"Gay capital" in gay student friendship networks: An intersectional analysis of class, masculinity, and decreased homophobia

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Abstract

This article draws on qualitative interviews with 40 gay male undergraduates at four universities across England to explore the dynamics of participants' friendship networks in the context of decreased homophobia. Describing their schools and universities as gay-friendly spaces, most participants developed close friendships with both straight and sexual minority peers in spontaneous ways, away from institutional venues such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender student societies. Building on Bourdieu's conceptualization of the symbolic economy of class, I introduce a new concept to understand how having a visible gay identity can act as a form of privilege in inclusive, post-gay social fields: *gay capital*. Through shared knowledge of gay cultures, belonging to gay social networks, and having one's gay identity recognized as a form of prestige, gay capital supplements cultural, social, and symbolic forms of capital. These findings trouble traditional generalizations of gay youth as victimized due to their sexual minority status. However, finding that participants' experiences differed across the four research settings, this article also develops an intersectional analysis by highlighting that access to gay capital is limited by other forms of class, gender, and sexual hierarchy.

Introduction

Research has traditionally found homophobia to be a defining feature of gay students' experiences in educational settings (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Rivers, 2001). Antigay bullying was commonplace in schools in the 1980s and 1990s, with sexual minority students described as feeling "defined by difference" (Flowers & Buston, 2001). Researchers also documented the detrimental effects of homophobia on university campuses (Epstein, O'Flynn, & Telford, 2003), where lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) undergraduates experienced a range of social pressures and psychological problems including depression, poor academic performance, and substance abuse (Rivers & Taulke-Johnson, 2002). In this cultural context, many gay students remained closeted in an attempt to avoid victimization (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010). However, this body of research was undertaken during a particularly homophobic social zeitgeist—one before the trend of decreasing homophobia witnessed over recent decades in the U.K. (Clements & Field, 2014) and before same-sex marriage was legalized in 2014, the same year that this study was conducted.

Changing attitudes toward homosexuality over the past 30 years have positively influenced young men's friendships, with scholars documenting the emergence of "inclusive masculinities," where heterosexual male youth express pro-gay attitudes and support their LGBT peers (Anderson, 2009; McCormack, 2012a). This body of research argues that declining cultural homophobia has led young men to perform less "orthodox" masculinities— defined by antifemininity, homophobia, machismo, and stoicism—through clothing, dance, and emotional intimacy (Anderson, 2009; Peterson, 2011; Scoats, 2015), alongside physical intimacy with other men including kissing, cuddling, and spooning in bed together (Anderson & McCormack, 2014a). However, inclusive masculinities are complicated by class, with working-class male youth maintaining more traditional masculine norms in some research settings, which in turn effects their relationships with other men (see McCormack, 2014b).

Little research has examined how decreasing homophobia relates to the social networks of gay male youth, who remain an underrepresented group within the sociology of friendship (Rumens, 2010a). Therefore, this study draws on in-depth, qualitative interviews with 40 gay male undergraduates aged 18–21 at four English universities. Focusing on the dynamics of participants' friendship networks, I examine how gay students described their high schools and universities as inclusive spaces where they could form close bonds with heterosexual peers; how they formed distinctively gay friendship groups at university; and how social class continued to intersect with participants' sexual identities, masculinities, and friendships. Building on the theoretical work of Bourdieu (1984) on the symbolic economy of class, I develop an intersectional analysis of class, masculinity, and declining homophobia within gay male friendship networks, introducing a new concept called "gay capital" to understand how having a visible gay identity can act as a form of privilege in gay-friendly social fields.

Gay Friendship Networks

Providing a precise definition of friendship is difficult, given that meanings and expressions of such relationships shift over time, across cultures, and between individuals (Rumens, 2011). Recognizing that friendship groups are shaped by the social, economic, and cultural contexts in which they are situated (Allan, 1998), sociologists have challenged idealized conceptualizations of friendship by highlighting the subjective and social dimensions of such bonds—sometimes hierarchical or exclusionary in nature (Pahl, 2000). External pressures, including discrimination on the basis of class, disability, gender, race, and sexuality, may also bring groups together through shared experiences or struggles (Rumens, 2010a; Valocchi, 1999). This has historically been a key motivator for gay men to form close networks (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001).

Traditionally, gay men's social networks were oriented around LGBT community venues, political organizations, and support groups (Levine, 1998), structured into particular geographical areas within cities (Ghaziani, 2014). It was in these locations that gay male friendships developed, providing a valuable defense against the homophobia they might experience in the broader culture (Weeks et al., 2001). These venues were once considered spaces of sexual liberation and a perceived deviance from mainstream culture (Armstrong, 2002). However, despite a groundswell in queer political activism in response to the HIV/AIDS crisis, the culture of hostility this epidemic fostered led many gay men to adopt a more assimilationist gender and sexual politics, emphasizing their similarities to heterosexuals rather than their differences (Halkitis, 1999). Even so, localized gay communities remained pivotal in the development of (often exclusively gay) friendship networks during this period (Nardi, 1999).

It has been argued that gay men's friendship networks can constitute *political* acts, not just through their institutional affiliation, but because they consolidate understandings of what having a gay identity means in the locales in which these friendships occur (Nardi, 1999). For example, Nardi (1999) described gay male friendships as being "mechanisms of social reproduction in which gay masculinities, gay identities, gay cultures, and gay communities get created, transformed, maintained, and passed on" (p. 7). Similarly, Savin-Williams (1998) found that gay students targeted institutions to make sexual minority friends, including a university fraternity which had reputation as being a "fag frat" (p. 187). He argued that exposure to gay communities and cultures enabled young gay men to develop positive understandings of themselves, which was partly achieved through meeting a diverse range of LGBT peers.

Alongside gay men's friendships with other sexual minorities, recent research has documented increasingly positive relationships between gay men and heterosexuals (Dean,

2014; Galupo, 2007). Rumens (2011) has argued that factors including a shared sense of humor, personality, and providing emotional support are pivotal not only in developing bonds between gay men, but also between gay and straight colleagues in the workplace (see also Rumens, 2010b). Research has further highlighted that the pro-gay attitudes of heterosexuals are an important factor in developing cross-orientation friendships (Stotzer, 2009). Dean (2014) has highlighted the social significance of cross-orientation friendships in "post-closeted cultures" for heterosexual men and women, while Galupo (2007) found that younger people have a greater number of cross-orientation friendships than older people. This corresponds with McCormack's (2012b) study of openly LGBT high school students in the south of England, where participants talked about their close bonds with straight peers. Central to this expansion of gay men's friendship networks is the social trend of decreasing homophobia (McCormack, 2012a).

Understanding Decreasing Homophobia

Over recent decades, one of the most sustained trends in public opinion in the U.K. has been improving attitudes toward homosexuality (Clements & Field, 2014). Evidencing this, the British Social Attitudes survey has asked whether homosexuality is "always wrong," "sometimes wrong," "occasionally wrong," or "never wrong" over the past 30 years. In 1983, nearly 50% of respondents said that homosexuality was "always wrong," rising to almost 64% in 1987, before declining to below 22%in 2013. Clements and Field (2014) attributed the rise of homophobic attitudes in the late 1980s to the HIV/AIDS epidemic and confirmed this trajectory across 13 surveys, showing that since the early 1990s, attitudes have improved across a range of measures including support for legal equality (e.g., adoption and marriage rights for same-sex couples) and support for gay people in specific roles (e.g., as neighbors, teachers, and politicians). Multiple factors have been identified as catalysts for this change in

public attitudes, including declining religiosity (Lee, 2013), expanding legal rights (Weeks, 2007), and increasingly positive representations of LGBT people in the media (Netzley, 2010).

The Internet has also been instrumental in liberalizing attitudes toward homosexuality and creating spaces for sexual minorities to express their identities more openly (Harper, Bruce, Serrano, & Jamil, 2009). For example, Gray (2009) showed how rural LGBT youth used the Internet to develop "authentic" coming out narratives and online communities in "the absence of locally visible LGBTQ communities" (p. 1165). Social networking sites such as Facebook have also contributed to this visibility, allowing users to publicly come out, state their relationship status, and whether they are "interested in" men, women, or both. Morris and Anderson (2015) also found that the most popular male YouTube celebrities in the U.K. expressed pro-gay attitudes and interacted with their gay friends for the consumption of millions of viewers. These social media platforms have made it possible for gay youth to interact and form friendship networks away from geographically fixed community venues, as was typical in the past (Levine, 1998).

Part of this trend toward social inclusion has also seen sexual minority youth less entrenched in a narrow set of sexual identity labels (Morris, McCormack, & Anderson, 2014). In this "post-identity" period, Savin-Williams (2005) has argued that "being labelled as gay or even being gay matters little" (p. 1). This period has also been characterized as belonging to a "post-gay" culture, in which gay people are increasingly assimilated into the mainstream; sexual identity is no longer viewed as the defining characteristic of a person and gay men's social networks have expanded to include heterosexuals—despite the persistence of some heterosexist social norms (Walters, 2014). As Ghaziani (2014) summarized, "Those who consider themselves post-gay profess that their sexual orientation does not form the core of how they define themselves, and they prefer to hang out with their straight friends as much

as with those who are gay" (p. 9). However, youth belonging to this post-gay generation continue to form friendship networks which are predominantly or exclusively gay; as Ghaziani has noted, rather than being "un-gay," being post-gay is about viewing one's sexual identity in a less restricted way, without the assumption of victimization found in the older literature. Thus, it is important to examine what contributes to the formation of both same-orientation and cross-orientation friendships in settings of decreased homophobia (Stotzer, 2009), where sexual identity politics based on a "narrative of struggle" has become less salient (Cohler & Hammack, 2007).

From Orthodox to Inclusive Masculinities

Declining homophobia has a profound influence on men's gender expressions, which is relevant for developing an intersectional analysis of masculinities (Dean, 2014; McCormack, 2014b). Inclusive masculinity theory argues that social attitudes toward homosexuality are pivotal in the changing nature of masculinities (Anderson, 2009). Central to this theory is the concept *homohysteria*, defined as the social fear of being perceived as gay in a highly homophobic culture. In a homohysteric culture, the combination of (1) homophobic attitudes, (2) awareness that homosexuality exists as a static sexual orientation, and (3) the conflation of male femininity with homosexuality leads men to embrace an orthodox model of masculinity characterized by intense homophobia and antifemininity. These three factors were met in the late 1980s, when both homophobic attitudes and awareness of gay men in the population reached an apex due to HIV/AIDS (Anderson, 2009). In this context, men feared being labeled as gay not only because of their gender presentation but also their friendships with other men (see Rumens, 2011). However, as cultural homophobia decreases, homohysteria also decreases, and young men have been granted access to a wider range of gendered behaviors (Anderson, 2009).

Although the body of research demonstrating the positive effects of decreasing homohysteria on young men's masculinities contends that it is an uneven social process (McCormack, 2014b; Roberts, 2013), scholars argue that rather than declining in a linear fashion, homophobia has transformed to become more implicit (Bridges, 2014). While the notion that homophobia can change forms is valuable (see Plummer, 2014), the contention that homophobia is no less insidious than demonstrated in the older literature downplays the significance of legal and social changes related to homosexuality (Clements & Field, 2014; Plummer, 2014). A more persuasive argument is to recognize the improvement in conditions for sexual minorities, but also focus on heteronormativity to understand the continued structural and social privileging of heterosexual identities (see Dean, 2014; Walters, 2014).

One element of this heteronormativity in the academy has been the neglect of gay men's interpretations of their heterosexual peers' attitudes and behaviors—perhaps a better way to gauge the effects of changing attitudes toward homosexuality than only interviewing heterosexuals (see Rumens, 2010b). The influence of inclusive masculinities on heterosexual men's friendships in university settings has been intensively investigated (Anderson, Adams, & Rivers, 2012), alongside research which has documented markedly improved experiences for bisexual students (Anderson, McCormack, & Ripley, 2014; Morris et al., 2014). Taulke Johnson's (2008) research with gay male undergraduates found more positive experiences of university life than earlier research (Epstein et al., 2003; Rivers & Taulke-Johnson, 2002). Despite being almost a decade old at the time of writing, Taulke-Johnson's small-scale study remains the most recent qualitative exploration of gay men's experiences of university life in a British context, something this article addresses.

Inclusive masculinities have been evidenced among participants from a diverse range of class backgrounds in the U.K., including working-class men in the service sector (Roberts, 2013), soccer fans (Cleland, 2014), and high school students (McCormack, 2014b).

McCormack's (2014b) ethnographic research with working-class, heterosexual, male high school students developed an intersectional framework to understand how class and masculinity intersected with decreasing homophobia. He found that while almost all participants exhibited inclusive behaviors, there was a continuum of masculinities on display that correlated with their classed positions, with several adopting a more orthodox masculinity. McCormack drew on Bourdieu's (1984) conceptualization of class as a symbolic economy, which consists of four forms of "capital"—economic, cultural, social, and symbolic—to demonstrate how the operation of class capitals led to his participants' variegated engagement with the broader, inclusive youth culture.

Different Forms of Capital

The empirical and theoretical works of Bourdieu (1984, 1986) critiqued the complex structures of class inequality. Developed from Marxist analyses of capitalism, the term *economic capital* generally describes the financial assets available to a person and is the most widely adopted measure of class. Bourdieu expanded this framing through the concept of social "fields," such as educational institutions, in which people compete for and accumulate different forms of capital. *Cultural capital* describes the nonfinancial assets which promote a person's social mobility, such as attitudinal dispositions, educational qualifications, speech patterns, or taste in fashion and media consumption. *Social capital* describes the cultural resources available to a person on the basis of belonging to a group, membership of which can be "socially instituted and guaranteed by the application of a common name" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 86). Each of these forms of capital can also be converted into *symbolic capital*, which describes a person's social prestige within a group, or how the other forms of capital become legitimized by others (Skeggs, 2004).

Intersectional scholarship has examined how class capitals can be reinforced or supplemented by other forms of structural oppression including racism, sexism, and homophobia (see Adkins & Skeggs, 2004; McCormack, 2014b). Often intersecting with class capitals, other forms of privilege including *gender capital* and *erotic capital* have also been theorized to examine social hierarchies (see Bridges, 2009; Hakim, 2010). Gender capital describes the value attributed to masculinity and femininity in different social fields, where the display of traditional gender norms carries social prestige (Huppatz, 2012). Erotic capital describes the cultural, social, and economic privileges associated with sexual desirability (Martin & George, 2006). It is difficult to empirically measure these forms of capital, in part because their importance varies across cultures. For example, Hakim (2010) has argued that "women generally have more erotic capital than men" (p. 499). However, this assumption may not hold true in LGBT communities, given that alternative sexual scripts and gender norms often exist in queer subcultures (Ghaziani, 2014). Thus, this article explores how decreasing homophobia shapes the social networks and gender expressions of gay male students in intersectional ways.

Educational settings have been a central focus for scholars interested in the expression of class, gender, and erotic capitals, and research has examined the role of socially homogenous friendship groups in structuring inequalities in universities (e.g., Brooks, Byford, & Sela, 2015). For example, scholars argue that cultural capital plays a key role in the reproduction of class inequality, particularly in education systems which conform to and promote an elitist culture (Bourdieu, 1984; Huppatz, 2012; Skeggs, 2004). Social networks in educational settings also tend to be highly homogenous, where universities facilitate social bonds between students with similar socioeconomic backgrounds (Brooks, Byford, & Sela, 2015) and students are less likely to form friendships with those from a different social class (Papapolydorou, 2014).

Bourdieu's theorizing understood class inequality as a hegemonic process, where subordinate groups have the potential to resist or discredit existing power structures and "give greater value to the capital that their particular group tends to possess" (Huppatz, 2012, p. 13). Yet this potential for creating new forms of capital has not been explored among sexual minority students, a traditionally subordinated group (Rivers & Taulke-Johnson, 2002). Although an increasing number of scholars have applied Bourdieu's theorizing to gender and sexuality, research about gay men's social status in inclusive settings remains underdeveloped. Therefore, this article explores the effects of social change by applying Bourdieu's concepts to gay men's friendship networks in contexts of decreased homophobia, where homohysteria no longer prohibits inclusive masculinities, yet class differences continue to structure friendships, masculinities, and sexualities. It also explores how gay male undergraduates utilize, subvert, or queer different forms of capital to build friendship networks, challenging social hierarchies including heterosexism and orthodox masculinity, which are similarly maintained through hegemonic processes (Bridges, 2009; Connell, 1992). I address these issues by posing and responding to the following research questions: (1) How does declining homophobia shape the social networks of gay male students? (2) How does the symbolic economy play a role in gay friendship groups in gay-friendly, post-gay university settings?

Method

Participants

This study draws on 40 in-depth interviews with gay male undergraduates attending four universities across England. The universities were selected to represent two sets of demographically distinctive samples, where I was able to spend at least two weeks collecting data. Two of the universities were traditional, elite academic institutions consistently ranked

within the top 10 by U.K. university league tables. Both institutions operated a "collegiate system," meaning that every student belonged to a named "College," which provided academic support, accommodation, common rooms, dining facilities, social events, and sports teams. The other two universities were former "polytechnics" or colleges of higher education granted university status from 1992 onwards. The student accommodation provided at these universities were blocks of apartments housing hundreds of students, with no institutionally organized academic, social, or sporting events unique to these buildings. I use the labels "Old North," "Old South," "New East," and "New West" to indicate the type of university and distinguish between the four geographic regions in which they were located.

Ten students were interviewed from each university. Participants were gay male undergraduates aged 18–21 years at the time of data collection, which took place between January and March 2014. It was a requirement of the study that participants were open about their gay identity to at least one person at their university. Two participants identified as Black British, two as Mixed British, with the remaining 36 identifying as White British. Participants were asked about their social class, with 14 identifying as working-class, 23 as middle-class, and 3 as upper-class. These self-identifications were corroborated by discussions of participants' high school type (public or private) and parental occupation. The class backgrounds of participants broadly reflect the student populations of each university, with 4 of the 20 participants from the Old Universities (20%) identifying as working class and 10 of the 20 participants from the New Universities (50%) identifying as such. Relatedly, 8 of the 20 participants from the Old Universities (40%) were privately educated, contrasting with 2 of the 20 participants at the New Universities (10%).

I focus on the experiences of gay men in this research because it is important to understand the diversity of experiences within the LGBT umbrella (Worthen, 2013). Specifically, bisexuals can face unique forms of discrimination from both gay and straight

communities (Anderson et al., 2014). Furthermore, sampling sufficient numbers of openly

bisexual participants away from what I call "institutional LGBT venues," such as support

groups or activist organizations, can be difficult. Having examined the experiences of

bisexual male youth in the context of declining homophobia elsewhere (Morris et al., 2014), I

explored gay male students' friendships in this study.

Recruitment and Reflexivity

Research with sexual minority youth has been critiqued for relying on convenience samples

from institutional LGBT venues (Savin-Williams, 2001), which are likely to represent a more

troubled segment of the population (Walby, 2010). McCormack (2014a) has argued that this

sampling bias tends to privilege narratives of victimization and calls for innovative

recruitment methods to enhance our understanding of the diversity of LGBT experiences (see

also Taulke-Johnson, 2008). I thus avoided recruiting participants from institutional LGBT

venues such as activist or support groups. Instead, I advertised the research online, inviting

gay undergraduates to participate through direct messages on social networking sites and

smartphone apps. Participants were recruited using Facebook (n = 16), Twitter (n = 3), and

the location-based smartphone app Grindr (n = 6). The remaining participants (n = 15) were

drawn from snowball sampling, through social interactions with friends of those already

interviewed, which allowed me to develop a more complete picture of the gay friendship

groups I encountered at each university.

Because these sampling procedures are nonrandom, it is not possible to make

empirical generalizations from the data. The evidence I present in this article reflects

participants' individual perceptions and experiences of university life, from which I generate

conceptual insights. Despite clear demographic differences between the universities, the

sample is mainly represented by White, middle-class men. Therefore, the results may be

biased toward gay youth with greater access to economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capitals, alongside other forms of capital such as erotic and gender capital, particularly given their uses of social media. My recruitment strategy may have also led to a focus on particular friendship groups, comprised of more outgoing and sociable individuals. By not recruiting participants from institutional LGBT venues, I might have excluded the experiences of gay undergraduates who are more marginalized. However, this approach allowed me to interview a sample of gay youth neglected by conventional recruitment strategies (see McCormack, 2014a; Savin-Williams, 2001).

To minimize social distance between myself and participants, I used an informal approach to data collection by actively placing myself into the students' social worlds (Ferguson, 2001). This included adopting a similar dress code, such as clothing from high-street stores popular among young men such as Topman and H&M, socializing with participants outside of the interview encounter, and being open with them about my own sexuality (McCormack, 2012a). The benefit of taking an informal approach was that it enhanced my ability to build rapport with participants, facilitating a form of reciprocal disclosure which enhanced the quality of the interviews (Walby, 2010). Another advantage to this approach was that it led participants to invite me to student bars, house parties, and nightclubs on and around campus during my time at each university. This enabled me to locate participants while becoming a recognized and trusted figure among those I interviewed.

Procedures

Data collection consisted of in-depth, semistructured interviews lasting 45–75 min. All participants signed consent forms and were provided with information sheets which included contact details for the author's university. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the

anonymity of participants and their universities. However, due to the information provided in this article, it may be possible to identify several members of the friendship groups commented on. Participants belonging to these groups have given permission for their interview transcripts to be used, knowing that anonymity may thus be compromised.

The interview schedule was structured around three sections: (1) sexual identity, focusing on how strongly participants identified with sexual identity labels; expressions of femininity and masculinity; how often they attended LGBT student societies; and attitudes toward sexual identity politics. (2) Experiences of being gay, focusing on participants' sexual histories; coming out narratives; and responses from family, friends, and peers—particular attention was given to whether participants had encountered hostile responses from heterosexual male peers. (3) Social networks, focusing on detailed accounts of participants' friendships, romantic, and sexual partners. Participants used their own interpretations of the terms "friendship" and "friendship groups," guided by asking them about their closest relationships in different social contexts: high school, university, work, and home.

Analysis

Following transcription, interviews were interpreted using a modified grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014), combining inductive thematic coding alongside existing frameworks to generate conceptual insights which are both empirically grounded and engage with the existing literature (Urquhart, 2013). Using this approach, coding followed a three step process: initial coding involved immersion in the interview data until saturation was achieved by the repetition of results; focused coding took the most significant codes related to recurring themes, such as participants' coming out experiences, friendship networks, and masculinities; and theoretical coding occurred with the repetition of patterns within the research, where key concepts were identified in order to generate new conceptual insights

about the attitudes, experiences, and identities of gay male undergraduates. Although grounded theorists traditionally avoid drawing on existing concepts and theories to ensure that their analysis is based solely in the data, the modified approach I used sought to refine both the focused and theoretical stages of coding through comparisons with existing research. In particular, I drew on the work of theorists including Anderson and McCormack (2014b) to understand the changing nature of masculinities and Bourdieu (1984, 1986) to understand the role of the symbolic economy. Final codes were cross-checked by three researchers from independent institutions with expertise in gay male youth, alongside member checks by key informants at each university.

Bourdieu's works influenced both the choice of research settings, to make comparisons on the basis of class capitals which correlate with educational capital, and questions about participants' social networks, which are influenced by shared cultural knowledge and socio-economic background. In the discussion, I relate the empirical findings back to Bourdieu's theoretical framework to introduce a new concept for understanding specific forms of privilege among gay male students, something I call "gay capital." However, because grounded theory approaches rely on the data to generate theory, this concept did not emerge until after data analysis. Thus, before expanding on this concept, I present the major empirical themes below: *Gay-Friendly, Post-Gay Educational Settings*, which explores how declining homophobia has positively shaped participants' educational experiences; *Forms of Capital in Gay Friendship Groups*, which explores how participants—predominantly those from the Old Universities—used unique forms of cultural, social, and symbolic capital to build and strengthen their friendship networks; and *Intersections of Class and Masculinity*, which explores how friendships and masculinities differed between participants from the New and Old Universities.

Results: Gay-Friendly, Post-Gay Educational Settings

The first major theme identified in the data was the low prevalence of homophobia reported by participants at both their high schools and universities (cf. Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Flowers & Buston, 2001; Rivers, 2001), which were usually characterized as "gay-friendly" spaces. Thirty-six of the 40 participants reported a total absence of homophobia at their high schools, allowing them to come out comfortably at an early age (cf. Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010). The most common response from school peers was one of acceptance or nonchalance, with several suggesting that their friends had already presumed they were gay. Henry (New East) said, "Most people's reaction was, 'Okay, cool. So what are you doing later?'" He added, "We already had two gay guys in our group, so it was totally normal to them." Evan (Old South) said, "It was quite uneventful. Most people didn't care or they sort of assumed I was gay anyway." Several participants suggested that coming out as gay had even enhanced their relationships with peers. For example, Harry (Old North) said:

> I have this theory that I became *more popular* after I came out . . . I could be more comfortable with myself, I came out of my shell, and people were like, "Oh he's gay, that's cool," so they were actually more eager to interact with me.

Similarly, Jamie (Old South) said, "My best friend at school was so happy when I told her. She was like, 'finally, no more boundaries'" (see Morris et al., 2014, for similar narratives among bisexual male adolescents). These narratives demonstrate the positive effects of declining cultural homophobia for the experiences of many gay youth in Britain.

Contrasting with earlier research about sexual minority undergraduates (Epstein et al., 2003; Rivers & Taulke-Johnson, 2002), the four universities that participants were recruited from were similarly described as being gay-friendly. Nathan (New East) said, "You can be

yourself completely. The university is great. The staff are supportive, but it's also your course mates. Our group is really close-knit, so we're all open and honest with each other." Similarly, Jack (New West) said, "When I came to university I was happy to talk about it with everyone . . . It's accepted here." This was also true for the four participants who had experienced homophobia at high school. For example, Patrick (Old South) said, "You can discuss it openly. People don't even see [being gay] as a different thing here." Frustrated by gay people being framed ubiquitously as victims by institutional LGBT groups, Bradley (New East) said, "I don't even see myself as 'out' at university, because no one cares. The only people who care about your sexuality are the LGBT society. They're like, 'We need loads of support', but honestly no one is fussed anymore." The inclusive nature of participants' universities, where being gay was seen as something normal, could also be framed as being post-gay, in that sexuality appeared to matter little in how students perceived one another (Ghaziani, 2014).

Having inclusive straight male friends was an important feature of participants' diverse social networks (McCormack, 2012b; Stotzer, 2009). Many contested the notion that straight men are more homophobic than women (cf. Mac an Ghaill, 1994). For example, Harvey (New West) said, "I thought all straight lads would be the same, less supportive, so I was pleasantly surprised when they reacted just as well as the girls." Seven participants highlighted the homosocial tactility (touch-based interactions between members of the same sex) that their straight male peers performed with them, including kissing, cuddling, and spooning, which was seen as indicative of their strong friendships (see Anderson & McCormack, 2014a). Charlie (Old South) said, "My best friend would always stay over, sleep in my bed, and we would cuddle. We were really close. So I was worried about telling him I was gay. But when I did absolutely nothing changed between us." Alex (New East) said, "We have a really strong, really close friendship group. It's great because we all love

each other . . . I've kissed all the straight guys." When asked why he thought his straight male friends felt comfortable giving him platonic kisses on the lips, he said, "It's just because they're comfortable with their sexuality" (see Anderson et al., 2012). Alongside shaping straight men's behaviors, these narratives highlight the importance of declining homohysteria in shaping gay men's relationships with their straight male peers.

Attending university provided participants with more opportunities to develop friendships with other sexual minority students than at high school. Although institutional LGBT venues have been seen as places where friendship networks between gay men can be fostered (Micelli, 2005), the majority of participants tended to avoid Student Union affiliated LGBT societies (hereafter described as "SU LGBT societies"). Only 6 of the 40 participants attended weekly events hosted by their university's SU LGBT society, usually because they were involved with the society's organizational committee; this contrasts with 19 participants who attended less than 5 times, usually "once or twice" at the start of the academic year, and 15 participants who reported that they had *never* attended an event by their SU LGBT society. This avoidance of institutional groups organized around sexual identity politics may also be indicative of participants living in a post-identity or post-gay culture (Savin-Williams, 2005).

The majority of participants at each university highlighted the spontaneous formation of their friendship networks away from SU LGBT societies. For example, Fred (Old North) said, "There is another gay person in our group, but I wouldn't say we're friends because we're both gay. We just happen to live in the same College and get on well." Liam (Old North) said:

I'm good friends with two girls in my College, and a guy who's also gay, if that's

relevant? I can characterise our group quite easily. We generally tend to be quite well

off, but not rich, and we're all quite academic.

Similarly, participants at the New Universities tended to meet their gay friends in student

accommodation, shared classes, or other spaces away from SU LGBT societies. Oliver (New

West) said, "One of my gay friends is another law student and the other two I met on Grindr."

Finn (New East) said, "We have five guys in our close-knit group, one is straight, one is

bisexual and three are gay. We met each other in first year because we lived opposite each

other in halls." Nathan (New East) said, "Most of my friends are just people I've met on my

course. Most are straight, one is pansexual, and then there's two guys I know that are in a

relationship: one is gay, one is bi." Not only do these narratives highlight that participants'

friendship networks existed beyond a narrow gay/straight binary, but they support the notion

that in post-gay university cultures, students value the organic ways in which friendships

occur (see Ghaziani, 2014). These results respond to my first research question about the

effect of declining homophobia on gay male students' social networks.

Forms of Capital in Gay Friendship Groups

In this section, I focus on 20 of the 40 participants who described themselves as belonging to

predominantly or exclusively gay male friendship groups at university, alongside having

friendship groups comprised of other genders and sexualities as described above. Mirroring

Bourdieu's model of the symbolic economy, I found that participants utilized distinctively

"gay" forms of cultural, social, and symbolic capital to strengthen social bonds with other gay

students. Such friendship groups were more common among participants at the Old

Universities (n = 14) than the New Universities (n = 6). In part, this was because the

structures of the Old Universities provided more opportunities for students to socialize away from SU LGBT societies. Participants highlighted the role of the collegiate system used by the Old Universities in fostering same-orientation friendships. For example, Daniel (Old North) said, "My College is known as 'The Gay College,' so it's really open and it's easy to meet other people." At Old South University, LGBT students frequently organized intercollege social events which were not formally connected with the university-wide SU LGBT society. One type of event was inspired by the university's athletic community, where one male and one female sports team would meet at a restaurant to eat, socialize, and play drinking games, with the intention of meeting friends, romantic, and sexual partners. This heteronormative tradition was co-opted (and queered) by bringing together LGBT students from two or more colleges for the same purpose, providing another space for gay students to socialize.

Gay friendship groups were often based on participants' access to specific forms of cultural capital, such as shared knowledge of popular movies, television, and music which is culturally coded as gay. For example, Edward (Old North) said, "I love how many gay guys I know here. We go to the same clubs, listen to the same music, and watch the same TV shows." Zachary (New West) said, "My gays are my really good friends. If I want to go out, I'll message them saying, 'Are we getting drunk tonight?' and they'll respond by sending me a meme of Beyoncé falling over or something." Alongside female pop stars such as Beyoncé Knowles, Britney Spears, and Lady Gaga, the most common cultural reference participants made was to the reality television show RuPaul's Drag Race. Describing his gay friendship group, Owen (Old South) said:

There are so many grounds we bond over. There's a fundamental understanding of each other from a sexual perspective. Then there are silly things like watching

RuPaul's Drag Race, or knowing the meaning of "sickening" and "fishy" . . . It's things like that which drew me to them.

Similarly, David (New East) said, "Recently one of my friends found RuPaul's Drag Race on Netflix. At first, I was like, 'I'm not sure how I feel about this.' Then we started watching it every week and I've loved absolutely everything about it." Sharing an interest in forms of popular entertainment—in these examples media which is culturally coded as gay is illustrative of the role cultural capital plays in forming social bonds between friends, including ways of speaking, dressing, and media consumption (Bourdieu, 1984).

Once friendships with other gay students were established, the dynamics of these groups developed in distinctive ways. Supporting Bourdieu's (1986) observation that the application of a common name can solidify social capital, several participants at the Old Universities gave their friendship groups gay-themed names. For example, one group at Old South University became known on campus as "the Gaytriarchy," which they explained to be a playful combination of the words "gay" and "patriarchy." This label was first applied to the group when a photo of them appeared in a student magazine. Mark (Old South) explained, "We were helping someone to run for Student President, along with some other gay politicos. They wanted publicity, so got five of us together who were young, gay, attractive, with reasonably nice bodies, and got us to pose topless." Quoting from a YouTube parody of the teen movie Mean Girls called "Mean Boyz," Owen (Old South) described this clique as "gay teen royalty."

There were several comparable friendship groups at both of the Old Universities. One group at Old North University called themselves "the Plastics," in reference to the popular clique in Mean Girls, while another group at Old South University called themselves "the Glitterati," a blend of the words "glitter" and "illuminati." More general descriptions were

also used to identify gay friendship groups. For example, Liam (Old North) said, "We have a jokey thing about us being the gays of [names College]," and Jamie (Old South) labelled himself as, "One of the party gays." Not only were these friendship groups identified as being distinctive for their "gayness," but the labels used to describe them played on notions of popularity and privilege.

Concerning symbolic capital, many participants described the social prestige which their gay social networks afforded them or others. This was often supported and promoted by other students through formal and informal titles which conveyed status. For example, Zachary (New West) said, "Gay guys definitely dominate the political groups here, and other places . . . I was a member of Youth Parliament for two years and that was gay central. There was a joke that the whole of the Youth Parliament was homo." Joe (Old South) suggested that there was an informal network of gay students who held positions of power in many student organizations, including the university's prestigious debating club and Student Union. He added, "Everyone knows it too, we have built up this sort of reputation." Similarly, Fred (Old North) said, "Perhaps because gay guys here are so well connected, not just with each other, but with different groups. That's probably why [names gay student] is President of the Union Society." That gay students at the four research settings were "known" to be well connected and often held formal positions of power can also be viewed as a form of symbolic capital.

The results in this section respond to my second research question about the role of the symbolic economy on gay men's friendship networks in gay-friendly settings. They show that specific forms of cultural capital led to an expansion and strengthening of participants' friendships with other gay students, that such friendship groups consolidated participants' social capital through naming practices, and that such friendship groups held symbolic capital through having their privileged social status recognized by others.

Intersections of Class and Masculinity

Access to the distinctively gay forms of cultural, social, and symbolic capital described above was not distributed evenly across the four universities, and in this section, I examine how these findings intersected with participants' classed positions and masculinities. Only one participant at the Old Universities reported having no gay friends. By contrast, 8 of the 20 at the New Universities said this was the case. These participants felt disconnected from other gay students. For example, Graham (New East) said, "I literally thought I was the only gay person here." Similarly, Lee (New East) said, "I've got a few different groups of friends: flat mates, work mates, course mates. It's a pretty even mix of men and women, but no gay guys." As the participant most removed from social life at his university, John (New West) said:

> I don't live on campus and I don't go to lectures—I'm not a bad academic, but it all ends up online, and it saves me bus fare not going in—so I only know a handful of people. They know I'm gay, they're totally fine with it. But I don't know any other gay guys.

Additionally, seven participants at the New Universities only had "one or two" gay friends, such as Tyler (New West) who said, "I wouldn't know where to meet more apart from the LGBT society." These disparities between friendship networks at the Old and New Universities were largely the result of institutional differences: Unlike the collegiate systems of the Old Universities, the New Universities accommodated students in large apartment blocks with few structured social activities available to those living together.

Alongside institutional differences between the wealthier Old Universities and resource-limited New Universities, another reason for the limited gay friendship networks of

some participants was due to economic burdens unique to working-class students. Balancing work schedules against university social life was a pressure that at least five participants had to navigate. For example, asked why he did not socialize with more gay students, Kyle (New West) said, "I don't really have the time. I come out of uni, then go to work. That's it." Similarly, John (New West) said, "I have to work quite a lot, and I don't like the LGBT society, so I don't know when or where I would meet other gay students." These participants' limited economic capital required that they work alongside their studies, giving them fewer opportunities to build gay social networks at university. By contrast, most participants at the Old Universities had middle- and upper-class parents, or generous financial support provided by their Colleges, granting them the freedom socialize and study without working.

Class differences also appeared influence some participants' attitudes toward and expressions of masculinity/femininity. Participants at the Old Universities who belonged to the mainly middle-class friendship groups described above often displayed their identities in overtly feminized ways. Several participants posted photos of themselves on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram in flamboyant costumes, wearing jewelry, or posing topless together. In one photo, which Lewis (Old South) described as "immensely popular on Facebook," three gay friends dressed as "the bondage reindeer" at an annual queer-themed social event hosted at his College. Other examples come from Mark and James, who frequently posted photos of themselves going to gay clubs in London, wearing flamboyant costumes including makeup, glitter, women's clothing, and accessories. Describing how the photos he posted on Instagram were linked to his gay identity, Oscar (Old North) said, "People can tell that we're gay in them, for sure. Tagging them as '#Gay' is a giveaway. I do that lots." When asked about this behavior, Fred (Old North) said, "I'm not a traditionally masculine guy. I'm not sporty and I lean more toward being feminine . . . I don't mind showing that off when I'm out with my friends." These men's friendships were an integral part of their publicly gay identities and

their feminine expressions were legitimized by the multiple likes, shares, and positive comments each photo received on social media. However, by their own accounts, posting semi-naked photos also illustrated how having certain body types—particularly slender or toned bodies—enhanced participants' erotic capital, another form of privilege possessed by many of these participants (see Hakim, 2010).

By comparison, there was evidence that a minority of working-class participants at the New Universities (7 of the 20) felt less comfortable embracing feminized or "stereotypical" gay identities. Several of these participants related their attitudes to their family circumstances. For example, Alex (New East) said:

I think it's partly to do with the way I've been brought up . . . I know some people are camp, some people are really into their feminine side. I mean everyone has their moments, even straight people . . . But my sexuality doesn't define me, it's just something that I am.

Also referring to his upbringing, Kyle (New West) said, "To be honest, I think I am quite homophobic. I think it was my grandparents who brought me up like that . . . I'm not a stereotype." Similarly, Callum (New East) said, "I love my dad, he's amazing, but obviously he's not used to that [gay] culture, and I don't expect him to be all for something he has no idea about." These comments illustrate the continued policing effect of heteronormativity on gender for some working-class participants, even in the absence of overt homophobia in their schools or universities.

Other working-class participants described how they tended to avoid becoming friends with other gay men who were "too" camp or feminine. For example, Jack (New West) said, "I don't click very well with flamboyant guys. I feel quite uncomfortable around them.

Not in a homophobic way, obviously, I just don't know how to react to them." Speaking about his friendship groups, Lee (New East) said, "I can't do the whole flamboyant stereotypical gossipy gay sort of thing. I get on better with lads than ladies." Only one participant at the Old Universities aligned himself with a more orthodox masculinity. Rory (Old South) said, "I don't like it when groups are immersed in the gay lifestyle. Quite flamboyant, which I would say I'm not." Rory was one of the six participants at the Old Universities who did not belong to a predominantly gay friendship network. Thus, it seems that participants who were most isolated from other gay students (particularly those who were gender nonconforming) embraced more heteronormative attitudes about "appropriate" gender behaviors (see Taulke-Johnson, 2008). These results provide an insight into how the uneven distribution of class capitals intersects with both the friendship networks and gender expressions of some working-class gay male students.

Discussion: Gay Capital

This article contributes to a growing body of research demonstrating the positive coming out experiences of LGBT youth in a culture of decreased homophobia (Anderson et al., 2014; McCormack, 2012b; McCormack, Wignall, & Morris, 2016; Morris et al., 2014). Rather than being ostracized or victimized due to their sexual minority status, the young men in this study were accepted and celebrated for being gay, sometimes interpreting their sexuality as a form of social privilege. To interpret these findings, I build on Bourdieu's theory of the symbolic economy to introduce a new concept: gay capital. Because it applies to all aspects of the symbolic economy, gay capital is an umbrella term which describes the unique forms of cultural, social, and symbolic capital available to young gay men in gay-friendly, post-gay social fields. In other words, *cultural* gay capital describes insider knowledge about gay cultures, *social* gay capital describes belonging to social groups which are exclusively or

predominantly gay, and *symbolic* gay capital describes having one's gay identity recognized and legitimized as a form of social prestige by others.

To elaborate on what it means to possess gay capital, at least half of the participants in this study attributed aspects of their strong social networks to having insider knowledge of gay cultures, belonging to gay friendship networks, and having their gay identities recognized by others as a form of prestige. Not only does this definition of gay capital supplement Bourdieu's definitions of class capitals, but it queers these concepts by demonstrating the unique value of *gay* forms of cultural, social, and symbolic capital. Indeed, those participants who possessed gay capital utilized this resource to subvert the hegemony of orthodox masculinity and heterosexual privilege (cf. Connell, 1992). However, Bourdieu (1984) held that cultural, social, and symbolic capitals can also be "converted" into economic capital, and thus used to maintain class hegemony. Although it was not within the scope of this research to determine the long-term economic effects of gay capital, I predict that the networks participants built using gay capital will eventually benefit them financially. The theoretical strength of my concept can be tested by this prediction. Relatedly, this research shows that participants who were "better off" in the symbolic economy of class had greater access to gay capital. Class capitals are also situationally relative, with some forms of capital belonging to "larger fields," maintaining value in diverse social settings due to dominant norms. Therefore, gay capital may belong to a relatively small social field, insofar as it is predominantly utilized by White gay men with middle-class dispositions, tastes, and backgrounds, building on other forms of capital they already possess.

Responding to my first research question, I found that the majority of participants reported an absence of homophobia among their school and university peers. Some participants even described themselves as being popular not in spite of, but because of being gay. These men also described their strong friendships with heterosexual male peers, which

for some included displays of affection that gay men have traditionally been excluded from (see Anderson & McCormack, 2014a). I therefore characterized the four research settings in this study not only as gay-friendly, but also as post-gay, in that most participants had strong cross-orientation friendships and did not view their sexual identities as the most important feature about themselves. However, as Ghaziani (2014) noted, being post-gay is not being un-gay, and many participants continued to view their gay identities as an important feature of themselves and their friendship networks. Therefore, for gay capital to exist, I argue it is necessary that homophobia (and homohysteria) has diminished or disappeared from the social fields in which gay men's friendship networks are developed.

It might be argued that if these participants were truly "post-gay," they would not develop friendship groups which were exclusively or predominantly gay at university. However, the gay friendship groups I have drawn attention to did not exist in isolation, and all participants maintained close friendships with men and women who identified as straight alongside other sexual minorities. It might also be argued that being post-gay suggests that participants would seek to present themselves as "ordinary" in terms of gender and sexuality by adopting more orthodox masculine traits. Although this was true for a minority of working-class participants, I argue that this is a heteronormative interpretation of what it means to be post-gay in social contexts where homohysteria has diminished. In settings where inclusive masculinity has become normative, there is no longer a singular, "correct" way to be masculine—what Anderson (2009) labels as "orthodox masculinity." Thus, the conflation of homosexuality with gender nonconformity had less power in policing gender norms at these universities, giving participants the freedom to express their "gayness" through gender nonconformity without distancing themselves too much from their heterosexual peers. This demonstrates a diversification of experiences and identities in post

gay social fields, where being gay is no longer ubiquitously associated with a "narrative of struggle" (Cohler & Hammack, 2007).

Responding to my second research question, this research also showed how the majority of participants developed gay friendship networks away from institutional venues such as LGBT student societies in spontaneous ways. Drawing on popular culture and social media (see Gray, 2009)—notably less elite forms of cultural capital than documented by Bourdieu (1984), suggesting that gay capital may queer traditional class boundaries—these participants did not reject gay cultures but, as Nardi (1999) described, used their friendships to develop their own local ways of "doing gayness." This trend was most evident among friendship groups at the Old Universities such as "the Gaytriarchy," "the Glitterati," and "the Plastics." These naming practices were important not just because they serve as recognition of participants' privileged positions (see Bourdieu, 1986), but because they illustrate how these students embraced contemporary gay cultures to develop individualized gay identities. Participants belonging to such groups also presented themselves in overtly gay and feminized ways, particularly on social media. Alongside class, Bourdieu's theorizing has been extended to examine both sexual and gender hierarchies (Bridges, 2009; Hakim, 2010; Huppatz, 2012) but has not yet considered how gay youth might develop their own forms of capital to challenge heteronormativity. Given that participants did not face discrimination, either for adopting highly feminine behaviors or overtly gay dress codes, troubles the notion that heteronormativity will always privilege gay men with greater masculine capital (cf. Connell, 1992); or it shows that in some social fields, heteronormativity has begun to wane alongside overt homophobia (cf. Walters, 2014).

In the final results section, I demonstrated the detrimental effects of the symbolic economy in reinforcing inequality among a minority of working-class participants at the New Universities, who held more rigid gender boundaries, and even some internalized

homophobia (see McCormack, 2014b, for similar findings among heterosexual male youth). Skeggs (2004) highlights that gender normalcy is a form of symbolic capital that is the result of privilege accumulated in other areas of social life. Yet this research demonstrates that the symbolic capital of masculine orthodoxy is highly context dependent. In highlighting this, it is also important to note that a range of masculinities were displayed at each research setting, including working-class participants at both the New and Old Universities who did not embody an orthodox masculinity. This suggests that while class continues to intersect with masculinity, the broader trend of decreasing homohysteria can transgress class boundaries (see McCormack, 2014b).

I attribute the differences in participants' masculinities across the four research settings to varying levels of access to class capitals within the symbolic economy (Bourdieu, 1984; McCormack, 2014b). For the majority of participants at the Old Universities, their social capital was expanded in these settings of privilege because they were granted more opportunities to form friendships with a diverse range of peers, for example, through the collegiate system; their cultural capital was expanded through engagement with forms of popular media, such as watching RuPaul's Drag Race on Netflix; and their symbolic capital became recognized through their tightly knit friendship networks, often by becoming "well known" on campus and adopting positions of influence. By contrast, participants at the New Universities had fewer opportunities to attend events or meet other gay students. Furthermore, some participants faced economic barriers, having to work part-time jobs, which gave them less free time to attend events (see Lehmann, 2014, for discussion of how class permeates experiences of university).

Gay capital provides a new conceptual tool for scholars examining the social networks of gay men in social fields where homophobia, and thus homohysteria, has decreased. Until now, the dominant research framework has sought to assess the extent to

which homophobia prevails in young gay men's lives, rarely considering how identifying as gay might *benefit* someone's social status. Therefore, the introduction of gay capital inverts traditional assumptions about gay youth as victims of a homophobic culture by showing that having a visible gay identity can also be interpreted and utilized as a form of social privilege. This is why some participants described themselves as "more popular" after coming out, while others attributed their elevated social status to the strength of their gay friendship networks. However, as demonstrated here, not all gay students possess the same amount of gay capital, and differences between gay student friendship networks illustrate how class continues to structure social inequalities by influencing young gay men's masculinities and sexualities in subtle yet important ways.

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