Sexuality & Culture (2013) 17:434–448
DOI 10.1007/s12119-013-9185-2

ORIGINAL PAPER

Sexuality and Teen Television: Emerging Adults Respond to Representations of Queer Identity on *Glee*

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Published online: 29 May 2013

Abstract Academic scholarship on teen television programs indicates that images of queer sexualities can strongly impact the identities of emerging adults. Yet what is missing from this body of scholarship is an in-depth examination of how these representations are incorporated into the identity projects of the emerging adults who watch these shows. This study fills this gap by examining qualitative interviews with emerging adults who watch *Glee*. The participants consistently and overwhelmingly identified *Glee* as representing "progressive" emerging adult sexuality. Within that, three key themes emerged. First, identifying with *Glee* is a gendered practice. Second, *Glee* fandom aligns with an affinity for musical theater, which is traditionally considered a mirror for gay culture. Finally, while viewers recognized queer narrative content, it did not produce a broader acceptance of non-heterosexual identities. Viewers normalized their own (real, straight) identities in relation to the (fake, queer) identities shown in the narrative.

Keywords Teen television · *Glee* · Sexuality · Sexual identity · Queer · Emerging adulthood · Adolescence · Music

A previous version of this manuscript was presented at SSEA's 6th Conference on Emerging Adulthood in Chicago, IL.

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Introduction

Teen television's latest broadcast success is Ryan Murphy's *Glee*. In the words of the FOX network, *Glee* "follows an optimistic teacher, Will Schuester (Matthew Morrison), who—against all odds and a malicious cheerleading coach—attempts to save McKinley High's *Glee* Club from obscurity, while helping a group of aspiring underdogs realize their true star potential" (fox.com). The show follows traditional teen television formats, yet incorporates a number of song and dance routines to broadway classics and contemporary pop songs, as well as some original musical compositions. Currently in its fourth season, *Glee* has won numerous awards, including a Screen Actors Guild Award for "outstanding performance by an ensemble in a comedy series," the People's Choice Award for "favorite new TV comedy," and even a Golden Globe for "best musical or comedy television series," beating out A-list veteran shows like *The Office*, *Entourage*, and *30 Rock* (Billboard.com, The Internet Movie Database 2009). *Glee* has been characterized as "*Bring It On*" meets "*High School Musical*" and also called "a lunchroom version of '*The Breakfast Club*' (nytimes.com). It is described as the "rarest of rarities in network prime time: an absolute original, an authentic musical comedy that's as outrageously funny as it is irresistibly tuneful" (tvguidemagazine.com in Hanlon 2009).

Congruent with an out, married lesbian as the show's biggest star (Jane Lynch), several out gay actors in the cast, and out creator Ryan Murphy writing and directing, *Glee* has had a rather burgeoning queer narrative focus. The series contains a number of queer characters, deviating from traditional teen television formats where non-heterosexual identities are typically contained to one token character. Perhaps the most visible is Kurt Hummel (Chris Colfer), an emotional, flamboyant gay teen who faces ugly torment because of his sexuality, to the point where he changes schools. Hummel is introduced early in the series, and comes out to his father and friends very early in the first season. The series also introduces primary characters Santana Lopez (Naya Rivera), a closeted (now out) lesbian in love with dimwitted Britney S. Pierce (Heather Morris), who identifies as straight and lesbian at different points in the show, more recently identifying as bisexual. There is also Blaine Anderson (Darren Criss), a former Dalton Academy Warbler who transfers to McKinley when he and Kurt start dating. Other queer characters include David Karofsky (Max Adler), a beefy, homophobic closeted gay boy who bullies Kurt to the point of expulsion, yet ironically becomes Kurt's first (forced) kiss, and Wade "Unique" Adams (Alex Newell), a transgendered character searching for a place to belong as her true inner-diva. All of these representations are intended to be sympathetic and transgressive. *Glee*'s writer Ryan Murphy publicly supported his decision to feature queer characters and romances: "I think what it says to a lot of young gay people who are confused and ashamed is that you can get love and are worthy of love" (Murphy in Stack 2011). Consequently, the show has been both lauded as "leading TV's gay teen revolution" (EW Staff 2011) and criticized for its sometimes "obvious" and "stereotypical" "neat neutering" of gay characters (Smith 2010). Either way, with an abundance of queer sexualities represented, the show deviates from traditional teen television narratives where

queer identity is not often considered one of the "facts of life" (Kielwasser and Wolf 1992).

While the queer characters represented in *Glee* could be subjects for textual analysis, our concern is with how emerging adults make sense of these queer representations as part of their own sexual identity projects. Teen television is frequently cited as a source of information for teens about sexuality, and the connection to the development of sexual identity is of strong interest to television scholars. Davis and Dickinson (2004) explain that the relationship between mediated worlds and identity formation is an integral part of how an individual constructs her/his sense of self throughout late adolescence and emerging adulthood:

> Within many of our societies, the role of media is considered vital – if not somewhat accountable – for the handling of teenagers' greater entry into citizenship, responsibility, and wider and more multifaceted forms of social interaction. The subsequent shaping of teen TV in line with this role must necessarily take into consideration what is generally accepted to be 'appropriate' to the exploration and cementing of teenagers' new-found positions within the world. (p. 10)

In other words, cultures often point to television genre or narrative as a strong influence on sexual identity formation (Davis 2004; Kielwasser and Wolf 1992; Meyer 2003) and behavioral choices (Chandra et al. 2008; Gottfried et al. 2013) made by teens, particularly as they grow into emerging adulthood (Vasilenko et al. 2012). As Gamson (2005) contends, while the recognition and celebration of gay identity on television moves queer identity into the American cultural mainstream, it was not long ago that media visibility was a primary concern for the queer community (p. 5). Gamson's critique centers on how producers shape visibility through television's genre conventions working to "normalize" gay identity (p. 15), but far less is known about how viewers position themselves in light of a show whose narrative is heavily centered on making queer sexualities visible.

Given the unique narrative focus of *Glee*, it warrants the question: How do audiences make sense of *Glee*'s representations of queer sexuality and how do these representations impact their own sexual identity? To answer this question, we conducted individual interviews with 97 emerging adult viewers of *Glee*, several of whom began watching the series in their late teens. Data suggest that participants consistently and overwhelmingly identified *Glee* as representing "progressive" emerging adult sexuality. However, identifying with *Glee* is a gendered practice, often aligned with an affinity for musical theater. Male and female respondents reported drastically different experiences of *Glee* fandom—from their own acceptance of being a fan, to viewing practices, to broader (perceived) communicative constraints in expressing their affinity for *Glee*. While viewers recognized queer narrative content, it did not necessarily produce a broader acceptance of non-heterosexual identities. Despite a recognition that teen television narratives deal with "real" issues, viewers typically normalized their own (real, straight) identities in relation to the (fake, queer) identities shown in the narrative. After discussing

these themes, we examine the implications for teen television and sexuality studies, offering directions for future research.

Teen Television, Sexual Identity, and Emerging Adulthood Audiences

Teen television is a term often associated with a specific genre of broadcast television narratives (typically originating in the US) which focuses on the lives of teens as they navigate the road from adolescence to adulthood. Teen television series often center on the relationship of parents to children (Kaveney 2006), progressing from high school to college contexts in many instances. These narratives are "often alienated from ratings success both because of [their] seemingly specific and exclusive audience niche" (Bolte 2008), framing many teen television narratives as "cult TV" with high levels of participatory fandom, intersexuality, and synergistic marketing efforts (Hills 2004; Wee 2004). However, for every narrative that reaches its end too soon (*My So Called Life*, *Popular*), there are long running series (*Saved By The Bell*, *One Tree Hill*) that viewers return to week after week. Despite their strong historical presence in television programming (Osgerby 2004), scholars rarely take teen television narratives seriously as objects of cultural analysis. Davis and Dickinson (2004) note:

> Teen TV is precarious: precarious in its appeal (its audience may 'grow out of it' and another one may not assume its place) and in its conviction about its themes (about-turns on major narrative issues in the name of market forces are commonplace). In this, these sets of programmes mirror the unsettled nature of the adolescent state itself. Yet, the rapid sell-by date of certain shows – like the quickfire turnover in teen clothing fashions – does not invalidate them as subjects to study; their impermanence and their particular historical emergence and disappearance are enormously telling. (p. 4)

Part of this lack of attention, as these authors note, is related to the ephemeral nature of teen television programs. They drift in and out of fashion quickly, particularly as characters age out of the high school context and into emerging adulthood. However, Ross and Stein (2008) argue that thinking about teen television as specifically linked to genre—in that it must be primarily focused on teens moving through this particular stage of life—is a misnomer for what can actually be considered a teen television narrative. They explain,

> If we do not restrict our understanding of Teen TV to only the obvious (the WB and UPN networks, and now the CW), we can see similarities between programs such as *Everwood* and *Gilmore Girls* that intermesh teen and adult storylines, and those "quality" cable television programs which include teens in their broader cast of characters. From this perspective, the difference between *Everwood* and *Six Feet Under* as Teen TV is more in degree of teen focus (and overt teen branding) than in scope or nature. (p. 5)

Expanding our understanding of what is defined as "teen television" can help academics navigate the changing dynamics of these narratives as they reflect

(traditionally US) cultural ideals such as capitalism, independence and self-sufficiency.

Perhaps one of the most defining features of teen television is its ability to address issues of identity formation. In congruence with cultural and psychological expectations for identity development in the teens and early 20s, teen television narratives often feature characters searching to define their identity in particular ways. They center identity formation as crucial to characters in their stories, particularly when it comes to sexual identity. Academics have analyzed narratives presenting characters struggling with sexual identity issues—such as Anna on *One Tree Hill* (Meyer 2009); Elliot on *Party of Five* (Davis 2004); Jack on *Dawson's Creek* (Meyer 2003); Kim on *Sugar Rush* (Monaghan 2010); Marissa on the *OC* (Burgess 2008); Rickie on *My So Called Life* (Davis 2004); and Willow on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Masson 2008). These narratives illustrate how sexual identity formation for young adults is murky because the question of when a "youth" becomes an "adult" is only explained loosely by cultural conceptions of puberty as a biological rite of passage (Gove 1996). Sexual self-awareness and freedom is a cornerstone of the transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood. Teen television scholarship observes that these narratives are liberal in their representation of queer identities, often depicting intimate contact between same-sex couples (Meyer 2003; Padva 2004). Wee (2008) explains that these representations function progressively because non-heterosexual identities are not seen as "alternative" or "aberrant," but rather as part of life, with the characters' "romantic relationships as largely functional, healthy, supportive, and loving" highlighting teen television's tendency to present sexuality in a "liberal and humanist stance" (p. 51). Unlike the 1990s, where queer sexual identity was all but invisible (Kielwasser and Wolf 1992), teen television narratives of the twenty-first century explore sexuality in much more overt and discursive ways.

Although the representation of non-heterosexual identities is increasing in teen television narratives, there remains a question of audience: who are these narratives intended for, and who is actually consuming them? Davis and Dickinson (2004) observe that teen television narratives, while created and branded explicitly to teens, are shaped by adults through modes of production. As a result, these narratives are "for" teens, "by" adults. Defining the audience as "teen" then becomes problematic, as these series often draw pre-teen, teen and adult viewers simultaneously. In fact, many of these narratives capitalize strongly on a sense of nostalgia, emphasizing both past and future. For example, in the case of *Dawson's Creek*, its characters "occasionally behave in irresponsible or immature ways" but their dialogue is "always resolutely mature and responsible in its pursuit of open channels of communication and reflexive self-understanding" (Hills 2004, p. 58). As a result, the series relies heavily on nostalgia—the characters are "acutely aware of time passing, of their own situations in flux, referring constantly to their next big decision and change" (Birchall 2004, p. 181). In drawing teen narratives this way, adult viewers can identify with the series as part of a nostalgic revisionist history of their own past identity struggles.

Thus, several teen television series appeal to emerging adults as a primary audience. Arnett (2004) marks emerging adulthood as occurring generally between

the ages of 18–25, but based on field data, indicates that this period can range as high as age 30. This appeal is strategic on the part of producers, who seek to capitalize on the purchasing power of this demographic. Meyer (2010) explains how using emerging adulthood as a general definitional framework when speaking about teen television audiences is useful for two reasons. First, emerging adults are primarily concerned with identity development, which is also a central concern of teen television. In addition, the characters portrayed in these narratives often cross over into emerging adult ages (or the actors/actresses themselves are of emerging adult age, portraying a younger aged character). The question of audience, therefore, extends beyond traditional definitions of "teen" or "youth," warranting further analysis. Furthermore, given contemporary viewing practices—where real time viewing is complemented by instant streaming, online content, access to purchase DVD recordings of recent and historic television series, and global exporting of narratives to other cultures via digital technologies—the question of audience for teen television narratives remains imprecise at best.

As a result, it is surprising that very few scholars have undertaken audience studies specifically designed to assess audience reactions to teen television programming. While academic textual analysis of teen television narratives has increased in recent years, audience studies have yet to follow. Rockler (1999) provides a notable early exception with her analysis of *Beverly Hills 90210*. She conducted focus groups with women who watched the series to ascertain their level of investment in the narrative and found that most of the women reported enjoying the show, but did not find its characters or themes to be particularly realistic. This distancing of oneself as a viewer from the "reality" of a particular program shifts when moving to more fan-based studies. Meyer (2005, 2007) conducted interviews with fans of the series *Charmed*, asking about their level of involvement and participation in the narrative. Respondents stressed that the series represented a complicated vision of feminist activism, featuring strong, empowered women—but only through the use of "magic" (2005). As a result, viewers found this to be representative of women's contemporary struggles as feminism becomes a narrative paradox. While each sister manages her magical power successfully, each faces enormous difficultly balancing magical responsibilities with personal relationships. Fans who specifically identified as Wiccan also commented on the construction of Wicca in the series, dissecting places in the narrative that presented the Wiccan faith realistically versus places where the series borrowed from Christianity to make its narrative appeal more interesting to a broader base of viewers (2007). Looking at internet message board postings, Kohnen (2008) reads fan participation in "HoYay!" culture through the narrative of *Smallville*. These fans read the relationship between Clark Kent and Lex Luthor as homoerotic, and focus their attentions on "correcting" the desired traditional heteronormative narrative of the series (Clark's pursuit of Lana) to account for their own queer readings (resulting in a love triangle between Clark, Lana and Lex). Moving this work into audience analysis, Meyer (2013) finds fan readings of the CLex relationship as both textually and communally based. Audiences who "see" the homoerotic undertones in *Smallville* consider themselves more enlightened than regular viewers, while at the same time remain wary of

corporate media interest in capitalizing on their "resistance" to dominant narrative interpretations. These studies taken together illustrate the potential of audiences reading teen television narratives in a variety of ways. Audiences may or may not align themselves with the preferred narrative reading purported by a particular series, and they may or may not identify with character concerns or identity struggles. The intent of the producers and/or creators in constructing character representations and storylines can ultimately be decoded in numerous ways by multiple audiences (Hall 1980).

Methods

This study operates within a qualitative methodological framework, employing 97 individual interviews with emerging adults who self-identified as *Glee* viewers. Interviews were conducted at two stages: directly after its first season, and again at the start of the third season. Interviews were collected via an interviewing course taught by the first author of the essay. Students were trained to conduct standardized one-on-one interviews according to protocols approved by the university's IRB. Student interviewers chose participants through convenience sampling of friends and acquaintances who had previously watched *Glee*. The interviewers used a standard interview guide with questions assessing the participants' reasons for watching *Glee*, the level of their fandom and participation, and the importance of *Glee* in our popular culture landscape.

Participants were all college students from a small liberal arts university. The sample was predominantly (female, 86.4 %, male, 13.6 %) with a mean age of 20.6. Consistent with the general student demographics of the university, respondents were predominantly White (90.9 %) with African-Americans (6.1 %) and Hispanics (3.03 %) each representing a smaller percentage of the sample. None of the participants were enrolled as students in the course conducting the interviews. Exposure to *Glee* prior to the interview was measured by an assessment of how the participants came to watch *Glee*—most participants either watched the pilot episode in May of 2009, or were introduced to *Glee* at some point during the first season by a friend.

Each interview was recorded and transcribed, with the transcriptions serving as the primary data for analysis. The transcripts were analyzed through a thematic analysis using Owen's (1984) categories of repetition and recurrence (e.g., Watts and Orbe 2002). Thematic analysis is helpful in discovering not only themes that emerge within each participant's responses, but also themes that are common across participants (Zorn and Ruccio 1998). After coding the data for repetition, we organized the data according to recurrent themes. While a number of primary themes emerged, the results reported in the following analysis represent only the responses that clustered around themes relating to sexuality and gender identity. Participants in the analysis are identified by the interview set (time one collection being group A, time two being group B) and a random participant number assigned to the transcript in order to protect the identity of research subjects.

Emerging Adults Respond to the *Glee* Narrative

The participants in this study consistently and overwhelmingly agreed that *Glee* is a "progressive" show, in terms of sexuality and identity. One participant explained that in relation to other teen television narratives, "the issues [*Glee*] does touch on are real issues, and it's nice to see those presented in a mainstream way" (B2, p.3). Including herself in the emerging adult category, another participant remarked that a unique aspect of the show is how it depicts "people around our age dealing with problems that we also face" (B18, p. 2). Many described the show as different, and as something other than what they've seen before (B5, p. 11), with "a little something for everyone. There are different music performances every week, and it's funny, but it also covers some very deep topics" (B4, p. 2). Interestingly, one participant contrasted *Glee* with reality television, saying, "*Glee* is slightly more realistic than a lot of reality television today. There are actually real, relatable high school stories in it, and I know that in a lot of shows it's just so dramatized that you just can't relate" (B23, p. 3). These responses about *Glee*'s reputation as progressive highlight the importance of representing "real" issues, things that actual teens might face in the context of a high school environment. However, viewers were also apt to point out that "it also has kind of like subtle sexuality and stuff like that that makes it also for more of an adult audience" (A30, p. 2). The perceived authenticity of the narrative as it relates to young adult experience and identity is of central concern to the viewers, and a large part of why they watch the program. *Glee*'s appeal then crosses into emerging adult audiences.

Emerging adult viewers engaging with the narrative extended the "real issues" they identified to the importance of visibility, particularly as it relates to sexual identity. As one respondent put it, "*Glee* is different because it addresses real life issues concerning homosexuality, teen pregnancy, and social outcasts" (A63, p. 2). Another participant expanded on this in more detail:

> It's definitely an eye opening show for some people, who maybe weren't exposed to the types of situations that it does bring out. So that's definitely a unique aspect—that you have this kind of introduction to these topics, maybe before you can deal with them yourself so you can build your own thoughts on them, and prepare to deal with them in real life, whether it be bullying, or you know, being gay and coming out, something like that. (B1, p. 7)

This respondent clearly stresses the need for visibility, particularly for young people who need to "build [their] own thoughts" on controversial identity issues, often before an individual has dealt with them in his/her own life. Another participant stressed the importance of visibility for non-heterosexual identities by stating, "the gay character coming out to his parents and things like that, I think it's important to show stuff like that on TV" (A37, p. 1). One young woman explained the presence of gay characters as important to queer youth, because, "for instance, let's say a kid has a hard time coming out because they're gay. That's a real situation, that happens and people have a real difficulty with that" (A16, pp. 1–2). By representing these non-normative identities on television, *Glee* has provoked mixed responses from critics, particularly those who may not agree with queer politics. One participant

said, "I've heard it's anti-Christian because like Kurt, the characters are gay, but I mean, that's part of real life, like you're going to run into characters that are gay, you know?" (B9, p. 2). In essence, respondents overwhelmingly identified that visibility for queer characters was important because every viewer might "run into characters that are gay" in their own lives.

In addition to this general acknowledgement of queer visibility being important for teen television narrative and the culture at large, participants identified *Glee* fandom as a gendered practice. As explained above, many of the participants commented on the real-life implications of *Glee*'s narrative focus. Several viewers connected this observation directly to their own fandom, and the sense of community obtained from talking about the issues presented in *Glee* with other fans:

> *Glee* shows all different viewpoints on the issues, so the viewers can relate to different characters in different ways. And then also, you watch how those different views play out on the show and then you can kinda talk about how you feel about that with other fans. (B1, p. 4)

In a way, viewers identified that presenting different viewpoints opens dialogue between and among fans about important cultural issues. For example, one participant explained that "Since *Glee* deals with such controversial topics, like pregnancy, religion, and homosexuality, it gets a lot of media attention and I think that bands the fans together and gives us a sense of community" (B4, p. 3). These comments imply inclusion in a community of young adults who critically assess themselves in relation to the ideas discussed in the show.

While the vast majority of participants identified as *Glee* "fans," the notion of fandom was discussed differently by female and male participants. In particular, female participants eagerly professed their fandom of the show, with no fear of it being public knowledge. Many of the female viewers self-identified as "*Glee*ks" (A2, p. 3)—a term employed by fans combining "*Glee*" with "geek," signifying their affinity for the show while also aligning themselves with a discourse of being an "outcast." In addition to identifying as "*Glee*ks," female participants spent time elaborating on their (fairly gender specific) viewing customs. One female participant stated, "When the first couple episodes came out, I usually made it my [Facebook] status like 'Girl's night watching *Glee*!' or something like that" (B30, p. 2). Another female respondent explained that she watches *Glee* in her college dorm, "We all watch it together in my room usually. A lot of the girls from my hall, we all sit together and watch it and sometimes make popcorn and just hang out watching it" (A2, p. 1). Many of the other female participants discussed how they watched the show with their best "girl friends" and "roommates" (B29) or their "sorority sisters" (B31). These markers indicate that the female viewers perceive the narrative as appealing primarily to women.

The communal aspect of television viewing reported by the women indicates that they perceive *Glee* to be a female-centric text, one that men would be unlikely to enjoy. Even in instances where female participants encouraged their male friends to watch the show, they reported complicated reactions from males in relation to *Glee*. For example, one participant responded during the first set of interviews at length:

> I guess an interesting experience I had actually was introducing [my male friend] to the show. It's cause he was really resisting it, because it's that weird like, I mean boys are just funny in general but um the fact that a lot of guys don't want to like [*Glee*] 'cause it seems like a girl thing to like which is so ridiculous to me but it's just fun like it's exciting and there's guys in the show who act like guys. It's not like everyone's gay. There's only one gay character. So it's funny that it's sort of a culture thing for guys to be like, oh *Glee*'s gay, which is so hilarious to me because there's so many guys that I know who love the show. (A5, p. 4)

In this case, the respondent explains the reticence her male friend had to watching *Glee*, directly linking his hesitancy to the perception that "*Glee*'s gay." Another participant described *Glee* as targeted to women, though she thinks "if men gave it a chance and sat down and watched it they would think that it's really funny. They would enjoy it too—it's just a lot of guys aren't into the singing and prancing around sort of deal" (A11, p. 2). Labeling the narrative as "singing and prancing around" subtly codes the participant's meaning here, segmenting these behaviors as anti-masculine, and thus, of no interest to male viewers. In fact, some of the female participants went so far as to characterize male viewers as gay. One of the female participants describes the narrative as:

> It's like a soap opera, scripted but not as dramatic. I don't think guys get anything out of it, either. I think it's just a girls' show. I have a lot of guy friends who watch it. I mean, granted, most of them are gay. (B30, p. 5)

This participant labels the *Glee* narrative as a "girls' show," and also marks "guy friends" who watch it as gay. This sentiment was echoed by another participant who characterized male *Glee* fans as "either they're homosexual or they're watching it with their girlfriends" (A50, p. 3).

Given these responses from women, it was no surprise that male participants in the study simultaneously recognized this gender stigma when affiliating with *Glee*. As a result, male participants characterized their viewing practices as quite different from their female counterparts. In several instances, male participants indicated that they only confessed their *Glee* fandom to interviewers because it was within the context of a confidential interview. In day-to-day life, they keep their fandom secret in order to avoid a perceived stigma by non-gay (or masculine) viewers. Male viewers reported watching the show alone, explaining "not a lot of [guys] will admit that they like *Glee*, but they do. So I guess that's the most unique aspect, that I actually enjoy the show" (B6, p. 2). However, this same viewer was quick to recognize that he would not claim fandom publicly in the same way female fans do: "I would never call myself a *Glee*k, but I guess if you looked at the definition of what it was, I would be a *Glee*k" (B6, p. 2). Disassociating with being a "*Glee*k" is part of refusing to acknowledge publicly one's fandom for the show, and was shared by another male participant who stated, "I don't want people to know I'm a *Glee*k, so I watch it alone. I guess you could call it a guilty pleasure so I just watch it alone with me, myself, and I" (B14, p. 2). This participant also characterized his

interaction with other male *Glee* fans (who, like himself, are musicians) as a "Deep dark dungeon *Glee*king out exchange" (B14, pp. 3–4).

The connection to music was important to male viewers, in conjunction with the privatized nature of their viewership. Another participant noted, "I don't go around telling people I watch *Glee*," because "guys feel like it's kind of girly—well maybe not girly, but musicals are not generally a guy thing" (A60, p. 9). Male viewers recognized that claiming *Glee* fandom aligned publicly with an affinity for musical theater—musical theater being traditionally considered a mirror for gay culture (Clum 1992). As a result, several comments made by participants disassociated masculinity and heterosexuality with *Glee* as a result of its musicality: "Definitely with the whole musical aspect, that's something more accepted in gay culture and it's less accepted in our masculine society" (A51, p 2). In other words, for male viewers, the inclusion of the music made the narrative of *Glee* "more gay"—even more so than the presence of queer characters within the narrative. The musical aspect combined with the visible presence of queer characters marks the overall narrative as queer, and thus, viewers perceived that non-viewing others would stigmatize male viewers as gay or queer, regardless of their own identities. All but one of the male participants made a point to indicate that their own sexual identity was heterosexual, and their discomfort associating with *Glee* resulted from the perceived threat to their own public sexual identity.

And That's What you Missed on *Glee*: Moving Forward with Teen Television Research

Through an analysis of 97 viewer responses to *Glee*, our study contributes to prior literature on teen television in a number of ways. First, it illustrates the importance of conducting audience research in addition to traditional textual analysis of media texts. Teen television narratives are often cited as a primary way teens obtain information about sexuality (Waston and McKee 2013). As a result, representations of sexuality and sexual identity formation contained within these narratives hold a unique power to shape individual viewers' perceptions of their own (and others') identities. However, few studies of teen television account for audience interpretation of these narratives. Moreover, our use of emerging adulthood as a framework for understanding these responses adds to prior scholarship on media audiences. Literature on emerging adulthood stresses the importance of this period of life in terms of identity formation (Arnett 2000, 2004, 2007; Côté 2006), which provides a crucial link between audience sampling and narrative selection.

Our findings also offer important insights into the way viewers make sense of television narrative. Clearly, Ryan Murphy intended to use *Glee* as a platform to increase the visibility of non-heterosexual identities within the teen television genre, and viewers acknowledged the importance of *Glee*'s non-heterosexual characters in this regard. Many commented on the specific challenges non-heterosexual youth may have in coming to terms with their own sexual identity, and linked the identities represented on *Glee* to these individuals in a positive way. They overwhelmingly identified sexuality as a problem some teens "have to deal with," and connected

visibility of these problems within the *Glee* narrative to productive cultural discourses about the transition from adolescence to adulthood. While commentary on the queer representations was overall positive, it was telling how specifically absent discussions about heterosexuality were in the viewer responses. Although the series does have a number of queer characters, there are also several heterosexual characters (who are arguably more prominent in terms of narrative focus and screen time). When asked about sexuality on the series, most respondents immediately identified the "gay" elements of the show, but neglected to discuss the heterosexual components (Rachel lusting after Finn, Quinn's teen-pregnancy narrative). While these heterosexual dimensions were sometimes mentioned, they were not elaborated on, or seen as crucial to the identity projects of viewers. Since most of the viewers in our study identified as heterosexual, it was interesting to see that they perceived the queer representations as important to queer youth, but dismissed (or did not regard) heterosexual representations as important to their own sexual identity development. Some respondents went as far as labeling "gay characters" as part of what one might encounter in "real life"—that a fictional narrative contains these characters makes the narrative "more real" in a sense than narratives that do not contain queer elements. In this way, the viewers are subtly recognizing the potential diversity of their own experiences growing up in an American context.

These findings are important as they reify the existence of heteronormativity, and illustrate the importance of audience decoding. Scholars studying queer television narrative lament the importance of visibility (Shugart 2003; Sloop 2004), even acknowledging in many cases that this visibility does not equal cultural acceptance (Brookey and Westerfelhaus 2001; Dow 2001). This academic discussion of visibility, while important for the development of queer television scholarship, has simultaneously created an unintended lack of discussion on heterosexual representation. Our respondents were quick to identify the queer narrative elements in *Glee*, but far more reticent to identify—or critically engage—any representations aligned with heterosexuality. In fact, critical scholarship interrogating heterosexual representations of sexuality is woefully absent in comparison to textual analysis of queer representations. In many academic circles, saying you study "sexuality" is automatically linked with the study of non-heterosexual identities and practices. When heterosexuality is studied, it is often in quantitative projects designed to correlate effects of exposure to sexual messages on adolescent sexual behavior. While prior scholarship certainly starts the conversation, we hope to see more studies take up the important interplay between heterosexual and queer representations. As television narratives become more complex (Mittell 2006), and in an era where television producers are diversifying casts in an attempt to appeal to broader audiences (Becker 2004; Meyer 2010), media narratives will continue to blend multiple storylines in an attempt to entice audiences. How audiences make sense of these blended representations is important, as it points to the way cultural discourses about sexuality circulate at a given point in time.

Additionally, our findings suggested a strong link between perceived non-heterosexuality and the presence of music in *Glee*. Both male and female participants commented on how the presence of music and dance numbers during the show constituted a "gay" narrative. As the series deals with a high school *Glee*

club, viewers tended to link this to their prior experiences with high school choirs or theatre groups. Our participants reported that musical theatre was at odds with traditional conceptualizations of masculinity, rendering male viewers of the show "potentially homosexual." This link is an interesting one, as musical theatre has often been aligned with gay culture (Clum 1992)—but teen television as a genre has also been strongly influenced by music. In fact, Dickinson (2004) argues, "without popular music, the representation and self-definition of the category 'teenager'—from its inception up until the present day—would be almost unrecognizable" (p. 99). Aslinger (2008) adds that anxieties within the music industry in the 1990s led to more concerted marketing efforts to link popular music and television narrative, developing soundtracks that served as promotional platforms for up and coming artists. A number of WB series included avenues for guest spots by various music artists (for example, P3, the club run by Piper in *Charmed*, and Tric, run by Peyton on *One Tree Hill*, often hosted performances by bands) as well as ended each episode with plugs for the albums of featured musicians during the episode. Thus, *Glee* as it currently exists is an outgrowth of a teen television genre convention—using the music as a platform for marketing to teens. At the same time, our respondents linked this musicality specifically to non-heterosexual identities. This connection warrants further analysis. How do viewers perceive the synergy of marketing music through the television series, and are they aware of these efforts? How do they make sense of the place of music in the teen television narrative, and how do they understand it as linked specifically to identity development?

While *Glee* can certainly be trumpeted as a progressive turn in television representation, what our analysis ultimately illustrates is that *Glee* is part of a long tradition of teen television narratives dealing with identity construction. More attention to teen television as a specific genre, as well as the place of teen narratives in more traditional 'quality' television, is necessary if we seek to understand the intricate link between media representation and identity formation.

Acknowledgments The authors would like to thank the students of CNU Interviewing 316 (2010 and 2012) for their assistance in collecting and transcribing data for this project.

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