

## **Teenage queerness. Negotiating heteronormativity in the representation of gay teenagers in *Glee*.**

### **Introduction**

Even though the socio-cultural and political-legal situation for gay men and women<sup>1</sup> living in Western societies has generally improved in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, gay communities' gains are often followed by losses and setbacks: The extension of civil rights to gay men and women in a handful of states and countries is juxtaposed with the denial of the same rights in other countries and states (e.g., Lewis 2011); the social and political visibility of the gay community is accompanied by homonegativity, homophobia, and homophobic violence (e.g., Stulhofer and Rimac 2009); the improved conditions for gay teenagers to come out is concurred by recurring homophobic harassment and gay teen suicides (e.g., Bennett 2010, Scourfield *et al.* 2008). The ongoing public debate about gay civil rights is not only waged in the political arena but also in popular culture. For the scope of this study, I turn to popular television. As Fiske (1987) stresses, television is an essential site in Western society for the circulation and consolidation of hegemonic ideologies. Yet, in order for television to be profitable, it needs to attract diverse audiences. To this end, a television text is often open to polysemic interpretations. Hence, television may produce and distribute representations that challenge traditional positions on social issues. Nowadays, several television shows feature recurring or main gay characters who are no longer denied love, sex, or a network of gay peers (Chambers 2009, Davis 2007, Streitmatter 2009), which differs significantly from the representation of gay characters as asexual, lonely, and pitiful in 20<sup>th</sup> century television fiction (Deiter 1976, Fejes and Petrich 1993, Gross 2001). Recently, television has been gradually tackling the political consequences of assuming a gay identity. In particular, where Kielwasser and Wolf (1992) were correct to point out the lack of gay youth on television up to and including the

1980s, several popular television series (e.g., *Dawson's Creek*, *Skins*) have since introduced gay teenagers. Even though initially depicted as sexually confused teens who turned out heterosexual, teenage characters in contemporary television series are represented as being comfortable with their same-sex desires and do not have their sexuality treated as an issue (Davis 2004, Tropiano 2002).

Yet, what demands to be scrutinized is the way in which contemporary television series negotiate heteronormativity in the representation of gay youth, since much of the adversity gay men and women encounter can be explained by positioning it in relation to the hegemonic discourse of heteronormativity. Media scholars who depart from queer theory (e.g., Avila-Saavedra 2009, Westerfelhaus and Lacroix 2006) argue that television takes part in the reiteration of a binary, rigid, and hierarchical perspective on biological sex, gender, and sexuality in society. They demonstrate how all those who do not conform to the heteronormal are represented on television as deviant, excluded from, or inferior to those who are privileged by heteronormativity. Even rounded and heterogeneous representations of gay men and women are argued to represent subjects that participate in or desire to participate in institutions and practices that privilege the heterosexual matrix. Despite the socio-cultural relevance of television's acknowledgment of gay youth identities, scholars need to be wary of television's discursive practices that reinforce heteronormativity and thereby represent gay teens as assuming a hierarchically inferior position to heterosexuals and seeking inclusion and recognition by heteronormative institutions – a discourse coined by Duggan (2002) as homonormativity. However, I also agree with Becker (2006) who, like a few other scholars (Chambers 2009, Needham 2009), considers television able to defy normative assumptions about sexuality. Adopting a cultural studies' perspective which considers popular culture a site that both embraces and resists hegemonic culture (e.g., Fiske 1987, Hall 2005), television may represent gay characters and themes that are articulated as queer. Whereas the word

queer was used as a derogatory term for effeminate men who engaged in deviant sexual conduct throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the appropriation by queer movements challenged the negativity of the term. Even though queer still signifies non-normative desires, behavior, and identities, it now also connotes empowerment and an attack on the dominant, rigid, and implicitly violent sexual norms (Dyer 2002, Hall 2003). Put differently, articulations of queerness within popular television expose, unsettle, and/or subvert the ubiquitous institutions and practices of heteronormativity.

Taking into account this ambiguity, this article is interested in how teen television fiction represents gay characters. Does it portray gay youth as aspiring to homonormative norms and values, and/or as resisting heteronormativity and assuming queer subject positions? As the objective is an in-depth investigation of representational strategies, this study chooses to focus on one teen series that is authoritative in its representation of gay teens, namely *Glee*. The American musical teen series revolves around the glee club members at the fictitious William McKinley High in Lima, Ohio. What makes *Glee* stand out among the broad range of contemporary Western teen series is its significant number of gay teenagers. To expose and interpret how the series negotiates heteronormativity in representing gay teenagers, this article relies on the results of a qualitative textual analysis of the popular series.

### **The normal gay teenager**

Before examining the series' gay representation, it is imperative to comprehend the pivotal role heteronormativity plays in the life of teenagers in Western contemporary society.

Therefore, I start by citing Warner's (1999) exemplification of heteronormativity:

If you are born with male genitalia, the logic goes, you will behave in masculine ways, desire women, desire feminine women, desire them exclusively, have sex in what are thought to be normally active and insertive ways and within officially sanctioned contexts, think of yourself as heterosexual, identify with other heterosexuals, trust in the superiority of heterosexuality no

matter how tolerant you might wish to be, and never change any part of this package from childhood to senescence. (Warner 1999, pp. 37-38)

Warner's notion of a fixed temporal order dictated by heteronormativity corresponds to Judith Halberstam's conceptualization of a "heteronormative temporality" (Halberstam 2005, pp. 2, 5). For her, the life path of almost every individual is set out by the societal emphasis on reproduction, marriage, and longevity. Put differently, the subject is expected to evolve from childhood through adolescence to adulthood by assuming subject positions that are centered around the nuclear family and which are gendered, sexualized, and fixed in time and space. Even though these socially constructed subject positions only serve to preserve the heterosexual matrix, heteronormativity ensures that they are experienced in contemporary Western society as natural and universal and therefore normal. This implies that, through social discipline, human beings nudge one another into embodying these subject positions (Foucault, trans. 1977). As a consequence, non-normative gender and sexual identities, which may unsettle the privileged position of the heterosexual masculine man and the heterosexual feminine woman, are dismissed or subdued by institutions, practices, norms, and values that reify heteronormativity.

Contemporary Western society may have "accepted" the gay identity position, it deploys plenty of heteronormative strategies to control and mold gayness. For a teenager, heteronormativity becomes particularly dominant when he or she is making sense of his or her sexual desires. Even though the teen may experience sexual desires that are various or conflicting, he or she will be forced to embody a fixed sexual identity. This implies that the teenager who desires someone from the same sex will be expected to embody a homosexual or bisexual identity which, despite the plethora of synonyms, is discursively predetermined to stand in a subordinate and oppositional relation to unquestioned heterosexuality. The discrepant relationship becomes consolidated when the teen comes out of the closet. Without discrediting the emancipatory potential of publicly acknowledging same-sex desires, coming

out as gay does not challenge the heteronormative discourse per se (Fuss 1991). The act of disclosing is already linked to a subservient subject position that not only grants the heterosexual majority the power to judge the intelligibility and accountability of the gay subject, but also reconfirms the heterosexual as the superior sexual subject. Additionally, it creates new hierarchies and tensions among those who can be identified as non-heterosexual. As Hackford-Peer (2010) stresses, it may create the impression that gay youth who came out are more brave than those who remain in the closet. This impression, however, does not take into account that the closeted boys and girls may not know how to label their sexual desires, may not want to inscribe themselves into the heteronormative sexual order, or may not want to disclose their sexuality – for whatever reasons.

The out and proud teenager, however, is faced with another issue. The teen who comes out is immediately seen as a victim (Hackford-Peer 2010, Marshall 2010). Rasmussen (2006) explains that in academic and popular discourse gay youth have been repeatedly discussed in relation to being at risk of psychosocial problems. She refers to the ubiquity of statistics on gay teen suicide, homelessness, HIV infection, drug and alcohol abuse, and the increased risk of being verbally or physically threatened. She stresses not to question the reality or social significance of the increased risks gay teenagers run – as demonstrated in studies by, for instance, Bennett (2010), Mishna *et al.* (2009), Scourfield *et al.* (2008) and Toomey *et al.* (2010) – but criticizes the unified reiteration of the victim trope that makes all gay youth vulnerable individuals in need of the help of adults. The victim trope further instigates the idea that gay adolescence is a troublesome phase one has to go through – a notion that is being supported by the “It Gets Better” project<sup>2</sup> – and thereby omits the possibility of happiness for gay teens. In a way, the victim trope corresponds to the early development models of gay identity formation (Cass 1984, Troiden 1989), which argue that gay men and women assume a stable gay identity after passing through several stages. Cohler and

Hammack (2007) explicitly link this to the victim trope by referring to the models as narratives of struggle and success, which are built around the idea that gay youth are innocent victims and subjects at risk. Like the victim trope, the models show that through the support of others, the gay subject can struggle him- or herself towards self-acceptance.

However, the traditional models of gay identity formation have been challenged by the emergence of youth who experience sexuality as an open-ended process of exploring and redefining (e.g., Savin-Williams 2005). Cohler and Hammack (2007) argue that these teenagers negotiate their sexuality through the narrative of emancipation, which typifies a generation of gay youth who are more comfortable with their own sexuality, who remain mostly free from anti-gay prejudice, who have access to many representations of gayness, and who choose to self-label themselves. These new gay teenagers, as Savin-Williams (2005) coins them, are part of the group of teens who refuse to come out as “gay,” since the fixity of the label contradicts the fluid experience of sexuality. Yet, this does not entail that these non-gay/non-heterosexual teenagers are queer. On the contrary, Cohler and Hammack (2007) consider the practices of the new gay teenagers assimilationist. Rather than expressing pride in a queer identity, the non-gay/ non-heterosexual teenagers pursue homonormative aspirations. As Hackford-Peer (2010) noted, the sexual diversity among gay youth that come out of the closet remains slim. In the end, heteronormativity offers the gay teen only one feasible option: To become a homonormative subject. It does so by proliferating narratives on gay youth as powerless and innocent victims at constant risk, which frame the assimilationist homonormative discourse as an attractive alternative. The danger of homonormativity is the false consciousness it creates among gay youth. In exchange for privileged civil rights, the gay community reduces its sexual freedom and averts to question the structural mechanisms that produce social inequalities in the first place (Duggan 2002, Murphy *et al.* 2008). At a micropolitical level, it dismisses the accountability of those who do not fit the homonormative

interpretations of a gay identity – in particular those whose sexual identities are articulated with nonconforming gender behavior.

Since the spaces in which gay teenagers move are dominated by heteronormativity, gay teens that come out of the closet are most likely to adopt the “normal gay” identity, since the normal gay trope is the only narrative that gives the gay subject accountability – even though it does so by strategies that merely “tolerate” homosexuality. However, not all gay teens adopt a normal – i.e., homonormative – gay identity. Driver (2008), among others (e.g., Rasmussen 2006), resists the tendency to either frame gay youth as victims or as assimilated subjects. She acknowledges gay youth culture as consisting of gay youth who have sexual pleasures, who move in counterpublics that challenge the heteronormal, or who participate in political resistance. She warns against the danger of the normalization of gay youth in public debate as it “...works to desexualize and depoliticize youth once again, creating safe, sanitized images that conform with white middle-class standards of visibility and value” (2008, p. 5). Taking her postulations as a point-of-departure, this article continues by inquiring how popular television represents gay teen culture, and specifically, to what extent teen series rely on processes of victimization and normalization to represent gay youth.

## **Method**

To study the representation of gay teenagers in *Glee*, the method of qualitative textual analysis (see Larsen 2003) is chosen and developed as an interpretative method that takes a queer theoretical perspective into account. This implies that the analysis of the television texts in the first place rely on deconstruction. A deconstructive attitude is significant since it allows for reading a specific representation from a non-hegemonic perspective. Like Doty (2000), I acknowledge that these queer readings of texts are individual and prefigured. This, however, does not imply a justification for an unstructured reading of the texts. To read a specific character or theme as queer demands a structured reading that takes general characteristics

and conventions of the television series into account. Therefore, I appeal to the tradition of film analysis which offers techniques to dissect an audiovisual text in order to reveal the meanings embedded in the text (Bordwell and Thompson 2004, Larsen 2003). However, in contrast to film, television series often consist of several episodes, arranged in several seasons. Conducting a thematic textual analysis of each episode would be a time-consuming activity, which would produce an overload of data. Hence, I studied a selection of episodes out of the first two seasons.<sup>3</sup> In particular, I selected 16 episodes that feature significant storylines revolving around the gay characters or a specific gay-related theme.<sup>4</sup>

### **Articulations of victimization and normalization**

At first sight, *Glee*'s gay teenagers are represented as struggling with their sexuality. Kurt Hummel is the first teen in the series to come out of the closet and the only gay teen in the first season. Even though the high-pitched boy, with a sense of fashion and a passion for showtunes, embodies the archetypical image of the swishy gay boy and is already assumed by most other teens at the school's glee club to be gay, he has trouble coming to terms with his own sexual desires. He comes out as gay to his best friend Mercedes early in the first season ("Acafellas", s1e3), but later episodes show him hiding his sexuality from other *Glee* members and experimenting with a girl as well as with normative masculinity. In contrast to Kurt, football jock David Karofsky remains in the closet throughout the first and second season. Introduced as the violent and homophobic school bully, David's harassment of Kurt takes an unexpected turn when David plants a kiss on his victim's lips. For David, however, the kiss is quickly disavowed as he continues bullying up to the point where he eventually comes to terms with his own sexuality and apologizes to Kurt. Nonetheless, at the end of the second season, David's struggle with the closet is ongoing as he tells Kurt he is not ready to come out. Like David, Santana Lopez is struggling with her same-sex desires. Santana, initially represented as a bitchy and verbal predatory female, turns out to be in love with her



best friend Brittany Pierce with whom she recurrently makes out. Santana is also shown as coming to terms with her sexual identity, evolving from being confused about her attraction to Brittany and about expressing her love to Brittany, to assuming a lesbian identity.

*Glee* thus joins the range of teen dramas that represent gay identity formation as a staged process – from sexual confusion to self-acceptance – which corresponds to the early gay identity models proposed by Cass (1984) and Troiden (1989). Governed by heteronormativity, the subject is demanded to assume and accept an identity that is fixed and hierarchically inferior to a heterosexual identity. With *Glee*, the narrative of struggle and success is supported in many instances. Most prominently, the episode “Born This Way” (s2e18) – built around Lady Gaga’s anthem “Born This Way” – stresses that he or she has to embrace that which he or she would like to change about him-or herself but which he or she cannot because he or she was born that way. Putting forward a moral message on self-acceptance, the series reiterates the idea that same-sex desires are something a gay teen needs to come to terms with and implies that desires need to be reified in a fixed identity. The different struggles are exemplary for that progression. Take, for instance, Santana’s progression toward a lesbian identity. First, Santana’s sexual desires are depicted as detached from a sexual identity. This is stressed in the episode “Duets” (s2e4), in which Santana minimizes her sexual relations with Brittany and refuses to connect their sexual acts to a lesbian identity, which is metaphorically hinted at by denying Brittany the opportunity to sing a duet together of out singer Melissa Etheridge’s “Come to My Window.” In the episode “Sexy” (s2e15), she, however, starts to acknowledge her desires for men and for women as equal, and confesses to Brittany that even though she cannot assume a lesbian identity yet – again metaphorically expressed as she says she is unable to go to an Indigo Girls concert – she has to accept her feelings for Brittany. At the end of the second season, Santana may still be in the closet but in an internal dialogue in the episode “Born This Way” (s2e18) she clarifies

how her sexual desires have evolved into an identity: “I’m a closet lesbian and a judgmental bitch, which means one thing: I have awesome gaydar.” By moving toward the assumed pivotal moment of coming out as gay, *Glee* not only privileges clear-cut sexual identities but also valorizes the teen who succeeds at coming out in public. Best friend Mercedes encourages Kurt to come out to the fellow glee kids since he should not be ashamed of who he is (“Acafellas”, s1e3), Brittany encourages Santana to publicly wear a t-shirt that was supposed to say “Lesbian” –Brittany spelled it out as “Lebanese” – to help Santana love herself (“Born This Way”, s2e18), and Kurt tells David that by coming out at the prom he could make a difference (“Prom Queen”, s2e20). Even though the friends who encourage the closeted teens to come out do so out of genuine support, their disappointment in them failing cannot avoid creating a moral hierarchy between the out and proud teen and the closeted teen.

It is particularly important to elaborate on the moral superiority of coming out as it is represented alongside storylines of homophobia. *Glee* both stresses the necessity of coming out while accentuating the dangers for the gay teen who got out of the closet. What does it mean to have Kurt stress the importance of coming out while he is recurrently represented as the recipient of homophobic slur and harassment? By featuring narratives that tackle homophobia within high school environments, *Glee* reflects on gay teen bullying in contemporary societies. Most of the gay characters are involved in a storyline that represents their victimhood or fear of becoming a victim. Being gay is represented as a condition that will likely coincide with unhappiness, loneliness, and the feeling of being under a constant threat of verbal or physical violence (Hackford-Peer 2010, Marshall 2010). Santana and David’s lingering in the closet has nothing to do with them rejecting the heterosexual order nor with experiencing difficulties of labeling their sexuality – both eventually assume a gay identity – but with the fear of being verbally and physically harassed over expressing a gay identity. Even a character like Blaine Anderson, Kurt’s love-interest who is out and proud,

confesses how fear and an incident of gay bashing drove him away from his old high school to Dalton Academy. Victimization seems to be key to growing up gay. Especially Kurt is represented as a teen at risk. Whereas Kurt was “only” verbally being taunted over being gay, he no longer is able to ignore the pestering the moment head aggressor David starts physically hurting Kurt and threatening Kurt’s life. The danger Kurt is in is emphasized by the fact the high school refuses to expel David, which eventually results in Kurt leaving McKinley High to transfer to Dalton Academy, which has a zero-tolerance harassment policy (“Furt”, s2e8). As such, the only debate that is raised is the responsibility of the school to guarantee the safety of gay teenagers, which reinforces the notion that gay teens are vulnerable victims who in the end depend on adults to protect them. Even more, it omits a more structural discussion of how high school, as a societal institution, creates an environment that perpetuates hierarchical categorization of teens and social discrimination of those at the bottom of the social order. Heteronormativity is crucial to understanding this contradictory process of coming out as victims, since the heteronormative discourse is aware that the very existence of the heterosexual matrix depends on that which it is not. Disavowing the sexual and gender non-normative other seems the most logical choice for a heteronormative society, but classifying the other as non-normative stresses the normality and universality of the heterosexual matrix. In granting the gay teen a safe place in society, the heteronormative majority is more able to control “sexual deviancy.” Further, as Hackford-Peer (2010) points out, the acquired status of the victim restricts the freedom of gay teens to experiment with their identities. Hence, *Glee*’s portrayal of coming out as a difficult process that can only be achieved with the help of adults guaranteeing the safety of the gay teen does not in the least challenge the discursive practices that consolidate social hierarchies and gay victimhood.

Gay youth, however, are adapting a homonormative identity to reduce the risk of being harassed (Hackford-Peer 2010, Oswald *et al.* 2005). *Glee* also represents this

normalization trope, in particular by making the normal gay identity seem more preferable. First, it does so by having friends and family suggest to the gay characters to assume a gay identity that does not unsettle the heterosexual matrix. The motives to do so vary. For instance, when Kurt's father Burt asks his son to not wear a fashionable kilt to his prom, he does so out of fear his son might get hurt ("Prom Queen", s2e20). However, when Finn, Kurt's stepbrother, exclaims that he does not understand why Kurt always needs to make a big spectacle of himself and asks him why he cannot work harder at blending in, it is out of discomfort with Kurt's sexuality ("Theatricality", s1e20). As both Sedgwick (1993) and Piontek (2006) point out, the effeminate boy has become the dupe of the increased homonormative discourses that are being adopted by gay civil rights movements. The revalorization of the masculine gay man and the feminine gay woman initially was a response to the essentialist and widespread assumption that gender and sexuality are inextricably linked and that gay men are per definition feminine and gay women masculine. However, notwithstanding the necessity for deconstructing and dismantling the binary and gendered approach to sexuality, it has benefited the assimilationist project that typifies homonormativity. Gay men and women acting in gender-appropriate ways are less of a threat to the heterosexual matrix since the reification of traditional gender roles supports the superiority of patriarchal masculinity. As a consequence, particularly the "sissy boy" – either gay or straight – has become a subject of homophobic mockery and violence, as well as a metaphorical figure against which patriarchal male subjects define and constitute their own traditional masculinity as the norm (Pascoe 2005, Plummer 2001). Kurt, who figures as the sissy boy, repeatedly gives in to heteronormative pressure to avoid personal risk and to prevent discomfort to his friends and family. For instance, Kurt decides to withdraw from singing a song traditionally performed by a woman to prevent his father from getting hurt by jokes and slur that mock Kurt's homosexuality ("Wheels", s1e9). Further, since music is

central to *Glee*, the importance of assimilation into a heteronormative order is articulated through songs and ways of singing. For instance, Finn discourages Sam, a heterosexual-identified student who is new at their high school, from performing a duet with Kurt. He motivates his argument as follows:

Finn: Look, I don't have a problem with gay dudes. Everybody else does, and we're living in their world. And in their world, you singing a duet with Kurt is a death sentence.

("Duets", s2e4)

Kurt's decision to free Sam from his promise to Kurt to sing a duet with him is exemplary because of the power of heteronormativity. Even though Kurt eventually sings a duet with himself – stressing his masculine and feminine identity – the series omits exploring the resistant potential of a gay-straight duet and instead imagines the gay teen as lonely in a duet and thereby desexualized.

In comparison to Kurt's rather fleeting moments of homonormativity, Blaine is the series' character who most embodies the archetype of the normal gay teen. His normativity becomes accentuated when he agrees with Kurt's father about Kurt's transgressive outfit for the prom to avoid causing trouble. In contrast, Kurt's outfit – which Kurt describes as "a homage to the recent royal wedding and the late Alexander McQueen" – Blaine chooses to wear a discreet black tuxedo. By performing an identity that conforms to the heterosexual majority – especially articulated through gender codes – Blaine is represented as the out and proud teen who behaves in gender-appropriate ways and assumes an identity that is hardly indistinguishable from his fellow students. Since Blaine is enrolled at Dalton Academy, the uniform jacket emphasizes how well Blaine is assimilated into the masculine traditional dress codes of the school.

### **Queer Teenage Dreams**

However, acknowledging the duplicity of a popular television text, the series can also be interpreted as exposing the mechanisms of heteronormativity that govern contemporary

Western society. A key theme of *Glee* is trying to show how subjects with a minority identity – which ranges from ethnic identity through sexual identity to the affiliation with a minority clique identity – should be proud of that which makes them different from the mainstream majority. In a way, *Glee* uses the institution of the high school as a metaphor for contemporary Western societies governed by heteronormativity. In the high school hierarchy of *Glee*, the football jocks and the cheerleaders are at the top of the social heap. Not coincidentally, these squads consist of respectively the most normative masculine and most normative feminine students, where the cheerleaders' primary role is to support the football team. Yet, *Glee* does not maintain this particular consolidation of the heterosexual matrix. Rather, the series is keen on subverting the matrix. It does so by criticizing the hegemony of the football jocks and cheerleaders, predominantly by means of irony and parody. The series, for instance, questions the necessity for the normative masculinity of the football team by letting "effeminate" Kurt join the team only to become the best kicker the team has had as well as using dancing as a method to improve their game play ("Preggers", s1e4). However, the series takes the difficulty to resist heteronormativity seriously. For instance, the episode "The Sue Sylvester Shuffle" (s2e11) focuses on David's difficulties with non-traditional expressions of masculinity only to discover his own talent for and pleasure in dancing. During the episode, the football team gives in to its own desire to perform. It features a scene in which the football jocks and the glee club boys are walking down the hallways in zombie makeup. However, they run into the hockey team – assumed inferior to the football team – ready to take over the power of the high school hierarchy. The hockey team claims its victory by throwing frozen drinks in the jocks' faces, a method infamously applied by the series' football jocks to humiliate their victims. The desire to conform to the norm is vital as the football jocks no longer want to perform. Yet, the series does not give up on articulating resistance as the football jocks nonetheless dance to a mash-up song of Michael Jackson's

“Thriller” and Yeah YeahYeah’s “Heads Will Roll” during the half time of the conference game. In a way, the teens are represented with agency that enables them to resist the disciplinary power that rules the hallways of the high school.

In exposing how the social hierarchy operates and equally subverting its mechanisms, *Glee* opens up possibilities for representations that challenge heteronormativity. Do these possibilities, however, hold potential resistance for the gay teens who, I argued, are represented as victimized or normalized? As Driver (2008) and Rasmussen (2006) stressed, there is a need for queer youth narratives – stories that show gay youth as sexual, political subversive, and beyond hetero- and homonormativity. One way in which the series unsettles the hegemonic position of victimization and normalization tropes in gay identity formation is through the character of Brittany. Even though slightly represented as being confused over her feelings for Santana, she never expresses the need to understand or conceptualize her sexuality. Brittany is represented as comforting Santana in her coming to terms with her lesbian identity, while she herself does not take the practice of labeling seriously. Only once does she refer to herself as bi-curious, when stating that she loves her boyfriend Artie as much as Santana (“Sexy”, s2e15). In contrast to Santana, Brittany sees no harm in expressing same-sex desires in public. She offers Santana the opportunity to be her date to the prom, and is seen dancing intimately with both boys and girls at the prom. Without feeling the need to fix her sexual acts and desires into an identity while continuing to express romantic and sexual interests in both men and women, Brittany is *Glee*’s representation of a character whose sexuality is experienced as fluid.

Yet, gay female identities are generally less denounced than gay male identities (Herek 2000, Ratcliff *et al.* 2006). Furthermore, the gay boy who articulates his sexual identity in relation to genderqueerness is considered the ultimate victim of homophobic harassment. Even though gender-nonconforming female teenagers are also at risk of negative response

from peers, studies (Plummer 2001, Toomey et al. 2010) have shown that gender-nonconforming male teenagers are more likely to be the victim of homonegative or homophobic response. To a certain extent, *Glee* reiterates this image. In contrast to Brittany, who has been represented as free to express her queer identity, Kurt is bullied to the point where he decides to transfer to another school to feel safe. Yet, Kurt's queer identity – both in terms of gender and sexuality – is much more complex, where reading it exclusively in terms of victimization would ignore its resistibility. Throughout the series, Kurt seldom tones down his queerness. His outfits remain flamboyant, fashionable, and utterly disruptive in a high school environment of jock vests and cheerleader outfits. He confidently dances to “Ring on It” in front of the football team and sees no issues in consequently performing songs by female divas such as Patti LuPone. In those moments that represent the everydayness of Kurt's life, he acts without acknowledging the code of conduct set out by heteronormativity. For instance, Kurt using a hairspray, which he keeps in his locker, in the hallways (“Acafellas”, s1e3), asking Finn's advice on the redecoration of his bedroom (“Home”, s1e16), or joining the girls in the glee club to perform Lady Gaga's “Bad Romance” (“Theatricality”, s1e20). Most of all, Kurt is represented as a happy teenager who is loved by friends, family and fellow students – at least in the glee club and at Dalton Academy – without having to perform a heterosexual or homonormative identity. Eventually, Kurt also defies the victim position as he comes to an understanding with main bully David, as David himself is coming to terms with being gay. The obstinacy of heteronormativity and homophobia does return in the prom-themed episode “Prom Queen” (s2e20), in which Kurt is involuntarily crowned as prom queen due to a huge number of write-in votes. Yet, even though briefly upset, Kurt reverses the attack on his non-normative identity and appropriates the prom queen status as a way to subvert the heterosexual order. By making a joke about it, he demands respect – illustrated by the applause and cheering – and celebrates his “victory”



by slow dancing with Blaine in front of the other students. As such, the sissy boy who is crowned queen mocks the binary and gender-appropriate tradition, underscored in the subsequent same-sex dance.

Not only by depicting Kurt as a sissy boy are the normalization and victimization tropes defied. *Glee* offers more instances of gay teens expressing, acting out, or imagining their queer dreams. The scene that introduces Blaine to Kurt is exemplary (“Never Been Kissed”, s2e6). At Dalton Academy, the members of the glee club are idols with Blaine as their popular lead vocalist. An impromptu performance draws all the students to the choir room, where Blaine and his fellow glee members sing Katy Perry’s “Teenage Dream.” The queerness is articulated at several levels. First, the popularity of the glee club and the out and proud Blaine – even though he embodies a normal gay teenage identity – contradict with the heteronormative order as preserved at McKinley High. Second, Blaine’s appropriation of the song, originally performed by a woman, turns “Teenage Dream” into a love song of a gay teen. As Blaine sings “I’m gonna get your heart racing in my skintight jeans tonight, be your teenage dream tonight” while looking at Kurt, the song is given a sexual and romantic message. Further, the song is performed in a room full of male students who do not fall into heteronormative behavior such as mocking or condemning the manifestation of male same-sex desire. I argued that the Dalton Academy setting encourages homonormativity, yet this scene portrays the school equally as an environment that transcends being a safe place for gay teenagers since it allows for sexual and gendered experimentation. Even more, *Glee* portrays the sexual dimension of same-sex desires – even though it happens mostly through insinuation. For instance, Santana and Brittany are making out in Brittany’s bedroom (“Duets”, s2e4), Blaine tries to talk with Kurt about sex (“Sexy”, s2e15), and Kurt’s father has a conversation with his son regarding sex and STDs (“Sexy”, s2e15). The representation of gay teens having sexual desires and/or being sexually active becomes significant as a counter-

narrative to the gay teen as innocent, vulnerable, or desexualized. Last, a queer counter-narrative can be spotted in the representation of David and Santana. For both of them, the closet remains the safest place to be gay. However, there is a great deal of resistant irony in the way they start up the Bully Whips, a club that has been deputized to identify and stop bullying in the hallways (“Prom Queen”, s2e20). Having two closeted gay teens become the protectors of openly gay teens exposes both the hegemonic power of heteronormativity but also the fragility of the heterosexual order. The irony is underscored in scenes where both guardians are patrolling the hallways wearing red berets while, for instance, David reports to Santana that “no gay protests or rainbow flags being lit on fire down this way.” Similarly, Santana escorting Kurt while shouting “teen gay, you may now proceed to the next checkpoint without fear of violence,” exaggerates the victimization trope and rather emphasizes how uneasy and annoyed Kurt feels being escorted.

## **Conclusion**

*Glee* has revealed itself to be exemplary for the ambivalence that typifies popular culture. The examination into its gay teen representation revealed a dual approach to heteronormativity. On the one hand, the series consolidates the image of gay teens as victims and represents the viability of being a homonormative teen. On the other hand, it challenges the power of heteronormativity by exposing how it governs the life of both gay and straight teens and by paying attention to the queer aspects of gay teenage life. Even though *Glee* pushes certain homonormative aspirations and omits a structural discussion of heteronormativity in the regulation of homophobia, it resists the idea that growing up gay can only happen through a process of struggle and success or through homonormative assimilation. Especially in featuring different and conflicting perspectives in the experience and expression of sexual desires among gay teens, the series explores sexual diversity among gay teens and questions the hegemonic and one-sided discourse of the helpless gay teen victim. Thereby, *Glee*

corresponds to an academic demand for an exploration and acknowledgment of counter-narratives in which gay teens are not only represented as suffering and self-loathing, but also as happy, self-confident, and able to position themselves beyond the boundaries of the heterosexual matrix (Driver 2008, Rasmussen 2006). As McCormack and Anderson's ethnographic study (2010) demonstrates, school settings can evolve into spaces where homophobia is decreasing. They found that straight boys associated themselves with gay boys, articulated non-hegemonic masculinities, and publicly expressed same-sex physical and emotional intimacy. Yet, their study also reveals how heteronormativity is nonetheless present in the way students rely on recuperation to delineate their heterosexual identity. Therefore, they stress the necessity to investigate how heteronormativity governs both straight and gay teenagers. This article into media representation demonstrated the diversity in gay representation in teen fiction. Future research, however, could inquire whether heterosexual-identified teen characters conform and/or challenge heteronormativity.

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For the scope of this article, I use the concept of gay to refer to those who are identified and/or are self-identified as gay, lesbian, and bisexual in contemporary Western society. As such, all men and women who may experience same-sex desires will be referred to as gay, even though these men and women may refer to themselves otherwise.

<sup>2</sup> An internet-based initiative, the It Gets Better project, aims to prevent suicide by reaffirming teens, through video confessionals of LGBTs and heterosexual men and women, that the personal life of gay teenagers will improve in the near future (see <http://www.itgetsbetter.org/>). However, by doing so, it reiterates the ideas that one needs to go through an identity struggle in becoming a gay subject and that adolescence is per definition a period of suffering and victimization. Also, in addressing solely gay subjects, it ignores addressing macro-political mechanisms that, on the one hand, reinstall this image, and on the other hand, have the potential to create structural social change.

<sup>3</sup> Even though the third season of *Glee* extends its gay teen cast and further explores gay teen issues (e.g., gay teen suicide, gay teen sex), this study is solely based on the series' finished seasons.

<sup>4</sup> With regard to the first season, the sample includes episode 3 ("Acafellas"), episode 4 ("Preggers"), episode 7 ("Throwdown"), episode 9 ("Wheels"), episode 15 ("The Power of Madonna"), episode 16 ("Home"), episode 18 ("Laryngitis"), and episode 20 ("Theatricality"). From the second season, the sample includes episode 4 ("Duets"), episode 6 ("Never Been Kissed"), episode 8 ("Furt"), episode 11 ("The Sue Sylvester Shuffle"), episode 14 ("Blame It on the Alcohol"), episode 15 ("Sexy"), episode 18 ("Born This Way"), and episode 20 ("Prom Queen").

## References

- Avila-Saavedra, G., 2009. Nothing queer about queer television. Televised construction of gay masculinities. *Media, culture & society*, 31(1), 5-21.
- Becker, R., 2006. *Gay TV and straight America*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Bennett, J. A., 2010. Queer teenagers and the mediation of utopian catastrophe. *Critical studies in media communication*, 27(5), 455-476.
- Bordwell, D. and Thompson, K., 2004. *Film art: An introduction* (7th ed.). Boston: McGraw Hill.
- Cass, V., 1984. Homosexual identity formation: Testing a theoretical model. *The journal of sex research*, 20(2), 143-167.
- Cohler, B. and Hammack, P., 2007. The psychological world of the gay teenager. Social change, narrative, and “normality”. *Journal of youth adolescence*, 36(1), 47-59.
- Chambers, S. A., 2009. *The queer politics of television*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris.
- Davis, G., 2004. Saying it out loud. Revealing television's queer teens. In: G. Davis and K. Dickinson, eds. *Teen TV. Genre, consumption, identity*. London: British Film Institute, 127-139.
- Davis, G., 2007. *Queer as folk*. London: British Film Institute.
- Deiter, N. E., 1976. The last minority. Television and gay people. *Television quarterly*, 13(3), 69-72.
- Doty, A., 2000. *Flaming classics. Queering the film canon*. New York: Routledge.
- Driver, S., 2008. Introducing queer youth cultures. In: S. Driver, ed. *Queer youth cultures*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1-26.
- Duggan, L., 2002. The new homonormativity. The sexual politics of neoliberalism. In: R. Castronovo and D. D. Nelson, eds. *Materializing democracy. Toward a revitalized cultural politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 175-194.

- Dyer, R., 2002. *The culture of queers*. London: Routledge.
- Fiske, J., 1987. *Television culture*. London: Methuen.
- Fejes, F. and Petrich, K., 1993. Invisibility, homophobia and heterosexism. Lesbians, gays and the media. *Critical studies in mass communication*, 10(4), 396-422.
- Fuss, D., 1991. Inside/out. In: D. Fuss, ed. *Inside/out. Lesbian theories, gay theories*. New York and London: Routledge, 1-10.
- Foucault, M., 1977. *Discipline and punish. The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, trans.). New York: Vintage Books. (Original work published 1975)
- Gross, L., 2001. Out of the mainstream. Sexual minorities and the mass media. In: M. G. Durham and D. M. Kellner, eds. *Media and cultural studies. Key works*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 405-423.
- Hackford-Peer, K., 2010. In the name of safety. Discursive positionings of queer youth. *Studies in philosophy and education*, 29(6), 541-556.
- Halberstam, J., 2005. *In a queer time and place. Transgender bodies, subcultural lives*. New York and London: New York University Press.
- Hall, D. E., 2003. *Queer theories*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hall, S., 2005. Notes on deconstructing 'the popular'. In: R. Guins and O. Z. Cruz, eds. *Popular culture: A reader*. London: Sage, 64-71.
- Herek, G. M. 2000. Sexual prejudice and gender. Do heterosexuals' attitudes toward lesbians and gay men differ? *Journal of social issues*, 56(2), 251-266.
- Kielwasser, A. P. and Wolf, M. A., 1992. Mainstream television, adolescent homosexuality, and significant silence. *Critical studies in mass communication*, 9(4), 350-373.
- Larsen, P., 2002. Mediated fiction. In: K. B. Jensen, ed. *A handbook of media and communication research. Qualitative and quantitative methods*. London and New York: Routledge, 117-137.

- Lewis, D. C., 2011. Direct democracy and minority rights. Same-sex marriage bans in the U.S. states. *Social science quarterly*, 92(2), 364-383.
- Marshall, D., 2010. Popular culture, the 'victim' trope and queer youth analytics. *International journal of qualitative studies in education*, 23(1), 65-85.
- McCormack, M. and Anderson, E., 2010. 'It's just not acceptable any more'. The erosion of homophobia and the softening of masculinity at an English sixth form. *Sociology*, 44(5): 843-859.
- Mishna, F., Newman, P. A., Daley, A., and Solomon, S., 2009. Bullying of lesbian and gay youth. A qualitative investigation. *The British journal of social work*, 39(8), 1598-1614.
- Murphy, K., Ruiz, J., and Serlin, D., 2008. Editors' introduction, *Radical history review*, 100, 1-9.
- Needham, G., 2009. Scheduling normativity. Television, the family, and queer temporality. In: G. Davis and G. Needham, eds. *Queer TV. Theories, histories, politics*. London and New York: Routledge, 143-158.
- Oswald, R. F., Blume, L. B., and Marks, S. R., 2005. Decentering heteronormativity. A model for family studies. In: V. Bengtson, A. Acock, K. Allen, P. Dilworth-Anderson, and D. Klein, eds. *Sourcebook of family theory and research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 143-165.
- Pascoe, C. J., 2005. 'Dude, you're a fag'. Adolescent masculinity and the fag discourse. *Sexualities*, 8(3), 329-346.
- Plummer, D. C., 2001. The quest for modern manhood. Masculine stereotypes, peer culture and the social significance of homophobia. *Journal of adolescence*, 24, 15-24.
- Piontek, T., 2006. *Queering gay and lesbian studies*. Urbana, IL and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Rasmussen, M. L., 2006. *Becoming subjects. Sexualities and secondary schoolings*. New York and Oxon: Routledge.

- Ratcliff, J. J., Lassiter, G. D., Markman K. D., Snyder, C. J. 2006. Gender differences in attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. The role of motivation to respond without prejudice. *Personality and social psychology bulletin*, 32(10), 1325-1338.
- Savin-Williams, R., 2005. *The new gay teenager*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Scourfield, J., Roen, K., and McDermott, L., 2008. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender young people's experiences of distress. Resilience, ambivalence and self-destructive behaviour. *Health & social care in the community*, 16(3), 329-336.
- Sedgwick, E. K., 1993. How to bring your kids up gay. In: E. K. Sedgwick, ed. *Tendencies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 154-164.
- Streitmatter, R., 2009. *From 'perverts' to 'fab five'. The media's changing depiction of gay men and lesbians*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Stulhofer, A. and Rimac, I., 2009. Determinants of homonegativity in Europe. *Journal of sex research*, 46(1), 24-32.
- Toomey, R. B., Ryan, C., Diaz, R. M., Card, N. A., and Russell, S. T., 2010. Gender-nonconforming lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth. School victimization and young Adult psychosocial adjustment. *Developmental psychology*, 46(6), 1580-1589.
- Troiden, R., 1989. The formation of homosexual identities. In: G. Herdt, ed. *Gay and lesbian youth*. London: Harrington Park Press, 43-71.
- Tropiano, S., 2002. *The prime time closet. A history of gays and lesbians on TV*. New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema.
- Warner, M., 1999. *The trouble with normal*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Westerfelhaus, R. and Lacroix, C., 2006. Seeing "straight" through Queer Eye. Exposing the strategic rhetoric of heteronormativity in a mediated ritual of gay rebellion. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 23(5), 426-444.