IDENTITY AND SOLIDARITY IN ONLINE COMMUNITIES: QUEER IDENTITIES AND GLEE

Katie M. Buckley

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Committee:
Katherine Meizel, Advisor
Kara Attrep
Megan Rancier
Glee, a popular FOX television show that began airing in 2009, has continuously pushed the limits of what is acceptable on American television. This musical comedy, focusing on a high school glee club, incorporates numerous stereotypes and real-world teenage struggles. This thesis focuses on the queer characteristics of four female personalities: Santana, Brittany, Coach Beiste, and Coach Sue. I investigate how their musical performances are producing a constructive form of mass media by challenging hegemonic femininity through camp and by producing relatable queer female role models. In addition, I take an ethnographic approach by examining online fan blogs from the host site Tumblr. By reading the blogs as a digital archive and interviewing the bloggers, I show the positive and negative effects of an online community and the impact this show has had on queer girls, allies, and their worldviews.
This work is dedicated to any queer human being who ever felt alone as a teenager.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I. METHODS</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television as Text</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital Archive</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Online Interview</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II. QUEER ANDROGYNY AND CAMP</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dolly and the Beiste</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Track Suit Barbie</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III. SUBVERSIVE FEM[ME]INITY</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Britney Fantasy</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Womyn’s Music</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER IV. TRANSMITTING SUBVERSIVE GENDER STRATEGY</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bram Revolt</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memes as Community Builders</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER V. PARTICIPANT INTERVIEWS</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radical Role Models</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tumblr: #Friendship #Hateful</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So Stereotypical</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX A. PARTICIPANT BIOGRAPHIES</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
IDENTITY AND SOLIDARITY IN ONLINE COMMUNITIES: QUEER IDENTITIES AND 
GLEE

INTRODUCTION

“Mainstream” is a term often used to devalue various art forms: music, cinema, television, visual art, etc. While the term can easily help identify characteristics of the art form in reference (such as “mainstream” versus “underground”) there is an implicit value judgment assigned. These popular arts are often driven by a market economy, therefore marking them as inauthentic or consumer-based and incapable of having a deeper significance to the culture that consumes them. The common Top Forty hits can be defined as a loosely constructed genre, “wherein industry programmers strive to tighten the format in an effort to attain mass predictability, a practice continuously disturbed by unstable affective mass interpretation” (Crane 1986, 3). Tamara Roberts defines mainstream as music that is not ethnically/racially, marked—white music—although over time the reality has become “industry producers that are largely white but artists that are, generally, black and white, and listeners that are entirely mixed” (Roberts 2011, 23). What both of the definitions focus on is the production, the industry. The music loses its artistic value in exchange for popularity and mass consumption. Put simply, the market is perceived to have removed the artists’ agency and voice—thus reducing mainstream culture to only what the producers, publicists, and advertisers want us to see. However, this explanation of mainstream arts is unsatisfactory. It does not take in to account the lives and thoughts of these consumers; it instead quickly dismisses them as uneducated, unknowing, or naive. I do not mean to declare popular culture as a guilt-free, perfect art genre. It has significant moments of perpetuating negative stereotypes, hegemonic gender roles, and glossing over deep issues of race and classism. But it is not purely this simplistic. Popular culture, especially in its
mainstream form (and by this I mean prime-time television, top-40 music hits, blockbuster movies—the art forms which saturate our daily lives,) can be significant for the profoundly important role it plays in the lives of individuals and peer groups. With this research, I hope to highlight the importance of both mainstream television and music in the virtual and real lives of fans.

The Fox television network’s popular comedy show, *Glee*, concluding its fourth season at the time of my research (Winter/Spring 2013), is arguably about as mainstream and mass mediated as possible. The show occupies the network’s Thursday night prime time slot at 9:00pm, and frequently releases Billboard top 100 music hits (often of covers of previous top hits), mass marketed CDs, and fan collectables such as posters, T-shirts, board games, and stationary sets. The cast holds a yearly concert tour, which draws thousands of fans, and has led to the creation of a spin-off reality show, Oxygen network’s *The Glee Project* (2011-2012), to find new cast members. Countless websites have been devoted to the show and its characters in the form of role-playing games, fan fiction, forums, and blog communities. This type of media phenomena is best defined in Media Studies as “transmedia,” in which it is:

> [Encapsulating] a convergence of multiple media platforms for the creation of or addition to a fictional world of some kind. Fundamentally, there is a specific form of participatory culture behavior that involves an active, collective audience that collaborates on a new, more intense level of fandom to create a deeper more fulfilling experience from an existing produced media text. (Baughman and Wood 2012, 331)

*Glee* focuses on a high school show choir (glee club) named the “New Directions” at a fictional McKinley High in the real town of Lima, Ohio. Through its characters, including both
students and teachers, the show navigates various social justice hot-topics and issues of difference, including teenage pregnancy, disability, religion, school violence, domestic abuse, fat shaming, and queer sexualities. The *Glee* kids, led by their teacher Will Schuester (actor Mathew Morrison), tackles each of these issues on a week-by-week basis using music as a therapeutic medium. Their soundtrack is an expansive collection of popular hits throughout several generations, show tunes, and a few inclusions of rock and lesser-known artists. The songs frequently relate to the complications in each episode and enact a transformative power for the characters and listeners. My thesis takes an in-depth look at four queer characters of the show and demonstrates how, through the utilization of social media communities, fans have used these characters to establish subversive identities and propagate ideas of gender and sexual non-conformity through their musical performances. I argue that while commercialized, the success of these characters has had an overall positive impact on its audience, and I focus on audience members who have taken to the blogging world to form virtual viewing communities.

My research, which combines social media, popular music, and sexuality studies, can be situated directly among some of the most recent work in ethnomusicology. As mainstream pop becomes more widely accepted as a legitimate music for study, and social media is proved to have real social impact as cited below, my work attempts to combine these facets to discover music and technologies that are reaching the most people most recently. I am not alone in this attempt, however, as a few ethnomusicologists have focused on these issues as well in recent years.

Katherine Meizel published *Idolized: Music, Media and Identity in American Idol*, focusing on the building of an American identity through mainstream television and marketing. In addition to traditional ethnographic methods, such as interviewing contestants and attending
recordings, Meizel used official and unofficial internet forums to gather information on the show’s fans. The fans have a perceived power over the results of the televised program because they cast votes, as a nation of viewers, to determine the next Idol. The winner—their chosen winner—then create their own media in the form of musical recordings, concert tours, movies, etc. The audience interacts through multiple media as well, and Meizel notes that “[media] theorists have long noted that television audiences do not exist in a vacuum but are formed by the media industry. The continuous introduction of new technologies and new media forms, accompanied by the development of new theoretical approaches, has obliged sociologists to regularly redefine the concept of audience” (Meizel 2011, 36).

Abbie Brinson-Woodruff, in her masters’ thesis, looks at Lady Gaga and her internet fan base, the “Little Monsters.” In her work, she interviews self-proclaimed Little Monsters about their relationship with Lady Gaga and how she has influenced both their individual and cultural cohort. Using a music-inspired social media website, Brinson-Woodruff finds that “[the] cultural cohort that is the Little Monster collective operates through the messages and moral beliefs presented by Gaga as the leader of the community. . . . Although some may view cyber imagined communities as a false reality without purpose, many people view the Monster community as the cultural cohort in which they are most participatory and most connected to others” (Brinson-Woodruff 2012, 68). In a similar fashion to my work, the author uses internet-based interviews and social media postings to study fan interaction and identity.

In some of her most recent work, ethnomusicologist Rachel Devitt focuses on femme performance, highlighting the popular music accompanying it in her article “‘Keep the Best of You, ‘Do’ the Rest of You’: Gender Performative Negotiations” (2013). Using traditional ethnographic methods, Devitt observes various queer and femme burlesque troupes to gain a
better understanding of the relationship between the burlesque/drag performer and the specific pop songs and artists chosen. Focusing specially on femme performers, Devitt argues that performers choose songs that they enjoy listening to. Typically, these are “songs that have a particular social, political, cultural and/or personal significance for them. Their performances, therefore, often powerfully embody the pleasure of musical consumption and appreciation” (Devitt 2013, 339). If real-world performers use this method of song choice, it is likely a TV audience would bestow this power (choice through personal enjoyment) upon characters as well. The characters in *Glee* chose the songs that they perform individually; these songs therefore have special meaning to each individual character.

*Glee* has gained the attention of the scholarly community in recent years. In music studies, only one article has been published to date. Christina Belcher’s article, “‘I Can’t Go to an Indigo Girls Concert, I Just Can’t’: *Glee*’s Shameful Lesbian Musicality” appeared in the December 2011 volume of the *Journal of Popular Music*. With a strikingly different view from my own, Belcher focuses on the characters’ rejection of a lesbian musicality reminiscent of the feminist womyn’s music festivals. Analyzing a few specific scenes and musical moments in the second season, at the point when Brittany and Santana’s same-sex relationship begins to blossom, Belcher notes the shame and stereotypes that surround musicians such as Melissa Etheridge and the Indigo Girls and how sex, lust, and the body has been removed and replaced with emotions. The analysis stops short of any ethnographic work, however, and my own research will demonstrate positive fan support of the moments Belcher mentions.

Outside of ethnomusicology, *Glee* has gained scholarly attention in media and television studies. In a 2012 issue of the journal Communication Studies, Megan Wood and Linda Baughman co-author the article “*Glee* Fandom and Twitter: Something New, or More of the
Same Old Thing?” In this article, the authors examine the transmedia storytelling that exists through Twitter, a social media network where users broadcast short, 140-character messages to all of their followers at once. Many Glee fans have taken on the personalities of the show’s characters, responding to plot twists and daily happenings as if they were the characters. The account holders interact with each other and fans, augmenting storylines and reinforcing the characters identity through interactive storytelling. This gives the audience and new role in the creation of their media experience; “such practices probably affect subsequent encounters or impressions of a television show’s characters, allowing the audience to reengage the narrative text in very different ways, shaping responses to the show’s narrative aspects” (Baughman and Wood 2012, 340). The authors’ overall conclusion is that the audience and fandom is changing; they both play into marketing strategies (of which may or may not be aware), but by taking an active role, also develop some sense of agency. With continued media convergence, fan studies needs to be consistently reevaluated with the ever-changing role of the interactive fan and audience.

My research focuses on the female characters of the show who have “queered” their gender or sexual orientation in some way. With a rise in queer visibility on television, particularly lesbian visibility, it is important to analyze the impact these characters have (Reed 2009, Himberg 2014). With vast attention paid to some of the most visible non-heteronormative female characters, it is important to analyze their impact on individual lives and society. Santana Lopez (Naya Rivera) is a lesbian who comes to terms with her sexuality throughout the series. Brittany Pierce (Heather Morris) plays Santana’s love interest and counterpart, never directly commenting on her sexuality but likely falling within loosely defined territories of bisexual or pansexual as she dates both men and women without much thought. Both of these characters are
traditionally feminine in both dress and mannerism. Sandra Lee Bartky, in a biting description of
the proper, feminine woman, describes this figure as disciplined in body, movement, and manner
(Bartkey 1990). She is “restricted in her manner of movement,” (407) and skilled in the art of
makeup, ensuring her skin must be “soft, supple, hairless, and smooth,” and her body “taut,
small-breasted, narrow-hipped, and of a slimness bordering on emaciation” (406). In following
these strict feminine guidelines, the traditional gender is constructed. Because Santana and
Brittany fall into these traditionally feminine looks and behavior—even if some of their traits fall
into Bartky’s description of “loose women,”— they easily pass as straight women. Two other
female characters are posited in stark contrast to Santana and Brittany. Sue Sylvester (Jane
Lynch) is the school’s cheerleading coach and Shannon Beiste (Dot Marie Jones) the school’s
football coach. Both of these women must continuously assert their heterosexuality. Their
masculine characteristics and androgynous bodies often signify that of a stereotypical lesbian.
The women both have short hair, wear athletic unisex clothing, and have fiercely competitive
personalities. The show positions cisgender characters (characters whose gender expression
matches their biological sex) with queer sexual orientations against heterosexual characters that
stretch the acceptable limits of femininity. I must note that my research falls short of including
all queer-women of the show. The character Wade “Unique” Adams (Alex Newell) is a
transgendered student who first appears at the end of the third season. Newell was runner up on
the first reason of the Glee Project, where Wade’s character began to develop. While I
wholeheartedly feel that the inclusion and visibility of a transgendered individual on national
television is of the utmost importance and significance, transgender topics and lives are beyond
the scope of this small project.
My research combines the performed sexualities of these four women and how they are interpreted by internet communities and the female fans who participate in them. Focusing on female fans demonstrates a positive relationship between the characters and fans and how media representations of non-traditional female identities serve as role models for girls in similar situations. Since *Glee* can be consumed in multiple media forms, it is imperative to examine as many of these aspects as feasibly possible. I examine the visual, sonic, and interactive attributes of this media empire to understand the lived impact the show and characters create in their queer and queer-ally fan base. Instead of tossing aside pop culture as nonsense or simply comedic programming and music, the central themes and deeper interpretations of the songs have strong impacts on people’s lives and lead to changes (or at least perceived changes) in the opinions of society at large. Because shows and music like *Glee* have gained such fame, they can be seen as over-commercialized and lacking artistry from the many hands of media and marketing that are at play. I argue that the perceived inauthenticities of the music and characters are irrelevant in many cases because the possibility for change and personal impact still exists.
CHAPTER I: METHODS

I have taken three different approaches to my research methodology in studying the characters of this transmedia phenomenon. In my first approach displayed in Chapters 2 and 3, I posit four female characters from *Glee* (Santana, Brittany, Suje, and Shannon) and their music as texts—fixed events that can be read and analyzed. The show itself, as well as the social context of the music, gives rise to a rich spectrum of meanings. In addition to textual analysis, I will also explore the virtual world where fans interact and express ideas and concerns about the and form specific communities based around these beliefs. My approach to the online communities is two-fold: an archival analysis of blog posts (Chapter 4) and ethnographic interviews with active members (Chapter 5).

The blog host site I studied is Tumblr (www.tumblr.com). Founded in 2007, the microblogging site Tumblr (short for tumblelog) now hosts over 161 blogs and over 70 billion posts. It is the main blog site of major companies, celebrities, and even the presidential White House. The website allows users to create an account and multiple blogs free of charge. With an account, you can “follow” any blogs you wish and receive constant updates on your home screen. Posts can be varying types of media, typically including text, pictures, and gifs (graphic interchange format—small animations from either drawings or photographs), but can also include videos and links. Users can also use the sites “re-blog” feature, the ability to pass a post from one user’s follows to another instantaneously allowing for mass distribution, as well as “fan mail,” a private message feature. I explore these posts, both original and massively re-blogged, to understand how the music and characters have been used and transformed throughout time and space. With the interviews, I aimed to discover how these same musical examples and character musicians go beyond mass-media and into personal lives. The bloggers have used the music and
latched on to these non-traditional characters in virtual context that overlaps onto their non-virtual lives.

Television as Text

My research looks at four musical performances that take place throughout the second through fourth seasons of *Glee*. Characters Brittany and Santana sing a duet “Me Against the Music” made famous by the sex-charged performance of Britney Spears and Madonna (“Britney/Brittany” September 28, 2010). The couple also performs (along with teacher Holly Holliday/Gwenyth Paltrow) to “Landslide,” originally performed by Fleetwood Mac (“Sexy” March 8, 2011). Sue Sylvester battles a male student with a performance of Nicki Minaj’s “Super Bass” mixed with Mariah Carey’s “I Still Believe,” (“Feud” March 14, 2013) and Coach Beiste, in her only solo of the series, performs Dolly Parton’s “Jolene” (“Never Been Kissed” November 9, 2010).

In the ethnographic tradition, studying culture through a textual resource is frequently referred to as “armchair anthropology,” highlighting a perceived air of laziness surrounding research from the comfort of a library or office (Sera-Shriar 2014). “Real” ethnomusicology takes place in the field. It is messy, exciting, unpredictable, and a defining feature of our field. But when dealing with fieldwork in mass-media, some of this textual analysis grows in importance and is commonplace in Media Studies. When the programs and art are being packaged and sold for one culture (the informants/consumers) by a tremendously different culture (the producers), much of the original meaning is lost in translation by the time the message hits the audience. Since the participants in my field, the bloggers, have not created this show on their own, I feel it is important to conduct my own analysis. I look into the gender and
sexuality aspects that have struck them as important as well as other issues that may have been overlooked by the casual consumer.

I have modeled my research after a similar approach used by ethnomusicologist, Katherine Meizel for her research on *American Idol*. In her co-written chapter from *Shadows in the Field*, Meizel explains how she was able to tie together television viewing and internet analysis (which she admits to seeming like the “ultimate armchair ethnomusicology”) along with a traditional participant-observation approach, including live viewings and face-to-face interviews. In order to create a holistic approach to studying *American Idol* (2002-2014), in a similar fashion to *Glee*, one must acknowledge that:

> [The] complete existence of *American Idol*, then, makes use of physical place and virtual space, established technologies such as television and recent innovations such as text messaging or digital music/video downloading. This networked design highlights an important consideration in the study of popular music: the field includes *all* of the expanding, shifting sites where culture is produced, disseminated, and consumed.

(Cooley, Meizel, and Syed 2008, 93)

This definition of “the field” would expand *Glee’s* possible sites to the living room, *Glee Project* auditions, Tumblr, Twitter, forums, and any other physical space where the soundtrack is played. With an expansion of the field, as well as the idea of communities, virtual fieldwork has become a relevant and useful tool in ethnomusicology (Lange 2001, Reily 2003, Cheng 2014).

21st century television and media scholars suggest a split in methodologies between production, textual, and audience studies. While all three sections undoubtedly have a role in the mediation of meaning in programs, the reading of television as text is a useful strategy to subjectively interpret a deeper meaning of the program, “focusing on ideological and cultural
assumptions” (Fürsich 2009, 240). The text exists at a time “independent of the intentions of the authors and producers or reception of the audience,” and should be able to be studied on its own, without the need to be filtered by multiple subjective readings (240). Elfriede Fürsich’s 2009 article “In Defense of Textual Analysis” centered in journalism and communication scholarship, highlights the multiple benefits of conducting a text-only analysis in television and media studies, and I argue that this can be easily translated to popular music (especially popular music television) as well. She believes text should be given priority, and the combination of textual analysis with audience studies often leads to neglect or only a partial reading of the actual text. While I do combine these multiple ways of learning, I take great caution to thoroughly analyze both sides—the text and audience—to be used to inform each other to see the big picture of a minute part.

Fürsich argues that media creates a reality for its viewers and listeners, understandably not a “pure reality”—viewers recognize it is fiction—but a glimpse into what the public is allowing to become real (246). This is crucial in programs promoting social change, such as *Glee*, where society’s underdogs are waging a constant battle with what is acceptable and mainstream. She states, “Since media are such significant institutions for creating meaning in our societies one of the central tasks of media scholars should be to analyze and interpret what spectrum of reality media allow for” (246). If a program deploys too radical of a plot or character, the likely outcome would either be failure or rejection from the mainstream, forcing the program into “underground” or “cult classic” stories. In *Glee*, the wide acceptance of these characters and stories has permanently altered the allowable reality for the generation it targets. Of course no high school choir is packed with quite so many perfectly stereotyped students, but at least now they are allowed to exist (in their fictional form). *Glee*, seen through a deep textual
analysis, could be what Fürsich declares a moment “where media content as a commodified-
creative-collaborative construct is ahead of its time—offering glimpses of oppositional or
emancipatory realities; possibilities also against more conservative audiences” (246).

In separating text from producers and audience, we find it as a fixed object that can be
read intertextually—locating many of the cultural forces and ideologies that help inform its
possible interpretations. The interpreter thereby informs its “ideological potential,” what it can
come to mean, “how emancipatory of hegemon[y]” it can be (249). Robert Demming, in
“Theorizing Television: Text, Textuality, Intertextuality,” argues that television consumers do
not watch with a “fresh slate,” because ideologies accompany viewers as they turn on the TV (or
radio, for that matter.) The researcher, then, by focusing on a textual analysis, can then determine
the “potential” that can be read (Deming 1986, 39). This type of intertextual analysis, looking at
each meaning a signifier may have picked up throughout history, “constructs for the
listener/viewer a socio-political (and ideological) position to inhabit which pre-determines the
listener’s/viewer’s relationship to the social system and to his/her own consciousness” (33).

In my analysis of four musical performances from Glee, I demonstrate the multiple ways
in which gendered meanings can be constructed through sound, history, and bodily performance.
Each song performed is a cover song—a remake of an already-made-famous hit. On one level of
meaning, the song is historically situated in a gendered performance: the constructed
hyperfemininity of both Dolly Parton and Nicki Minaj, the androgyny and scandal of Madonna,
the idol-worship of Stevie Nicks. When these histories combine with the on-screen “real” lives
of the characters, completely new meanings and implications emerge (or possibly not at all,
depending on the previous knowledge of an audience member.) The personal lives and
sexualities of the actresses (often made public with the help of social media) can bring yet
another layer to the performances meaning (lesbians playing straight women, straight women playing lesbians). The gendered expression of the actresses—their hair, makeup, wardrobe, vocal registers and inflections, whether carefully constructed by productions or not, become realized on the small screen for millions of viewers. Each detail and social-historical situation deserves ample attention through textual analysis before audience reception can be examined for an attempt to see a holistic view of the show and its music.

Digital Archive

The next step in my fieldwork methodology was the exploration of both personal and re-blogged posts from the host-site Tumblr. The importance of the posts lies in their creators’ anonymous community in which members can virtually express honest opinions, thoughts, and pictures without fear of “real world” consequences. Through “re-blogging” and the use of the hashtag to label the content of a post (examples would be #glee or #brittana), users can quickly find and disseminate pop-culture information as previous generations could never imagine. The non-stop tagging, re-blogging, and posting society that we now know as social media gives us not only a glimpse into the massive volume of real-time conversations among virtual societies, but it diligently tracks each individual history in the archives of the web.

In Johannes Fabian’s book, *Ethnography as Commentary: Writing from the Virtual Archive* (2008), the author details the use of researchers depositing their data into virtual archives, and subsequently creating a new genre of ethnographic writing in its commentary (Fabian 2008). A strong argument can be made for the importance of studying internet commentary in its own right. Fabian defines commentary according to three criteria, the first being more than a superficial comment, but a thoughtful engagement with the text. His next qualification describes commentary as “a practice of writing. . . . Commentary is made
‘practically’ possible by the virtual presence of text(s) and it can be realized, practiced, within a community of writers and readers who have access to the internet” (Fabian 2008, 10). While fan comments on episodes and characters may seem superficial, my research argues that even these snippets of opinions and identities offer deeper insights into the lives of the bloggers. Furthermore, if we take Fabian’s use of “texts” to qualify not only the television program itself, which in this day is widely watched online through websites such as Hulu (www.hulu.com) and Netflix (www.netflix.com), where subscribers can stream entire shows for a small monthly fee, but the gif animations, production stills, and self-promoting pictures of the cast and producers as texts to be read, the presence of this spectacle is virtual in every way. These images are borrowed, changed, passed on, and commented upon in an ever-growing and fan-produced digital archive, allowing one to dig years into the past in one screen and watch real-time commentary in other.

There are numerous ethical concerns to consider when doing ethnography through a digital archive. In what Dhiraj Murthy calls “a covert affair,” many ethnographers conduct this line of research under-cover, stalking forums, chat rooms, and blogs without revealing their true identity or purpose to the people about whom they later publish (Murthy 2008). In his survey, Murthy discovered a “disproportionate number of covert versus overt projects” (839). Since internet research can be largely invisible—like a non-participating chat room attendant or a non-registered user reading forums and blogs—they go unnoticed by those they study. While many internet scholars agree that research should be conducted overtly, research review boards are often ambiguous about the responsibilities of internet research or slow to respond to the changing social media. For example, much contemporary research about these archives deals with observations in listservs (841).
In my investigation into the archived posts of *Glee* Tumblr bloggers, I made the decision to overtly publicize myself and my intentions. While everything posted to Tumblr is accessible by the public and considered fair use for researchers by the Human Subject Review Board’s standards (“Human Subject Review Board FAQs” 2013), I included permission for its use in consent documents sent to each participant (Appendix D). My participants each have blogs that deal with their sexuality and the sexuality of characters on the show. While posts are kept relatively anonymous by the use of pseudonyms, the users have created such an interwoven community that, in my opinion, emotions would be stirred if old posts were brought to the attention of a user’s current followers (especially if those posts conflicted with the current climate of the blog). While I realize this situation is unlikely to surface, blog posts, no matter how public and anonymous they truly are, give glimpses into personal and private thoughts often forgotten as they become automatically archived. Using these public archives without permission would be an invasion of the private-public lives of the users.

A complication arises, however, with the analysis of re-blogged material. The author of these images and stories are typically unknown, and the original likely came from a different host-site altogether. Tumblr tracks many aspects of each piece that is re-blogged in “notes.” Notes can be as simple as users who publically liked the piece (by clicking a picture of a heart,) to who re-blogged it from the current user and who that user took it from before. This feature allows us to see the one-on-one interaction between users and the instant dissemination of material. The network gives full meaning to the “web” in which it exists. However, as some of these texts have seeming endless histories and hundreds (or sometimes thousands) of likes and shares, the network goes beyond that of my permissions. Throughout my analysis, if I wish to uphold my policy of always asking permission, I must be sure to not investigate too closely the
network in which the texts lie. Isolated from this, they still illustrate the importance of the text for individual users in terms of identity performance and negotiations. I can see which images and videos have become widely popular by the numbers attached to it and therefore determine a popular dialogue in the community. In doing this, however, I risk some of the privacy I sought to protect, and therefore investigate only the numbers, not the users of the network.

The Online Interview

The final methodological approach I employ is the interview. Conducting online interviews has a fairly recent history full of controversy. While it can be seen as an easy way out of literally traveling “to the field,” others (particularly internet scholars) believe social media gives us an immense opportunity to tap into communities either difficult to locate in the “real” world, as well as communities that only exist in their virtual form.

In their co-authored article, Susan Crichton and Shelley Kinash, coming from the fields of educational technology and educational research, respectively, outline many of the benefits of text-based virtual interviews. Although dated by technology in today’s situation, I believe many of their arguments hold true. One important consideration when weighing the usefulness of these interviews is that by participating in online communication, the researcher is meeting the participants in their own space (Crichton and Kinash 2003). If the culture is an online-based community, telephone and face-to-face interviews would be taking the participants out of context, much like we would consider bringing someone in to a researcher’s office an ethnography faux-pas. In addition to “keeping consistent with the actual practice of the participants,” the authors offer a list of numerous benefits of text-based interviews:

- Writing one's life experiences in text contributes to a sense of self.
- The absence of visual, bodily cues, and the fixed nature of printed words allows participants to stay oriented to the other's intentions.
- When asynchronous, the participant has the time and access to information resources, to inform, reflect, revise, and iterate responses.
- Participants are less likely to put regrettable words in print, as they are to let them "dissolve" into the air.
- There are no nods, frowns, or yawns to discourage or distract, and misread nonverbal cues that result in second-guessing the expectations of the "other." (Crichton and Kinash 2003)

While these interviews may not be as natural and fluid as ethnographers typically like, they do allow the participant the advantage of having time available to shape their words and responses, leveling a bit of the researcher’s privilege.

Vanessa Paech (2009) speaks to the value of online anonymity. Without using these carefully constructed pseudonyms, Paech argues that "web traffic would slow to a crawl" (Paech 2009, 205). She refutes critics’ attacks on the usefulness of virtual ethnography. These critiques often state that "the anonymity of self-virtualization distances a researcher from their subjects, artificialising interactions and exchanges in an ‘unreal’ environment. Truth is diminished, or unattainable; authentic affinity and discretion infeasible" (205). But these evaluations ignore the freedom anonymity gives participants to answer questions and engage in conversations that can not only be more open and truthful, but possibly be considered unsafe in "real world" situations. These conversations both disprove the critiques of distance, but create "greater behavioural intimacy than offline observation can achieve" (206).

As previously stated, all of my participants were sent a consent message with the full details of my study, and a positive response was used in place of a signature. I never asked their given name or age; I only required that they be at least 18 years old. Since my participants remained anonymous and were found through social media, my interviews were slow-paced, virtual conversations online. Tumblr has a private messaging feature named "fan mail." After a
few days of following a blog, users are allowed to send these private messages. “Questions” (which have much shorter word limits) can be sent when fan mail is not enabled. I identified myself, my institution, and my project to each possible participant through these messages and asked very little biographical information in return. I felt this balance of power to be unlike much of what is taught in fieldwork literature—these strangers now knew my full name, location, and phone number (the first thing we once taught internet users not to display online) and I did not even know if they were presenting a true identity (self). However, since I had followed each of the participants for quite some time, I had some sense of safety and connection with them already. Many had even started following my Tumblr blog before initial contact was made.

After receiving consent from each participant, I began with a strict set of questions that I thought would lead me to everything I needed to know. I soon discovered what I considered open-ended questions led to short answers. There were several moments where I took a figurative step back from the computer screen and had to re-think my overall objective. I ventured from my original list and tried to form as many follow-up questions as I could. With these slow-paced conversations, a sense of continuity was lost. While I take much of the blame for this myself (my own lack of internet access and my schedule made it difficult for me to respond and ask questions rapidly,) I also saw shifts in patterns of Tumblr use from participants. Many members virtually disappeared, no longer posting or responding, only to pop back in a month later or not at all. One participant took herself out of the research for two weeks from frustration with the fan community but came back when she declared herself ready (only to leave the community entirely later on). Had I been conducting face-to-face interviews, many of these issues would not have affected my research. A break in the conversation would likely be less
than a minute, not two weeks. However, these interactions could never have been face-to-face, as the Tumblr community exists only in the digital world.

I have found that text interviews lack something else rather obvious—voice inflection. In asking rather direct questions, I have often found myself in need of extra explanations. When read in certain tones, I fear that many simple, well-intended phrases come off as condescending. To remedy this, I informally explain the sincerity with which I am intending the question. Since text can so often be misinterpreted, I find this to be one of the leading issues in my research. Besides these concerns, I do feel that the text-based interviews have been beneficial. As Crichton and Kinash predicted, many of my answers have been long and well-researched. In general, my participants have not been timid about their personal histories—I hardly believe I would have received half the details I did if these were face-to-face or even telephone interviews with the bloggers. The power of anonymity is evident. In addition, conducting the interviews virtually allowed the participants to reflect upon their constructed community. Some bloggers had strong opinions on the effect Tumblr had on their *Glee* and community experience. I was able to inquire about their means of communication using the same messaging tools.

My research is inherently impacted by a small sample size, a focus on consumption that does not extend to production, and subjective readings of the televised performance which favor gender and sexuality separate from issues of race and class. But while this study is limited, it addresses some significant discourses in need of research. Without a detailed reading of example performances combined with an ethnographic approach to the Tumblr bloggers, there would be only a fraction of the total picture. By connecting the blogger response and public displays of fandom to an overarching ideology enacted in the gendered performances, a more holistic and
complicated web is unearthed. The *Glee* empire has become such an entrenched example of transmedia intertextuality that one side of the story cannot be considered an adequate analysis.
CHAPTER II: QUEER ANDROGYNY AND CAMP

Camp, often used in queer entertainment such as film and television, can be a subversive, political act when recognized. Exceedingly hard to define, camp was first described by Susan Sontag as the “love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration” (Sontag 1964, 53) and “a vision of the world in terms of style—but a particular kind of style. It is the love of the exaggerated, the ‘off,’ of things-being-what-they-are-not” (56). In her essay, “Notes on Camp,” she lists numerous points and ideas of what camp is and what it is not. Sontag notes that a key character in camp is the androgynous person, stating that “[the] androgyne is certainly one of the great images of camp sensibility . . . Allied to the Camp taste for the androgynous is something that seems quite different but isn’t: a relish for the exaggeration of sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms” (56). With this, both the characters of Coach Beiste and Sue Sylvester easily fit into the discussion of camp sensibilities—both are so exceedingly androgynous that they stand in for an exaggeration of specific personalities. For example, no one could possibly eat two chickens for lunch, as Beiste does, or be so competitive as to spend four years doing nothing but trying to dismantle a school club, as Sue does. Even in their most earnest times, something is decidedly “off” with each of these characters.

Later androgyny-camp scholarship focused on Annie Lennox, singer in the band Eurythmics and famous for her gender-bending appearances (Piggford 1997; Whitely 2000; Leibetseder 2012). Most notable is her appearance in the music video “Love is a Stranger,” where she “performs two kinds of drag. . . . It is not clear from viewing the video whether Lennox is a man in female drag (in the first part of the video) or a woman in male drag (in the second half)” (Piggford 1997, 285). The ability for a biological woman to participate in a drag performance as a woman is more transgressive and unexpected than a biological male.
performing as a woman—we as viewers expect the drag performers to be men. This female-to-
female performance exemplifies the extreme artifice and performativity of gender. In Lennox’s
and similar performances, “the camp androgyne both performs drag and produces a deliberate
‘camp effect’—a period of disorientation that encourages its viewer to question his/her
assumptions about the relationship between gender performance and biological sex” (287). It is
in this way that I argue, in disagreement with Sontag yet agreement with later scholars, that camp
is political (Meyer 1994, King 1994, Dyer 1977). This disruption of gender norms, being
performed not in the privacy of a queer-club or drag show but in mainstream public media,
deliberately challenges the dominant ideology on gender. In a similar fashion, the campy
characters of Glee, as well as the show itself, become a political text on queer identities
broadcast across America’s primetime televisions. The creation and acceptance of camp are
political acts.

Dolly and the Beiste

Coach Shannon Beiste, played by actress Dot Marie Jones, is the coach of the McKinley
High boy’s football team from the second season of the show onward. Everything about the
construction of her character suggests masculinity—from her size, build, profession, deep voice,
and even her name (pronounced “beast”). Her appearance is occasionally mocked on the show as
the boys suggest using images of her to “cool down” when situations get too “heated” with their
girlfriends (“Never Been Kissed” 2010). Because of these masculine characteristics in her
appearance and personality, Beiste stands as the picture of androgyny—even butch—and her
sexuality is frequently questioned throughout the show. The character must continuously
reaffirm her heterosexuality. In our current society, women of Beiste’s stature and profession are
often automatically labeled “lesbian.” In studying the visual identity of bisexual women,
psychologist at the University of West England affirm the visual signifiers of butch style—“the short hair, minimal makeup, ‘masculine’ clothing, ‘sensible’ or ‘comfortable’ shoes” (Hayfield et al. 2013, 173). These visual identities are formed so lesbians can form communities and visually separate themselves from heterosexual society and nonverbally communicate their orientation (Hayfield et al. 2013). While the character is straight, and not queer in the sense of the traditional sex-desire relationship, her performed gender queers the expectations of the heteronormative sex-gender-desire relationships. By never questioning or even doubting her own attraction to men (as even the androgynous Coach Sue questions herself from time to time), her gender performance is subversive because the audience, influenced by societal discourses, expects her to be gay. While the true reasons for the show creators including this subversion from gender norms are beyond the scope of this study, this deviance can certainly be read as one of the many critiques of mainstream society included in *Glee*—disrupt viewers expectations and require them to examine the world they live in.

The character of Coach Beiste does not sing often on the show. While she is close friends with the glee club director and many of her football players are members, she more often plays the part of a mediator and supportive faculty member. However, the two times when she sings occur in episodes centered on her sexuality (“One Bourbon, One Scotch, One Beer” duet with Will Schuester in the episode “Never Been Kissed,” and singing “Jolene” solo in “I Kissed a Girl.”) In the plot of “I Kissed a Girl,” (originally aired November November 29, 2011) Beiste and Sue have been fighting over the same man, Coach Cooter, a football coach visiting from Ohio State University. Beiste has just lost Cooter to Sue for being too passive and hard to read (read: inexperienced due to her appearance) while Sue has no problems aggressively taking what she wants. In this instance, the masculine features in these androgynous characters’ personalities
are either punished or rewarded by the pursued man. The distraught Coach Beiste sings Dolly Parton’s “Jolene” as a soliloquy, displaying to the audience her fragile, feminine interior.

By covering a song by Dolly Parton, infamous for her exaggerated femininity, *Glee* uses an uncomical form of camp to highlight the character’s masculinity, further upsetting gendered expectations. The song is taken quite a few steps down to accommodate Jones’ voice, and sonically Jones can hardly be distinguished from a male singer. Visually, the character performs this in her usual attire—not the dramatic costumes that often accompany *Glee*’s more theatrical numbers. She wears gym shorts, knee-high gym socks, a striped polo shirt and her hair is cropped very close to her head. She wears bright red lipstick, sticking out as the one feminine feature on her body and reminding the viewer of the artificiality of the entire performance. The performance is reminiscent of many earnest drag performances, in which torch songs are performed by heartfelt female impersonators, destabilizing the ideology that gender-bending must always be comical.

Dolly Parton has long been a figure in camp aesthetics as she juxtaposes the importance of a country star being emotionally authentic next to the extreme artifice of her appearance, which she revels in. Her hyper-femininity is a deliberate act, an act that Parton has exploited in order to achieve stardom (Myhre 2010), using the constructed-ness of a feminine gender as a source of power. This display of an over-the-top feminine woman has lent itself to use by drag queens and forms of feminine parody. In viewing Parton as “decidedly camp,” her “hyperfemininity might confirm gender stereotypes for conservative listeners and at the same time serve as a model for female empowerment or a queer celebration of artifice,” in many ways making her a gay icon (Myhre 2010, 55). Her single “Jolene” adds to this constructed hyper-femininity. While Parton is a successful and exceedingly powerful woman, the character she
portrays in “Jolene” is in many ways helpless. The character in “Jolene” is not aggressively fighting for her man, she instead takes the rather passive route and resorts to begging and pleading. Viewing “Jolene” as a traditional female lament, Myher argues where the “feminine is submissive and lacking agency, without any real influence over her faith she has no other option than to beg for herself” (79). This adds yet another layer to Dolly Parton’s constructed hyperfeminity.

“Jolene” accentuates Beiste’s heterosexuality subversively through the content of the song since visually and aurally her assumed object of desire is feminine. It is a musical battle with her current rival—the school’s other androgynous coach. The video suggests Coach Beiste is envious of Sue’s (as well as some of the school’s cheerleaders’) feminine characteristics; she is shown walking through the bathroom as some of the characters apply their makeup, singing “And I cannot compete with you, Jolene.” This bathroom section illustrates J. Halberstam’s description of “the bathroom problem” from the book, *Female Masculinity* (1998) in which women use public restrooms as spaces for the policing of gender normativity. While Sue is able to freely interact in the room, Beiste observes from a distance. The next scene shows Beiste watching Sue and Cooter in the school’s weight room, lifting dumbbells together—a very male-dominated activity. Again, Beiste’s feminine, emotional private life has lost out to Sue’s more aggressive, masculine public life. With the song, she expresses her desire to both physically appear more feminine yet gain a more confident and aggressive approach to dating and men.

The specific use of Parton’s “Jolene” shows multiple important elements. One cannot ignore the parallel between the Dolly Parton drag queen and Beiste’s exaggerated masculine appearance. Disregarding her biological sex, Beiste is a masculine body in red lipstick performing a Dolly song. The song lends itself to a queer reading as well. Never specifying the
gender of the singer, “the song’s open lyrics (both thematically; weighing the feeling of inadequacy more than the story, and lyrically; not stating any explicit gender) has made this country song more universally available, across borders of country-, gender- and sexuality” (Myhre 2010, 87). Without ever calling herself a woman and distancing herself from those she perceives as more womanly, the character expresses the shame in losing a man to a more feminine woman.

Typically, camp is distinguished for its humor and playfulness. While there is no direct humor in Dot Marie Jones’ portrayal of “Jolene,” the number of layers at play contribute to its camp sensibility and politics. In a broad summary, we have a lesbian actress, playing a heterosexual masculine woman, pining over a man she has lost to another heterosexual masculine woman (also played by a lesbian actress) with a passively feminine Dolly Parton song. However serious this plot may present itself, something is decidedly “off,” a required characteristic of camp, as Sontag notes (1964).

In reading the performance as a particular type of feminist camp, one can see how Beiste’s Dolly Parton impersonation acquires a subversive and political undercurrent. The sheer absurdness of the situation—watching the character pine over her lost love to “Jolene” in the locker room—demonstrates the artifice of hegemonic gender. With these situations, Pamela Robertson suggests that women “reclaim camp as a political tool and rearticulate it within a theoretical framework of feminism” (Robertson 2010, 268). Discussing the problems with viewing camp as an exclusively homosexual-male practice, Robertson prefers to read camp as a broader, queer discourse, “because it enables not only gay men, but also heterosexual and lesbian women, and perhaps heterosexual men, to express their discomfort with and alienation from the normative gender and sex roles assigned to them by straight culture. Feminist camp, then, views
the world ‘queerly’: that is, from a non- or anti-straight, albeit frequently non-gay, position” (271). With this definition of a feminist camp, Beiste’s heterosexuality does not exclude her from being read as a camp performance, and instead places her (and “Jolene”) in a category of “feminist aesthetics and interpretations that are simultaneously non-gay and not stereotypically straight” (272).

Track Suit Barbie

Acting as Coach Beiste’s colleague and sometimes-rival is Coach Sue Sylvester, played by actress Jane Lynch. Coach Sue is the coach of the Cheerios, McKinley High’s cheerleading squad. She is portrayed to be a fierce competitor, frequently winning national competitions, entering political elections, and continuously trying to destroy the New Directions in an attempt to receive their share of the school’s extracurricular funding. While less masculine than her counterpart, Sue’s attire and overall appearance is also androgynous. Throughout the series her blonde hair is cut short and styled simply, she wears little to no makeup (contrasting to Beiste’s frequent red lips,) and always wears—unless a musical performance dictates otherwise—a solid color track suit with a stripe up the side. While her androgynous image is not as striking as Coach Beiste’s, her aggressive, masculine traits mark her personality. The character questions her sexuality throughout the series, as do others, but each time comes to realize that she truly is heterosexual (“I Kissed a Girl” 2011).

While Sue sings back-up vocals and duets a handful of times a season, her one true solo comes out of the first season episode “The Power of Madonna” (2010) where she performs Madonna’s “Vogue,” and more recently a solo of Nicki Manaj’s “Super Bass,” performed as a mash-up in the Season Four episode “Feud” (2013). In the latter, Sue performs “Super Bass” as a duel with the character Blaine, a homosexual senior who performs Mariah Carey’s “I Still
Believe” as his half of the fight. The two are feuding over Blaine’s contract to be a male Cheerio; Sue insists she needs a “passing” male cheerleader who will not romantically pursue her girls. Blaine is obviously resistant because of Sue’s demonizing history. They settle their dispute through a musical fight between two dueling divas (Minaj vs. Carey, Sue vs. Blaine). Sue’s over-the-top representation of Minaj ultimately wins over Blaine’s heartfelt rendition of “I Still Believe,” but Blaine’s plan to take Sue down “from the inside” is later revealed.

In this performance in “Feud,” Blaine begins to sing “I Still Believe” in typical glee club style, standing exposed in front of the audience in the McKinley High choir room. After the first verse, the music abruptly changes to “Super Bass,” and Coach Sue and her Cheerios take the floor. All of the performing women wear the bleach-blonde and pale pink wigs worn by Minaj in her original video, the blonde, pink, and ironed-straight locks presenting a symbol of high-maintenance and hyper-femininity. The Cheerios have not changed—they still wear their red cheerleading uniforms. Sue’s outfit mimics that of Minaj’s, a skin-tight, pink, and cheetah-print jump suit, however Sue’s has a solid pink skirt attached, possibly meant to hide her curves. While rapping and singing a cleaned-up version of the lyrics, she dances along with her Cheerios. Her movements, however, are far different from those of the hired-dancers of Glee. The Cheerio dancers look perfectly in place, even with the long blonde wigs, but Sue/Lynch, positioned in the center, sticks out in a comical way from her lack of dancing ability and sex-appeal—like a six foot tall drag queen performing with a cheerleading squad. She is obviously not “doing femininity” right.

As the lights are turned off and Sue leads into the black light portion of Minaj’s original video—complete with glowing outfits, hair, and lips. Blaine attempts to steal the show back but instead must force his song to into the beat and music of “Super Bass.” A (pink) glowing dance
stage is brought onto the floor, and Blaine tries to assert power by singing on top of it, only to be pushed off by a neon Sue in a final act of triumph.

With this song, Sue wins—exactly what she does best. She exerts her heterosexuality, flaunting (if sarcastically) the hair, body and movements of a straight woman, to triumph over a gay man through musical performance. While “Super Bass” is an ode to men who make the (female) singer’s heart beat with lyrics stating “Boy you got my heartbeat runnin’ away/Don’t you hear that heartbeat comin’ your way,” it also asserts female dominance and objectification over men. The original music video makes sexual objects out of shirtless men, and the lyrics provide the accompanying insults and control of these same desired objects:

… I can tell that you’re in touch with your feminine side, oh

Yes I did, yes I did, somebody tell him who the F I is

I am Nicki Minaj, I mack them dudes up . . . (Minaj 2011)

Not only is she using camp to show the ridiculousness of her gender—wearing a blonde wig over her blonde hair, skin-tight cheetah print suit which makes her look reminiscent of a drag queen, she also uses this overtly constructed gender to gain a victory over a gender-normative student, even if he is not quite straight. If in this instance we disregard sexual orientation, the subversive, camp gender is conquering the normal. The Sue-as-Minaj character exhibits all the artifice and humor one looks for in camp.

The choice of Nicki Minaj for a demonstration of gender artifice is easily observable—she often constructs herself as a black Barbie doll which she calls “Harajuku Barbie,” one of her many stage personalities. Popularized in the United States by performer Gwen Stefani and her “Harajuku Girls,” this fashion style, embraced largely by young women in Japan, adopts the “cute” and innocent in women’s’ clothing. It allows wearers to express individuality in colors,
patterns and styles, while emphasizing exceedingly feminine traits—such as innocence found in the common use of pigtails and other childlike imagery. Jennifer Dawn Whitney positions Minaj’s appearance on the album cover of Pink Friday (2010) as “an archetypal picture of feminine excess” (Whitney 2012, 141). While playing up her sexuality, a feature that undoubtedly helped her rise in the male-dominated world of hip-hop, the excessive pink Barbie flair targets a female audience. Minaj uses her body for a mode of female empowerment while dangerously flirting with the over sexualized black woman stereotype. However, Minaj asserts that “she is a role model for young girls . . . [and] clearly understands her hyperfeminine performance of Harajuku Barbie to be playful as well as empowering” (147). Her ability to disrupt the image of the doll can become powerful tool in destabilizing traditional passive femininity—she looks just like Barbie!—kind of.

Whitney also interrogates Mattel’s creation of the black Barbie, or more correctly, Barbie’s diverse friends, stating that “this discourse troublingly implies that, like the black Barbie dolls to which they are equated, Minaj and her fans are simply counterfeit imitations of a blonde original” (149). Black Barbie is an imitation, and Minaj a parody of the classic doll that set the beauty standard in the United States. Instead of critiquing Minaj for aspiring to be like this icon, she visually represents the assembly that is required in the construction of stock femininity—in the familiar words of Simone de Beauvoir “becoming a woman” (1953).

In much the same way as Minaj imitates and parodies a blonde Barbie, so does Coach Sue. Minaj’s construction of a high femininity performed on an androgynous character and body turns Sue (and Minaj, for that matter) into a bio-queen, a biologically sexed female doing feminine drag. Rachel Devitt analyses the bio-queen troupe The Queen Bees in a staged performance of “Milkshake” (2003) by Kelis, another hyper-sexualized African American
female musician (Devitt 2006). In traditional drag queening, the amusement of the performance is the easy realization that underneath the glitter and wig is a penis. But this gender-play is “in a unique position to out gender as performative because it does not depend on an assumed incongruity between ‘actual’ and staged gender. If there is no hilarious disparity between miniskirt and penis yet gender is still being performed and even parodied, then what becomes of that naturalized link between body/sex and gender?” (30). Lynch/Sue’s performance is without doubt a parody—the sight of her body next to the petite cheerleaders is laughable. But why? All characters are heterosexual and biologically female. Yet all of the cheerleaders look more natural in the dances and wigs than Sue. These performances allow bio queens to challenge gender in ways “not available to traditional drag queens” (31). We expect a man in a dress to be laughable—not a woman. The Glee performance reenacts a large majority of the original music video, from the sexy backup dances, black lights, and skin-tight jumpsuit. The play-by-play of the parody next to the original forces the viewer to rethink femininity in hip-hop culture (31). Conceiving Sue as a bio queen performing “Super Bass” situates her act simultaneously as camp, parody, and subversive. By mocking normative pop-star gender and exposing its many artificial qualities, Sue’s character challenges what a successful and crowd-pleasing gender can be.
CHAPTER III: SUBVERSIVE FEM[ME]ININITY

Cheerleaders and New Directions members Brittany and Santana have in some way been physically or emotionally involved since the show’s inception. What began as a few quips suggesting the fantasy-like interaction of two sophomore cheerleaders in Season One to a battle for Brittany’s love in Season Two and a full-fledged senior year relationship in Season Three, and ultimately the long-distance relationship and breakup of Season Four. Brittany has easily fluctuated back and forth, dating between the sexes, and Santana has come to positively own her identity as a lesbian and shown tremendous personal growth. As mainstream television characters, these two feminine and queer girls can serve as exemplary role models: Brittany by not allowing herself to be forced into the dreaded label of “bisexual” and Santana showing the healthy development of a queer identity. In addition, the two characters attraction to each other defies stereotypes that imply that all lesbians are the “dykish” or masculine type, or that feminine lesbians must only be attracted to the butches. The femme-on-femme relationship has attracted so much attention in the adult film industry as well as media aimed at heterosexual men that it has become divorced from reality. But with the duo in Glee, a show focused on high school underdogs rather than created for college-aged boys, the relationship can serve as a model for the multiple possibilities of queer feminine identities. The musical interaction of Brittany and Santana opens up the possibilities for queer feminine spaces in America’s television by covering popular songs with manifold layers of meaning.

The Britney Fantasy

Staying true to the habit of basing entire episodes on a single theme or artist, the second season of Glee features an episode idolizing Britney Spears in “Britney/Brittany” (2010). The students plead with their director to allow them to perform Spears’ music, stating that her rise,
fall, and then rise again to success and fame is an inspiration to their generation. Viewers also learn that the character Brittany has a particularly difficult relationship with the pop star. Her full name, Brittany S. Pierce, leads her to both confusion and embarrassment. At this point in the series, Brittany and Santana are not a couple, nor have they acknowledged any emotional attraction to each other. They have not confronted any questions about their sexual orientations. While early into the first season the audience learned the history of their physical relationship, it has until this point been left at that. Santana spends much of the episode inappropriately flirting with older men while Brittany tells Spears (who makes multiple cameo appearances) how attractive she is.

The “Brittana” couple shares a duet in a drug-induced dream (spending time together at the dentist’s office) to Britney Spears and Madonna’s controversial song “Me Against the Music” (2003). The close re-creation of the original video positions Brittany as Britney and Santana as Madonna. Brittany wears a black leather corset and tie, and Santana is in a white suit similar to the one donned by Madonna. The video is largely dance-based, and the male backup dancers are treated as objects—the focus is solely on the two girls. While tame in comparison to the original music video, the dream is sexually charged and the intended attraction between the two characters unquestionable. With the lyrics, Santana begs Brittany to “lose control” and “come on over,” perhaps foreshadowing for later episodes in the season where Santana is actively pursuing her best friend. But as the video ends, Santana vanishes to be replaced by a cameo appearance by the real Britney Spears. With Britney face-to-face with Brittany S. Pierce, the girls wake up from their anesthesia dream wondering how they had the exact same hallucination.
The original video and subsequent Madonna-Britney kiss at the 2003 *MTV Video Awards* sparked discussion about public girl-on-girl affection, especially concerning the stars’ history of using their feminine sexualities for success. Two sides of the argument focus on either the negative attention to female bodies or the power that this display of free sexuality can hold. Using the term “heteroflexibility,” Lisa Diamond comments on these images and female characters noting that the absence of lesbianism may prove more harmful than good. Diamond notes that:

This puts feminist psychologists in a quandary: on one hand, images of female-female sexuality between attractive, ‘heterosexual-looking’ participants (perhaps better called ‘femme-femme’ sexuality) may have a powerful influence on young women by countering stereotypes of lesbians as unattractive, masculine and hostile. One the other hand, these images typically take pains to clarify that the participants are not, in fact, lesbians. (Diamond 2005, 105)

Spears’ and Madonna’s history of staged and shocking sexualities is easy to dismiss as a publicity stunt, and Spears’ music video is not a far stretch from many other pop and rap videos of the decade. This keeps the video safe—just unrealistic enough to not spoil the fantasy for the intended audience (105). Bisexuality is not an option either, “considering that bisexuals are still widely stereotyped in the mainstream media—and even still among many lesbians—as sexually voracious, confused, predatory, and emotionally unstable” (106). Diamond argues that while this media representation of “heteroflexibility” has all of the potential to contest rigid stereotypes, the effect is “lost on a viewing public that is all-too-accustomed to the economically motivated packaging and marketing of sexual controversy” (107).
Throughout much of “Me Against the Music,” Madonna watches Spears on a screen in a hidden room. One androgynously dressed female body seductively watches another, suggesting a voyeuristic queer scene. Most of the video separates the two women either by a simple wall or the camera. Even at the end, when they almost touch, Madonna mysteriously disappears and Spears is left with a look of confusion and disbelief. This keeps the fantasy alive. In agreement, Meredith Levande focuses on the literal male gaze created in the original video. In “Women, Pop, and Pornography” (2008), Levande writes that “both the placement of the camera and the video within a video are significant. They symbolize consent to both the male gaze and surveillance” (303). In straight, or more likely heteroflexible, girl-on-girl action, male surveillance is key. The audience reaffirms the straight sexuality of the pair, attracting attention, and ultimately power (ibid.).

With the transplantation of Spears and Madonna’s video into Glee, specifically sung by characters with a history of private sexual interaction and a future romantic relationship, the basis of the debate changes drastically. The secret camera and viewing room is absent, taking away the literal surveillance of the fantasy. The dream-state of the performance privatizes the girls’ interaction (if we ignore the millions of fans watching the television program), and they are not acting to gain attention from a male audience like their predecessors. The addition of this dream/hallucination state takes the “fantasy” away from the straight-male audience for which it was designed, as this performance is Brittany and Santana’s very personal fantasy. In addition, it shows the viewers a glimpse of what the future holds. Brittany’s constant flirtations with Spears in her cameo appearances and her comfort in her and Santana’s history immediately suggest a queer orientation. Meanwhile, Santana’s promiscuity and attitude suggests that the brand of “[femininity] here is powerful, playful and narcissistic—less desiring of a sexual partner than
empowered by the knowledge of her own sexual attractiveness” (Gil 2009, 151). Pairing a powerful female character with a queer character, the show creators develop a strong counter-story that appears mainstream and commercial yet includes multiple subversive layers, creating a context in which femme-on-femme sexuality can be legitimate and influential.

Womyn’s Music

On the second season episode “Sexy,” Santana personally confronts her sexual orientation for the first time. After being confronted by Brittany regarding the meaning of their sexual encounters, the pair talks to the temporary sex-ed teacher Holly Holliday (Gwyneth Paltrow). Holliday reveals the sexual fluidity of her past and encourages the girls to share their feelings. It is here that Santana mentions she can explain her emotions through the use of a song. The trio performs a version of Fleetwood Mac’s “Landslide.” Santana uses the lyrics to express her feelings to Brittany publically, singing:

Well I’ve been afraid of changing
Because I built my life around you.
But time makes you bolder, children get older,
I’m getting older, too. (“Sexy” 2011)

Holliday, here in the role of teacher and feminine mentor, sings the lead vocal part of the song, while Santana comes to the front for a few choice phrases and Brittany stays in a more passive backup role. Through tears and intense emotions, Santana recognizes she is now “bolder” and “older,” and ready to confront her emotions and sexuality. However, the invisibility of their sexual identities prevail—the girls’ respective boyfriends comment on how great it is that their girlfriends are so close. In fact, the only student who recognizes the true emotion of the girls is Rachel Berry, a character who was raised by a same-sex male couple (“Sexy” 2011).
In a panel interview with AfterEllen, a website focused on lesbians in popular culture, creator Brad Falchuck stated that Santana’s character development was intended for lesbian visibility (Goldberg 2011). Both Falchuck and Naya Rivera, the actress who plays Santana, noted that they have heard stories, often through social media sites, of young women who had contemplated suicide and girls who had the courage to come out after the “Sexy” episode. Both said the positive feedback was inspiring (Goldberg 2011). While such a diverse nation will never be fully pleased with any mass-media portrayal, many of these posts and reactions show the importance even a fictional mainstream character can have in young queer girls’ lives. In Susan Driver’s book *Queer Girls and Popular Culture: Reading, Resisting, and Creating Media* (2006), a chapter is dedicated to queer girls’ relationships with fellow queer musicians. While Santana is a television character, the reality in which she exists in fans’ minds and the representation she allows on mainstream television makes her tangible enough to be a role model. Driver explains that “personalized engagements with queer music incite awareness and resistance, while also helping girls to feel comfortable, connected, and in-tune with others” (Driver 2007, 196). This character enables her audience to know that they do not have to feel alone, and demonstrates a healthy medium (music) in which one can deal with difficult feelings. Driver states further that “what signifies queer music is a willingness to grapple with issues and feelings relevant to young queer women” (Driver 2007, 203).

The selection of Stevie Nicks’s “Landslide” is remarkable in many ways. Stevie Nicks, while not known to be queer herself, has become a star in gay culture and her fashion iconic. In “Queering the Witch: Stevie Nicks and the Forging of Femininity at the Night of a Thousand Stevies,” (2006) author Jason Lee Oakes describes the politics of dragging-up Nicks by men in traditional drag fashion and bio-queens. Night of a Thousand Stevies, previously held at the
queer/feminist bar Mother in New York City, is an annual event where Stevie Nicks impersonators of all genders and sexualities perform as their goddess of femininity. Unlike Dolly Parton and Nicki Minaj, however, Nicks’ gender expression is conventional, contrasting with the hyper-femininity of many popular musicians. With Parton and Minaj, as well as many other excessively-girlish diva figures, campy, drag-like performances are expected. How easy is it to camp-up something when the original is already artificial? But the approved and established notions of gender are a playground for the heteronormative. So, “[given] Nicks’s strong association with markers of conventional femininity… one is led to wonder why a sizable contingent of her fans appear to take a highly unconventional approach to gender and sexuality” (Oakes 2006, 44). In other words, why is Stevie Nicks an idol for queers?

Oakes suggests that these events, and Nicks’s iconicity in general, sprang from a “feminine/feminist agenda” and “were produced with the goal of communicating a ‘female-dominant aesthetic’” (49). Adopting a conventional feminine symbol resisted both the earlier lesbian-separatist movement of assuming masculine characteristics and patriarchy’s role in deciding what feminine-identify person’s desires (52). Steve Nicks comes to represent how the traditionally feminine woman can be defined and empowered by her own terms.

Glee’s performance of “Landslide” plays to this aura of a toned-down femininity. The girls wear flowing, country-style attire, fairly reminiscent of Nicks’ witch or gypsy persona. This is a stark difference between the skimpy cheerleading uniforms and tight fitting clothing the audience typically sees the two in. Suggestive, sexy dances are similarly swapped out for wooden stools in an acoustic sing-a-long setting. Holliday sits in-between the two girls, singing and playing the guitar, acting as a physical barrier between the two. The arrangement
automatically lessens the sex appeal of the characters in what Christine Belcher describes as a “lesbian musicality” (Belcher 2011).

Belcher explains this lesbian musicality as an anachronistic aesthetic harkening back to the early womyn’s music festivals that aimed to desexualize lesbian relationships. In same-sex relationships, women could finally be free to privilege emotion and communication, allowing them to move the emphasis away from sex. This political action was (and largely, still is) reflected in the music. As Belcher states, “the house lights were on and the consciousness was up, and the association with lesbian feminism divorced identity formation from genital sexuality, or musicality from sexual pleasure” (2011, 414). The aim was not to mimic the cock-rock of the boys but create an increasingly separate space. This is positioned as a “drag” on Glee, where the mention of lesbian musicalities, such as Melissa Etheridge or the Indigo Girls, puts an immediate halt on Brittany and Santana’s physical pleasure and burdens Santana with a heavy dose of shame (418). Up until the “Sexy” episode, the relationship was purely physical, and the fast-paced dance music fitting. But with the introduction of “Landslide,” Santana momentarily adopts a lesbian musicality to effectively communicate and work through her feelings. (This same affect was used later in season two’s “Rumours” [May 3, 2011] when Santana sings Fleetwood Mac’s “Songbird” in a moment of heightened emotion about the fear of coming out publically.)

The use of a song written by Stevie Nicks, a noted (gay) cultural icon of authentic femininity in a women’s music/lesbian musicality helps broadcast a queer sensibility into mainstream television. There is nothing inherently queer about Stevie Nicks—but the Night of a Thousand Stevies still creates a queer event. Likewise, acoustic guitars are used by straight teenage boys all over the country to attract girls, but put one in the middle of three young women and a lesbian musical space is created. On the surface of the “Landslide” performance, a viewer
sees and hears a charming and emotional song about growing up with the Midwestern Dixie Chicks appeal well-established in their town in Ohio. But when you peel back the intertextual layers littering this scene, the audience can find a unique performance about confronting feminine queer feelings in a covert cover song.
CHAPTER IV: TRANSMITTING SUBVERSIVE GENDER STRATEGY

The character of Santana Lopez is a stereotypical “feisty” Latina, who grew up in the rougher area of fictional Lima Heights. During her time at McKinley High she is head cheerleader, an ambitious diva in the Glee Club, marked for her promiscuity, and notorious for her sharp wit that often toes the line of bullying. However, Santana’s self-discovery of her sexual orientation shows viewers a softer, emotional side. She is fiercely protective of her best friend and the object of her desire, Brittany. Throughout the series she comes to terms with her lesbian sexuality and progresses from passing as straight and being ashamed to speaking freely and being proud of her identity. Brittany, a fellow cheerleader and a lead dancer in the glee club is without argument cast as the stereotypical dumb blonde. Most of her speaking parts are short, nonsensical one-liners and she failed to graduate at the end of the third season with the rest of her class. In terms of her sexuality, she creates no gender boundaries in those she chooses to date, drifting between hetero- and homo-sexual relationships without much thought or question. She has never “come out” or discussed her sexuality—it has been simply a non-issue throughout the series.

I find these two characters to be subversive in multiple ways. While many parts of their identities are classically stereotypical—the feisty Latina and the dumb blonde—their gender expression defies the lesbian stereotype. Both characters are traditionally feminine. They sing, dance, cheer, cry, have long hair and wear dresses. Absent is the short-haired, flannel-wearing, rough-and-tough lesbian that we have come to recognize as the stereotype. (In fact, that role is occupied by the heterosexual female characters such as Coach Beiste and Sue Sylvester.) Defying even more stereotypes is this relationship of two “femmes.” The attraction of these two characters to each other challenges what we recognize as a butch-femme/masculine-feminine
relationship and the perceived irrationality of pornographic lesbian romance. Unfortunately, even in a lesbian community, femmes often become “invisible.” This invisibility develops into a battle for authenticity. While the femme can easily “pass” for straight, it is the butch who is celebrated “as [an] authentic lesbian based on her ‘blatant’ representation of sexual deviance” (Walker 2001, 202). To have both characters publically disrupting the tradition gender-desire relationship, in which feminine bodies desire masculine and vice versa, made famous in Butler’s Gender Trouble (1990), is non-traditional even in terms of queer relationships. In addition, Brittany’s role as a bisexual woman can be understood as revolutionary. Since she makes no fuss about understanding her sexuality, the “disadvantaged queer teen” trope is confronted. Popular discourse places queer sexualities as a disability—something that must be overcome, and teens must learn how to be both gay and happy. (It can only “get better” if it was bad to begin with.) This indifference, coupled with the simple existence of a bisexual character, often branded as purely artificial, experimental, or a position of being “on-the-fence,” is revolutionary for both queer and straight audiences.

In social theory, memes, a term coined by Richard Dawkins, are “[units] of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation” (Dawkins 1976, 192). This definition describes easily imitated and replicated pieces of culture that can quickly spread, accounting for the transmission of much of what we understand to be culture today. In the article “The Meme-ing of Folklore,” Kenneth Pimple describes the usefulness of the meme concept to folklore study. In many ways, memes are directly comparable to genes, successful ones are passed on and unsuccessful genes/memes die out and are lost. In considering memes to be a necessary factor in human survival, Pimple states that “[for] thousands of years now, human beings have survived because we have good genes and good memes; we could not survive without our memes” (Pimple 1996,
In this context, he is speaking of memes such as the use of fire and clothing (236), but I would like to extend this argument further.

In today’s language, a meme is a very specific internet phenomenon. Based on Dawkins’ idea of rapid cultural transmission, an internet meme can be loosely defined as a cultural idea, in text or image form (most often a combination of the two) that is quickly spread around the internet through social media websites. Not only do these memes participate in the transmission of ideas, but in a virtual community. Marshall states:

“What matters is a common interest. . . . [A] diverse collection of people, perhaps drawn from all parts of the world and united by only a common interest, needs to construct its own culture. The network facilitates this with communication and the spread of memes. But, by comparison with the real world, memes are spread rapidly and accurately.” (Marshall 1988)

Marshall positions memes to be a key figure in the construction of communities, instead of purely the transmission of values required to survive. Since these memes are person-made and person-shared, their folkloric quality is not lost in the means of transmission, even if it is mass-mediated. While the internet can be seen as “highly artificial” in terms of culture, contrasting with a purely oral form of “natural” cultural practices, “insofar as individuals are in control of a mode of expression, that mode of expression is folk (or folk-like)” (Pimple 1996, 238). The insertion of a computer or other media usage does not discredit the value of the information because “it is crucial to remember that the overwhelming majority of vernacular expression online is initiated, prolonged, and transformed through the actions of individual people” (Blank 2012, 11).
This community building and character identification further backed by an investigation into the message boards of fans for the popular show *American Idol* (2002-2014). Using this method, Katherine Meizel discovered die-hard fans’ loyalties to specific contestants. Loyalty in this program is excruciatingly important since the show depends on the votes of fans for the “idol” of their choice. In examining contestant loyalty, Meizel states “[it] is clear from the dialogue on electronic message boards that viewers may identify with contestants (characters) not only based on singing talent, appearance, and personality but also on the singers’ (professed or presumed) regional, ethnic, and religious affiliations. . . . They may coalesce into groups, especially online, that are unified both by loyalty to a particular contestant and by identification with his or her individual sociocultural background” (2011, 43). In an equally important style, the bloggers I study are loyal to *Glee*. They chose characters based largely on sociocultural background, as will be discussed further on, but also have a strong connection to the *Glee* franchise. Similarly to *American Idol*, the fans do “not revolve around a single performer or band, or even a single genre, but around a media brand encompassing a network or different musical and social identities” (43).

This community initiation and building is exemplified in the fan communities of Tumblr. My participants on Tumblr, all with blogs centered on the relationships of queer characters from Glee, as well as a number of other queer female television characters, post a variety of different objects. These include question-and-answer sessions, pictures of the characters, text-based analyses and concerns, and gifs (short, looping animations created from still photos). With these blogs, the users cultivate an internet-based vernacular tradition, one with strict rules on what can be liked and disliked, a social hierarchy, and perceived political power. While this information cannot be passed on orally in a digital culture, the text and visual aspect of the posts substitutes
for this tradition. In this case, the “text” is not fixed; when a post is re-blogged, comments and variations can be added—accounting for both the tradition and change of the vernacular practice. In providing analyses, opinions, and hopes about the show, the fan-bloggers are creating conversations and changing their realities vis-à-vis the acceptability and visibility of queer identities and relationships.

The examples used throughout this research come directly from my participants’ blogs. Since they lack any voice inflection or other language cues, I have chosen to leave all statements as-is, with no corrections to grammar, spelling, or punctuation. The internet and blogs have their own vernacular which should not be disregarded in analysis.

Bram Revolt

In my observation of the network, there is a strong movement among bloggers to reunite “Brittana.” In the storyline, Santana and Brittany broke up soon after Santana left for college in season four (though she is currently working in New York City). The breakup was amicable, providing hope to the viewers that the couple may come back together. Soon after, however, Brittany began dating a male student in the New Directions, Sam Evans (Chord Overstreet), beginning the relationship titled “Bram.” Brittany’s character hesitated, even once noting the internet backlash that would soon follow. Brittana “shippers,”—bloggers rooting for a specific television relationship, have a seemingly fierce hatred for this heterosexual relationship.

Much of the commotion on the blogs stems from internet-based (often through Twitter) spoilers released by FOX throughout the week. For a recent episode, “Shooting Star” (April 11, 2013), fans received word that Brittany and Sam would be performing a duet together. One blogger’s response was simply titled “A Bram duet? Oh hell to the no” (Participant 4). Among the community, there were talks of boycotting the episode (as well as frequent “boycotts” of any
episode that does not feature both Brittany and Santana’s characters). The rest of my participant’s posts states:

> The fact that Bram is singing this duet [“More than Words”] makes me hot! And then to sing this song? They’re basically saying that they’re in love. Brittany isn’t even in love with him! And why is Santana not going to be in this episode or the one before? Glee is pissing me the f*** off.

Other text-based posts made by the same participant detail how the two girls continue to suffer from the breakup.

> I’m waiting for the day when Brittany tells Sam that she can’t be with him anymore because she’s not in love with him and that she never was…cuz let’s face it.

> Whether it is on purpose or not, I’ve also realized that Brittany pays only little attention to Sam, although they have had their disgusting moments like when she called him ‘baby’ in Thursday’s episode.

The strong language and use of terms like “disgusting moments” are common among the self-described Brittana shippers. These blogs focus on the positive aspects of Santana and Brittany’s failed relationship and provide hope and reason to community members that their iconic couple will be reunited.

Users also try to organize political actions in an attempt to force the show’s writers to put the couple back together. Much like the above mentioned boycotts, these actions include posts asking followers to communicate. This is seen in a highly re-blogged post titled “Brittana Shippers Unite GLEEonFOX is talking to us, LET THEM KNOW HOW WE FEEL” (accessed from Participant 3’s blog.) This call-to-action post urges the bloggers to communicate with the writers in any way they can, particularly through the GLEEonFOX Twitter account. Feelings towards the writers and producers often become personal. In a message about creator Ryan Murphy, one blogger wrote:
I honestly think Ryan Murphy shits all over Brittana because he is so arrogant that he refuses to be good to something that he didn’t think up. Every other ship came from his head first. But we created Brittana. We, along with Hemo [Heather Morris] and Naya, rooted for them before we ever had any hope they would happen. And Ryan Murphy doesn’t like that. He can’t bear to think that we were right and he was wrong.

This style of postings is not without precedent. Murphy and the show creators are well aware of the blogging community. In an AfterEllen (a lesbian-focused website) article soon after it was decided Santana’s character would come out as a lesbian, Murphy asked if the “vocal lesbian fans” that inspired this were happy with his decision (Goldberg 2011). In addition, Brittany states in the fourth season episode “Swan Song” (December 6, 2012) that she cannot date Sam because of an active and dedicated “lesbian blogging community.” Since the writers continually acknowledge this community, their posts foster ideas of political power and agency in creating favorable outcomes of the characters.

The bloggers have also banded together against “Bram shippers”—bloggers and fans who support Brittany and Sam’s relationship. While this is a fairly common trait I have observed in this online community, one of the participants has been noticeably outspoken on this matter. She remarks on her hatred for Bram followers incorrectly tagging their posts, resulting in searches for “Brittana” on Tumblr locating blog posts instead promoting the competing relationship. My participant posed to her followers, “If the Bram shippers insist on posting Bram in the Brittana tag let’s all go post Brittana and Samcedes [another relationship] in their tag. Don’t tag your hate. Just tag your Brittana love.” This comment gives us a small glimpse of a seemingly massive battle between the two sides—sides that can be placed in a heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy. By urging her followers not to “tag hate,” Participant 6 is creating a type of peaceful protest. By flooding the Bram tags with “Brittana love,” they fight back against heterosexuality
but without insults, attempting to take the high road, showing what they believe to be an evolved state of the queer fan followers.

But the Brittana shippers are not completely above insults. A highly transmitted (over 500 “notes”—re-blogs and likes) comment remarks with a double entendre about Brittany’s cat, Lord Tubbington. In the same episode, “Shooting Star,” Sam becomes jealous of Brittany’s affections for her excessively-personified cat. The comment, re-blogged from Participant 6, states “I’m sorry, Bram [gets] closer because Sam wins over Lord Tubbington’s affections? I’m laughing because I doubt Santana ever had problems getting Brittany’s pussy to like her” (Accessed from Participant 6). This comment is of particular interest because while most of the statements aimed at this rival relationship describe Brittany’s inability to love Sam in the same way as Santana, this speaks to the physical relationships between the two couples. By putting down the sexual fulfillment of a heterosexual relationship, which is often used as the reasoning behind hegemonic heterosexuality, this statement favors the sexual ability of a woman in a jarring, offensive manner. It can be read as a direct insult to masculinity and the homophobic tendencies of the media. The shippers have formed a community that privileges homosexuality in an insubordinate manner.

By looking into a limited selection of the text-based activity on Tumblr fan blogs, we can see how queer and queer-friendly Glee fans have actively tried to manipulate their media, both television and internet, into a distinctively queer-accepting space. With the text, as opposed to image-based posts, bloggers can explain more complex thoughts, opinions, and political actions to their followers. Even though Glee as a whole is seen as a revolutionary existence in queer media, the fans have taken the breakup of a beloved couple personally and sometimes see it as a triumph of hegemonic practices.
Memes as Community Builders

In addition to ideas expressed in text, Tumblr bloggers often use images and gifs to express complex ideas and community values. Many of the most-replicated posts are not text-based analyses or calls to action, but collages of still photographs with Brittany and Santana together and gifs of the two characters with short captions—in other words, the typical social media memes. These expressions of culture allow us to have a visual representation of the community in a highly homogenous way; while the texts give insight about individual members of the community; these image-based memes build a virtual community through uniformity of ideas as they travel from blog to blog.

With the added visual aspect of gif and image posts, many of the blogs shift from opinions and critical remarks to character idolization. In the observed community, a number of these images focused on the sexuality of the actresses both individually and as a couple. Images of Naya Rivera in tight dresses, the two actresses off-set caught in flirtatious poses, and stills from the series that show the characters in intimate moments dominate the blogs. One example, re-blogged at this point over 700 times, is a collage of six gifs of the “Brittana” couple at various points in their relationship when specific sexual acts are mentioned in the script of the show. Each segment has a caption of the reference, ranging from “It’s a nice break from all that scissoring,” “Do you think we can scissor-Skype later?” and Brittany confessing “Yes, we had interesting lady-sex” (Accessed from Participant 4). Another gif collage shows the couple’s first on-screen kiss and physical action. As it circulates through Tumblr, user’s leave comments, often sexually-charged, expressing their appreciation of the couple’s publicity (Accessed from Participant 7).
The quick dissemination of these queer and sexually charged images creates a unique fan community that stands opposed to the heterosexual hegemonic norm. By focusing on a queer relationship, the bloggers reject the privileging of heterosexuality in the media, even if the program has since redefined Brittany’s character in a straight relationship. The community ignores and mocks this relationship through the use of visual memes, favoring instead the lesbian plot and continuing the relationship on their own terms.

What makes this community truly subversive is the appropriation of a queer female gaze upon the girls of *Glee*. Traditionally in feminism, women’s bodies are defined upon by the ever-present male gaze (Mulvey 1975). In this community, however, we see women visually objectifying other women. If we look beyond the problematic effect of all gazes, we can find a subversive political action. By taking femme-on-femme images traditionally reserved for straight-male audiences, the Tumblr bloggers have created another way for the community to ignore the media’s historical appropriation of their sexuality. The “meme-ing” of these images makes homosexuality the norm in their culture, and the rapid and prolific spread of the memes solidifies their usefulness to the members.

By using a popular blog host site and the stories and images of truly mass-mediated television, the Glee-focused Tumblr bloggers have created a subversive and counter-hegemonic community through the use of folkloric memes and communication. The fans have used text-based expressions in an attempt to teach their followers the rules of the community—such as whom one is allowed to “ship” and which sexualities are acceptable—as well as unite members in a plea to influence the show’s creators. Mass-circulated images and animations further this cause by redefining “normal” and contribute to a positive queer space.
CHAPTER V: PARTICIPANT INTERVIEWS

The virtual interaction is an intriguing mix of anonymity and trust. Of the Tumblr users I followed and interviewed, most freely offered insights into their private lives. A benefit of the nature of the work, this openness and trust allowed me access to personal information about the sexuality of the viewers of Glee. My intentions in these extended, text-based conversations was to uncover the roles the queer women of Glee played in real fans lives, and particularly what impact the music—the songs these women sang—left with queer viewers.

Steering the slow-paced conversation to the function of the music in the show proved extremely difficult, and I have determined that while music is central to both the show’s theme and the emotional outlet of the characters, fans focus on the plot, characters, and social media relationships over the intentionality of the musical selections. While attempting to keep music at the forefront, I investigated three central subjects in the interviews of my participants. First, I explore how Glee relates to the participants lives in general—such as when and why they began watching the show, what impact the show has had on their own lives, and what greater importance they believe the show holds. This general information, as well as biographical information about each participant, can be found in Appendix A. Next, my participants told me how they relate to specific characters on the show—if they felt any characters were role models or paralleled their own lives in some way. Lastly, I learned about my participants views on Tumblr’s role in Glee fandom and what this particular relationship with social media means to them and the show. With insight on these three factors, one can understand the importance that these (mostly) queer musical characters have in the lives of their (sometimes) queer fan base.
Radical Role Models

After inquiring about each participants’ background and general opinions on the show and its impact, I questioned about specific characters. Specifically, I attempted to learn if my participants thought of the women on *Glee* as role models, and if they thought their lives paralleled any of the storylines in the show. The answers to these questions were fairly mixed in my small group of participants who answered.

Participant 3 felt a strong connection to Santana’s character, explaining that throughout high school she similarly had feelings for her best friend. However, she does not feel that Santana, or any of the other main queer characters, could be considered a role model for her although they could for others. She states, “I think it’s important that gay/lesbian people have someone in t.v. or film that they can identify with. It gives hope to people who need to feel represented.” While she acknowledges the stereotypes that are portrayed on the show, she believes Santana has been cast in a positive light:

I think Santana is a strong character on the outside but very insecure on the inside. I think coming out made her more confident and happy. Since her coming out she has been much more vocal about her sexuality which I think is a good thing for the audience to see.

She focuses on Santana’s evolution as a character before and after she came out and accepted her sexuality. By portraying this as a positive experience, Santana can be used as a role model for other teens in similar situations.

Participant 3 had similar feelings towards Brittany’s character. Although Brittany can easily fit into a negative stereotype of a dumb blonde or “easy” bisexual, she notes Brittany’s
typical role of comic relief, but adds that she is at times mature, insightful, and helps Santana handle many tough emotional issues. While the participant feels that the dumb blonde status of a bisexual character has both positive and negative qualities, she is quick to understand, and feels that most viewers will also understand, that this stereotype does not represent every bisexual girl.

Participant 6 has a particularly strong connection with Santana and her story line. Her explanation is below.

Santana’s storyline and self-discovery served as a parallel to some of the thoughts going on inside my head. I connected with her long before I even fully understood why. I just wanted to see her happy and open and “out.” It would be another year before I was ready to accept my own bisexuality, but I cannot separate the impact Santana’s storyline had on my thought process. Naya Rivera was the first girl I allowed myself to openly admit I was attracted to. Santana and Brittany as a couple was the first girl-on-girl couple I felt passion and love for. I am not sure exactly how much of my self-discovery was altered by *Glee* and mostly Santana, but I am sure I probably would have denied that part of myself longer.

Furthermore, the pain of my realization sometimes is not so biting when I watch Santana’s journey. It gives me hope.

While the participant never claims Santana as a role model, this message excerpt clearly places the character as a model for positive behavior in LGBTQ youth.

Since she disclosed she had been teased for having a masculine body in early adolescence, I also asked Participant 6 about her opinions towards Coach Sue and Coach Beiste. She claims to be less androgynous now in her life than previously and no longer has assumptions made about her sexuality. She appreciates these two characters and believes “*Glee* did it right in
making both these characters heterosexual” since so many assumptions are made based on appearance. She likens this situation to talk of Santana being too feminine to be a lesbian—not looking gay enough. The participant thinks this is a great issue in both Tumblr and the larger society, stating “I hope, with showing that Sue and Biste are straight, people realize that the way one chooses to look, dress and take interest in has nothing to do with one’s sexual preferences and sexual identity,”

Participant 7, who does not identify as queer, finds many role models in *Glee*. She personally identifies with characters over body issues, parental involvement, and ambition. She finds one character in particular, Mercedes, to be a powerful role model for dealing with peer pressure, confidence in her body, and being an individual. While Participant 7 does not cite any of the queer characters as potential role models, her attitude towards Mercedes and other characters shows the potential each character on the show has for becoming a role model to viewers in similar circumstances—her response to being asked if any characters could be seen as role models was an enthusiastic “Yes! Yes! A million times yes.”) Participant 8, also identifying as straight, had a similar response to Participant 7. Since she is a teacher by trade, she looks up to the adult characters, the coaches and teachers, as role models. She also identifies a bit with Santana since one side of her family is from Cuba. She does not cite any specific characters for being role models from expressing their sexuality, but instead the attitude and personality of each of the characters creates a positive cast to follow.

Tumblr: #Friendship #Hateful

The last issue about which I questioned many of my participants was the digital interaction and effect of *Glee*. The *Glee* “fandom,” the internet community that rallies behind the show and its characters, has multiple outlets. While this study covers Tumblr exclusively, it
should be noted that the fandom is active in forums, Twitter, Facebook, fan fiction writing, and online role-playing games. But as previously stated, because of the opportunity for multiple modes of expression and communication, I have specifically chosen Tumblr as the site of study. This portion of the interview came later in my research, and therefore I was not able to contact each participant (a few had become inactive since the season’s end or left Tumblr altogether).

Participants 1 and 3 both believed that overall, Tumblr was a positive experience and place to simply share thoughts and experiences about the show. Participant 1 particularly thought it was a good tool to use to thank the writers and show the support of the characters, and Participant 3 enjoys using Tumblr to “vent” and keep up with spoilers and publicity about the show.

Participant 6 had quite a bit to say about Tumblr and the Glee fandoms. Copied below, her statement reflects the previously mentioned rivalries and communities of the “shippers” and gives insight to the intensity that these virtual relationships create.

I believe tumblr has both helped and deterred the cause Glee once stood for (and by that I mean uniting people of all different walks of life under one similarity). On one hand the individual sub-fandoms have become families amongst each other. I personally have made many friends on the site and have had many great and helpful conversations that have made my self-acceptance journey easier. On the other hand though, there is a lot of hostility between the sub-fandoms. The anonymity of the internet allows for people to say really horrible things. I’ve been told that the world would be a better place if I died simply because I do not like Blaine as a character. Many others have received similar threats. I believe the Glee fandom bullies each other because of the social media surrounding the show.
People easily forget that their opinion is not necessarily the end-all of opinions and attack others when they do not agree. Stereotypes run rampant and the fandom tends to be incredibly hateful. And yet, tumblr in and of itself allows for an open place for people to speak candidly about sexuality and gender issues. It seems to be a double edged sword.

While the site, and others similar to it, allow users to revel in the anonymity of the internet to freely express themselves, this participant brings up the danger in doing just that. Viewers are given a public space in which to cling to characters that offer a refuge from bullying, but they run the risk of being tormented in the process. One participant left Tumblr during the course of this research because she believed the fandom was too aggressive and hateful.

So Stereotypical

During these interviews, most of my participants were quick to mention another issue with the show—the perpetuation of stereotypes. Surprising to me, however, was that each participant had a very different opinion of the show’s use of stereotypical characters. A few disregarded any issues with Brittany’s problematic dumb blonde character. It was obvious to them that Brittany was one bisexual girl and did not represent bisexuals as a group. There was no mention of the correlation of Santana’s race and sexuality—an over-sexualized Latina with an over-sexualized orientation. I cannot be sure whether my participants did not put these two factors together or simply do not think it matters. Interestingly, though, the same blogs are often peppered with collages of Naya Rivera and Shay Mitchell, an actress of Filipino descent who plays a high school lesbian on the ABC show *Pretty Little Liars* (2010-2014). Participant 8 was the only member who commented on Santana’s race, stating, “I feel bad for saying this but Santana reminds me of my mom and aunt. Santana is a bit of a stereotype, but all stereotypes are
partly true—the crazy Latina. . . . Santana’s methods may be scary but her heart is in the right place.” Similarly to Brittany’s dumb blonde persona, Participant 8 does not see the harm in having a stereotypical Latina woman on *Glee*.

Participant 6 had a different opinion of the stereotypes in the show. She claims that “not all publicity is good publicity” and had a negative reaction to the way queer men were portrayed on the show. Because of this reaction, she was not able to fully support the show in the newest season or episodes. She notices that the show is often celebrated for everything it does right—opening people’s minds, putting real issues on TV, featuring queer characters—and the wrong is ignored. She believes that the show perpetuates doubles standards, makes fetishes out of queer high school boys, and highlights many stereotypes.

Having an active fan community for *Glee* has lead to both positive and negative outcomes for the individual fans. They have been connected with fans similar to themselves, whether by sexuality, hobbies, or other interests, and team up in support of their favorite characters or relationships. Knowing they are truly not alone, both by seeing situations acted out on the small screen and finding the connections through the internet, some fans express that *Glee* has served its purpose of being a televised anthem for the underdog. But with good always comes bad, and communities quickly “other” their own, forming alliances and enemies.

While my interviews were often widely-spaced and sometimes-incomplete, I was able to learn many of the opinions and reasons for blogging from the Tumblr *Glee* fandom. Each participant had a different background, reason for watching the show, and activity level on the site. Through these interviews, the thought and dedication of each participant concerning the show and their blogs became evident—some simply liked the fan community, some were committed to change, and some used Tumblr for media critique. But the existence of this virtual
community brought these women together to share opinions, pictures, and jokes when no other possible form of community would have existed. They moved beyond posting small status updates or pictures and writing fiction from the characters. In a community that celebrates multiple different types of posts and interactions, this fandom formed solid relationships and interactions stemming from the musical characters of *Glee*. 
CONCLUSION

*Glee* and its characters, particularly the four queer women discussed in this research, have had an outstanding effect on music, television, and society. The music made by these characters has allowed for a new type of queer visibility in prime-time media. The use of the internet and a transmedia approach has created a culture of virtual fans that can post, share, and archive any fleeting thought or picture. In addition, personally interacting with blog owners allows for a new perspective.

The music performed by these queer women tests the boundaries of what is acceptable, both on prime-time television and in society. Without simply calling Brittany and Santana’s duets “raunch culture” (Levy 2005), a stance is taken on allowing these characters, who arguably seem quite raunchy to the casual viewer, to be packaged for adolescents and to become role models for queer girls. The girls are not perfect—they feed into certain stereotypes, such as the crazy Latina and dumb blonde—but the fans recognize this stereotyping, and that these two characters do not represent everyone. Their duets range from oversexualized works such as the “Me Against the Music” hallucinogenic fantasy to the heartfelt “Landslide” performed in a womyn’s music style. These characters demonstrate the multiple facets of any one identity. More importantly, Brittany and Santana demonstrate healthy growth and personality development in handling their queer sexualities, often demonstrated through their choice of song. By not fully feeding in to the idea of raunch culture, or a society embracing the perceived empowerment of porn stars, strippers, miniskirts, and being “one of the guys” (4) culture, they are disrupting the popular stereotype assigned to queer feminine girls.

Coach Beiste and Coach Sue have created a similar disruption without accruing a comparable fan base to Brittany and Santana. In my research I did not discover dedicated
followers to these women, but most of my participants acknowledged their importance to the show and to violating societal expectations. Their music is both fierce and dominating, such as Sue’s rendition of “Super Bass,” and soft and emotional, like Beiste’s “Jolene.” Both of these characters display the artifice of their gender with either red lipstick or blonde wigs while performing traditionally feminine songs. By existing as straight women in masculine roles and dress, the sex-gender-desire relationship is disrupted, arguably more so than with Brittany and Santana (as at least society has recognized their relationship in raunch.)

The internet and fan-run blogs play a vital role in Glee’s transmedia empire. Fans are able to bond in their virtual community by posting reactions to teasers and episodes, re-blogging pictures and gifs, and commenting and asking one another questions. Alliances are formed by the followers of specific character relationships, and emotions are stirred when the meaning behind musical selections does not agree with the fan philosophy. In the fourth season, shippers of the queer Brittany-Santana relationship often became hostile towards fans of Brittany and her new boyfriend Sam. When teasers were released about a duet, the Tumblr bloggers united their disappointment in re-blogged media. While the relationships and fans were not solely based on the musical selections of the characters, the music chosen heightened the emotions of fans to an aggressive state.

Text-based interviews with participants in these blogs gave mixed results. Every participant I spoke with agreed that Glee’s message was important and that music had a large impact on the heightened emotions of the show. Some, but not all, of those I interviewed even cited the musical involvement as the main reason they started watching the show. However, each participant seemed significantly more concerned with the relationships, specifically the queer
relationships and their representation, than the featured music. While the theatrics drew many
viewers in, the storylines became the reason for the fans passion for the show.

The lack of musical discussion from my participants brings to light an interesting, yet
problematic, question for the field of ethnomusicology: if the fans are not focusing on the music,
should these characters be considered *musical* role models? Or are they merely the same as any
other teen-focused television characters? Maybe they are the same, but the act of singing,
especially about one’s emotions, is a very personal act. With many of the fans drawn in to the
show for the vocal music, they are likely familiar with that feeling and emotional outlet. That
musical connection, between fan and character, offers what other shows, even those featuring
queer characters, do not. This supplemental link helps create the fierce loyalties to relationships,
seen with Santana and Brittany (and even Kurt and Blaine) and respect for characters to whom
the fans may not directly relate, such as Coach Beiste and Sue. It allows fans to create true role
models from the characters of the show, whether because they see themselves in the characters’
sexualities, occupations, or ethnicity.

An intertextual analysis of many of the songs performed by the show’s queer female
characters gives additional insight to the readings of a few of the bloggers. We can see how each
performance serves as a unique piece of camp and makes a subtle statement about the roles of
queer women in both high school and the media. Whether showing the artifice of gender with
lipstick and wigs, or commenting on the fantasy of high school lesbians, or the emotional safety
of women’s music, the creators and actors of *Glee* have used music to remark—in a very loud
way—on the issues at play with being a queer woman today. *Glee* has become a mass-mediated
soundtrack used to both inspire and infuriate its fans concerning real-world, specifically
sexuality-based, issues effecting high school students and young adults. *Glee*, in addition to
many other similar pop-culture phenomena, has proven itself worthy of serious study with a positive light. While many scholars have shown a negative opinion of the stereotypes perpetuated on the show, my research suggests the value and positive impact the music and characters have on real people and the perceived society surrounding queer women.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Print


**Media**


“Feud.” *Glee*. First broadcast March 14 2013 by FOX. Directed by Bradley Beuker and written by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa.


“I Kissed a Girl.” *Glee*. First broadcast Nov. 29, 2011 by FOX. Directed by Tate Donovan and written by Matthew Hodgson.


“Never Been Kissed.” *Glee*. First broadcast Nov. 9 2010 by FOX. Directed by Bradley Beuker and written by Brad Falchuk.


“Sexy.” *Glee*. First broadcast March 8 2011 by FOX. Directed by Ryan Murphy and written by Brad Falchuk.


“Swan Song.” *Glee*. First broadcast Dec. 6, 2012 by FOX. Directed by Brad Falchuk and written by Stacy Taub.
Participant 1 identified as a bi-curious or pansexual woman who had come out to very few people in her life. While some accept her, her mother has told her being gay is a sin and does not support her. While she has never felt bullied, Participant 1 views media, especially television as a distraction from day to day stresses. She started watching Glee because a friend recommended it, and while she does not know of anyone specific in her life the show may have touched, she states that “the show has made me accept people as they are because [I] used to be very homophobic but watching the show made me realize that [I] need to accept people and myself.”

Participant 3 self-identifies as bisexual and has openly come out. She did not feel as though she was bullied for identifying as bisexual, and claims that any bullying was “typical mean girls” situations. Also identifying TV as a coping mechanism/distraction, Participant 3 had very detailed feelings on the importance of Glee in her life and others. When asked why she started watching the show, she states:

I started watching because I heard that Santana told Brittany she was in love with her. I found that interesting since there aren’t many lesbian or gay relationships on primetime shows so it peaked my interest. . . . I feel the Brittana relationship has made me feel connected to it because of my sexuality and I think alot of people feel the same way. It gives visibility and normalcy to same sex relationships particularly in high school which is a hard time to go through those things. Hopefully showing that relationship and the Klaine relationship has made some people more accepting of same sex relationships.

The background of Participant 4 differs a bit from my first two interviews. She identifies as heterosexual but was bullied in school for being assumed gay. She was an athlete in high
school and friends would start rumors about her sexuality. While she identifies as straight, she sees herself as a queer ally and finds comfort knowing that her friends trust her enough to come out to her. Participant 3 was also attracted to the show after learning of Santana and Brittany’s relationship, and while she does not feel it has had a great impact on her life, she sees the effect on those around her, stating that friends personally relate to the show. In addition, Participant 4 adds her thoughts on Glee’s role in society:

I think that Glee has impacted society as a whole in a major way. Glee expresses who people really are and what they’re afraid of and also what they tend to hide. It expresses bullying, real-life emotion that teens feel when they’re in high school and fears of what comes after high school. It portrays fears about being popular, sexuality, etc. It shows that everybody [is] the same no matter what level of popularity anyone is ranked.

Past the highlighted themes of sexuality and queer adolescents, Participant 4 relates the impact of the show back to the general underdog anthem, tying all of the plot points together. With this in mind, queer identity is pulled back into the normalcy of any other high school underdog trait.

Participant 6 identified herself to me as a well-educated, bisexual woman. At the time of the interview, she had come out to most friends, but is waiting to tell her family until she feels she can fully support herself. Since she publicly identified as straight in high school, she was not bullied for her sexuality. However, the participant explains that “in middle school a rumor started that [she] was on steroids due to [her] large shoulders and more masculine body type,” both due to gymnastics. According to her, this teasing “made me feel pressured to be a ‘better girl.’ I also was teased about being a ‘dyke’ a few times because I played softball, but those instances never were malicious.”
With these statements, Participant 6 is clearly differentiating from bullying and teasing, a line that has become extremely fuzzy, even non-existent in today’s heightened awareness of bullying. (Even in *Glee*, Santana’s character continuously walks this line.) Along the lines of heightened awareness, the show focuses in on the large social issues concurrent with each season in what seems like a goal to raise awareness. In speaking of her original encounters with the show, Participant 6 explains how the plot affected her.

Originally Glee opened my mind. I didn’t really know any LGBTQ people at the time. As I watched Kurt throughout season 1 I really started to feel for him. It became clear how unjust the world is when I saw the way he was treated for his preference in partners. It was during season 2 though that I really connected with the show. It was my first year at college and I was already starting to form my own thoughts and opinions on what is right and wrong.

The show and characters continued to have a profound effect on this viewer, and she also saw the change in others around her after watching the show.

I think Glee has made one of my best friend’s more open to accept me as I am. She has been watching for as long as me and she loves Kurt. She’s a true ally to the cause and I think Glee is a big part of that. I also think the show has softened my mother to some of the queer issues. She still does not accept homosexuality as an “acceptable lifestyle choice,” but I think watching the show has diminished some of the hate in her heart. She is not nearly as homophobic as she used to be. Nor is she as judgmental.

Whether or not she is correct in assuming *Glee* is the reason for the change of heart she sees in her friends and family, it is evident that the show gives security and hope for a changing
environment to its viewers. This is a common theme in many of my other participants’ responses.

Participant 7 is a heterosexual woman who has never questioned her orientation or gender identity in anyway, yet sees herself as a strong queer ally. Unlike many of the other participants, she was not drawn to the show for the queer relationships or plot, but instead for the musical selections. When asked about the impact of the show on those around her, she chose to write about what she saw online. Since most of her friends do not follow the show yet she speaks with people online about it (as evidenced by the Tumblr blog).

This show has impacted the lives of so many people and I would say it has impacted kids and adults that are maybe confused or struggling with their sexuality, to realise its okay to feel these things the most. Homophobia is still a massive problem in school’s around the world and . . . I can’t imagine how it would feel watching those scenes if I was going through the same thing. Then we have Santana’s story line, using boys to try and hide what she is feeling deep down for another girl to then eventually be able to admit to herself and the girl she loves that she wants to be with her. . . . I believe this show has probably saved the lives of a lot of teenagers and adults for lots of different reasons. This participant realizes that she is an outsider in this context, yet she realizes and follows the impact the show has in the lives of queer viewers. She notes the interviews in which the actors address fan mail from viewers contemplating suicide, and rejoices that it has been called “the gayest show on television.” In addition, she claims that older generations would have benefited from a similar show, and that *Glee* has “helped bring down the wall society has built to block out homosexuality and especially gay representation in the media.”
My final active participant, Participant 8, also identifies as a straight woman but admits to being occasionally attracted to other women. She too considers herself a strong ally, and makes regular contributions to the Human Rights Campaign (a non-profit group dedicated to queer rights). She began watching the program because she was a fan of many of the people involved, particularly creator Ryan Murphy and the actresses Lea Michelle and Jane Lynch. She credits the show for her involvement in social media, particularly with being vocal about gay rights, but feels that the greatest impact the show has had as a whole is bringing attention to arts education.
APPENDIX B: HUMAN SUBJECT REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

DATE: February 25, 2013
FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board
PROJECT TITLE: [307873] Online Communities and Queer Identities: Finding Solidarity in Glee
SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision
ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: February 25, 2013
EXPIRATION DATE: January 22, 2014
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review
REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Revision materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is available as a published Board Document in the Review Details page. You must use the approved version of the consent document when obtaining consent from participants. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please add the text equivalent of the HSRB IRBNet approval/expiration date stamp to the "footer" area of the electronic consent document.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

You have been approved to enroll 20 participants. If you wish to enroll additional participants you must seek approval from the HSRB.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on January 22, 2014. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7710 or hsr@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.
Hi! My name is Katie, and I am a graduate student studying music, queer folks, and the internet. My next exciting exploration: Glee!

I have noticed your blog/tumblr/twitter devoted to Glee characters, and since I study blogs and their creators like you, I’m hoping I get the chance to talk to you! I’m seeking any queer or queer-friendly social media users and Glee fans (or haters!) to follow their posts and have a few online-based interviews with, which will be kept completely anonymous. My school requires that participants in this study be at least 18, and I would be more than happy to answer any questions you might have.

May I send you a consent form, detailing everything you need to know about my project?

Thanks for your time, and I hope to hear from you soon!

Katie
APPENDIX D: CONSENT DOCUMENT

Bowling Green State University

Hello again, my name is Katie Buckley (KatieTheVegan online), and I am an ethnomusicology graduate student at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. My advisor for this project is Dr. Katherine Meizel, teaching at the same university. My thesis will be researching the queer identities in Fox’s television show, Glee, and how they might help shape online and real life identities of fans. I have asked you to participate since you have a social media account which dedicates many posts to the queer characters on the show.

The purpose of this research is to better understand the connection between media role models, music, and queer identity. I hope to broaden the understanding of the relationship between music and queer identity that individuals experience. While I can’t say your participation will benefit you in any personal way, I hope that my work will benefit queer youth as they gain acceptance and search for identities in mainstream media.

I will be closely looking at the relationships that the characters Santana, Brittany, Coach Sue, and Coach Beiste have with their gender and sexual orientations. I also want to look at how these affect social media sites and real lives. I will be looking at online posts and comments and conducting interviews through online-based private messages throughout the next few months. Everything should be fully wrapped up by this May. From you, I am simply asking for permission to study your posts and for you to respond to any interview questions/messages in a timely manner. I would guess, depending on the depth of your answers, it shouldn’t take up more than two or three hours of your time spread over the next few months.
I want you to know that your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time. You can skip any question you like or completely stop answering without any penalty. Deciding to participate or not to participate will not affect your relationship with me, my advisor, or Bowling Green State University.

Since your posts are already public on social media sites, I cannot control who sees that, but I can offer to change your online user name in my work. I will never ask you for your real name or location, so any communication with me with me as anonymous as you would like. I may, however, quote your responses to show examples of my research, but in doing this I will use a fake username. To ensure you remain anonymous, you may wish to clear your internet browser and page history after any communication. The exact communication between us will not go farther than my password protected computer. Your interviews with me will be deleted from my inbox and saved to my computer. I will use a numerical code instead of your username in all of these documents. With the anonymous nature of the internet, I cannot foresee any risks that may come to you in participation. However, since gender and sexual orientation are key topics of my research, these sensitive subjects will arise with a potential for some emotional stress. Please remember, you do not have to answer any question you are not comfortable with and can change the topic any time you wish. The risks of participation in this study are no greater than those experienced in daily life.

If you would like to contact me with any other questions, you may do so through this website or directly e-mail me at bucklek@bgusu.edu or call at [redacted]. My advisor’s contact
information, should you want to talk to her, is kmeizel@bgsu.edu, office phone number 419-372-7716. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Review Board at 419-372-7716 or hsr@bgsu.edu, if you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, or even to verify that I am who I say I am—I understand the risky nature of internet strangers. Thank you, and I look forward to hearing from you!

By responding positively to this message, you verify that you have been informed of the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits of this study. You are also confirming that you are at least 18 years of age as required to give consent for participation. You have had the opportunity to have all your questions answered and have been informed that your participation is completely voluntary. By responding to this message, you agree to participate in this research.