

Glee: A Cultural Phenomenon?

Jayne Smyth

Hailed as a “cultural phenomenon” by FOX broadcasting company, the TV show *Glee* has been praised for transcending its purpose of not only entertaining Americans but also furthering social change as well. Helen Oliviero, a reporter for the *Atlanta Journal- Constitution*, interviewed local choir teachers in Atlanta who raved about the ability *Glee* had to eliminate stereotypes within their schools and encourage kids from all different social groups to break down the barriers and unite in a common positive outlet: singing. Sources like *Entertainment Weekly* have praised the show for showcasing “the daily high school realities of bullying, discrimination and ignorance” (Weimann). *Glee* has even been recognized by prominent organizations within the LGBT community. In 2010, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) Media Awards recognized *Glee* and its accomplishments when the TV show nabbed the award for best comedy series (“TV’s ‘Glee’”).

While most would agree that *Glee* has served as a prominent vehicle for social change in high schools, the negative ramifications the show produces are vastly overlooked. While I do agree *Glee* has taken on the challenge of portraying teenagers trying to navigate the challenges of high school, I question the accuracy with which the show depicts these characters. Instead of acknowledging the everyday obstacles faced by teenagers, *Glee*’s character depiction only ends up broadcasting a cookie cutter version that undermines the real, severe issues plaguing teenagers, negatively affecting them and their environment.

Many may question why this is even an issue; *Glee* is a television show, and a television program’s job is to merely entertain citizens and to serve as an escape from reality. However, I believe *Glee* transcends this typical social function for television because it has a civic and moral duty to portray teenage characters in an accurate way due to the fact they have willingly taken on this social responsibility.

Glee’s recognition by the LGBT community serves as one prominent example of how the show’s creators have taken on this civic and moral duty. When *Glee* appeared on the nomination list for the 21st annual GLAAD awards in 2010, Jarrett Barrios, the President of GLAAD and an activist for reform in the gay community, described the significance of this nomination: “With these awards, we seek to recognize news coverage and entertainment programming that go beyond stock stereotypes with LGBT storylines that more fully reflects the challenges gay and transgender people face and the aspirations we hold for ourselves and our families” (“GLAAD Awards”). By accepting this nomination, *Glee* had therefore also accepted the job of accurately portraying gay teenagers in the right way, in the hopes of bettering the community for gay citizens.

Glee’s avid use of self-promotion also demonstrates that the show has accepted this social responsibility. Ryan Murphy, the co-creator of the hit show, was quoted in the *New York Times* in 2010 speaking about *Glee*’s gay character Kurt saying, “I think that character is in many ways the

most important character on television, particularly for kids. When I was growing up, there was nobody like that. I think that character changes lives” (Itzkoff). This bold statement conveys that *Glee* and its creators market themselves as catalysts for positive change. *Glee* has continued to enforce this image by releasing their first 3D movie in theatres in 2011. Advertised as a one hour and twenty-four minute concert experience, it grossed nearly 11.9 million dollars at the box office (“*Glee: The 3D*”). While the main focus of the film was musical numbers performed during the tour, the movie also featured testimonies from fans of the show that discussed how *Glee* had impacted their lives positively. One fan, a 19 year old from Rhode Island named Trenton Thompson, spoke about how Kurt had helped him cope with being a gay teenager as well (Burke). This facet of the movie showed America that *Glee* was all about existing to help gay teenagers thrive. The use of this personal account set a standard for *Glee* to have to live up to. It proves *Glee* wants to promote an image that they play a vital role in the movement for reform in the gay community, therefore making it their civic duty to uphold this idea. From the interviews conducted with the co-creator Ryan Murphy to the relentless propaganda the show uses in an attempt to portray themselves as a platform for gay rights, *Glee* is continuing to give a false representation to the public of what they are really achieving. What the public perceives as fact is merely twisted biases that the *Glee* franchise has sold them.

Of course *Glee* is purely fiction and does not claim in any way to be a documentary. Some might argue that television alone does not have the power to influence viewer’s daily actions and thoughts. However, television does contain this innate ability to affect individuals and their lives immensely. In an *Out Magazine* interview, Ryan Murphy recounted a conversation he had with lawyers who were fighting for Proposition Eight to be overturned. When Murphy asked them why they thought public opinion had drastically changed over the issue of gay marriage so quickly, the lawyers simply replied it was because of television (Vargas-Cooper). This example proves how television has the ability to shape public opinion about something as powerful as national court cases. With Proposition Eight serving as such a controversial issue that divided the nation unlike any other, it is proven in the most radical way that television has an undeniable power to affect and reach the minds of citizens. A study in the *Pakistan Journal of Psychological Research* found that “television (TV) is considered... the most potent and easiest entertainment means to affect the lives of human beings” (Tomar). With *Glee* addressing such a pertinent issue in today’s culture, through a medium as powerful as the television, one might wonder what the possible repercussions of misinterpretations of the struggle faced by these teenagers.

A prominent example of inaccurate character portrayals can be seen throughout the gay characters on the show. The bullying tactics used in *Glee* are nothing but shallow, watered down versions of bullying that in no way justify what real gay teens experience in school. In the show, the gay students are bullied infamously by being “slushied,” an act in which the bullies throw slushies in the faces of the gay characters as a way to torment them (Weinmann). While this comes off as comedic and entertaining for viewers, being “slushied” is not a normal occurrence for gay teens facing harassment in high schools. In a study conducted by George W. Smith, a gay man himself, where gay teenagers were interviewed about their experience in high school, one student revealed that it often normal for harassment to progress to violent fights where the gay student is heavily outnumbered by teenage homophobes (Smith). This gay teen depicted harassment that included merciless gossip and constant name calling, even escalating to students graffiti-ing anti-gay remarks in places like the restrooms (Smith). These very real, traumatizing bullying tactics will

not be found anywhere in the plot of *Glee*. Instead, viewers will observe the real harassment faced by gays being belittled to a slap-stick comedy routine that fails to depict what serious harassment issues are actually taking place in high schools today, in turn keeping anyone who tunes into the show unaware of these serious issues. Irene Monroe, a lesbian activist and writer, investigated the rise of anti-gay bullying on a deeper level and found that in just one month, nine teenage suicides had occurred due to this national epidemic (Monroe). Monroe wrote about listening to Sirdeaner L. Walker of Springfield, Massachusetts, pleading for strong legislation to be passed against bullying, after losing her eleven-year-old son to suicide (Monroe). At a time when teenagers are turning to suicide as the only solution, *Glee* has the perfect opportunity to tackle these hard topics in an effort to show teenagers that suicide is not the answer. Instead, though, teens wrestling with vicious tormenters will take no comfort in the mockery of their situation being made on FOX. Having no ability to relate to the campy gag of a slushy, *Glee* will have failed the average gay teenager again. While *Glee* does accurately depict the lack of openness teenagers have for homosexual students, this lack of true realism makes the issue seem insignificant, when in fact, anti-gay harassment is increasingly finding a place among not only today's culture, but the death rate as well.

This trend of depicting real life issues as underdeveloped subplots continues to live on in numerous facets of the show, not just within the gay characters. On *Glee*, one of the sweetest and certainly most naïve characters, Marley, develops bulimia and struggles with self-image after being told by a fellow classmate that being thin will solve all her problems (*Glee*). Marley's eating disorder is short-lived and not fully developed, seemingly disappearing magically after a just a few episodes (*Glee*). In reality, negative self-image has been reported to develop in girls as young as first to third grade (Giudice). This immediately makes Marley's sudden body image issue at age sixteen an inaccurate portrayal of eating disorders. Belittling the true psychological depth that correlates with eating disorders, this gives viewers the idea that eating disorders are merely a "stage" or normal occurrence for teenage girls, when in reality they are a highly detrimental mental disorder that develops over a long span of time.

In an in-depth investigation on eating disorders, Brenda Broussard described bulimia as a "chronic and a potentially life long health issue" (2). While *Glee* depicts the effect of dehydration that can be produced from bulimia through Marley passing out during a performance, *Glee* fails to address the many other harmful body effects bulimia causes, like the eroding of teeth and gums, tearing of the esophagus, cardiac arrest, osteoporosis, and the possibility of a ruptured stomach (Broussard 5-6).

Broussard expresses in her investigation that "gaining bulimic women's perspective could promote a compressive appreciation of bulimia; its etiology, and direction for relevant treatment alternatives (14). With *Glee* neglecting to address the very serious health risks brought on by bulimic behavior and depicting Marley's struggle as easy to overcome, eating disorders are not portrayed to viewers as the truly detrimental disorders they are. This negative portrayal could stunt or prevent treatments from being developed for women who are suffering from a real eating disorder, not the superficial cookie cutter disorder portrayed on *Glee*. When Marley passes out at sectionals, her fellow teammates respond with anger because she cost them the win, not because they care about her eating disorder. The characters are so upset about the loss, it is not even addressed that Marley passed out due to the fact that she was bingeing and purging. This lack of a

supportive, caring environment sets up a negative image for viewers as to how people would respond to such a disorder. This is significant because it can cause young girls to hide their disorders further because they fear they will only be ridiculed for sharing their problem.

While *Glee* did depict the trials of teenage pregnancy accurately, the show reverted to its cookie cutter ways when the aftermath of something as detrimental as teen pregnancy was shown as a breeze. *Glee* was sure to not make pregnancy look like a walk in the park for the character Quinn Fabray in the beginning by having her parents kick her out and having her coveted spot as head cheerleader on the cheerleading squad be taken away from her (*Glee*). But, after Quinn finally does give birth to her child, the emotional struggle she faces is short-lived, and only brought on by the fact that she gives her baby up for adoption.

In reality, the emotional trauma of teen pregnancy does not stop after the baby is born. In an analysis of teenage pregnancy, Luisana Barraza explores the negative emotional strains that pregnancy has on teenage girls. Barraza notes that a 1996 study found that “in a sample of 114 adolescents mothers, 36%... had elevated depression scores at two months postpartum and elevated scores of 32% at 4 months postpartum.” Barraza also describes how pregnant teens experience “crying, loneliness, sadness, sleep change, and mood swings” (15). While Quinn Fabray is portrayed crying and lonely at times during her pregnancy, when she is shown after the birth of the baby, it is as if the pregnancy never happened and Quinn thrives again in high school, reclaiming her spot as head cheerleader and dating again instantly (*Glee*).

This false depiction of how easy it is to overcome a teen pregnancy gives teenage girls an inaccurate portrayal of the difficult burdens that come with teen pregnancy. It sets the idea that while there will be challenging moments during the actual pregnancy, once the baby is born, your life will return to the way it was before, with no emotional baggage or trauma. In a time now more than ever when girls need to be educated properly on the negative effects on teen pregnancy, *Glee* chooses to show only half of the story, potentially repressing social change.

All of these subplots only further prove the idea that instead of inspiring social change, *Glee* relies on cookie cutter versions to depict characters and plots and only strays farther from reform. While a surface level look at *Glee* may provoke the idea it is a positive thing for teenagers struggling with issues like homosexuality, eating disorders, and pregnancy, a deeper look reveals that it is achieving just the opposite. While *Glee*'s creators and advertisements speak highly of its social advancements, the characters themselves fail to show any real aspect of the struggle faced by these teenagers. Being so hyper-focused on trying to instill the idea within viewer's minds that they have incited social change, the show lacks the element of detail that is needed to actually bring about any real awareness of these issues. Because the show only halfway depicts the struggles faced by these societal groups, citizens are not accurately informed about the issues, and therefore are not motivated to take a stand or help improve these conditions. This false representation only ends up promoting similar behavior in the future instead of repressing it because of the fanciful, unrealistic way *Glee* chooses to represent them.

While the idea of *Glee*'s false depiction has been established, it is also revealed how easy it is for *Glee* to get society to buy into the idea that they have served as such a benchmark in the community. With all advertisements and statements made by the *Glee* franchise themselves put

aside, what solid proof really exists anywhere else that they have lived up to this social and moral obligation? Though *Glee* is a revolutionary in the sense that it shows on television in somewhat new ways teenagers in groundbreaking situations like discovering their sexuality or dealing with an eating disorder, anyone who agrees it has truly done this accurately has merely fallen into the trap of brilliant advertising and propaganda. Failing to achieve the moral and civic duty the show has built its premise and popularity on, *Glee* serves as yet another example of how powerful not only the medium of television can be, but the art of persuasion as well.

Works Cited

Barraza, Luisana. "Teen Pregnancy: A Content Analysis of Existing Literature." Diss. California State University, Long Beach, 2011. *ProQuest*. Web. 14 Nov. 2013.

Broussard, Brenda Beverly. "The Experience of Bulimia: A Phenomenologic Investigation." Diss. University of Washington, 2002. *ProQuest*. Web. 5 Nov. 2013.

Burke, David. "RI Native Featured in 'Glee' Concert Movie." *The Quad-City Times* 11 Aug. 2011. Web. 05 Dec. 2013.

Giudice, Joseph. "Body Image Concerns of the Adolescent Female and the Impact on Self-Esteem and Life Satisfaction." Diss. Fairleigh Dickinson University, 2006. *ProQuest*. Web. 31 Oct. 2013.

"GLAAD Awards Nominees Announced." *Windy City Times* 27 Jan. 2010: 24. *ProQuest*. Web. 8 Dec. 2013 .

Glee. Fox. WXIA, Atlanta, 19 May 2009. Television.

"Glee: The 3D Concert Movie (2011)." *Glee: The 3D Concert Movie*. Rotten Tomatoes, Aug. 2011. Web. 8 Dec. 2013.

Goldberg, Nicholas and Ingrassia, Michelle. "Teenagers and Sex Attitudes and Understanding Many Say it's Permissible but as More, and Younger, Teens Become Sexually Active, the Pregnancy Rate Soars and Fear of AIDS Increases." *Newsday*: 04. 21 Jun. 1987. *ProQuest*. Web. 6 Nov. 2013.

Izkoff, Dave. "Ryan Murphy Brings a Bullying Story to 'Glee'." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 9 Nov. 2010. Web. 07 Dec. 2013.

Monroe, Irene. "When Will the Anti-Gay Bullying Cease?" *Windy City Times* 27 Oct. 2010:12. *ProQuest*. Web. 9 Dec. 2013.

Oliviero, Helena. "At High Schools, a 'Glee' Effect: TV shows Raise Interest in Choral Groups, especially among Boys." *The Atlanta Journal – Constitution* 19 Dec. 2010. *ProQuest*. Web. 6 Oct. 2013.

Smith, George W. "The Ideology of "Fag": The School Experience of Gay Students." *The Sociological Quarterly* 39.2 (1998): 309-35. *ProQuest*. Web. 31 Oct. 2013.

Tomar, Sanjeev. "Modernism as a Function of TV Viewing, Gender, and Cultural Setting." *Pakistan Journal of Psychological Research* 22.1 (2007): 55-69. *ProQuest*. Web. 31 Oct. 2013.

"TV's 'Glee' Honored for Gay Advocacy." *Virginian – Pilot* Apr 19 2010. *ProQuest*. Web. 4 Nov. 2013.

Vargas- Cooper, Natasha. "Murphy's Honor." *Out Magazine*. Out, 2013. Web. 03 Dec. 2013.

Weinman, Jaime J. "TV: Not Much Glee Over These Slushies: A Show That Takes a Stand Against Bullying Might Have Given Bullies Some Ideas." *Maclean's* 14 Feb. 2011: 65. *ProQuest*. Web. 5 Nov. 2013.