAngelis as a requirement of audiences of fictional bromances. In particular, the reaction of audiences to the humour displayed in off-screen bromances indicates their willingness to invest in the dynamic and believe in the intimacy at the moment of performance.

The paper explores audience responses to a video interview, *X-Men Days of Future Past Interview! Jackman photobombs Fassbender & McAvoy!* (Beyond The Trailer, 2014) featuring Fassbender and McAvoy with a special appearance by Hugh Jackman, during the promotion of *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (2014). Through

analysis of audience comments, it suggests that such videos can work as strong promotional tools to stimulate audience interaction and highlight specific celebrity pairings. Additionally, it highlights the humour displayed in off-screen bromances suggesting that, in addition to functioning as a hook to attract attention, humour in off-screen contexts transcends that of on-screen bromances. This is achieved through more nuanced engagement with humour in off-screen contexts, which not only foregrounds but disavows homoerotic subtext (seen in on-screen bromances), but is employed at varying levels by both celebrities and audiences. The bromance pair engage in a high level of humour in order to construct a likeable and affable image, deploying frat boy humour to underscore the pairing. Simultaneously, audiences adopt humorous language and playful attitudes in response to the dynamic. Humour is thus both performative and connective. It becomes the conduit through which the off-screen bromance is enacted and received.

Before examination of the video, it is useful to establish the context of the ongoing narrative of the Fassbender/McAvoy bromance.

### **The McAvoy/Fassbender bromance**

The *X-Men* film franchise is based on the Marvel comic book series of the same name. The cast includes Patrick Stewart, Ian McKellen, Hugh Jackman, James McAvoy and Michael Fassbender.<sup>2</sup> It is unclear when exactly McAvoy and Fassbender became recognised in popular culture as a celebrity bromance. One possibility is in a short interview session for Skymovies *Face2Face* in 2011. In this session, the actors interview each other and cover topics illustrating their mutual affection from the genesis

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<sup>2</sup> While this paper acknowledges that on-screen and off-screen bromances can help to sell the perceived authenticity of one or the other, the focus here is on the off-screen relationships being used to sell films. Magneto and Professor X have a strong bromance based on a love and hate relationship, while Wolverine has a bond with Professor X and hates Magneto. Thus, the roles played by the actors does not necessarily impact on their bond off-screen.

of their acquaintance in Steven Spielberg's *Band of Brothers* (2001); to their reconnection while in traffic on the back of two Vespers years later (Face2Face 2011). Much of this information is repeated in a 2011 interview for *The New York Times* in which McAvoy sums up his friendship with Fassbender by recounting the Vesper story and their antics on the set of *X-Men First Class* (2011). It is from these stories that the audience can ascertain that they are friends and that their connections began before starring in *X-Men*, suggesting a degree of authenticity.

These on-set anecdotes and origin stories are folded into a performance that the two actors quickly realise the media require of them. In a 2014 profile on McAvoy for online magazine *Out*, Paul Flynn describes how early in the process the pair discover '...exactly what interviewers wanted from them ...[and] turned themselves into an affable Celtic double act...' (2014). Flynn cynically suggests an element of performance to the display of their friendship, however in reality, a trust had developed.

The crux of the film (like the comic series), and the only way to make the story work in the minds of both actors, is the central relationship between the young Charles and Erik (Face2Face 2011). The relationship not only provides the main emotional storyline for *X-Men: First Class* (2011), it also establishes the friendship between the older versions of the characters presented in the three previous *X-Men* films. Both actors felt the need to work on the relationship of the characters but also, in the words of McAvoy, to 'back [each other] up' (2011) in the face of vested studio interests.

What emerges from this connection is a culture of on-set antics that reinforces a *frat boy* persona, constructing them in the image of male immaturity that underscores many of the male homosocial films predating the contemporary bromance (DeAngelis 2014). In particular, media reporting tends towards sensationalised characterisations of the actors as a *couple*, while concurrently representing them as mature masculine



personas (Lam and Raphael 2016). Often the impression of closeness originates from the actors themselves.

While at the London premier of *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (2014), Jonathan Ross interviews both separately, starting with McAvoy:

Ross: I know a lot of the fans loved in First Class the relationship between you and Mr. Fassbender, Charles and Erik. There was an intimate moment or two there.

There was a connection. Do we finally get to see them kiss?

McAvoy: (laughter) Air kiss and eskimo kiss.

Ross: You know if you're air kissing him, he can use his brain to pull you closer, you know that?

McAvoy: That's a good one. He can try. He can keep trying. He's going to have to buy me dinner a few more times first. (2014)

Ross refers to their bromance as something fans enjoy. He also conflates the bond between the actors with that of the characters, thereby bringing to the off-screen relationship some of the *relational* subtext in the film.

Ross also asks Fassbender about the 'bromance', 'masculine friendship' and 'intimacy' shared on-screen with McAvoy, suggesting that McAvoy is 'willing [for a kiss] if you're game' (2014). In response, Fassbender sings 'Sometimes when we touch, the honesty's too much' (2014). Fassbender's use of humour conforms to other accounts of their bromantic behaviour during interviews, and reinforces the construction of a sense of closeness. Thus, the celebrity figure demonstrates a certain degree of agency in the construction of their combined persona through consistent and repeated performances of bromantic intimacy in both on-and-off screen contexts.

In 2011, the 'affable Celtic double act' (Flynn 2014) adopted by the actors on the junket circuit attracted viewer attention. Not long after, video compilations appeared

online. In a similar way to Gray's 'viewer-created' (2010, p. 143) videos, these creations encourage a specific reading of the celebrities through displaying funny moments that demonstrate their closeness, innuendo-laden jokes, and overall 'bromantic nature' (Eonline 2014).

This image of playful co-conspiratorial *bros* is further reinforced in the mainstream talk show *The Graham Norton Show* (2007- ). Their appearance on the show enhances the *frat boy* nature of their relationship with anecdotes of on-set BB gun battles and legitimises Jackman's presence within the relationship through ongoing banter and the performance of a coordinated dance to *Blurred Lines*. Jackman had a cameo appearance in *X-Men First Class* (2011) however, it was not until the promotion for *X-Men Days of Future Past* (2014) that he joined McAvoy/Fassbender, engaging in similar forms of affable humour.

### ***Jackman Joins the Junket: Video Analysis***

For the promotion of *X-Men: Days of Future Past* McAvoy, Fassbender and Jackman did a variety of interviews together, as either trios or pairs, which are archived on YouTube. These videos show the strong banter between them, which adds credibility to their friendship and entertainment value to their bromance.<sup>3</sup> This is also evidence that the bromance is not restricted to Fassbender and McAvoy.

The *Beyond The Trailer* interview is an example of the dynamic between the three celebrities, and raises questions of authenticity through Jackman's seemingly sporadic appearance. Within one year of upload to YouTube it received almost 200,000 views and more than 2,500 likes (Beyond the Trailer 2014).

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<sup>3</sup> One particular example is a 2014 Yahoo! Movies video, where the three actors interview each other for 20 minutes.

The interview begins with Fassbender and McAvoy laughing about ‘Marvin Gaye’ and ‘masturbating’ (Beyond the Trailer 2014). The interviewer, Grace Randolph, speaks over them to gain their attention. Jackman interrupts as the pair begin answering Randolph’s questions. He is off-screen when Fassbender states: ‘That sounds like Hugh Jackman to me’. Jackman enters the frame holding his phone and playing *Blurred Lines*. The actors dance in unison. Jackman jests about needing to wake them up because they are hungover. Jackman then jokes about how good the other two actors are in the film. When Jackman leaves, Fassbender and Mcavoy state with straight faces:

Fassbender: ‘He’s a compulsive liar’.

McAvoy: ‘Who was that?’

Fassbender: ‘I have no idea’.

McAvoy: ‘I don’t know who that is. I was trying to be nice, you know what I mean? I thought maybe it was one of those fan experiences things.’

Fassbender: ‘You’re going to make sure he gets a poster right?’

McAvoy: ‘Yeah totally, and a kiss.’

They return to answering questions professionally, until Randolph refers to Fassbender’s powers as a ‘weapon’, which McAvoy and Fassbender turn into an innuendo. McAvoy states: ‘Careful now, careful now. Safety on?’ Randolph joins in the humour by saying ‘don’t shoot’, to which the men burst into laughter. The banter continues until the end of the interview.

Throughout the video, McAvoy and Fassbender laugh at each other’s jokes, supporting each other and enhancing their bromance image. They have a similar sense of humour, strong chemistry and their body language suggests their closeness. They are both comfortable with each other and lean in to speak. When Jackman joins them, he taps them both on the shoulders in a friendly manner and gives a group hug, and high

fives as he leaves. The rehearsed swaying suggests they have spent time together outside of filming. Thus, this video adds authenticity to their bromance. Furthermore, they refer to each other as ‘man’ and ‘pal’, adding to the notion they are friends.

### ***Method***

As of April 21 2015, YouTube displays 223 comments in response to the video. Those not written in English and Google+ likes are excluded from analysis. Comments are transcribed and tabulated according to username, time (expressed as duration since posting) and content of remark.<sup>4</sup> In order to ensure the confidentiality of users, no identifying information is sourced, including gender, age and location. However, if self-reported in the comment, the gender of a user will be noted if relevant to the topic of discussion.<sup>5</sup>

Inductive category development (Mayring 2000) was utilised to allow categories to emerge from the data. Comments that refer specifically to the interview are assigned to ‘Interview specific’. Comments that name actors, or the film *X-Men Days of Future Past*, are assigned to ‘Discussing actor’ and ‘Discussing film’ respectively. Comments that express emotional responses to viewing the video, such as ‘LOL/Haha’ are allocated to the ‘Bromance: audience experience’ category, while comments that actively contribute to the construction or perpetuation of the bromances, such as the use of bromance names ‘Fassavoy’, are classified under the ‘Bromance: audience creation’ category. The comments are independently categorised by both authors and compared. Any differences are discussed and adjusted by the authors. Results are summarised in

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<sup>4</sup> Noted also are any interactions between posters, commonly expressed in the form of conversations between users repeatedly posting replies to each other.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, self-reported (heterosexual) male users expressing desires for the male cast are noted for their use of bromance discourse and humour. Thus, audience humour may be influenced by the gender of the respondent, with male respondents potentially expressing higher degrees of humour.

Table 1.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Bromance: audience experience	78
Bromance: audience creation	22
Interview specific	49
Discussing actor	40
Discussing film	18
Other	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>211</b>

Table 1. User comments to ‘X-Men Days of Future Past Interview! Jackman photobombs Fassbender & McAvoy! - Beyond The Trailer’.

A total of 211 user responses are included in analysis, with comments organised into six main categories: ‘Bromance: audience experience’, ‘Bromance: audience creation’, ‘Interview specific’, ‘Discussing actor’, ‘Discussing film’ and ‘Other’. The comments provide insight into the reception of the bromance by audiences, as well as, the forms of audience discursive practices that surround the celebrity text. Revealed is the potential for bromances to successfully engage audiences and promote a film, and the primacy of humour in the reception of off-screen bromances.

### ***Categories and Analysis***

#### *Interview specific, Discussing Actor, Discussing Film and Other*

‘Interview specific’ refers to those who commented on the interviewer and her questions. Comments relating to individual actors and the film are categorised separately, as they are not directly related to the bromance. Unclear comments are categorised as ‘Other’. The remaining comments fit into either bromance category.

#### *Bromance: audience experience*

‘Bromance: audience experience’ includes those who showed enjoyment of the bromance displayed in the video by referring to the content and appreciating the

bromantic humour shared between the men. The enjoyment of the humour is represented through comments or the transcription of jokes. Some playfully questioned the sobriety of the cast, while others expressed a variant of the bromance, the *man-crush*, by stating they are straight but have a crush on the actors:

Comment 89

I know I'm a guy and i feel like a teenage girl

Comment 30

Crap! I'm straight, but James Mcavoy is dreamy...Crap!! So is Michael

Fassbender...

Evidently, these users feel comfortable to express their feelings towards the actors, as the actors themselves display a strong heterosexual bond. They express intense and sexually laden attachments to the celebrities, but cloak these in the similar tongue-in-cheek tones displayed in the actor's bromantic performance. In this way, the audience adopts bromantic discourse to express their desires for intimacy with the celebrities, while concurrently disavowing any romantic connotations through playful language and the foregrounding of their heterosexual orientation. The audience discourse also demonstrates a positive reception of the celebrity bromance. This reaction compliments the humour highlighted in the viewer-created videos in 2011, illustrating an alignment between viewer-paratexts and discursive paratexts.

At the same time, the audience affirm the likeability of the actors, and the reading of their bond as 'close', by stating a desire to bond with them:

Comment 104

They seem like they'd be fun to hang out with

Comment 91

To work with these two would be just amazing

Comment 105

Totally. Everybody either wants friends like that, or they were a friend like that for someone else. Now, what I want to know is where to find the sign-up sheet for them.

Comment 176

Great interview, the interaction told me alot about the actors and how it was on set. It would have been a fun wrap party.

The audience also displays a desire for the friendship to be authentic, even though they themselves cannot become their friends:

Comment 38

It's so awesome to see the cast members become so close after working on a movie like this. When all three of them started dancing I just couldn't stop laughing.

This particular user acknowledges the perceived closeness between the three actors and refers to the filmmaking process as being part of their bond.

Ultimately, videos such as these add to the celebrities' individual brand identities as likeable, witty men. The friendship shown to the viewer suggests they must be nice people, which feeds audience interpretation of their celebrity personas.

Discussion of the celebrities in this way, enable the audience to reinforce readings of the individuals as gracious and approachable.

### *Bromance: audience creation*

'Bromance: audience creation' refers to use of the term bromance, or statements about their relationship. In essence, these discursive paratexts demonstrate the audience's active role in creating and perpetuating the image of the celebrity pairings. These statements variously highlight the bromance by identifying the 'frat boy' behaviour of

the actors, referring to them either as a pair or a trio. They also construct or adopt their bromance names and cross-reference to other *X-Men* bromances. In line with Gray's paratextual framework, these are discursive paratexts that shape reception of the celebrity text, demonstrated through the following conversation:

Comment 34

They are so in sync with their reactions, it's scary. The way they both turned their heads/reacted once they heard Jackman coming, their simultaneous sighs after laughing at "Don't shoot". Omg. These two.

Comment 35

That happens when you spend too much time with a person (:

Comment 36

That's just good, old-fashioned bromantic humor.

Other references are made to the Fassbender and McAvoy bromance specifically and relate it to the bromance between McKellen and Stewart, demonstrating an awareness of other bromances associated with actors in the *X-Men* film franchise:

Comment 41

It's so ironic that Fassbender and McAvoy play a younger Magneto and Professor X respectively, because the FassAvoy bromance reminds me so much of what McStewart would have been like if they were young today!



Viewer comments thus act as a means to acknowledge and perpetuate the specific McAvoy/Fassbender (Jackman) bromance, as well as allude to the McKellen/Stewart bromance. As the quote illustrates, these connections are established both on-screen (via their respective characters), and off-screen.

### **Audience activity and celebrity bromances**

The press undoubtedly plays a significant role in the popularisation of specific bromance pairings by bestowing public visibility. However, as analysis of user comments suggests, the audience also occupy a significant and powerful position within the cultural economy. This role is articulated through their acceptance of a celebrity pairing as a bromance, their evaluative roll in affirming the authenticity of the bromance, and their active role in perpetuating it.

The paratexts constructed included compound names and compilation videos to highlight and enhance the consistency of the actors' bromantic *performance*. The prevalence of these viewer paratexts thus operate as 'entryway paratexts' (2010, p. 23) pointing to the existence of the celebrity bromance, and influencing how audiences enter the celebrity text.

In addition to popularising the notion of the McAvoy/Fassbender bromance in 2011, and by extension the addition of Jackman in 2014, audiences are positioned at the apex of a performance/reception scaffold in which their ability to invest in the relationship ultimately affirms its existence. As generic investigations of bromance in narrative contexts highlight, the notion of the bromance relationship relies on the very paradox of male intimacy that mimic homosexual tropes, while firmly embedded within heteronormative contexts. Thus, for a bromance to be successful, audiences are required to engage with the paradox, to indulge in subtext and actively suspend disbelief. As the

bromance is by definition performative, whether on-screen or off-screen, audiences are required to display a high degree of interpretative flexibility when perceiving the performance. They at once accommodate readings of the celebrities' public persona, which for the three actors in question are undeniably heterosexual, while entertaining the plausibility of the homosocial intimacy of the bromance. User responses to the junket interview analysed equally highlights the homosocial closeness of the bromance between the actors, and the heterosexual innuendo-laden humour of the 'weapon' interchange with the female interviewer. For audience of this pairing, an off-screen bromance does not imply the homosexual undertones of homosocial intimacy coded into fictional representations. Rather it refers to the fun and mischief of close male bonds. The audience discussion surrounding the celebrity text thus constructs a context in which homosocial intimacy (presented as bromance humour), is accommodated within a predominately heteronormative context.

At the same time, viewer-created works dedicated to the pair actively highlight alternative readings of the actors that engage with the absent but playfully suggestive *romantic* undertones of their interaction. As the audience comments illustrate, romantic undertones are comfortably read alongside homosocial closeness as an expression of male intimacy. Indeed, the audience engage in the same tongue-in-cheek homosexually evocative banter to express their own affection for the actors.

For audience toying with, but disavowing, homoerotic 'conclusions', is only one element of celebrity bromances. Audience comments suggest that the humour associated with the performance of the bromance is as important to an enjoyment of the pairing, as toying with romantic subtext. The intertextual connection of observed behaviour (in the interview video) with viewer-created works (in bromance videos or fan art), or knowledge of other celebrity pairings (McKellen and Stewart), shapes

audience discourse as a site of pleasure, as well as, the place where a reception context for the celebrity text is constructed. This suggests the possibility that scholarship of bromance as an observable off-screen phenomenon (i.e. real-world interaction), needs to take a more nuanced approach to specific bromance pairings. It also suggests a need for closer exploration of humour in off-screen bromances, as a means for both expression and reception. Audiences recognise and enjoy the frat boy humour that characterise the McAvoy/Fassbender bromance. This form of humour is not necessarily connected to specific romantic subtext, but is shaped in the language of boyish playfulness. At the same time, audiences adopt humour as a means to express their affection for the celebrity pairing in a similar way to on-screen bromances. The audience members who express their *man crushes* on the actors do so in exaggerated terms that mimics the scripted scenes of on-screen bromance declarations of affection. Thus, for audiences and celebrities alike, humour becomes more than a method of conceptual disavowal to distance homosocial intimacy from romance, it becomes a performative tool through which the off-screen bromance is expressed and appreciated. Humour and romance (or bromance) are not discrete elements in off-screen bromances, rather they are adopted in varying degrees to construct, reinforce, perpetuate and respond to celebrity bromances.

Additionally, the degree of agency exercised by viewers who perceive and promote their take on an off-screen celebrity pairing requires more attention. Audience discourse surrounding the off-screen bromance of McAvoy and Fassbender potentially functions as a beacon drawing media attention to the relationship. These instances of ‘audience discussion, as paratext’ (p. 118) have the capacity to emphasise specific readings of celebrity interaction that resonate throughout viewer communities and are subsequently picked up by mainstream media.

## **The promotional potential of celebrity bromances**

Prior to the Web 2.0 paradigm shift, the analysed interview would have appeared once with occasional replays on the channel of original airing. The length of life given to interviews today has grown, however there is a lot of other media clutter to compete against for audience attention. Therefore, it is becoming increasingly significant for celebrities to find ways of creating word-of-mouth and viral videos. One of these techniques is forming bromances. Bromances can be used not only to promote a film but, to enhance individual personas. Fassbender, McAvoy and Jackman are dependent on each other to promote the *X-Men* franchise, but also to build their individual identities as celebrities. Just like celebrity power-couples, their brands have become entwined. While, in their case, this reliance is periodic and based on film promotions and events, it can still impact on how they are perceived apart from one another and when promoting other films. However, forming a bromance does not guarantee success, it is about how it is performed and the perception of authenticity. The content created through the bromance also needs to be entertaining and create dialogue.

The banter shared in the video certainly generated conversation not only about the actors but also about the film they are endorsing:

Comment 154

I cannot wait for X-Men Days of Future Past because of these great actors!

Michael Fassbender, James McAvoy, and Hugh Jackman! :D They're so handsome and amazing! :D I loved X-Men First Class and now they're adding Wolverine and the others!? So cool!

Comment 140

Love these three guys together.

However, the authenticity of these videos is called into question when jokes and stories

are repeated across their various interviews and media appearances. This has become an increasing concern when social media enables content to be available 24/7 internationally. Celebrities have increased pressure to perform something different even though they are being asked the same questions repeatedly in interviews. The purpose of the interview is clearly to promote their work, and the best way to increase views online is to create hype around a video. By dancing in the interview, a unique experience of the celebrities is created, yet audiences will point out when a performance is repeated. This is evident in remarks such as this:

Comment 182

They did that whole Blurred Lines thing on Graham Norton, haha!

While one interview may be set up for a particular audience, it reaches global viewers. By repeating a performance such as this, it can add authenticity or seem overly staged, and if it is the latter, it can open celebrities up to a lot of criticism. In a set-up like Norton's show, it seems more pre-planned, compared to a junket interview where they appeared surprised to see Jackman and the interviewer's reaction looked authentic.

This video unveils a behind-the-scenes view of the actors. Although they are still performing in front of a camera, the perceived authenticity behind their friendship and the natural use of humour allows audiences to feel rewarded for their commitment to the actors. Banter adds authenticity to the celebrities' personas and fuels the fantasy that they would make a good friend. This is evident in the YouTube comments analysed.

This case study is just one sample of the bond between the actors and just one example of a celebrity bromance. As a promotional device it has the potential to break through media clutter and thus, promote works affiliated with celebrity figures. This is achieved by providing audiences with a less staged performance that entertain viewers

with a 'unique' experience, rather than actors who repeatedly answer questions about the filming process or describe the plot. However, regardless of the number of celebrities involved in the bromance, authenticity is crucial in how their presence is denoted and how effective this promotion is. For the strongest effect, a friendship should be perceived as going beyond the film promotion. Banter is also significant during the expression of bromantic behaviour and can offer a high degree of enjoyment and entertainment to fans, resulting in a stronger promotional piece that is more likely to go viral. The history of the bromance between McAvoy and Fassbender contributes to the perception that it is authentic. It remains to be seen if Jackman continues to be part of the extended McAvoy/Fassbender bromance, or whether it is purely a short-term promotional tool. It is possible bromances will become overused by the industry, which may affect the perception of their authenticity.

## **Conclusion**

Explorations of the bromance in academia variously examine the notion from generic, discursive and ideological perspectives that highlight the complexities of male homosocial bonding through representations of masculinity and sexuality. These perspectives emphasise the ambiguities of visual/cultural tropes that tread the line between hetero/homosexuality, employing humour and female characters to reassert heteronormative contexts. However, an examination of the audience's role in perceiving and constructing these bromances is generally lacking, as is an examination of the factors surrounding off-screen celebrity bromances.

As a means to initiate an investigation of off-screen bromances, this paper embarks on a case study of the perceived bromance between *X-Men First Class* (2011) and *X-Men Days of Future Past* (2014) actors, interrogating, the relative importance of audiences to validate, perpetuate and, in some instances, create the bromance, and its

potential for use as a marketing tool. The thematic analysis of comments reveals highly nuanced and responses to the bromance. Analysis of fictional bromances emphasises the interplay between the suggestive homosexual undertones in the heterosexual reality of close male friendship. However, audience responses demonstrate an overwhelming appreciation of the behaviour and ease of presence the close bond between the actors elicited. Audiences also demonstrate great enjoyment in witnessing the bromance between the actors, indicating the *performance* of such off-screen persona could be as significant to audiences as on-screen dynamics.

Thus, this paper offers a view of audience discourse as a reflection of their degree of investment in celebrity bromances ranging from enjoyment (having fun while watching the interaction), to promotion (highlighting behaviour that confirms their reading of the actors as a pair), and their desires for interaction (wanting to be friends). Additionally, humour in off-screen contexts is not limited to foregrounding and disavowal of homoeroticism. Like on-screen bromances, humour enables the celebrities to express homosocial intimacy, often with romantic subtexts. However, it also allows for the creation of dynamics that are playful, though not always specifically romantic, in which other forms of homosocial interactions are evident. The case study highlights the ‘frat boy’ nature and humour of the bromance pair, emphasising how audiences respond to their apparent ease and likeable dynamic. Thus, the romantic subtext of the on-screen bromance is not always present in the off-screen, although it is used to perform a type of homosocial intimacy that is affable, funny, and fratboyish in nature. The humour within the interactions also attracts audience attention, increasing the likelihood for videos to be shared between audience members. As such, the humorous nature of the bromance dynamic also serves a promotional purpose as enjoyable videos are virally spread through social networks.

Future scholarship of off-screen bromances may need to consider audience enjoyment alongside the ideological implications of bromances in contemporary popular culture. This paper analysed one example of bromance between actors of the *X-Men* films. As such, any conclusions are specific to audience engagement with this instance of bromantic performance, and are not generalisable.

Closer examination of other of *X-Men* promotional videos will further elucidate the facets of off-screen celebrity bromances that resonate with audiences. Further research into fan works and audience reactions will also provide a clearer indication of the success of off-screen bromances as a marketing device. Additionally, a focus on the influence of audience interpretations of celebrity bromances on media reporting will highlight fan and audience agency within the wider media sphere.

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