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“Who is the Biggest Glee?”

Traditional Media Targets the Digital Youth Generation

Following the series premiere in 2009, GLEE (2009–2015) rapidly developed into a fully fledged multimedia franchise encompassing soundtrack albums, a reality series, clothing and accessories, and a series of live concerts subsequently repackaged in 2011 as GLEE: THE 3D CONCERT MOVIE (hereafter GLEE 3D). This franchise is typical of a conglomerate's exploitation of content and synergies in today's multimedia entertainment environment.¹⁾ However, we must also recognize that the development of the property involved negotiating changing technologies and audience expectations which characterized the new millennium. Most significant in this respect was the proliferation of digital technologies that had begun in the 1990s.

This shift increased audience expectations of agency, interactivity, and direct involvement with the media they consume. It is especially true of a new generation of digitally proficient young people born between 1995 and 2012, labeled variously as Gen Z, millennials, and the digital generation. Many of their ranks have been drawn to digital technologies' promise of heightened opportunities for users to actively adapt and fashion their own entertainment experiences. This generation also boasts high numbers of amateur media producers active in the (re-)production of content, often through the appropriation of copyrighted material. The changed behavior of a youth demographic long valued as media consumers has had significant repercussions for the media conglomerates.²⁾ It has signaled

- 1) For examinations of multimedia conglomeration and its impact on the strategic development of synergistic content see Derek Johnson, *Media Franchising: Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); William M. Kunz, *Culture Conglomerates: Consolidation in the Motion Picture and Television Industries* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007). For an exploration of multimedia conglomeration and youth-oriented media in the late 1990s and early 2000s see Valerie Wee, *Teen Media: Hollywood and the Youth Market in the Digital Age* (Raleigh, NC: McFarland, 2010).
- 2) See for example Elissa Moses, *The \$100 Billion Allowance: Accessing the Global Teen Market* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2000); Peter Zollo, *Wise up to Teens: Insights into Marketing & Advertising to Teenagers* (New York: New Strategist, 1999); Lawrie Mifflin, 'Where young viewers go (and ads Follow)', *New York Times*, 8 September 1998, unpaginated. <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/09/08/arts/where-young-viewers-go-ads-follow-wb-network-with-narrow-focus-grows-20-percent.html> [accessed Jan 5, 2015]; Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988).

a need for producers, particularly those targeting youth, to rethink the ways they court this tech-savvy cohort. This is especially true of those handling traditional media such as films and broadcast television. The multimedia franchise that is *GLEE* furnishes us with a touchstone example of traditional media companies' attempts to confront the opportunities and challenges of this new technological media environment and of the new generation of consumers prominent therein. Although many of their strategies have developed from existing practices, the specific adaptations applied to *GLEE* offer us important insights into the media industry's responses to the changing commercial entertainment landscape of the twenty first century.

Accordingly, this article explores how the different components of the *GLEE* franchise reveal one media company's attempts to negotiate this shifting terrain and the new behaviors and demands of young consumers. I consider how these conditions shaped a high-profile *GLEE* promotional campaign and the aforementioned *GLEE* 3D film, specifically how this campaign and the conventions of the concert picture were reworked so as to appeal to an audience demanding acknowledgement, engagement, and involvement. I show that 20th Century-Fox Television (hereafter FOX) cultivated such behaviors when, in 2009, its Marketing and Communications division, along with its Online Content and Strategy division, and *GLEE*'s production company, Ryan Murphy Productions, devised a campaign centered on the search for "the biggest GLEEK" or fan of the property. This campaign encouraged the participation of interested youth, and harnessed their labor to promote the television series. It used digital communications technologies to construct a fan identity characterized by discourses of competition; to prove oneself the most dedicated GLEEK, and ultimately to convert others. I also highlight how such efforts were paired with the humanist ideals of *GLEE*'s diegetic universe. To that end, this essay is divided into three sections. The first section overviews the contemporary media landscape, spotlighting key differences between traditional and new media, and explaining how digital technologies have transformed the media experience. In the second section, I turn my attention to the strategies with which the aforementioned decision-makers targeted millennials during the launch of the *GLEE* TV series. The third section considers how stakeholders in *GLEE* 3D modified the conventions of the concert film to reach out to, and to capitalize on the labor of, millennials through fan-centered segments positing the franchise's humanist themes.

From traditional media's passive consumer to new media's (inter)active producer

Early scholarly comparisons of traditional and new media emphasized differences, usually in binary terms.³⁾ On the one hand, traditional media was typically perceived as a "closed" system marked by high barriers of entry derived from their complex infrastructures, which required significant capital to maintain.⁴⁾ It was also suggested that tradition-

3) See for example Kevin Kawamoto, *Media and Society in the Digital Age* (Boston, MA: Pearson, 2003), pp. 32–35. This early view has since given way to discussions of traditional and new media that acknowledge a steady blurring of boundaries and distinctions between the two.

4) The film and television industries require huge financial commitments to sustain production, distribution, and exhibition. The cost of producing a Hollywood film or television series typically runs into tens of

al media was difficult and expensive to produce,⁵⁾ consumed on regulated schedules in specific venues via distinct devices, and offered identifiably disparate experiences.⁶⁾ By contrast, new media was touted as open, democratic, and promising crossmedia “convergence” and easier access to and for content producers, distributors, and consumers.⁷⁾ Unlike traditional media, which is predicated on a model of mass communication whereby information flows from a single source to many passive recipients,⁸⁾ new media’s largely unregulated structure and low barriers of entry allow for information to flow from countless sources to recipients. This shift has in turn given rise to the figure of the active digital media user-consumer-producer, intent on exploiting the increased flexibility afforded by these new technologies.

These developments have changed the expectations, behaviors, and desires of consumers. Digital technologies have afforded such individuals greater freedoms in terms of how, where, and when they consume entertainment; a situation which itself has incentivized the development of new ways to engage with media products. The impact new digital technologies had on traditional media, especially television, has also received notable scholarly attention. For example, Amanda Lotz, Theresa Rizzo, and Graeme Turner all considered the extent to which digitization transformed this particular medium, arguing that television’s traditional associations with domesticity, family viewing, and regimented consumption have diminished in recent years, and must therefore be rethought.⁹⁾ The digital era is thus populated by viewers driven by personal schedules, heightened control, and self-determination, and who utilize the technology’s capacity to overcome spatial and temporal differences to enable viewers to imagine communities built around shared interests and commitments to particular material; “tribes of affinity”, as Lotz called them.¹⁰⁾ In examining the effects of digital technology on television, Rizzo shows that consumers now enjoy unprecedented levels of “personalization, customization and individualization”.¹¹⁾ She also argues that they have adopted a “playlist” model so as to interact with content that need “not result in social isolation, but rather the opposite: [it] encourages sharing and

millions of dollars, as does the price of maintaining both national and international distribution networks. The operating budgets of exhibitors — whether multiplexes or television stations — are also high.

- 5) Film, television, and music production typically involves numerous individuals, the use of expensive, high-tech equipment, and specialized talents and expertise.
- 6) For instance, films are traditionally experienced in a movie theatre, while television is characterized as a domestic medium at one time accessed only via the television set.
- 7) This is not to suggest new media is entirely responsible for the collapse of media-specific distinctions. The rise of media intersections and hybrids preceded the rise of new media, motivated by the rise of media conglomerates and their synergistic practices. However, developments in new media have catalyzed media-content and aesthetic convergences.
- 8) In labeling traditional media’s audiences “passive”, I refer to their inability to control how, when, and where they consume these media, not their ability to critically engage with media texts.
- 9) See Amanda Lotz, *The Television will be Revolutionized* (New York: New York University Press, 2007); Theresa Rizzo, ‘Programming your own channel: an archeology of the playlist’, in Andrew T. Kenyon (ed.) *TV Futures: Digital Television Policy in Australia* (Melbourne: University of Melbourne Press, 2007); Graeme Turner, ‘Convergence and divergence: the international experience of digital television’, in James Bennett and Niki Strange (eds), *Television as Digital Media* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 31–51.
- 10) Lotz, *The Television will be Revolutionized*, p. 246.
- 11) Rizzo, ‘Programming your own channel’, p. 112.

tap[s] into the desire for communities".¹²⁾ Both scholars posit a new generation of viewers whose expectations of television have shifted away from one bounded by passivity, spatio-temporal constraints, and industry control, towards activeness, freedom, and self-determination.

In a related development, digitization has encouraged user-consumers to expect greater interactivity and input than heretofore.¹³⁾ The millennials who came of age in the digital era have developed behaviors and preferences that shape their understanding of what constitutes entertainment. New media's "democratic" access, in conjunction with affordable user-friendly software, has made it easier for them to participate in some forms of production. Going digital allows such viewers to "customize" and generate their own content, and to distribute the fruits of the labor across online platforms. Hence the coining of portmanteau terms such as "produser"¹⁴⁾ (conjoining "producer" and "user") and "prosumption" ("production" and "consumption").¹⁵⁾ Reworking and disseminating copyrighted content and information for their own and others' pleasure, contemporary produsers prompted Joshua Green to observe that television in the digital age is ideally suited to, and actively address, the needs of fans.¹⁶⁾ This situation consequently broadened the range of creative activity taking place outside the control of the major media corporations.

As they began to repurpose content and distribute their efforts, produsers ran afoul of the content owners from whom they were poaching. The media industry's early responses to this activity were often hostile. Before the 2000s, they typically reacted to such conduct by issuing cease and desist letters.¹⁷⁾ However, these companies came to accept that digital media, and more recently social media, might be mobilized to generate audience interest. This realization prompted them to position "their creative texts to plug into pre-formed fandoms and pre-established online cultures and communities".¹⁸⁾ Consequently, the industry's ever more pointed cultivation of fans communities, along with the creative and interactive opportunities of digital platforms and interfaces, has resulted in a surge of produser activity. These developments coincided with a rise in audience expectations to interact directly with personnel and performers,¹⁹⁾ and participate — however marginally — in the creative process. It is therefore increasingly common for creative practitioners to

12) Ibid., p. 114.

13) For discussion of the emergence of these (inter)active media consumers/fans and the need to reconceptualize this media-audience interaction through an "engagement-based model" see Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), p. 116. See also Kawamoto, *Media and Society in the Digital Age*.

14) Axel Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

15) Don Tapscott and Anthony D. Williams, *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything* (New York: Portfolio, 2006).

16) Joshua Green, 'Why do they call it TV when it's not on the box? "new" television services and old television functions', *Media International Australia* no. 126 (2008), p. 103. While fans have historically "poached" professionally produced media content, using and transforming it to serve their own purposes and pleasures, these earlier activities have often been personal and restricted to small communities. See Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

17) Jennifer Gillan, *Television and New Media: Must Click TV* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 3.

18) Ibid.

19) Entertainment producers and stars commonly use social media such as Twitter to update fans on their latest projects and activities. Elizabeth Ellcessor examines how online media creator, writer, and actor Felicia

involve fans in this process, by tweeting updates, posting Instagram photos, or soliciting feedback on content.²⁰⁾ Companies offering targeted publics the chance to contribute to the production and assembly of their media products are thus oftentimes better positioned to capture the interest of millennials and exploit their willingness unwittingly to serve as unpaid creative labor.²¹⁾

These new media platforms challenge Hollywood because it remains uncertain about how to utilize them or whether it is commercially viable to do so. The challenges digital media poses to traditional platforms have predictably led to fears of a looming crisis. Several reports highlighted a marked decline in youth consumption of commercial media entertainment supplied by traditional platforms. For example, S. Craig Watkins reported that 52% of the young people he surveyed “agreed that there are Internet sites they must visit every day”, whereas 60% did not consider watching network television a daily necessity.²²⁾ The partial shift to digital platforms is also said to have had a detrimental effect on the film industry. Consequently, the trade paper *Variety* reported that in 2013 frequent moviegoers in the powerful 18–24 year-old age group had fallen by 21% and 12–17-year-olds by 15%.²³⁾ This decline prompted speculation that youth audiences had started to abandon traditional, industry controlled, forms of media for new ones, especially platforms offering levels of agency and interactivity which gave these young people a heightened sense of participation, control, and ownership of the text. Cognizant of the challenges facing television networks’ pursuit of millennial youth, FOX and *Glee*’s other stakeholders began formulating strategies to attract this hard-to-reach but potentially lucrative segment.

The GLEE phenomenon

The American media industries have long believed that young people prefer entertainment which acknowledges their experiences and lifestyles. As a consequence of such thinking, youth-oriented fare tends to be quite formulaic, often isolating a group of teen-

Day uses online activities to cultivate fans and generate media attention. While Day is a marginal media practitioner compared to Hollywood talent, her activities furnish us with one example of how a professional involved in this sphere benefits from exploiting the opportunities provided by the internet and social media. See Elizabeth Ellcessor, “Tweeting @feliciaday: online social media, convergence, and subcultural stardom” *Cinema Journal*, vol. 51 no. 1 (2012), pp. 46–75.

- 20) This is not to suggest that fans usually exert a meaningful influence over the creative or decision-making processes. Rather, it appears fans are being offered a heightened sense of involvement, one intended to feed their sense of importance and to encourage them to develop a form of ownership over the show. These attempts at fan cultivation and engagement are also apparent in the increasing importance of events such as Comic Con, where producers and stars present filmed content and answer fan queries as a means of generating interest in media products.
- 21) For an in-depth examination of Millennials’ interaction with and use of contemporary digital media see S. Craig Watkins. *The Young and the Digital* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009).
- 22) Watkins, *The Young and the Digital*, p. 16. Youths’ disinterest in daily television viewing threatens the networks, as traditional television viewing is founded on habit.
- 23) Andrew Stewart, ‘Number of frequent young moviegoers plummets in 2013’, *Variety*, 25 March 2014, unpaginated. *Variety*, <<http://variety.com/2014/film/news/number-of-frequent-young-moviegoers-plummets-in-2013-1201146426/>> [accessed 27 March 2014].

agers (many alienated or unpopular) from adult society through institutions like High School. Its key themes typically concern the perennial challenge of surviving High School, and related issues such as the formation of identity — often in the face of bullying or peer pressure, sexual exploration, and, in recent years, accepting non-heteronormative sexual identities. This package also invariably centralizes music to convey the tone of such experiences.²⁴⁾

GLEE is therefore hardly innovative as a youth-oriented product in its depiction of marginalized students joining an "uncool" Glee Club to spotlight humanistic concerns. Thus, during this series, the once popular football players Finn and Puck learn to ignore their mocking teammates and embrace the pleasure of Glee Club. Meanwhile, Rachel, a talented, ambitious, self-absorbed "diva-in-training" forms friendships with club members. Quinn, a pregnant and thus ostracized cheerleader, finds acceptance from the very club she once previously ridiculed. And the somewhat effete Kurt receives support from the club during a homosexual romance with another club member. These events are wrapped around dance performances to pop songs, hip hop tunes, power ballads, and Broadway standards, which show the club's members seeking validation by competing at various events.²⁵⁾

This combination of musical numbers and tales of ordinary people seeking acceptance and validation by harnessing their untapped talent and dedication positioned GLEE as a successor to a number of hit television shows. For one, it was seen as a successor to competition based reality shows like *AMERICAN IDOL* (2002–), because it too thematized crafting an authentic sense of self through music, performance, and the pursuit of stardom. At the same time, its mixture of music and humanism called to mind earlier youth-centered dramas such as *DAWSON'S CREEK* (1998–2003), *BEVERLY HILLS, 90210* (1990–2000), and *MY SO-CALLED LIFE* (1994–1995). What is more, when combined with the notion of potential stardom, GLEE evoked the successful tween-oriented properties *HANNAH MONTANA* (2006–2011), *HIGH SCHOOL MUSICAL* (2006, 2007, 2008),²⁶⁾ and *CAMP ROCK* (2008).

In contrast to these derivative features, FOX launched GLEE under quite unusual circumstances. The show premiered at the close of the 2008/2009 primetime television season following the grand finale of *AMERICAN IDOL*. This was an eye-opening strategy inasmuch as audience interest in GLEE needed to be sustained across the three month gap before it returned to screens that August. FOX took steps to ensure critics were wrong when they predicted that young people would have forgotten about the show come August. Over the summer, the company used its website and social media to build interest and loyalty to the property. Central to this practice was a contest named "Who is the Biggest Gleek?" which Fox ran on its website and publicized on the social network services Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter. This practice was not entirely novel as *DAWSON'S CREEK*

24) For a detailed discussion of the fundamental features of teen television see Wee, *Teen Media*, pp. 142–165.

25) Music has provided an effective means of attracting young viewers. *THE DICK CLARK SHOW* (1958–60), MTV, and more recently, the online social network site MySpace, all embraced a music-focused format to effectively draw a youth audience/user/consumer.

26) While the first two parts of the trilogy were made-for-cable films premiering on The Disney Channel, their success prompted the third film to be released theatrically.

had been targeted to teens through a website that sought to retain fan interest by providing updates on characters' desktops and diaries.²⁷⁾ Similarly, Disney promoted *HIGH SCHOOL MUSICAL* by offering tweens a free downloadable song and software needed to make their own *HIGH SCHOOL MUSICAL* videos. It also held a competition on MySpace offering graduating classes the chance to win a trip to a Disney resorts by completing various tasks online.²⁸⁾ However, Fox's version of this practice involved fulfilling millennials' expectations for greater interaction and participation.

A detailed analysis of the "biggest GLEE" contest reveals the strategies FOX's marketing and online content divisions adopted to connect with millennial youth. FOX directly "hailed" young people, thereby explicitly acknowledging and interpolating them as active participants in the show's success, by asking "[w]ho is the biggest GLEE?" Millennials were urged to form a community based on their dedication to GLEE's humanistic values of self-respect, compassion, and acceptance of anything traditionally unpopular. This angle encouraged them to align themselves with the marginalized characters featured in the series premiere and to compete for the title of "biggest" GLEE fan as they went about unwittingly promoting the show.

This contest, like that of *HIGH SCHOOL MUSICAL* before it, invited viewers to compete for a prize. The opportunity to meet GLEE's cast could be won by exploring websites, posting self-produced material, and interacting with the likeminded. The campaign overtly courted digitally savvy youth, by encouraging them to engage in creative online activities, "link your 'Biggest GLEE' profile to your Facebook profile", "[post] links of the day to your online profile", "[invite] friends to join the competition", and so on. GLEE's promotional activities therefore extended beyond pushing branded products towards production-oriented activities. Not only were young people encouraged to disseminate their GLEE-related profiles online, they were urged to base these on their dedication to GLEE's humanist themes.²⁹⁾

Furthermore, millennials were invited to help GLEE become a hit; to become active, industry-recognized, valued advocates of the show. The GLEE campaign thus adapted the "audience-as-essential-participant" model which had contributed to *AMERICAN IDOL*'s sizable fan base. It even marshaled the rhetoric of this singing competition's repeated calls to viewers to participate and therefore determine a contestant's ranking by "calling in to vote". In this respect, copy advertising made similar appeals to youth, by fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility. As Jenkins, Ford and Green note, in the contemporary digital era, such "engagement-based models see the audience as a collective of active agents whose labor may generate alternative forms of market value".³⁰⁾ GLEE therefore represented another case of a network attempting to organize the online activities of a potential mass audience. This call to GLEEKdom remained industry controlled inasmuch as it

27) For a detailed study of Dawson's Creek.com, see Wee, *Teen Media*, pp. 192–218.

28) For a detailed study of Disney's promotion of these properties see Wee, *Teen Media*, pp. 166–191.

29) FOX's cultivation of young people, and the company's encouragement of their online activities and creative practices, marks a reversal of the network's earlier responses to *THE X-FILES* fansites, when the company threatened legal action against those who created sites discussing and promoting this property. See Gillan, *Television and New Media*, pp. 31–32.

30) See Jenkins, Ford, and Green, *Spreadable Media*, p. 116.

was a top-down enterprise. Yet, its endorsement of fan production and promotion indicated another step in the development of the fan-industry online relationship: FOX's campaign stands as a carefully orchestrated attempt to whet millennials' appetites before marshalling their labor.³¹⁾

The success of this campaign ensured that a sizable segment of the targeted youth audience embraced GLEE when it returned for the 2009/2010 season. By the end of that season, GLEE was the top rated show among 18–49-year-old females.³²⁾ It was also the third most lucrative show that season based on advertising purchases, behind AMERICAN IDOL and NBC SUNDAY NIGHT FOOTBALL (2006–).³³⁾ Despite relatively low overall ratings, ranking 38 for the season with a 4.0 rating in the general 18–49 demographic,³⁴⁾ GLEE's core youth audience was particularly attractive to advertisers, who paid between US\$272,694 and US\$373,014 for a thirty second spot.

In light of these achievements, FOX extended the GLEE experience to other media in order to promote the show and create new profit centers such as branded merchandise.³⁵⁾ Like predecessors such as DAWSON'S CREEK and HIGH SCHOOL MUSICAL, GLEE licensed products included DVDs and Blu-Rays, novelizations, and soundtracks, while Macy's and Claire's stores sold apparel across the United States.³⁶⁾ Moreover, in 2011, THE GLEE PROJECT — an AMERICAN IDOL-like show in which contestants competed for a role in

31) Fan labor is a complex issue, which has generated a fairly contentious relationship between fans and the industry that hopes to exploit them and their work. For insights into these conflicts see Alexis Lothian, 'Living in a den of thieves: fan video and digital challenges to ownership', *Cinema Journal*, vol. 48, no. 4 (2009), pp. 130–136; Julie Levin Russo, 'User-penetrated content: fan video in the age of convergence', *Cinema Journal*, vol. 48, no. 4 (2009), pp. 125–130; Robert V. Kozinets, 'Why brands suddenly need "fans"', in Denise Mann (ed.), *Wired TV*, (New Jersey, Rutgers University Press, 2014), pp. 161–175.

32) See Ann Donahue, "Glee" throws lifeline to music industry', *Reuters*, 13 December 2010, unpaginated. Reuters, <<http://in.reuters.com/article/2010/12/13/us-glee-idINTRE6BC0LL20101213>> [accessed 12 May 2014]. According to Josef Adalian, *Glee* "soared to just over 12 million viewers, its biggest audience sans an *American Idol* lead-in ever. It was the No. 1 show of the night in the crucial under-50 demo (5.5 rating) and was an instrument of destruction in women 18 to 34 (outdrawing ABC, NBC, and CBS combined among that group)". See Josef Adalian, 'Your TV ratings explained: let's hear it for *Glee*!', *Vulture*, 23 September 2010, unpaginated. Vulture, <http://www.vulture.com/2010/09/your_tv_ratings_explained_lets.html> [accessed 20 February 2014].

33) See Darren Franich, "American Idol," "Glee," and football top the list of most expensive broadcast TV shows for advertising', 18 October, 2010. Popwatch, <<http://popwatch.ew.com/2010/10/18/american-idol-glee-and-football-top-the-list-of-most-expensive-broadcast-tv-shows-for-advertising/>> [accessed 6 November 2014].

34) Bill Gorman, 'Final 2009–10 broadcast prime-time show average viewership', 16 June 2010, unpaginated. TV by the Numbers, <<http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2010/06/16/final-2009-10-broadcast-primetime-show-average-viewership/54336/>> [accessed 6 November 2014].

35) For a discussion of television networks' efforts to leverage youth-oriented shows beyond the boundaries of the medium see Wee, *Teen Media*, chapters six and seven.

36) In addition to multiple volumes of *Glee: The Music* soundtrack albums, there were also collections of GLEE cover versions of specific performers' music (including Madonna), a Christmas album, a Dance music album, and a compilation of ballads. All of these tracks were available for download on iTunes, a strategy clearly acknowledging the consumer behaviors and preferences of the digital youth demographic. See Donahue, "Glee" throws lifeline to music industry'; T. L. Stanley, 'Dress yourself in "Glee": TV shows go licensing crazy', *Los Angeles Times*, 8 June 2010, unpaginated. Los Angeles Times, <<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/showtracker/2010/06/glee-swap-hits-stores-in-fall-shows-tv-shows-licensing-crazy.html>> [accessed 10 June 2014].

GLEE — premiered on the Oxygen cable network.³⁷⁾ Like Disney's HANNAH MONTANA and CAMP ROCK,³⁸⁾ there was also a summer concert tour GLEE LIVE! IN CONCERT!, which featured cast members performing songs from the series, and a concert film. The latter represented an attempt to extend returns from the concert tours by catering to fans who had been unable to attend live events or those lucky few who simply wanted to relive them.

The notions of becoming oneself the “biggest GLEEK”, extolling the pleasures of GLEE, and converting others served to align each GLEE branded product. This strategy freed the franchise from needing to link media texts narratively, thereby distinguishing this property from many earlier instances of transmedia expansion.³⁹⁾ Rather, FOX intended for GLEE's constituent texts to attract youth via the shared exhortation to be “the biggest GLEEK,” a notion which emphasized the construction of GLEEKdom as a distinctive identity based on humanist ideals; a notion central to the handling of GLEE 3D.

GLEE: THE 3D CONCERT MOVIE — celebrating the biggest GLEEKs

Opening on 12 August 2011, GLEE 3D received a limited two week theatrical release before the premiere of the series' third season.⁴⁰⁾ As with the earlier version of the “biggest GLEEK” campaign, GLEE 3D was designed to retain young people's interest in the property during the show's summer hiatus. GLEE 3D confirmed FOX's commitment to incorporating millennial youth into the entertainment product and experience by allowing them to contribute to both. To appreciate why this approach was extended in a manner that addressed millennials' desire for acknowledgement, engagement, and participation we must consider how GLEE's creators sought to overcome the constraints of the concert film format that typically includes emphasis on stars, the blending of song and dance numbers with backstage events, and the inclusion of fan testimonials. It is therefore necessary to ask how stakeholders' marshalling of fan labor in the guise of audience interaction was integrated into the concert film format.

37) Oxygen's target demographic of young female viewers matches that of GLEE. See Robert Seidman, “Oxygen Media increases original programming by 50%,” 4 April 2011, unpaginated. TV by the numbers, <<http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2011/04/04/oxygen-media-increases-original-programming-by-26-in-2011-launches-new-night-of-originals-on-sunday-june-12/88149/>> [accessed 3 February 2014].

38) Disney's HANNAH MONTANA was promoted with a concert tour featuring the series' star, Miley Cyrus, which was then released as a 3D concert film with related CD releases. Disney replicated these practices with stars of CAMP ROCK, The Jonas Brothers, who also headlined a concert tour, a concert film based on that tour, and featured on CDs cross-promoting these various entertainment texts. See Wee, *Teen Media*, pp. 166–191.

39) Engagement-based transmedia links are not uncommon for Reality formats such as AMERICAN IDOL; however, GLEE offers an example of a fictional, narrative-based, series characterized by techniques more typical of the reality format. I would like to thank one of my peer-reviewers for making this point. Jenkins, Ford, and Green comment on the shift away from a narrative-based model of transmedia links to an engagement-based model, in which they cite GLEE as an example. See Jenkins, Ford, and Green, *Spreadable Media*, p. 146.

40) Steven Zeitchik, “With ‘Glee’ 3-D concert movie, Lea Michelle will sing on the big screen,” *Los Angeles Times*, 4 May 2011, unpaginated. Los Angeles Times, <<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/movies/2011/05/glee-3d-lea-michell-ryan-murphy-movie.html>> [accessed 11 June 2014].

The decision-makers behind *GLEE 3D* replicated the TV show's combination of musical performances and humanist themes, thereby reinforcing the typical *GLEE* experience, while advocating diversity and difference. However, *GLEE 3D* all but jettisoned the narrative structure of the series. Instead, the bulk of the film showcased onstage musical numbers in which the cast of the show recreated well known performances from the series. The film also featured brief backstage interludes of the cast in character, conducting vocal exercises, having makeup applied, and delivering sound-bites to camera. This material was paired with testimonials in which fans declared their allegiance to individual characters, or explained why they were "the biggest Gleeek", or stressed that thanks to *GLEE* they were more socially engaged and better understood difference.⁴¹⁾

Alongside this traditional concert film content were less typical segments directed by the documentary filmmaker Jennifer Arnold spotlighting three self-proclaimed "biggest Gleeeks" who personified *GLEE*'s message of celebrating difference, (self-)acceptance, and peer-support. Janae is a high school cheerleader with dwarfism, Josey struggles with the autism spectrum disorder Asperger syndrome, and Trenton is an African American student who suffered discrimination because of his homosexuality. A combination of personal statements, interviews with friends and teachers, footage of their daily lives, and dramatized segments revealed their anxieties, challenges, and triumphs. Crucially, the trio emphasized that *GLEE* helped them build their self-confidence and fight for acceptance. Each Gleeek also related his or her challenges to those experienced by characters in *GLEE*.⁴²⁾

Comprising almost one third of the film, these segments represent *GLEE 3D*'s most striking deviation from the conventions of the concert film. As demonstrated by contemporaries such as Michael Jackson's *THIS IS IT* (2009), JUSTIN BIEBER: *NEVER SAY NEVER* (2011), and KATY PERRY: *PART OF ME* (2012), such films typically bolster concert performances with documentary footage of the star performer. For example, both Perry's and Bieber's films traced their respective stars' rise to prominence, and offered biographical insights by way of interviews with family, home videos, and "day-in-the-life" material. By contrast, *GLEE 3D*'s focus on the aforementioned Gleeeks positioned them as deserving the spotlight more than the returning cast members, so much so in fact that the professionals' performances are interrupted to focus on the fans. The Gleeeks became a featured attraction, reinforcing the notion that they were as vital a component to the *GLEE* text as its traditional onscreen talent.

These segments served additional functions however. They extended the original TV show's humanistic themes, providing a voice for young people typically overlooked by mainstream media. *GLEE 3D* therefore offered an — admittedly mediated — form of rec-

41) I would like to thank one of my peer-reviewers for bringing this to my attention.

42) For instance, Janae comments on how she related to the show's "popular" characters, as she was part of her high school cheerleading squad, and the more 'marginalized' characters, due to her dwarfism. Josey praised the show for giving the marginalized and unpopular a voice, one she appreciated as someone with Aspergers, while also highlighting how *GLEE* served as the means for her to bond with other *GLEE* fans based on their shared love of the show. Trenton discusses how he survived the high school bullying and ostracism which he experienced when his homosexuality became known, by identifying with the struggles, hardships, and triumphs that Kurt, one of *GLEE*'s homosexual characters, experienced.

ognition such individuals are usually denied. By representing these GLEEKs believably, and by presenting their experiences in the style of a documentary, GLEE 3D acknowledged their marginal status while validating their struggles and achievements. Taken as a whole, these testimonies — and those of others used to support them — maintained and reinforced the notion of GLEEKs comprising a special community. Being a GLEEK was thus associated with empathy, compassion, and rooting for underdogs, which, although not alien to youth-oriented media, is rarely presented in a documentary style or articulated on the screen by actual teens.

Yet, these strategies also served distinctly corporate and thus commercial functions. By ensuring that the film and the franchise to which it belonged allowed young people directly to participate in the GLEE universe, they showcased the property's relevance to youth. Foregrounding fans' proud, insistent proclamations of the roles this franchise played in their lives enabled decision-makers behind the property to undermine charges that this series was a cynical exercise in exploiting the young, even though doing so cannot avoid supporting such claims. By interpolating GLEEKs into the texts, stakeholders could indeed capitalize on fans seemingly tireless efforts not only to promote the GLEE experience, but also to be a part of the product. As with the appropriation of fan labor in the promotion of the TV series, GLEE 3D supports Mark Andrejevic's assertion that such labor does little to challenge traditional media relations as it ultimately "[reinforces] social and material relations".⁴³⁾ While the feature film format prevented the degree of interactivity and creative productivity possible with digital media, GLEE 3D nevertheless offered its own form of fan engagement, participation, and labor exploitation. It provided an additional opportunity for fans to declare their dedication to the series, to build a sense of community, and even to share — and thus commodify — the sometimes painful often personal struggles faced by individuals such as Janae, Josey, and Trenton.⁴⁴⁾

Produced on a budget of \$9 million, GLEE 3D ended its brief theatrical run with a North American gross of \$11.8 million.⁴⁵⁾ Commentators considered this a disappointing figure.⁴⁶⁾ It suggested once more that, in spite of their best efforts to cultivate millennial youth — and even to interpolate it into the entertainment text — traditional media producers continue to struggle to find a reliable means of fully capturing this demographic. However, we should not forget that this concert film may well have fulfilled its principal function of retaining fan interest and whetting fans' appetites for the new series of GLEE. Immediately after GLEE 3D's theatrical run had concluded, a third season of the show premiered to similar ratings as its much anticipated debut season, once again scoring 4.0 in the coveted 18–49-year-olds demographic and successfully holding off audience attrition.

43) Mark Andrejevic, "Watching television without pity: the productivity of online fans," *Television and New Media*, vol. 9, no. 1 (2008), p. 43.

44) This is not to simplistically suggest that these individuals are strictly or solely victims of "big business" exploitation or that FOX and GLEE's other creators are primarily driven by unfeeling commercial motives. Rather, I simply wish to highlight the complex nature of this youth-oriented entertainment enterprise.

45) Anon., 'Glee: The 3D Concert Movie', unpaginated, Box Office Mojo, <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=main&id=gleelive3d.htm>> [accessed 20 November 2014].

46) Eric Ditzian, "Glee": Five reasons "3D Concert" sunk at the box-office, 15 August 2011, unpaginated. MTV, <<http://www.mtv.com/news/1669059/glee-3d-concert-movie-box-office/>> [accessed 20 November 2014].

Conclusion

GLEE offers an instructive case study of the challenges facing the media entertainment industry as it confronts the opportunities and difficulties of the digital age. Stakeholders in the property adopted many fairly standard strategies characteristic of an increasingly transmedia world, by spinning off a media text across multiple platforms. However, they also adapted a series of key strategies revolving around the specific interests, behaviors, and desires of digital youth. Many of their online strategies were adapted from existing practice. Their one innovation, however, lay in the cooption of fan stories in place of the stars' profiles as part of a sustained commitment to integrate them into the show and related texts as active participants.⁴⁷⁾

This commitment enabled the GLEE franchise to deviate from the more common practice of transmedia production dominated by the narrative expansion of a universe and its characters across various media texts. GLEE instead embraced the strategies of its advertising campaign by expanding the quest for "the biggest GLEEek" across multiple platforms. The fictional developments explored in the television series did not feature in any of its media spinoffs. For example, GLEE 3D divided its focus between the GLEE concert featuring the TV show's characters and documentary footage of the "biggest GLEEeks". Just as the promotional campaign placed the "Biggest GLEEek" at the center of its activities and attention, THE GLEE PROJECT exploited unknowns seeking media attention and stardom. In each case, it was the fan that was accorded a participatory role in a GLEE spinoff.

These interrelated media texts and activities served as an effective marketing tool. Seeking out the biggest GLEEek ensured the extension of the series' message of affirmation, self-confidence, and support of the GLEE community. The mantra that different is OK was repeated across multiple media products, alongside the exhortation to be yourself, face down peer pressure and rejection, and follow your dreams. Such practice also allowed for the exploitation of fans who appeared thrilled to be assimilated into the text/product, and allowed themselves, their stories, and their labor to be utilized into the production, content, and marketing of GLEE. These activities ultimately married an ostensibly humanist message with a commercial one.

There is no denying GLEEedom existed as a media-created and organized identity, one which GLEEeks appeared gleefully to embrace, at least going by the numerous admissions found in GLEE 3D. However, it is difficult to determine precisely where the boundary lies between celebrating these fans and exploiting them for entertainment and capital gain. Thus, despite GLEE's ostensibly humanist messages of empowerment and agency, the media industry's relations to fans are characterized by ongoing struggle in which top-down manipulation is difficult to avoid.

47) I thank one of my peer-reviewers for pointing out that GLEE's emphasis on celebrating fan identity and humanist ideals while seemingly downplaying the show's narratives and talent reads as an efficient strategy to help counter the inherent challenges of a high school format characterized by the aging of on-screen talent and the necessity to continually changing its characters.

Films and Television Shows Cited:

American Idol (Various directors, 2002–); *Beverly Hills, 90210* (Various directors, 1990–2000); *Camp Rock* (Matthew Diamond, 2008); *Dawson's Creek* (Various directors, 1998–2003); *Glee* (Various directors, 2009–); *Glee: The 3D Concert Movie* (Kevin Tanharoen and Jennifer Arnold, 2011); *The Glee Project* (Various directors, 2011–); *Hannah Montana* (Various directors, 2006–2011); *High School Musical* (Kenny Ortega, 2006); *High School Musical 2* (Kenny Ortega, 2007); *High School Musical 3: Senior Year* (Kenny Ortega, 2008); *Justin Bieber: Never Say Never* (Jon M. Chu 2011); *Katy Perry: Part of Me* (Don Cutforth and Jane Lipsitz, 2012); *This Is It* (Kenny Ortega, 2009); *My So-Called Life* (Various directors, 1994–1995); *NBC Sunday Night Football* (Various directors, 2006–).

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SUMMARY

"Who is the Biggest GLEEK?"

Traditional Media Targets the Digital Youth Generation

Valerie Wee

This article considers how the different components of the GLEE franchise reveal one media company's attempts to attract the valuable youth demographic amid shifting media and technological terrain, and the evolving entertainment demands and emerging new behaviors of young consumers in the digital age. Specifically, I illustrate how 20th Century-Fox and Ryan Murphy Productions' successful promotional strategy for the GLEE television series — an online contest to discover "the biggest GLEEK" (i.e. GLEE's most committed fan who was devoted to everything GLEE-related, and dedicated to promoting and converting others into fellow fans) — would eventually shape the form and content of a wider range of GLEE spin-offs, including GLEE: THE 3D CONCERT MOVIE. In examining these developments, the article explores how this campaign and the conventions of the concert picture were reworked so as to appeal to an audience demanding acknowledgement, engagement, and involvement. This investigation further reveals how these profit-oriented interests in cultivating and exploiting fan labor is blended with (and camouflaged by) a discourse emphasizing humanist values of inclusion, acceptance, and respect for self and others.