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# “Dolphins Are Just Gay Sharks”: *Glee* and the Queer Case of Transmedia As Text and Object

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## Abstract

The FOX television series *Glee* has been lauded for its progressive portrayals of gay characters and criticized for trafficking in stereotypes. We position *Glee* within a transmedia framework, using textual analysis of program storylines, ethnographic fieldwork, and messages about *Glee* circulated on the microblogging site Twitter, to examine fan responses to and uses of *Glee*. We find that young adults experience and deploy *Glee* in two ways. First, they use *Glee* as a text to interpret their own life experiences, and imagine how they might articulate queer desires and acceptance of them. Second, as a malleable and mobile symbolic object, *Glee* acts as a strategic device used to signal identifications with and levels of awareness and acceptance of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT)–identifying people. Although some of the engagement with *Glee* on social media echoed textual themes, we also find devoted fan engagement that diverges from that of our ethnographic observations.

## Keywords

*Glee*, LGBT, queer, gay youth, Twitter, media ethnography, transmedia

## Introduction

The FOX television musical-comedy series *Glee* revolves around a high school glee club in small-town Ohio. Critics and activists have praised *Glee* for featuring a diverse

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cast and offering ground-breaking portrayals of gay, lesbian, and bisexual high school students. It is also one of the more financially successful examples of “transmedia”—content produced for a variety of media platforms that takes advantage of digital venues for media consumption and fan engagement (Jenkins 2006). *Glee* received four Emmy and five Golden Globe nominations for its 2010–2011 season and won the 2011 Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) Award for Best Comedy. In addition to this praise, others have criticized the show for trafficking in stereotypes (Doty 2011; Meyer 2010). Given these layered, at times contradictory readings of *Glee*’s representations of queer characters, this article investigates how young people, particularly lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT)—identifying or questioning youth and their allies, make use of *Glee* in their everyday lives.

This study draws on textual analysis, ethnographic fieldwork among a group of eighteen- to twenty-year-olds, and analysis of discussion about *Glee* found on the social media site Twitter to examine how media engagement with *Glee* was consumed, produced, and circulated by young people. The project involved ethnographic observations of a cohort of eight college students watching *Glee* together over a five-week period in Spring 2011, as well as individual, in-depth, open-ended interviews with six of the eight participants. To triangulate our participant observations and ethnographic interviews, we analyzed discussions about *Glee* on Twitter. The Twitter data roughly coincides with the timing of our ethnographic fieldwork. Our readings of that data focused on how *Glee* Twitter discussions mapped onto and diverged from our participants’ understandings and cultural uses of *Glee*. Finally, we watched *Glee* and undertook textual analysis of how queer youth are portrayed on the show.

This study addresses three questions. First, what do young viewers “do” with *Glee*’s representations of queer teens, particularly the same-sex relationships featured on the show? Second, how does *Glee*’s cultural work shift when viewers invest in the show and its character portrayals through transmedia engagement? Finally, what insights can this project offer media researchers trying to analyze ethnographic materials found across mediated platforms, from television screens to Twitter’s trending topics? As we will discuss, we found that participants of the ethnographic component of our research experience and deploy *Glee* in at least two compelling ways. First, *Glee* works as a textual point of reference—a socially constructed “sexual script” (Gagnon and Simon 1973)—through which viewers interpret their own life experiences. They use storylines to imagine and articulate queer desires and acceptance of them. Second, *Glee* operates as a mobile, symbolic object. These young people used references to watching the show rather than specific narratives to signal identifications with and acceptance of LGBT-identifying people. Their practices illustrate that television viewers may consider themselves fans of a program without necessarily mastering the textual object of their affections. Programs like *Glee* operate as transmedia objects, remediating and spreading consumable texts across media platforms for voracious megafans, but viewers also find meaning in these programs as cultural objects in and of themselves.

Comparing data collected ethnographically and from Twitter illuminates divergent fan practices that neither research method alone could have effectively brought to light. The comparison offers a triangulation of qualitative and quantitative approaches to interpreting what fan practices look like and their cultural significance. It suggests that fan engagement with transmedia texts across different media platforms, from social media to group television viewing, produce distinctive fan practices. They invite different opportunities for identification and communication with present and distant others. Building on current findings in fan studies scholarship (Sandvoss 2005), our research suggests that fan studies must expand to imagine viewers who are both casual and enthusiastic, invested in a program's cultural existence rather than the specifics of its storylines and plot twists.

## Literature Review

*Glee* is considered a "transmedia" text (Jenkins 2006; Kinder 1993) in that the show's story, while primarily told through the television series, is supplemented with other media: albums and MP3s of cast recordings, mobile phone ringtones, a concert tour, a reality show called *The Glee Project*, a three-dimensional (3D) movie of the concert tour, and various Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube channels maintained by official sources, cast members, and fans. Understanding how young viewers think about and use the show requires a multisited approach that can account for these different mediated interactions (Marcus 1995). Although *Glee* is a distributed text emerging within a contemporary media landscape, its meaning and uses can be understood within the media history of queer representation and audience reception.

## Representation

Historically, LGBT characters have been either absent from mainstream media or portrayed as villains or victims. This absence is referred to by Gerbner and Gross (1976) as "symbolic annihilation" and reflects the subordination of sexual minorities. As Gross (1991, 406) writes, "Those who are the bottom of the various power hierarchies will be kept in their places in part through their relative invisibility." While a few queerly coded characters appeared on television in the 1970s and 1980s, the presence of LGBT characters on television and in movies substantially increased during the 1990s (Gross 1991; Walters 2001). Shows like *Will and Grace* (1998–2006) and *Ellen* (1994–1998) and movies like *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997) and *The Birdcage* (1996) focused on gay themes. Despite this increase in visibility, these characters were primarily white, urban, wealthy gay men, and "presented in a way acceptable for heterosexual audiences by reinforcing traditional values like family, monogamy, and stability" (Avila-Saavedra 2009, 8). Helene Shugart (2003) writes that in such media, LGBT characters typically functioned as support for heterosexual relationships; gay identity was depoliticized and viewed as a personal matter, often

absent of sexuality. The homogenized nature of these characters required a call for more nuanced queer representation beyond mere numbers (Battles and Hilton-Morrow 2002; Dow 2001; Papacharissi and Fernback 2008).

Since the mid-2000s, the diversity and breadth of gay characters on television has increased. On network television, *Ugly Betty*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Modern Family*, *Gossip Girl*, and *The New Normal*, among others, have prominently featured LGBT characters and themes, as have premium cable shows like *United States of Tara*, *True Blood*, *The Wire*, and *The L Word*. LGBT-focused cable channel Logo, launched in 2005, produces original programming like *The A-List* and *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Reality programs have continually featured LGBT contestants from Adam Lambert on *American Idol* to Christian Siriano on *Project Runway*. While many of these characters are wealthy white gay men, others are not. For instance, among several prominent LGBT characters on *True Blood* is Lafayette, a working-class African American cook, whose boyfriend Jesus is a Mexican American nurse.

This relatively recent spike in the representation of LGBT people could potentially be important to our research participants. Not only do LGBT characters signify social legitimacy, but these newer varied representations may provide models for negotiating sexual and gender identity among questioning youth, their straight allies, and those who identify as LGBT (Epstein and Friedman 1996). *Glee* must be contextualized within this landscape of expanded LGBT representation.

### *Fandom and Transmedia Engagement*

Online fan cultures are a popular site for academic inquiry. Researchers have studied fan cultures on a range of fronts, including their online discussions (Baym 2000; Shefrin 2004), content production (Andrejevic 2008; Tosenberger 2008), and the interplay of fandom with the media industry (Milner 2009; Murray 2004). These studies extend the active audience paradigm of media studies, which finds that media audiences are participants in creating meaning, giving rise to polysemic or resistive readings and alternative textual interpretations (Fiske 1992; Radway 1984). Organized fandom takes this one step further, with collaborations among fans creating and promoting actual alternative texts, fan fiction, and its queer subgenre of "slash fiction," being notable examples.

While most audience members do not take part in organized subcultures like the ones described above, viewers' affective attachments to media texts demonstrate deep investments that are distinct from "fandom" or textual productivity. Such viewers express fan productivity through emotional relationships with fellow viewers, rather than as individual textual producers. Studying television *watchers* rather than *fans* opens up a spectrum of textual engagement, from viewing an episode now and then to serious involvement in the narrative. Jonathan Gray (2003, 73) advocates for studying "anti-fans" and "non-fans" in audience studies, arguing that looking at a *range* of viewing experience outside of the active, engaged fan makes for a more informed understanding of the text. Sandvoss (2005, 8–9) defines "fans" as those who "build

and maintain an affective relationship with mediated texts,” pushing back against the dominant idea that fandom is something necessarily subcultural or subversive.

Creative content that circulates through digital media platforms extends the meaning of “watching” even further. Henry Jenkins (2006, 21) used the term *transmedia* in his book, *Convergence Culture*, to describe texts that require consumers to

assume the role of hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels, comparing notes with each other via online discussion groups, and collaborating to ensure that everyone who invests time and effort will come away with a richer entertainment experience.

Jenkins (2006, 21) suggests that these elaborate texts may push audiences “further than they are willing to go,” because only the most die-hard fans will attempt to track down all these pieces. We suggest broadening understandings of transmedia use, considering where and how texts become meaningful to less ardent fans who may bring particular investments to the table/screen. Transmedia studies often think first and foremost about texts’ origins and how they transcend venues, screenings, or broadcasts. But this approach is no longer sustainable. Scholars interested in flows of media across sites of engagement must imagine audiences as mobile meaning-makers embedded in shifting contexts that are not defined by a single or static set of circumstances. Transmedia become new texts and objects that demand multisited analyses of the kind conducted in this study.

Although *Glee* is a transmedia text, we expected to find a spectrum of participation similar to that of “traditional” audiences, in that most watchers will only engage with a subset of the text’s proliferation. This allowed us to examine how *Glee* watchers might do something different with the program as both transmedia text and object. As such, our findings contribute to expanding anthropological approaches to media and technology studies (Ginsburg et al. 2002). While much of media anthropology has focused on understanding how small, defined audiences make meaning out of texts based on their own experiences (e.g., Abu-Lughod 1998; Mankekar 1999), we believe the field needs to shift toward tracing the movement of a complex aggregate of narratives across media types. This means conducting ethnographically grounded, multi-methodological examinations of television programs to account for an increasingly distributed experience of positionality.

## Method

This article is multimethodological by design to address the complexities of contemporary television. Some *Glee* audience members watch the program at the network-defined date and time, while others may watch DVDs, downloaded episodes, On Demand or Hulu streams. As such, viewers have the opportunity to consume the text according to their own schedule, at a variety of places and times with different people. They can discuss the show not only in person but also on Facebook, through text

messages, on Twitter, and over the phone, using what Haythornthwaite (2001) calls “a multiplexity of communications media.”

We therefore attempted to follow *Glee* as an ethnographic object rather than one with a single privileged location, interpretation, mode of viewing, or subject position. As such, this research offers a model for how to study audiences and reception through an ethnographic lens. We align this work with “media anthropology,” a body of literature briefly referenced above. While there are debates about how to differentiate ethnographies from, say, case studies, one relevant distinction is ethnography’s methodological focus on the interpretative value of participants’ understandings of cultural phenomena. Case studies, however, focus on unpacking the meaning of phenomena from a broader vantage point, typically de-privileging the tacit knowledge of a specific group in the analysis (Stake 1995). We hope this essay contributes to the ongoing discussion of how best to study audience engagements with transmedia texts and what ethnographic approaches can contribute to media scholarship.

To understand the show and develop our own readings, each researcher watched the first two seasons of the series (forty-eight episodes), concentrating on the last five episodes of the second season. We undertook textual analysis of these five episodes (April–June 2011), concentrating on the representation and storylines of two romantic pairings, “Kurt” and “Blaine” and “Brittany” and “Santana.” Kurt and Blaine are teenage boys, while Brittany and Santana are teenage girls. We discussed our understandings of the characters and compared them with those of our ethnographic participants.

Second, the project involved ethnographic observation of a group of college students watching *Glee* together over a five-week period. We recruited the student group through e-mails to various LGBT associations at local universities. One student responded and, through him, we were introduced to the larger group. We watched *Glee* with the group for five weeks and wrote field notes on our experiences. We conducted individual, semistructured interviews with six of the group participants (Spradley 1979; Wengraf 2001). Before the interview, each interviewee was given a questionnaire with basic information to fill out; they were offered a \$20 gift at the start of the interview, whether they completed it as scheduled or not. The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and coded using a grounded theory method (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Of the six students we interviewed, three were male and three female; the three men identified as gay and the three women as straight (one of those as “straight but not narrow”); two students identified as biracial or multiracial while four identified as white. None of our female participants identified as queer. Four out of six students listed their religion as “Christian.” The average age of our interview participants was 19.6 years.

We turned to social media for a sense of how *Glee* was talked about by others beyond our small cohort. Twitter is a major site used for fan discussion and celebrity interaction (Marwick and boyd 2011). On Twitter, a hashtag is an informal content ordering scheme used to find related content by prefacing a topic with the pound sign, such as #msr or #stateoftheunion initiated, used, circulated, and interpreted by Twitter users (Romero et al. 2011). We found three prominent hashtags used in *Glee*-related

discussions. The first one, #glee, is used for general discussion of the show. The second and third, #klaine and #brittana, are portmanteaus of two couples, “Kurt and Blaine” and “Brittany and Santana,” respectively. By examining each, we hoped to understand how “gay” and “lesbian” relationships are read and used by a larger pool of viewers. Over a nine-week period we collected all tweets that included any of these three hashtags, resulting in a corpus of approximately 450,000 tweets. We analyzed these tweets using several methods; we determined the most frequent tweeters, the frequency of each hashtag, and when tweets were sent to get a basic sense for the patterns of *Glee* fans on Twitter. (For the technical specifics of this analysis, see Marwick and Gonzales-Rivero 2011.)

We focused Twitter analysis on the nine-week period that roughly coincided with our ethnographic work to triangulate fieldwork and interviews with Twitter activity and *Glee* broadcasts. This allowed us to compare how participants and Twitter users talked about the program, as none of our ethnographic participants used Twitter to discuss *Glee*.<sup>1</sup> The ethnographic and computational approaches to *Glee* fandom gave us different views of patterns and norms among a subset of fans: those sharing a dorm space and a desire to watch together, and those with social media access and a motivation to use it as part of their viewing experience.

## Findings: *Glee* As Cultural Work

*Glee* primarily tells the story of a group of outsiders who overcome odds to achieve success. The core group of glee club members is racially diverse, with African American, Asian American, Hispanic, Jewish, and white members. One white character, Artie, is paraplegic and uses a wheelchair. Other minor characters represent minority groups, including two female actors with Down’s syndrome. The characters display a range of body types outside of the slim Hollywood ideal. Several characters undergo exploration of their sexual identity, including Kurt and Blaine, who are openly gay; Karofsky, a closeted gay football player; Santana, first represented as a sexual opportunist who later develops into a closeted lesbian; and Brittany, who could be read as bi- or pansexual, though the character makes no specific identity claims in the series.

The show’s creator, Ryan Murphy, is openly gay and known for shows like *Popular*, *American Horror Story*, and *Nip/Tuck*, which use irony and satire to challenge decorum on broadcast television. *Glee* employs conventions of musical theater, teen movies, music video, and melodrama to create an overwhelming sense of camp. For instance, in the show’s first season, the character of Kurt tries out for the football team (“Preggers,” S1E04). It is revealed that he is a remarkable kicker, but only when he dances to the hit Beyoncé song “Single Ladies.” This song’s music video had very recognizable choreography derived from a Bob Fosse routine, and became a popular phenomenon. Kurt teaches the choreography to all the football players, who perform the dance during a game, confusing the other team. After the team’s triumphant win, Kurt comes out to his father, who responds warmly and supportively.



*Glee*'s engagement with stereotypes, beyond those dealing with sexuality and gender, sometimes seems to further rather than resist them (Hildebrand 2009; Kociemba 2010). For instance, in the Season 3 episode "Asian F" (S3E03), the character of Mike Chang is berated by his parents for receiving an A- on an exam, which his girlfriend Tina refers to as the titular "Asian F," furthering stereotypes of the "model minority" and the "tiger mother." A nonparaplegic actor (Kevin McHale) plays the paraplegic character, Artie, and the program uses the actor's body in dream sequences to play out storylines in which Artie fantasizes about dancing without his wheelchair, signaling the presumption that Artie is "less than able" in his current body ("Dream On," S1E19). In an earlier Dickens-esque episode, the character Coach Biest buys Artie an expensive "ReWalk" device to give him the joys of walking that Christmas ("A Very *Glee* Christmas," S2E10). *Glee*'s treatment of gender and sexuality is no less complicated, particularly when it comes to representations of LGBT characters.

### Using *Glee* As Text

Our discussion focuses on audience reactions to the on-screen romances between two openly gay characters, Kurt (played by Chris Colfer, a gay-identifying actor) and Blaine (Darren Criss), and the somewhat more opaquely coded, though no less homoerotic, affair between Santana (Naya Rivera) and Brittany (Heather Morris). We found that these relationships served as "equipment for living" (Burke 1974, 293) for the youth involved in our study. In other words, our informants compared their own experiences with those of the characters on *Glee*. Our study participants used several of the situations explored by the *Glee* characters on the show to imagine how they might navigate similar situations in their own lives.

In Season 2, *Glee* followers are introduced to Blaine Anderson, a charming, impeccably dressed, arguably gender normative student leader in a competing glee club called "The Warblers." Mid-season, Kurt, an openly gay student with a distinctly fey affect and fabulous couture clothing, transfers to Blaine's private school. The transfer comes after Karofsky, a student athlete, physically harasses Kurt. As the storyline unfolds, we see that the bully could be suffering from his own inner demons as a deeply closeted teen.

Kurt and Blaine's relationship develops with a sweet but passionate kiss between the characters after Kurt wins Blaine's heart singing the Beatles song "Blackbird." Once together, they portray an unproblematic, positive, and sexually innocent relationship. They struggle with bringing their relationship to the militantly heterosexist public spaces of the high school dance, but repeatedly present themselves as out and proud of their sexual identities.

These themes of resilience, sexual restraint and modesty, and a monogamous commitment to a virtuous romantic relationship resonated with our participants. As Rachel, a straight-identifying nineteen-year-old, notes,

I think people would be able to relate to Kurt [transferring schools] . . . it's interesting to see people dating because they want to be in relationships. I guess you can kind of see that there's hope in the end because of what happened with Kurt and Blaine.

Laurie, a twenty-year-old, felt that the possibilities for love reflected in Kurt and Blaine's relationship transcended the gender of the viewers:

I can say that the relationship between Blaine and Kurt, I have a lot of friends who are girls and who are gay that think it's adorable and are in love with that. So, we were just like waiting for them to get together. Like, "They're so cute! Why isn't this happening?!"

And for Michael, a twenty-year-old,

There are moments when I'm like, "Kurt, why are you being so ridiculous?" But at the same time, there are people that I know that are that ridiculous. So it's a combat between perpetuating gay stereotypes, which is always seen as a bad thing . . . Except there are some times when I'm very comfortable with gay stereotypes and I like them. Like the good fashion sense. We can hold on to that.

While Michael liked the Kurt character, he expressed ambivalence about Kurt's flamboyance. He noted that,

Sometimes you just get tired of seeing [the same stereotypical qualities] over again and again. I get worried about . . . whether or not that means that . . . our culture at large is going to continue to think that's all we can be.

If several of our youth participants saw Kurt and Blaine as standard bearers of a positive gay masculinity, the characters Santana and Brittany and the relationship they developed through the arc of Season 2 were more ambivalent textual resources for queer desires. The brash, sexually charged Santana begins her glee club career as something of an unscrupulous lover among the young men at McKinley High School. Brittany, however, reads like an idiot savant, able to drill deeply into specific topics (cats) yet always seeming a bit spacy (as in her memorable non sequitur declaration that "dolphins are just gay sharks"). Brittany is conveniently naïve when it comes to her relationship with her boyfriend Artie and the specifics of her desires. As she and Santana "practice kissing" (offscreen—no scene actually depicts the beginning of their love affair), we are left uncertain of the meaning of Brittany's acquiescence to Santana's pressure to continue "practicing" and what, if anything, the relationship means to Brittany beyond a deepening of her friendship with Santana.

For Laurie, the lack of clarity around identity and desires gave her the impression that the storywriters were simply filling a gap:

The Santana [and Brittany romance] caught me by surprise. I didn't remember anything about her and Brittany and so when they had all of this drama about it, I was a little bit confused. I felt like they were really pushing it and trying to put it in there. Like, "Oh. We should address the female side too. OK. She's totally a lesbian." It's like, "Well, that's just random. Why did you do that?"

Conversely, for Heather, age nineteen, the lack of coherent narrative to Santana and Brittany's relationship made it all the more compelling and real to her: "I feel like it's a lot more real than Blaine and Kurt . . . [which] I feel is very storybook romance, which is not really what I'm into." The timing of our observations coincided with a point in the storyline where Brittany and Santana's relationship still held a significant measure of ambiguity, not only to the viewers but also to the characters in the show. While Laurie found this confusing, Heather found that this reflected the often complicated nature of high school relationships better than did the idealized Blaine and Kurt relationship.

This vagueness and lack of definition is compounded by an absence of recognition of the relationship from other *Glee* characters, unlike Kurt and Blaine's relationship, which is celebrated. While the show frequently refers playfully to gay male semiotics and history, there is a relative dearth of similar playfulness with lesbian iconography. We saw far more ambivalence among our participants about Brittany and Santana's relationship compared with that of Kurt and Blaine's. Few of them noted any strong feelings about Brittany and Santana's romance as a potential model of hope. This certainly fits with the popular celebrations of Kurt and Blaine as the key, often read as the only, queer couple on the show. However, this dichotomy was equivocal. While some of our participants enthusiastically supported the Kurt and Blaine pairing, several others expressed discomfort with its idealized nature and what we often read as a playful use of stereotypes. And while Brittany and Santana's relationship offered some of our participants material to think about the complications of youth relationships, it was too undeveloped a romance—in the arc of that season's storyline—to offer much comparison with Kurt and Blaine's pairing. The polysemic reads of these relationships reflect both the text of the show and the experiences and identities that participants brought to bear while watching it.

Our participants picked up on broader contexts that intersect with and shape Kurt and Blaine's public relationship, as well as Santana and Brittany's clandestine desires, from school environments to family dynamics and peer friendships. These young people use the show's discussions of bullying in school, coming out to family members, and dealing with friends who may not know their stands on LGBT politics as social-sexual scripts as they work through myriad concerns. For example, Michael interprets the story of Karofsky, the student athlete who persistently harasses Kurt only to kiss him later in the locker room, as a way to understand and talk about homophobia. Michael explained that he saw people like "Karofsky [being] just like afraid. And [he] comes with this history of bullying to put that part of himself aside. [The show is] trying to get at a different aspect of being in the closet." David, a twenty-year-old,

believes that the bullying storyline demonstrates that the program's producers are being "responsible with the gay character. They used [the story] to highlight bullying." Conversely, Emily felt the representation of bullying to be off the mark:

I mean my school was supposed to be like a pretty classy school, and I still saw a lot of like fights and like burn books on like Facebook. Like really awful stuff, which Kurt got pushed into a locker like twice. I don't know. I just didn't think it compared to the bullying I saw when I was in high school.

To Emily, the bullying storyline did not go far enough and did not reflect her experiences and those of her classmates.

Our participants most fully drew on *Glee*'s texts in discussions around family relationships. They used *Glee* characters and storylines as materials for imagining conversations and ways of being that they hoped to take up for themselves one day. Ethan, a twenty-year-old participant in the middle of coming out to his own family, had difficulty with how easy *Glee* made it seem:

I guess I just want to see the family dynamics of [Kurt] bringing Blaine home for a date . . . I want to see that happen and I want to see somebody's reaction to it, even if it's a positive reaction. I just want to see that dynamic. Just, as you said, the inclusion of someone else in your family that they know, you know love. Or people who love you know you love them. I want to see that dynamic get played out, almost, maybe just have something that I would want to have.

For Ethan and the other gay-identifying young men, *Glee* served as both a source of frustration and potential raw material for conversations they hoped to have one day with friends and family about their own queer identities and desires.

### *Using Glee As Transmedia Object*

While *Glee*'s plots and characters offered ample fodder to imagine what it might be like to come out to a parent or ask someone out on a date, the program itself played a key role as a symbolic object. Watching *Glee* or "liking" it on Facebook signaled one's status as supportive, inclusive, and even potentially LGBT-identifying. The program also created a connection within the dorm household where we conducted fieldwork and recruited participants. While some students watched *Glee* episodes individually, with other people, or at different times, the show's weekly live airing served as an organizing event for the group and an opportunity for solidarity, convening them amid stressful class schedules and other commitments.

Rachel described watching *Glee* with her dormmates as "definitely a haven. People that are having issues, we always talk it out and people help each other out." Rachel also points to the value of the over-the-top plotlines as a chance for friends to come

together over a show that does not require a lot of energy to watch: "Some of the plot-lines are just getting more ridiculous, but we still watch it because it's a place to socialize and hang out." There is also a range of ways that the participants watch the program. As Heather explains watching with her friends,

. . . completely depends on the week. We try and watch it together every week, but sometimes we have exams or other stuff that we have to be doing on a Tuesday night, and so then I'll watch it on Hulu later that week. A lot of times, if some of us miss it, we try and watch it together again. Me and David watched it together a lot.

When asked why these busy students try (even if they fail) to watch this program with friends or family rather than watch it on their own, several, like Laurie, suggested that it was more about enjoying the copresence of loved ones rather than the show itself, noting,

Actually [I] mostly watched it at home with my family because that's just where I watched most of my television. I guess I loved watching it with my mom because she just likes really adorable things [like musicals].

Now that Laurie watches the program with friends at college, she seeks out smaller groups of friends to watch with:

Because then I get to choose more specifically the people I watch it with and not be disturbed by a lot of people talking, which I'm one to say that because I talk a lot. I talk a lot just because it's fun. That's the whole point of it. The whole point is to have fun watching it and to share that with other people.

As in many audience contexts, the very act of watching becomes a social bond that can strengthen social ties (Lull 1980; Mankekar 1999).

Several participants noted that they used someone's interest in watching *Glee* or other LGBT-themed programs like *Will and Grace*, or appreciation for icons like Lady Gaga, as a litmus test of someone's sexuality or inclusive politics. For Michael, watching and talking about *Glee* serves as a quick way to signal one's support or willingness to think about LGBT issues:

Positive gay role models in popular media allows people that don't know anything about it to understand, where the problems are. Or where people are coming from when they say they're having problems. It gives people something to talk about, to show their support.

This extends to social media, as Michael so eloquently puts it,

I don't think that there's like an online community based around *Glee* . . . [but] You meet somebody, and you either want to know if they're gay-friendly or if you want to know if they're gay. So you go on Facebook and you'll look through their pictures. If they're posing with a lot of women, that's a good sign. Even if it's not listed that they're interested in men, we can extrapolate. And then it's one of those things where if you're looking on the interests, the pages that they like, if *Glee*'s on there, and if Lady Gaga's on there, and if all these other things that you can enjoy, from sort of the culture that we have now, are things that they enjoy, then you have a basic community forming there.

He continues,

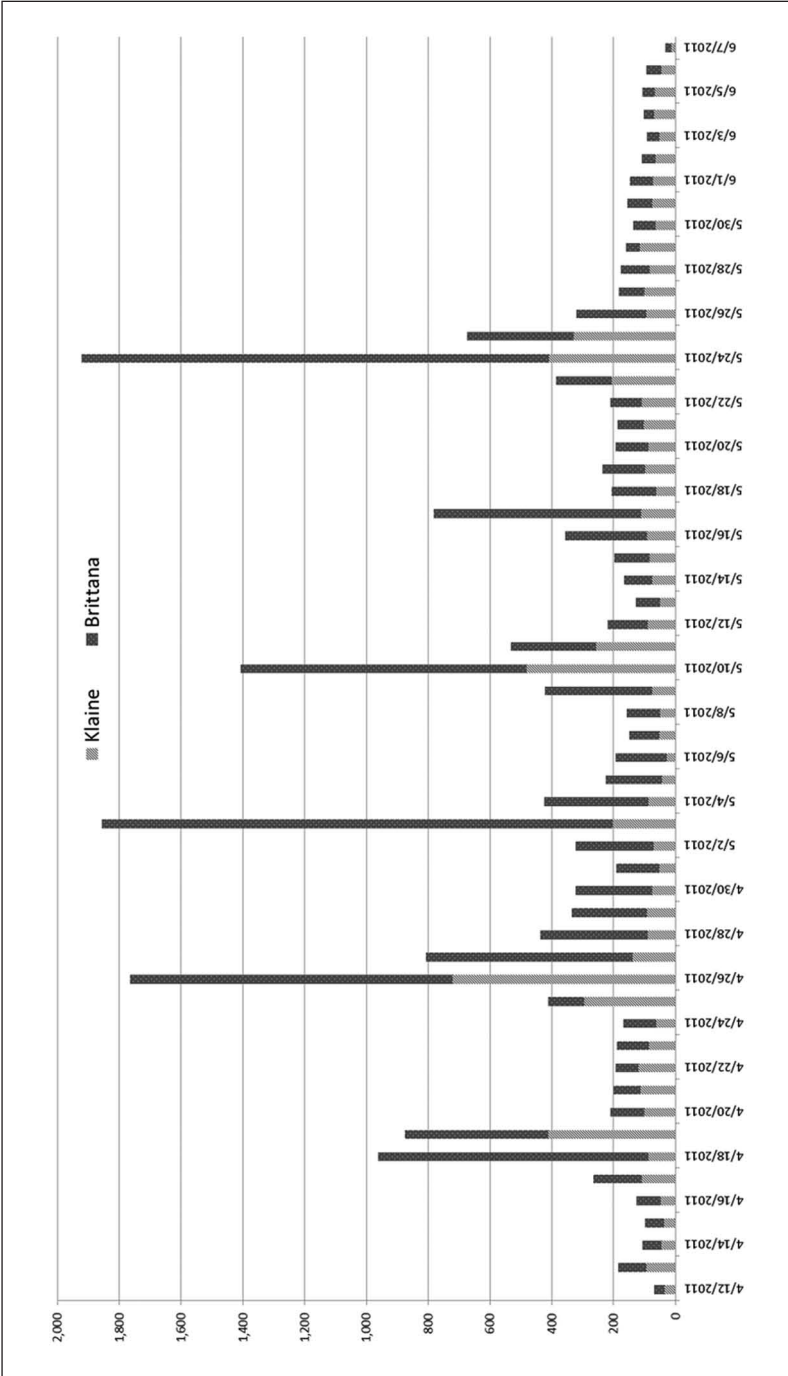
You're part of the [Facebook] group that likes *Glee*. It's not like we're online to talk about *Glee* . . . But the fact that I can tell you like *Glee* means we're probably going to get along and you probably won't hate me.

*Glee* becomes a way for young people to identify possibly like-minded people without the risk of publicly identifying as LGBT online.

*Glee* watchers can use the program to start conversations with friends and family and gauge others' reactions to its models of dealing with issues, from Kurt coming out to his father to the meaning of safe sex for newly out gay teens. If there was one gap our participants noted in modeling conversation, it was around how to negotiate religion and queer sexuality. (Perhaps acknowledging this absence, Ryan Murphy stated on the 2011 reality show *The Glee Project* that he would like to include Christian characters on the show.) As a symbolic cultural object, our participants often asked friends and family members to watch the show together or talk about it, and monitored their reactions. Watching the show and being willing to discuss it signaled to our participants that the person was, at least, open to LGBT issues.

The importance of using qualitative and quantitative data became clear while analyzing the Twitter data. We collected 450,000 tweets about *Glee* that included one of three hashtags: #glee (the general tag), #klaine (a portmanteau of "Kurt" and "Blaine"), and #brittana (a portmanteau of "Brittany" and "Santana"). We predicted that the Klaine tag would be larger than the Brittana tag, given the popularity of the Kurt/Blaine pairing among our interview participants and in the media at large.

To our surprise, the Brittana tag had twice as many tweets as the Klaine tag (Figure 1). A few posters, vociferous fans not only of the show but also of the actors who played Brittany and Santana, dominated the hashtag. The tweets of user "Team HeYa" (He = Heather and Ya = Naya, the first names of the actresses who play Brittany and Santana) included a great deal of information insinuating a romantic relationship between the two actresses. The greatest numbers of tweets appeared during the airing of episodes with significant romantic scenes between the two girls. There was clearly a large and active fandom for this "ship" (fan speak for "relationship"). While we found many positive tweets about Blaine and Kurt, there were no single Twitter accounts focused



**Figure 1.** Graph showing relative number of Tweets from April 12 to June 7, 2011, with hashtag #klaine (the Kurt–Blaine relationship) versus #brittana (the Brittany–Santana relationship)

on their relationship, and no Twitter users who produced as much content as Team HeYa did about Brittana.

Otherwise, our findings were unsurprising. Most tweets had a positive valence. Users often referred to the actors' official Twitter accounts through @replies (a way to direct a tweet toward a particular user) or retweets (a way to resend and amplify another user's tweet). A small number of posters were responsible for the majority of tweets. We found that tweets peaked during episode airings, suggesting that watchers were both tweeting their own opinions and interacting with other members of the Twitter community during the show. Indeed, Laurie explained that she took to social media when watching *Glee* alone:

[I] definitely [use] other social media just because if I watched it at home, a lot of times you want to talk about it immediately before it gets old. So, it'd be a text message to a friend, "Oh my god! Did you see this?" Texting and some Facebook posts about, "This is so exciting!" And then, people like it and you're like, "Yeah. I know! I liked it too."

Social media is a way to discuss the show with others without requiring copresence.

But what explains the disconnect between our reading of the Brittana relationship, the lack of interest in the pairing we found among our interviewees, and the large and active fandom online? First, these are two different populations; some of our interview participants were casual viewers, and none engaged in stereotypically "fannish" activity. (Michael went so far as to deny the existence of online *Glee* fan communities.) Our participants' social media participation around *Glee* seemed confined to sporadically reading or joining *Glee*'s Facebook group or discussing it over instant message (IM) or text with friends. Moreover, none of our participants identified as queer women, who might be more likely to identify with a lesbian relationship. In contrast, the "Team HeYa" users are deeply engaged, even voracious, fans invested in queer readings of the text. We should note here a methodological and analytical challenge inherent in considering identity across large- and small-scale data sets. For example, while none of our ethnographic participants identified as queer women, we have no data about how "Team HeYa" users identify, how their identities may differ when using Twitter (as opposed to when they are off-line or in other social media contexts), or how the kind of identity work they do through Twitter may change over time or in relation to other users. Twitter use is often pseudonymous, and has prominent quantitative metrics for numbers of tweets and follower count. These technical mechanisms may encourage the abundant creation of tweets. The disconnections we found among our readings, participant interview responses, and tweet patterns suggest that identities and orientations to queer relationships depend on the social and media context in which they are expressed.

Second, the fan activity on Twitter could be a better indicator of the complexity of the Santana–Brittany relationship than what the text alone tells us, supporting our



broader point about the need to construct and read multisited texts. An alternate hypothesis may be the relative lack of queer female relationships and characters on the show, and television in general. If gay sexuality is marginalized on television, lesbian sexuality is even more so. For example, one study showed that most queer female relationships on television are coded as bisexual and often portrayed as “less gay” than those of males (Meyer 2010). While *Glee* storylines have dealt with many issues specific to young gay men, such as safer sex practices or negotiating expectations of masculinity, there have been fewer comparable storylines that address young women’s concerns. Perhaps the fervent fandom for Brittana is an attempt to celebrate even the small space devoted to this by *Glee*.

## Conclusion

School is going well (I guess) but we aren’t watching as much *Glee*. Fox changed their Hulu policy and now make you wait 8 days after the original air date to watch an episode. I haven’t watched beyond the season opener :/ (Ethan, a twenty-year-old; e-mail personal communication, October 30, 2011)

When we began this study, we were skeptical that young people would find *Glee* as significant or revolutionary as it is sometimes portrayed in mainstream media. Many of *Glee*’s storylines seemed clichéd, problematic, or even offensive. But we consistently found that our young participants used *Glee* to appreciate and navigate their own sexualities and experiences. Both our participants and many of the Twitter accounts we observed seemed to have strong emotional ties to the program and its characters. To young people, the continued representation of minority characters in media is extremely important, not only to validate their own existences but also to open them to the experiences of others (Bond 2011; Evans 2007).

While our interview participants generally liked the queer characters on *Glee*, especially the “alpha couple” Kurt and Blaine, they acknowledged the show’s limitations. Several of our participants were struggling with reconciling their sexual identities with their religious upbringings. While *Glee* helped them to imagine situations in which they might find themselves negotiating these issues, it was silent when it came to these concerns, which loomed large in their minds. Others understood that Kurt’s character was a stereotype but appreciated the positive and negative implications of his depictions.

We found that our participants and Twitter users “did” various things with *Glee*’s queer characters and storylines. They engaged with *Glee* both as a transmedia text and as an object in a cultural symbolic sense. Young people watched with family or alone, while doing homework, or texting friends while they watched. They carried out conversations about the show at different times, on the phone, in person, and on Facebook and Twitter. They also watched the program with different sets of friends and groups, as their schedules allowed, on their own, and through time-shifting technologies like Hulu and DVDs.

These types of engagement did not fit the ideal of the transmedia viewer who chases down information about a program across divergent media types, but perhaps represents a more common casual engagement with a text across different media platforms. Our work sees transmedia as an amalgamation of media industry practices invested in tie-in content, pressed to negotiate audiences' capacities to timeshift and watch content online, and called upon to accommodate the dispersed voices of fans engaging content across social networks. But transmedia also make possible modes of reception that draw on the affordances of specific media platforms.

Primarily, *Glee* served two functions for the young people we worked with. First, it functioned as a signifier of support for LGBT issues (e.g., manifested in a family member's willingness to watch the show and discuss it, or a queer affiliation on a Facebook profile). Second, *Glee* functioned as a "sexual script," a guideline for appropriate sexual behavior and encounters (Gagnon and Simon 1973). Watchers used *Glee* to interpret their own life experiences and imagine how they might articulate queer desires and acceptance of them.

Our work calls for nuanced, contextual understandings of audiences and theories of "fandom," which need to account for the role of transmedia as a text, driver of fan-generated content, and symbolic object doing cultural work beyond textual or fannish production. Media theories of fandom often presume an audience with a high level of engagement who create content to support media texts, such as writing fan fiction or making costumes of favorite characters. We concur with other media scholars that fans' affective investments may have more to do with signaling belonging, inclusion, and self-identification (Gray 2003; Sandvoss 2005; Tabron 2004). It may indeed be true that fans who engage closely and generatively with texts "come away with a richer entertainment experience," (Jenkins 2006, 21) but—as texts occupy multiple spaces and fans encounter them through varied channels—engagement may provide more than entertainment. Our study suggests that transmedia texts such as *Glee* might scaffold self-development (e.g., using the show to experiment with adopting queer identities), personal political awareness (e.g., critiquing the show's depictions of bullying against personal experience), or group identity exploration (e.g., using the show's appearance on a Facebook profile as a marker of sexual orientation).

Essentially, the transmedia text's distributed and networked aspects offer fans, or even casual observers, multiple methods and motivations for encountering and using the text.<sup>2</sup> What emerges is a repertoire of meaning-making actions that may map to particular aspects of a transmedia text, or a constellation of subtexts whose assembly and significance depend on contexts that are only beginning to be understood. We suggest that transmedia theories should explore such casual engagements with media texts that do not follow the model of science fiction fandom outlined by Jenkins and similar theorists. Viewers can be deeply invested in a program without engaging in "fannish" activities, or even standard viewing practices, as shown by our viewers, who were more devoted to the program's existence in a cultural context than its fine details.

Attending to and cross-referencing participant observations, in-person interviews, and analysis of social media data illustrate the importance of multimethodological studies of audience engagement. Specifically, they can help us account for ethnographic

particularities that come to the fore against the backdrop of other social data. For our study, multisited analysis meant combining participant observation and interviews with social media data; for other ethnographic field sites, a different mix might be required. Comparing these participants with Twitter engagement allowed for a richer picture of affective investment that we might not otherwise have found.

In providing alternative topographies of fandom, the “big data” produced by social networking sites map out what falls beyond the normative patterns of a posited “average fan.” These data may show us fan activity we neither see in a specific qualitative sample nor anticipate from the popular discourse surrounding a particular program. Qualitative approaches give us a way to explore the meaning of people’s participation in one medium or another. While this is no place to stop or draw conclusions, it is a necessary next step in building out ethnographic work in media studies and moving to a richer picture of what mediascapes and the cultural products they circulate mean to those who come to them with a range of experiences and investments.

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### **Notes**

1. Unfortunately, our nine-week research window meant we were unable to address developments of the Santana/Brittany pairing that unfolded in *Glee*’s following season. Many of the most fascinating elements of their pairing (e.g., the tension between [dominant] representational embodiment and [negotiated] fan consumption, especially as it relates to specific viewers) are, therefore, not within the scope of our analysis. Taylor Cole Miller’s (2011) essay, “Performing *Glee*: Gay Resistance to Gay Representations and a New Slumpy Class” in *Flow* is an example of current scholarship that can take up these pieces of the puzzle that we are unable to address in our study.
2. Indeed, several of our interviewees had not seen previous episodes of the show, did not always watch the airing live, and were unclear on the complex plotlines (e.g., as we observed participants watching *Glee*, several participants did not recognize minor reoccurring characters and were unable to explain to each other secondary storylines).

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