

DANCING WITH MYSELF: REPRESENTATIONS
OF DISABILITY WITHIN *GLEE*

By

Lauren Levins

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Thesis Committee:

Dr. Katie Foss, Chair

Dr. Jason Reineke

Dr. Clare Bratten

ABSTRACT:

Media have potential to alter people's perceptions towards unfamiliar subjects (Davis, 2006). In the case of disability, danger can occur when representations are inaccurate. Previous research on portrayals of disabilities found a lack of representation and negative depictions overall. This study looked at the first three seasons of the television show *Glee*. Textual analysis was applied using Hall's Encoding/Decoding, Dyer's stereotyping, social construction theory, and a developed list of stereotypes. This study attempted to answer how people with disabilities were constructed and the perpetuation or challenging of stereotypes on *Glee*. Resulting topics involved storylines used to depict disabilities, interactions, and disability and agency. Stereotypes were found, but serious topics were also discussed. Implications involve the importance of accurate portrayals, the possibility to learn about disabilities, and the risks of self-stigmatization and negative treatment of disabilities. Further analysis of *Glee* seasons and comparisons of *Glee*'s depictions to other shows were suggested.

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Introduction

Despite the contemporary emphasis on political correctness and tolerance towards certain groups considered to be in the minority, examples of insensitivity towards people with disabilities permeate both the media and society (CBS, 2013; Kornegger, 2013). For example, the phrase, “that’s retarded,” is often used by teenagers and young adults, especially in social networking as frequently as the equally offensive phrase “that’s gay” (James, 2009; Greenberg, 2013; Smith & Sapon-Shevin, 2013; Taylor, 1996). Both common phrases display insensitivity to those individuals that are actually referenced by this outdated terminology. Media messages can both counter and reinforce such insensitive statements, depending on how they present a typically stereotyped group.

Current highlights from today’s newspapers illuminate recent trends in disability portrayals. For example, in the last two years, the following headlines ran in the *New York Times*, “5 Queens Disability Judges Called Biased in Lawsuit,” “Bonded by Disability, a Couple Keeps a Promise Till Death,” “Disability and H.I.V.-I Had Polio. I Also Have Sex” or “From Welfare Queens to Disabled Deadbeats” (Dolnick, 2011; Dwyer 2011; Zulu, 2011; Krugman, 2013). All of these articles centered on the disability itself, and the individual with the disability was pushed to the background. Disability has also been a popular subject of discussion in several areas such as literature, vaudeville, theatre, and film. In the movie *Tropic Thunder* (2008), the character Kirk Lazarus educates a fellow actor on the proper portrayal of a mental disability in order to win an Academy Award saying, “You went full retard man. Never go full retard. You don’t buy that? Ask Sean Penn, 2001, ‘I Am Sam.’ Remember? Went full retard, went home empty handed” (Stiller, *Tropic Thunder*, 2008). In this example, it can be assumed the character is stating that extreme resemblance to disability caused critics to dislike the performance, and lost

the Oscar. Media representations provide their audiences with opportunities to form opinions of what people with disabilities are like, and have the potential to impact the way people with disabilities are treated.

According to the 2010 Census, one fifth of the United States population has a disability, with the majority of disabilities being physical. A total of 11 million people, age six and older, need personal assistance with everyday activities, 3.3 million, age 15 or older, use a wheelchair, and approximately one million are considered hard of hearing. Approximately 13.3 million of the population, ages 16-64, has difficulty finding or maintaining a job due to a physical or learning impairment (Census, 2010). A total of 2.8 million students, ages 5-17, out of 53.9 million surveyed students, report having some type of disability, with the largest percentage falling in the cognitive or learning disability category (Brault, 2012). Since a significant number of people in today's population have some form of disability, it is important to see what common perceptions are held about people with disabilities, particularly in television, in which people with disabilities are portrayed visually and verbally. Negative perceptions can lead to potential mistreatment and discrimination towards people with disabilities due to a feeling of superiority that can develop, such as the extreme example of Nazi, Germany where sterilizations and genocide were perpetrated against people with physical and mental disabilities (Mostert, 2002). This study examines the first three seasons of the television show *Glee*, due to its frequent highlighting of characters and storylines involving disability, exploring the stereotypes and common themes of disability issues.

Television shows provide audiences the opportunity to have prolonged exposure to groups they may not be experienced with themselves, including disabilities. It has become an ingrained part of today's society, with the average American spending about one fifth of their

day watching television (Nielsen, 2011). When watching television, viewers are invested emotionally into specific characters and plots, developing attachments to characters. The prolonged exposure to characters can cause viewer perceptions of meaning to be reinforced by repeated viewing of ongoing dramas (Esslin, 1976). Over the course of multiple episodes, viewers become actively invested in characters, interacting with them as though they are real-a phenomena known as parasocial interaction (Russell & Stern, 2006). Because Americans are exposed to television extensively (Hinckley, 2012), it is imperative to look at what information is being disseminated.

Several contemporary television programs include characters and topics related to disability, like *Switched at Birth*, in which one of the main characters is hard of hearing. However, shows today do not depict a diversity of the disabilities that exist within the current disability population (GLAAD, 2013). In 2009, the program *Glee* premiered, becoming one of the first fictional television shows to include a diversity of disability representations (Gerber, 2011). This study examines the first three seasons of the television show *Glee*, given its numerous disability representations, exploring stereotypes and common themes of disability issues.

As of this writing, *Glee* is in its fifth season. The show revolves around a high school glee club called New Directions, which competes in various singing competitions. The members of New Directions and their director Will Schuester, face numerous high school dilemmas, especially social isolation and stigmatization. Several members of the glee club are minorities in some respect, including characters with disabilities. Despite the groundbreaking portrayals of disabilities in this show, *Glee* has yet to be mentioned or covered extensively in research literature.

Defining Disability

Definitions of disability are constantly evolving to reflect current populations. According to the Equal Employment Opportunity Association, disability is defined as “a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such an individual” (US Department of Justice, 2009). The Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) states that the person is: 1) Unable to perform a major life activity that an average person can perform and 2) is significantly restricted as to the condition, manner, or duration that they can perform an activity. Examples given include were hearing difficulties (including deafness), serious emotional issues, mobility challenges, and Autism, among others (Brault, 2012). Disabilities can be temporary or permanent. The current study examines all representations of cognitive and physical disabilities. Additionally, for this study, any faked or self-diagnosed disabilities are also analyzed. The audience is unaware of the faked disability until the character reveals it, which allows for extensive exposure to the disability. Additionally, though a disability is claimed to be self-diagnosed, viewers might still develop perceptions of the disability based on the character’s declaration.

History of Portrayals

Throughout history, people with disabilities have been represented in art and literature, and are usually ridiculed. As Martin Norden (1994) described, people with disabilities have “been exhibited for the edification and amusement of audiences ranging from royalty to peasantry” (Norden, 1994: 7). Many royal courts retained people with learning disabilities or short stature for amusement. People with physical deformities were put on display at village fairs, the origin of what would later be called “freak shows” (Bogdan, 1996; Gerber, 1996). Even the *Bible*, one of the most popular texts in Western civilization, includes several references to

people with disabilities that link disabilities with disease, sin and evil, or a punishment from God (Olyan, 2008). As these practices and characterizations from the past demonstrate, people with disabilities were often considered outcasts in ancient societies and were often avoided or killed. (Henderson & Bryan, 2004)

Several prolific pieces of literature bring to life characters with disabilities that later became some of the iconic characters repetitively seen in television and film today. Traditional literary characters known for their disabilities include Captain Ahab of *Moby Dick*, Hook from *Peter Pan*, Shakespeare's *Richard III*, and Quasimodo from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Norden, 1994). These traditional depictions have been noted as "evidence of the tendency of writers of literature and film to associate evil and malevolence with physical impairments and disfigurements" (Schuchman, 1999: 4). Researchers have noted that disability has often been stereotyped and the immorality of a villain is often linked with physical or mental deformity as a dramatic technique (Nordan 1994; Harnett, 2000).

Scholars have identified three distinctive phases of past disability portrayals in film and television. First, there was an "exploitative" phase from the 1890s to the 1930s, which introduced some of the common stereotypes still perpetuated today. Then, in the 1930s to the 1950s, characters with disabilities often strived to overcome their personal tragedy, marking an "exploratory" phase. Finally, an "incidental" phase during the 1960s to the 1990s began to address broader social themes, though still utilizing some stereotypes (Mercer & Barnes, 2003). This final phase seems to extend to current representations, though it seems that formulaic techniques from past eras are still utilized by television and film. In two examples, impersonation of disability is briefly seen in *Django Unchained* (2012) and *Dinner with the Schmucks* (2010) makes fun of a blind man, who believes he is a fencing champion.

1890s-1930s

World War I would cause the first large changes to disability legislation in the United States. Before this time, care of people with disabilities fell primarily on the family with disability viewed as an individual problem and a personal tragedy (Mercer & Barnes, 2003). A total of 45 states enacted workers' compensation programs from 1910-1921 and the War Risk Insurance Act of 1917 provided a fixed monthly income for veterans (Norden, 1994). In 1920, the president passed the Vocational Rehabilitation Act, which extended job related services to all people with disabilities (Norden, 1994). During this time, the American Red Cross formed a film bureau to educate on the war and to raise money, and this organization tended to use newsreel snippets of soldiers with disabilities, among other images (Norden, 1994).

During the silent film era, disability was often used as a source of humor, usually with characters overcoming obstacles and being placed at the center of chaotic movies. Norden calls this the "Comic Mis-adventurer: a person with a disability who is victimized by 'able bodied' people or a person whose impairment leads to trouble" (Norden, 1994:8). One source of humor came from characters who faked having disabilities (Norden, 1994). Often the character would be a beggar pretending to have a physical disability, such as blindness or an amputation. Upon discovery, the character would lead the police on a humorous chase scene as exemplified by *The Fraudulent Beggars* (1898), which was directed by James Williamson in which a blind beggar is caught reading to a deaf beggar and *You'd Be Surprised* (1926), directed by Arthur Rosson, in which a famous deaf actor, Granville Redmond, played a hearing inspector pretending to be deaf in order to catch a thief (Norden, 1994).

People with disabilities were also portrayed as tragic victims to be pitied, often poverty stricken, reinforcing the stereotype of the Sweet Innocent. Martin Norden (1994) says the Sweet

Innocent was most commonly depicted by young children and unmarried women, and was linked often with the curability trend (where characters with disabilities were miraculously cured of their disability). These characters “seemed to bring out the protectiveness of every good hearted ‘able bodied’ person who came his or her way” (Norden, 1994: 33). A famous example of Norden’s (1994) Sweet Innocent would be the iconic character Tiny Tim from *A Christmas Carol*, which started showing on films in 1908. Sometimes the stereotype involved being able to function more in an ‘able bodied’ society, such as in *The Man Who Played God* (1922), which also demonstrates the stock character of the Expert Deaf Lip Reader (Schuchman, 1999). There was also an “ever growing movie trend of casting characters with orthopedic impairments as villains” such as *Richard III* (1912), *The Hunchback* (1913), and *West of Zanzibar* (1928) among others (Norden, 1994: 57). Overall, during many of these movies, the character with the disability is socially isolated and often relationships are not successful (Norden, 1994).

For the most part, characters were also played by ‘able bodied’ actors, similar to Caucasian people dressing up in so-called black face: white people portraying black characters, often in a comical way. Leonidas Chaney was one of the most popular of these actors at the time. He was a child of deaf parents and often played characters with disabilities in movies such as *The Sea Urchin* (1913), *The Penalty* (1920), *Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923) and *The Miracle Man* (1928) (Norden, 1994). During the silent film era, actors with physical disabilities were recruited to play parts more frequently. The silent films presented a golden opportunity for deaf actors to appear on the silver screen and two of them, Emerson Romero and Granville Redmond were depicted with prominence, with Redmond even appearing alongside Charlie Chaplin in films (Schuchman, 1999). Several companies also recruited amputated actors to play roles in

films that depended on the “shock factor” of their appearance in films like *The Automobile Accident* (1904), *One Legged Man* (1908), and *Story of a Leg* (1910).

1930s - 1950s

Specific groups for disability representation began forming in the 1930s. For example, in 1935, the League for the Physically Handicapped was one of the first advocacy organizations to help progress the Disability Rights movement, protesting discrimination by New York state and federal relief agencies (Bagenstos, 2009). The Second World War led to the creation of the National Federation of the Blind in 1940, which urged states to adopt “white cane laws,” which eliminated restrictions on the use of service animals by blind people which gave them far more independence (Mercer and Barnes, 2003). This decade also saw tragic laws: for example, in 1938, including legal protection for the sterilization of women with mental disabilities in 33 states (Mercer & Barnes, 2003).

The 1930s introduced movies with sound, known as talkies, ending the silent film eras. “Talkies” introduced new stereotypes, while reinforcing older ones, such as what Norden (1994) calls the Obsessive Avenger. This stereotype emphasizes three common prejudices, “disability is a punishment for evil, disabled people are embittered by their fate, disabled people resent the nondisabled and would, if they could destroy them” (Norden, 1994: 4). The 1930s brought both familiar literary characters such as Captain Ahab in *Moby Dick* (1930) and Long John Silver in *Treasure Island* (1934 & 1950) as well as the trend of using characters with disabilities in horror movies such as *Frankenstein* (1931), *Freaks* (1932), and *Ghost of Frankenstein* (1942) among several others. *Freaks* used “real circus show freaks,” many of who reported later regretting appearing in a movie they felt was exploitative (Cook, 2001). The horror genre also introduced a stereotype that ran mainly between the 1930s to the mid 1940s which Norden (1994) called the

Saintly Sage: blind and usually older, pious, and above all, wise, with the ability to “see” what “sighted” people cannot (Norden, 1994: 131). The best example can be found in *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), which depicts a nameless, old hermit as the only character who “understands the monster will behave as a human being if so treated” (Norden, 1994: 133).

World War two (WWII) increased depictions of veterans with disabilities as “Noble Warriors” as well as displaying “Civilian Superstars” such as in *Eyes in the Night* (1942) and *The Hidden Eye* (1945) are both about a detective who uses a seeing-eye dog. An actor with a disability played Dr. Kildare through 15 films, from 1938 to 1947, with the actor’s own wheelchair utilized (Norden, 1994). Many of the war films ignored important topics like prejudice and access, possibly due to the Hollywood Blacklisting era during the Cold War, which blacklisted several directors producing progressive films, including films depicting progressive disability subjects among other issues (Norden, 1994). But this time also presented some of the more positive examples of people with disabilities such as *Johnny Belinda* (1948) and *Man of a Thousand Faces* (1957), one of the first films to deal with deafness and heredity and to present a happy deaf couple, as well as depicting the life of actor Leonidas Chaney (Schuchman, 1999). Also, *Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), directed by William Wyler, addressed the issues faced by war veterans with disabilities adjusting back to their home life. Several films would still maintain the old stereotypes, relying on old formulas to try and combat the introduction of television (Norden, 1994).

1960s – 1990s

The 1960s and early 1970s were an era of great change, caused by a time of high civil rights activism and large changes in legislation in regards to disabilities (Norden, 1994). A shift began to occur from the medical model of disability, with disability seen as a disease to be cured

and the responsibility of the family to a more social model, focusing on social and environmental barriers that create disability by favoring an “abled” society (Mercer & Barnes, 2003). Dramatic changes in legislation occurred: the FCC required captions for television and the Media Access Office was founded in 1978 to fight for people with disabilities and better representation in Hollywood (Nelson, 2003). The Fair Housing Act of 1988 prohibited discrimination on the basis of race, sex, disability, national origin, or familial status for state and federally funded housing (U.S Department of Justice, 2009). Finally, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 was Congressional recognition that society’s institutions and structures functioned as unintentional barriers to people with disabilities and that society needed to make changes to improve their inclusion in the community (Bagenstos, 2009).

This progression began to make its way into film as directors, writers, and producers started making characters with disabilities just people who happen to have disabilities and introduced topics such as prejudice, rehabilitation, and sexuality (Mercer & Barnes, 2003). Television included more characters with disabilities, with storylines about acceptance in *Little House on the Prairie*, with Mary’s blindness, and episodes of *Ironside* (1967-1975), which has a detective in a wheelchair (Smit & Enns, 2001). The “Obsessive Avenger” stereotype appeared in television with the wheelchair-using villain in *Loveless* (1965-1970). Humor was also still utilized with famous cartoon characters such as Porky Pig’s stutter, Mr. Magoo’s eyesight, and Elmer Fudd’s speech impediment portrayed on popular children’s television (Norden, 1994).

New topics of disabilities, including suicide and adjusting to a disability were discussed in the *The Elephant Man* (1980), the television movie *Whose Life is it Anyway* (1981), and in an episode of *Quincy M.E.* (1983), when a dockworker loses his arm and has to learn how to live with the disability. Also seen is the movie *Mask* (1985) in which a man with severe physical

difference faces discrimination (Norden, 1994). War movies also addressed these new disability themes. For example, *Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Coming Home* (1978) explore Vietnam soldiers' reentry into American life and culture, with both physical disabilities as well as PTSD, both representing a rather accurate portrayal of the Vietnam trauma and *Tell Me That You Love Me*, *Junie Moon* (1970) which deals with deinstitutionalization and independent living, trying to link ableist and racist attitudes. Also seen during this time were satires making fun of the classic disability stereotypes such as *Blazing Saddles* (1974), *Young Frankenstein* (1974), *Tommy* (1975) and *Movie Movie* (1978), all which satirizes disabilities. For example, in *Young Frankenstein*, director Mel Brooks satirized the hunchback character, Igor, by having his hump change sides from scene to scene and he also included the stereotyped saintly sage of the blind man (Norden, 1994). Overall, the subject of disability seems to be discussed with much more freedom and variety than in the past decades.

Literature Review

Perceptions of People with Disabilities

Although there are improvements today in the treatment of people with disabilities from past decades, there are still stigmas that remain. Students with disabilities are 50% less likely to report a sense of belonging, feeling safe or accepted, or to view other students as kind, than students without disabilities (Hogan, McLellan, & Bauman, 2000). They also report greater levels of conflict at school, loneliness and isolation and negative peer attitudes towards them (Hogan et al, 2000; Nowicki & Sandieson, 2002). Prejudice against disabilities often did not vary by type of disability (mental versus physical) with children holding negative attitudes towards all disability in general (Maras & Brown, 2000; Nowicki et al., 2002). "Typically developing" students can have stigmas regarding disability, which result in teasing or avoidance toward their

peers with disabilities (Carter & Spencer, 2006; Martlew & Hodson, 1991). For example, a study done of high achieving children found they commented that classmates with disabilities often exhibited inappropriate behavior (Litvack, Ritchie, & Shore, 2011). Another study also found stigmas of autistic children could transfer to parents, leading to humiliation, social exclusion, and isolation by others (Farrugia, 2009), a topic that was discussed in some form through shows like *Glee* and *American Horror Story*, among others. Likewise, a majority of disabled students in one survey felt stigmatized in relationships with peers (Tally, 2010).

When students and faculty in the larger social community are educated on disability, it is more likely students with disability will maximize their educational potential (Graham & English, 2001; Campbell, Gilmore, & Cuskelly, 2003). This is because greater education about disability leads to more positive reactions of people towards those with disabilities (Askamit, Morris, & Leuenberer, 1987). According to Albert Bandura (1986), behaviors are learned quickly through observation and imitation of others. Although these studies refer to education within the school, their findings might also apply to cognitions and behaviors learned through television as well, which could apply to tolerance within the larger community. The more positive examples of disability seen in television, would most likely contribute to more positive reactions towards people with disabilities, by providing models of accepting and appropriate behavior when interacting with people who have a disability.

Perceptions from Disability Community

There has also been an increase in responses and critiques of people with disabilities about the portrayals of disabilities within media. A study surveying the reaction of ten male wheelchair athletes to sport print media featuring disability coverage found that they did not want “courtesy coverage,” where people with disability are highlighted simply because they

possess a disability (Hardin & Hardin, 2003). An online survey of people with disabilities was conducted by Beth Haller and Lingling Zhang (2010) to discover how they feel about media representations, which revealed that entertainment shows actually depicting people with disabilities such as *Little People, Big World*, were the most empowering and that news media did not provide balanced views of disabilities, and often used predominately negative frames. In an analysis of *Glee*'s first season, Alice Sheppard (2011), a dancer with AXIS wheelchair Dance Company, found that the show was failing in regards to depictions of disabilities. She found two main themes of isolation and difference, especially in regards to the character Artie Abrams on *Glee* who uses a wheelchair, and is a main character in the glee club. Artie Abrams was also the subject of criticism in an article of *The Guardian*, stating controversy over *Glee*'s utilization of "cripface" (using actors without disabilities to play characters with a disability) because Kevin McHale, who plays Artie, does not have a disability. This criticism revealed that while viewers without disabilities praised *Glee* for its disability-centric episodes, viewers who actually had disabilities found some of the episodes offensive and wildly inaccurate (Smith, 2010). Some of this skepticism may be warranted as *USA Today* (2009) revealed that one third of actors overall who have disabilities reported feeling discrimination in the workplace by being refused an audition or not cast in a role due to their disability.

Television Effects and Influences

Television has been viewed as useful in educating viewers in various topics. Researchers found a total of 65% of teens surveyed were able to recall facts about condom efficacy presented in a *Friends* episode (Collins, Elliott, Berry, Kanouse, & Hunter, 2003). A 15 year long study done at the University of Michigan, found a link between viewing TV violence and violent behavior, which persisted into adulthood (Huesmann, Moise, Podolski, & Eron, 2003). A survey

distributed to high school students revealed that watching *The Daily Show* had a positive effect on civic participation and this relationship was mediated by political efficacy (Hoffman & Thomson, 2009). The “Lisa the Vegetarian” episode from *The Simpsons* led to a study examining the effects of nutrition related information on children’s nutrition cognitions and intended behaviors. Results for follow-up post test knowledge and intended behaviors were significantly more positive for the treatment group (Byrd-Bredbenner, Greci, & Quick, 2010). These studies exemplify just some of the numerous ways television impacts viewers. The effects on knowledge, perception, and behavior seen in these studies demonstrate how television shows, like *Glee*, can impact how viewers perceive and think about certain issues, like disabilities.

Disability and Media Content Studies

Frequencies of disability representations have varied at different points in time. In the 1940s and 1950s most portrayals focused on mental disabilities, possibly due to the fact a person with a mental disability can still maintain a perceived look of “normality.” A sample of one week of dramatic programs broadcast on New York City stations in 1953 showed 2% of characters in evening programs and 6% of daily serials were categorized as insane (Smythe, 1954). Another study analyzed television films, documentary films, and feature films from 1948 to 1958. The number of television films that portrayed mental illness increased from 27 in 1954 to 170 films in 1957 yet decreased to 73 in 1958 (Gerbner, 1959). A follow up study found the decrease was due to censorship of films because of references to mental illness that they made, with comedies as the film genre most censored (Gerbner, 1961). Also, television productions that mentioned mental illness were often in the dramatic genre and theatrical films with mental illness were frequently in the horror and mystery genres (Gerbner, 1960).

However, lack of physical disabilities was not always the case in television. Physical disabilities were found in programming that appeared on independent stations as well as in popular programming. One study examined all programs in a one-week sample that aired on an independent VHF station in 1955 and found physical disabilities were referred four to ten times more frequently than mental disabilities (Nunnally, 1957). *Gunsmoke*, a show that aired on CBS affiliates and America's longest running Western (1955-1975), contained the character of Chester Goode, as part of the series from 1955-1963, who was the deputy's assistant and had a physical disability (Brioux, 2008).

Studies noted the scarcity of disability portrayals in the 1970s and 1980s. For example, Bradley Bond (2008) looked at 408 episodes of children's programming. Findings revealed characters with physical disabilities were rare. The characters with physical disability tended to be older males, the disability was often central to the character yet insignificant to the plot (Bond, 2008). Another study looked at programming in 1979, of 387 major and 542 minor characters. This study showed 3% of major and 1% of minor characters had a physical disability in comparison to 15% to 20% of the population with physical disabilities at that time (Donaldson, 1981). Francis Barcus (1978) analyzed network and independent weekday morning programming and independent weekday afternoon programming broadcast in 1977. A total of 228 program segments, 889 characters, and 1,022 commercials were sampled for physical disability. Barcus (1978) found nine segments that dealt with physical disabilities. Similarly, Barcus (1983) noted very few characters with disabilities in his examination of 1,145 characters across 235 programs. Overall portrayals of physical disabilities were limited and did not accurately convey the numbers of disabilities found within the population.

Mental disabilities were still the most prevalent disabilities portrayed during the 1970s and 1980s. One study found that 10% of prime time shows from 1969-1978 regularly involved some depiction or theme of mental illness (Gerbner, 1980). Another study looked at one month of primetime programs on five stations in 1981 (Wahl & Roth, 1982). The sample of 385 programs found 29% of the programs contained some relevance to mental illness, with characters often males over the age of 40 who had no specific occupation. Finally, Nancy Signorielli (1989) identified depictions of mental illness in 20% of all the primetime programs, affecting 3% of major characters (Signorielli, 1989).

Overall, disabilities were portrayed very little in television during the 1970s and 1980s, potentially due to the fact that disability awareness began growing during this time, leading to a fear in media to portray disabilities, as well as the fact disabilities were often seen in film. Regardless of the reasons, studies found an era of invisibility during this time for disability portrayals. Byrd and Elliott (1985) analyzed 1,051 films in the 1980's and found 11.4% depicted disabilities, with the largest depictions being males with psychiatric disorders. Television had even less representation with less than 1% of approximately 23,000 intervals observed depicting disability content (Warzak, Majors, Hansell, & Allan, 1988). Also, the studies of the 1990's stopped analyzing for frequencies and began focusing on content and how the disabilities that were depicted were portrayed.

In looking at today's portrayals, some shift from past representations can be seen, but there is still a large lack of disability portrayed in communication media. A study found that less than 1% percent of series regulars on broadcast networks for the 2011-2012 season were depicted as living with a disability (*GLAAD*, 2011). They also stated that the majority of the

appearances of disabilities are seen on the Fox network and there were fewer portrayals than the previous season (*GLAAD*, 2011).

Disability and Media Studies: Content Portrayals

Media has provided a reference point for construction of disabilities both in the past as well as currently, by providing a gauge of where society is in accepting disabilities or aspects of disabilities, and by showing an example to the audience of what they as viewers should believe about disability and its struggles. The studies from the 1940s to the 1980s mainly focused on frequencies but discussed some portrayals. One study said that Hollywood tended to associate mental illness with bizarre aspects of human behavior for typically dramatic purposes (Gerbner, 1980). Nunnally (1957) also found that mental and physical disabilities were linked with bizarre symptoms, particularly in physical appearance. On a more positive note, a few characters such as Chester Goode from *Gunsmoke* became important characters to the plot and had understated disabilities (Newcomb, 2012). Donaldson's study (1981) found disability was often made a spectacle of, and that characters were isolated from others. The characters were also seen as either evil and menacing or sick and pitiful. Barcus (1978) also noted that characters with disabilities also were often portrayed in a comical way. The mentally ill were also viewed as more likely to commit violence or become a victim (Gerbner, 1980; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1981). People with disabilities were most likely not employed outside of the home and were more often portrayed as failures in employment (Signorielli, 1989). Wahl and Roth (1982) found common traits among characters with disabilities were confusion and aggressive behavior, with a potential for being dangerous and unpredictable.

During the 1990s a few studies focused more specifically on the types of common stereotypes shown for characters with disabilities. For example, a study in the 1990s looked at

the attitudes of viewers with disability on the portrayals of disability found on television. Several criticisms were found, among them being the largely negative way disability was featured in dramas and soaps, the limited variety of character types, the infantilization of people with disabilities, and the persistent use of the wheelchair as an iconic symbol of disability (Ross, 1997). Some other examples of negative stereotypes seen when looking at television and film during the 1990s show people with disabilities as victims to be pitied and being incapable of living fulfilling lives (Norden, 2001) or as childlike, incompetent, needing total care, and a drain on tax payers' money (Nelson, 2003). Obsessive-compulsive disorder in particular was often treated with humor and levity, during the 1990s in shows such as *Monk*, which often distorted the actual experience of the disorder (Cefalu, 2009).

Today: Repeating Formulas and Breaking Tradition

Movies and television function under curious economics, due to the fact their success cannot be predicted until they are completed (Grant & Wood, 2004). Because of this, Hollywood relies on certain formulaic strategies that have been lucrative, and these strategies often include stereotyped and easily identified characters. There is still representation of negative stereotypes seen such as Mini-Me in *Austin Powers*, who is also used as both a villain and a comedic device and Samuel L. Jackson as the villainous Mr. Glass in *Unbreakable* (Nelson, 2003). The show *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* aired 29 out of 165 episodes that addressed hearing loss or deafness, prominently through one recurring character, Gil Grissom. This show presented hearing loss as isolating, but celebrated Deaf culture in other storylines (Foss, 2009). One example of positive disability portrayal in television is that of an amputee woman, Svetlana, in the *Sopranos*, who is portrayed as independent, especially sexually (Lebesco, 2006). Usually, when Svetlana is shown without her prosthetic her residual limb is not visible (Lebesco, 2006).

Svetlana has sexual relations with the character Tony, determining the rules of their love affair, and takes care of Tony when he is ill (Lebesco, 2006). In *Desperate Housewives* (2008), the character Carlos becomes permanently blind and struggles with the unwarranted fear of losing his love and his inability to be the main breadwinner. Also on *Desperate Housewives*, the character Orson Hodge has a hard time adjusting to life in a wheelchair after a plane accident (IMDB, 2008). The movie *Tiptoes* (2003) revolves around the difficulties of dwarfism, yet ironically has average size actors playing any major character with billing, contradicting the importance of the subject. A “little person” played the role of a boss man in the *HBO* series *Carnivale* (2003-2005) and a dwarf character is featured within the currently popular show of *Game of Thrones* (2011-present). However, *Glee* is one of the shows with the largest amount and diversity of different portrayals. The show utilizes both positive and negative stereotypes and most of the topics in past years of study. The show tries to create a positive awareness for disability issues, which makes it a very unique show for studying.

Theoretical Framework

This study will use theories predominately focused on meaning interpretation and stereotyping. Television’s creators and viewers bring established frameworks of knowledge to infuse and interpret television messages through their own perspectives. Stuart Hall’s theory of encoding/decoding stipulates that the receiver of a message will interpret the message in three ways. The first stance is the dominant hegemonic position, where the viewer decodes the message in the same way as the reference code. Second is the negotiated position, where the viewer understands the dominant message, but adds their contradictions and beliefs. Third is the oppositional position, where the viewer completely rejects the dominant message (Hall, 2006). This theory is useful in considering the various ways people can interpret a television show such

as *Glee*, especially in regards to how a certain group might be constructed. Viewers, based on the background frameworks they are using to interpret the show, can interpret one theme into several perspectives. Hall's theory will be used when considering the different variations a certain message can be perceived.

Media of all kinds utilize stereotypes to help viewers quickly reference certain character types when watching. Richard Dyer's theories revolve around the stereotyping of various groups within media. He focused attention on the portrayal of homosexuality and ethnicity, but his theory can be expanded to include that of disability. Dyer emphasizes the idea of the stereotyped group living in community as well, which is similar, for the most part, to the characters in *Glee*, especially in regards to some of the characters with disabilities. Several of the characters with disabilities seek out others dealing with similar circumstances, either through a school or through relationships. Dyer (1993) defines a stereotype as having four different definitions: an ordering process, a short cut, a reference, and as an expression of values, which, although not always inherently wrong, can contain problems. Ordering process involves thinking of stereotypes as absolutes and the order being grounded in social power. The issue with shortcuts is that the simplicity they are supposed to create is deceptive, and that many connotations are implied within an individual stereotype (Dyer, 1993). The problem with references lies in the fact that this form is usually used to tell the story of a certain character, causing a social issue to become merely a personal or individual one (Dyer, 1993). Finally, in expression of values, people usually get their ideas about social groups from the stereotypes that are already formed, which causes an endless cycle of regenerating stereotypes (Dyer, 1993).

Constant exposure to specific ideas causes those thoughts to imprint in viewer's minds. The theory on social construction of reality (1966) sets up an interconnection between the social

culture and the individual. In this theory, humans fall into habitual ways of acting, especially in relation to others as typical or ideal types. The process of sedimentation occurs when we selectively choose from and store information about a subject that is relevant to us (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Humans construct life, but over time, the social life becomes social fact, where things become fixed into society. To preserve these social facts, legitimating is utilized, which is connected to the creation and control of ideas. This leads to people themselves becoming a social product (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Dyer's theory describes definitions and issues for stereotypes in general, but Nelson and Barnes developed a list of specific stereotypes that characterize how disability is portrayed within film and television. In looking at some stereotypes of disability, Jack Nelson (2011) describes the "supercrip" hero, the threat (villain), the victim, the misfit, or the burden. These five stereotypes will be compared with the characters in *Glee* who have disabilities, to see if they are replicated in any way. Colin Barnes (1992) also conducted a survey similar to Jack Nelson's analysis of the construction of disabilities in the media, which entailed eleven stereotypes. While some of the stereotypes are the same or similar to Nelson's, there are additional stereotypes that can also prove helpful in the analysis of *Glee*.

Method

This study involves analysis of the first three seasons of *Glee* as well as *Glee: The 3D Concert* movie in reference to the representations of disabilities. The show contains numerous major and minor characters with some form of disability, and uses certain episodes to highlight specific themes of disability issues. The goal of this paper is to address the following questions about *Glee* and disabilities, to try and gauge what some of the common themes for disability might be.

Textual Analysis

The paradigms for the analysis of texts first came from literature, through analyzing themes, plots, and characterizations of novels or poetry; since the 1960s this method of analysis has been applied to film and television studies (Stokes, 2003). In particular, this study will utilize a narrative analysis combined with semiotics. Narrative analysis takes as the object of analysis the entire text, focusing predominately on the narrative of the story (Stokes, 2003) Narrative analysis was chosen for *Glee*, due to its strong narrative, following story lines sometimes across several episodes. It is often chosen because narrative analysis “is often used to unpack the ideological intent of a piece of work” (Stokes, 2003: 67). Narrative analysis, for this study, involves examining all completed seasons of the television show and then analyzing the possible different meaning and interpretations involved in my subject chosen for study. Semiotics is utilized to divulge the meaning of texts and will be useful for this study because it involves “how the producer of an image makes it mean something and how we, as readers, get meaning out” (Stokes, 2003: 71). With *Glee*, multiple meanings may be found in certain disability-centric episodes, based on the interpretation of the viewer.

Cultures ascribe different meanings and levels of value to topics and issues, and this can be expanded into subcultures as well, such as those with disability and those without disabilities (McKee, 2003). For example, “in most Western countries a combination of medical and aesthetic discourses insist that being larger is not a good thing” (McKee, 2003). Disabilities also have certain discourses and stereotypes developed over the years about what to expect of a particular disability and how or how not to treat a person with disability. So, when looking at a television show that portrays disabilities, textual analysis is used to interpret the dominant meanings and overall themes about disability. Within a given society certain ideologies prevail over others.

These dominant messages are often taken for granted as the “normal” way to view people or a particular idea. Media often perpetuates these dominant ideologies, further entrenching them within society’s belief systems (Devereux, 2007).

Justification for “*Glee*”

Glee was chosen for its continuous and diverse portrayals of disabilities. Of those few shows that do depict disabilities today, *Glee* contains numerous and varied portrayals of disabilities within the three seasons chosen for analysis. Other shows have depicted disabilities such as *Malcolm in the Middle*, in which a character uses a wheelchair, *Switched at Birth*, where several characters are deaf, *House*, where Dr. House uses a cane, and *Pretty Little Liars*, where Jenna is blind and depicted as a villain. All of these shows highlight one disability, whereas *Glee* includes several. Of the four seasons currently released OCD, Down syndrome, stuttering, a deaf choir, a boy who is paralyzed from the upper chest down, a boy in a wheelchair, and a boy with dyslexia have all been highlighted in episodes. Several of these disabilities are seen in main and recurring characters.

Now in its fifth season and renewed for an additional season, *Glee* is averaging a 3.6 rating in the 18-49 demographic with an average of 8.7 million viewers, and is ranked among the top ten comedies to watch (Goldberg, 2013). *CBS News* reported that the episode that was aired after the Super Bowl was the top scripted telecast in three years, with an 11.1 rating in the 18-49 demographic (Derschowitz, 2011). The show has also won numerous awards and achievements, such as Emmys, Golden Globes, a Peabody Award, two Grammy Award nominations, two Platinum and three Gold albums, more than 53 million downloads, two sold-out concert tours (Fox, 2013; Goldberg, 2013) and a GLAAD award (Lang, 2011).

Research Questions

RQ1: How are people with disabilities constructed within *Glee*?

RQ2: To what extent does *Glee* perpetuate or challenge traditional media stereotypes about people with disabilities?

Analysis of *Glee*

The first three completed seasons of *Glee* were chosen for this study as well as a brief look at the *Glee 3D Concert* movie. Episodes that prominently highlighted disability were chosen for further analysis. Those episodes were watched multiple times. All lines in reference to disability were transcribed and notations were made throughout the viewing of episodes referring to placement of a character within shots, who the character was seen the most with, descriptions of those with disabilities. Notations were also made of any important scenes that centered on the disability, what the disability was, and descriptions of those scenes. In addition, it was briefly noted if the actor actually had the disability, or merely portrayed that disability on the show.

This information was then analyzed to see if possible themes occurred. This involved what Hall refers to as a close reading, which entails a deeper study of the episodes contextually to see recurring patterns (Livingstone, 2011). Stuart Hall (2006) also discussed the three positions an audience member takes when interpreting a message. This concept was used to think about the multiple messages that might all be interpreted through a scene that contains a character with disability or discusses disability in some way. Many scenes in the show carry the potential to produce a variety of meanings, in variance with what the viewer possibly perceives. Dyer (1993) concluded that stereotypes are often replicated and perpetuated within society. His theory also involves the discussion of the community of groups. This emphasis on community can be seen in *Glee*, through examples such as the school for the deaf and through the desire for

certain characters in *Glee* to have relationships with others who have disabilities. With the social construction theory taken into account, television's consistent portrayals of disability have the potential to socialize audiences into constructions of disabilities presented. While the audience can reject messages, it is still important to analyze potential messages audiences might be receiving and implementing into their daily perceptions. Barnes and Nelson analyzed media texts with disability seen in them to identify certain themes of stereotypes within television and movies both in the past and currently. Neither Barnes nor Nelson used *Glee* as a text of study, but it seems possible, when taking Dyer's idea of replicated stereotypes into account, that some or possibly all stereotypes about disability could be seen replicated within *Glee*.

Results

As stated earlier, several different topics are discussed on *Glee* regarding disabilities. This discussion will first address the different types of disabilities seen within the show. Secondly, the varying storylines revolving around disability are discussed. Thirdly, I looked at the overall relationships, and the interactions between characters with disabilities and characters that do not have disabilities. These relationships involve everyday interactions as well as romantic attachments. Fourthly, I discuss the concerns involved with the utilization of people without disabilities to portray a person with a disability. Finally, I discuss the stereotypes both perpetuated and challenged within *Glee*.

Overall: Types of disabilities

Overall there are a total of 12 characters with some form of disabilities. Two characters temporarily experience physical disability: Quinn Fabray, a main character in glee club, is in a wheelchair for four episodes due to a car accident and Blaine Anderson, also a member of the glee club becomes temporarily blinded for two episodes due to having a slushy with rocks

thrown at his face. Quinn's disability is highlighted and becomes her main topic of conversation for the time she has it. Blaine's disability is barely touched on, being more vocalized by other members in the glee club, than himself. Four of the twelve characters have a permanent physical disability: Artie Abrams, a main character in the glee club, is in a wheelchair, Sean Fretthold, briefly seen in one episode, is paralyzed from the upper chest down, Mr. Rumba, the choir director of one of the competing glee clubs, is partially deaf in one ear, and the final portrayal is the deaf choir Mr. Rumba coaches, who will be labeled as one character due to the fact no single choir member is named or singled out. Of all the characters with physical disabilities, the kids in the deaf choir and the actor playing Sean Fretthold actually have the disabilities being portrayed; as noted previously, much controversy revolved around the fact that the main character, Artie Abrams, is also not portrayed by an actor with the physical disability. All of the characters with physical disabilities, except the deaf choir, were not born with the disabilities; Artie and Sean both were in accidents which caused their disability and Mr. Rumba lost hearing due to Scarlet Fever. Also, all of these characters are vocal about their disability and its issues, with Mr. Rumba especially calling attention to being partially deaf.

Several characters in the show have a cognitive disability: Emma Pillsbury, the guidance counselor and a main character of *Glee*, struggles with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Jean Sylvester, Coach Sue Sylvester's sister, has Down's Syndrome and is the only character living in care facility, Becky Jackson, one of Sue Sylvester's cheerleaders and a rather prominent character on *Glee*, also has Down's Syndrome, and Sam Evans, another main character in glee club, has Dyslexia. Also introduced in the third season, is the fact Sue Sylvester is going to have a baby who has Down's syndrome, though this is only mentioned in one episode. Of these cognitive disabilities, the actors of Becky Jackson and Jean Sylvester actually do have the

disabilities they are portraying. Jean's character passes away in the second season, becoming the only character to die within the show. Of all the disabilities, Emma's is the most highlighted, especially in regards to the effects the disability has on her romantic relationships. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Sam Evans' disability is only mentioned in his first appearance and is never brought up again.

Finally, there is a third category of people with disabilities within *Glee*: fake and self diagnosed disabilities. In the first season, it is believed that Tina Cohen-Chang, another member of the glee club, has a stutter, but it is revealed in "Wheels" that she had been faking a disability as a way to avoid interaction with people. This revelation causes Artie, who has a permanent disability, to become greatly upset. Also, Quinn Fabray gets better only to fake her disability as a way to gain sympathy votes for prom queen and to be able to surprise everyone as she got up to walk at prom.

In the third season, glee member Sugar Motta introduces herself as having self diagnosed Asperger's disease. She uses this disease as her reasoning to be allowed to say whatever she wants and behave rudely. However, the disability is only mentioned in two episodes and she is later found describing herself as "abled" in comparison to Artie, who is in a wheelchair, so it is unclear whether she faked the disability. It does, however give the only construction of Asperger's disease a negative connotation, making it seem that people with this disease are rude and insensitive. This role is ironic, as the summer before Sugar Motta was cast, the *Glee Concert 3D* movie introduced a girl with Asperger's disease who talked about how much *Glee* helped her to break out of her shell and portrayed the disease in a positive light. For a list of all the characters with disabilities, please refer to the table below:

Table I: Characters with disabilities in *Glee*

| Name | Disability | Category | Permanent/Temporary | Episode 1 st Seen with Disability |
|------------------|-------------------------------|----------------|---------------------|--|
| Tina Cohen-Chang | Stutter | Physical | Temporary-Faked | Pilot |
| Artie Abrams | Wheelchair | Physical | Permanent | Pilot |
| Emma Pillsbury | Obsessive Compulsive Disorder | Cognitive | Permanent | Pilot |
| Becky Jackson | Down's Syndrome | Cognitive | Permanent | Wheels |
| Jean Sylvester | Down's Syndrome | Cognitive | Permanent | Wheels |
| Dalton Rumba | Partially Deaf | Physical | Permanent | Hairography |
| Deaf Choir | Deaf | Physical | Permanent | Hairography |
| Sean Fretthold | Paralyzed | Physical | Permanent | Laryngitis |
| Sam Evans | Dyslexia | Cognitive | Permanent | Audition |
| Sugar Motta | Asperger's Disease | Self-Diagnosed | Permanent | The Purple Piano Project |
| Blaine Anderson | Partially Blind | Physical | Temporary | Michael |
| Quinn Fabray | Wheelchair | Physical | Temporary | Big Brother |

Storylines about disabilities

It seems that in regards to disability there are two types of disability representations—those with storylines that focus on the disability and storylines that include characters with disabilities that are not about disabilities. The four most prominent themes displayed in the show involve characters facing obstacles, attempting to cure disability, and coping with disabilities. Finally, some characters appear as “regular” people who have disabilities.

Obstacles.

One constant theme of the program *Glee* is the overcoming of obstacles, from the acceptance of gay and transgender adolescents to dealing with poverty, eating disorders and teenage pregnancy. As part of this recurring theme, characters with disabilities also overcome obstacles in their physical environment.

One prominent episode depicting obstacles is “Wheels,” which centers on how Artie Abrams is treated by other members of the glee club, due to his wheelchair. He is often overlooked when it comes to full involvement within the group, often sitting on the sidelines of songs. In several episodes, Artie has to be carried out of the auditorium, due to the lack of accessibility. The school has a lack of ramps, which limits his access into the school itself. Artie even has to travel alone to competitions because the bus is not physically structured for his wheelchair. Principal Figgins reveals they cannot afford a “handicapable” bus and requires the glee club to pay for it themselves. Artie is physically isolated due to the fact the auditorium, buses, entrances, etc. were designed for teenagers who were “abled.”

When the subject of raising money for a bus that is wheelchair accessible is broached, the glee members protest, saying, “Artie doesn’t mind, do you Artie?” However Artie states, “I kind of do mind. It kind of hurt my feelings.” The glee club’s coach, Will Schuester, is unhappy at the

club's lack of sensitivity and gives the glee club an assignment. Will asks them to be in wheelchairs for two hours every day, to have a bake sale to raise money for the bus, and to perform a wheelchair number in order to understand what challenges Artie faces every day. Wheeling around school, the glee club members get hit by bags in the hallways, have food slammed in their faces, and lack the ability to reach things due to their wheelchairs. In another example, when Quinn becomes temporarily paralyzed, Artie has her attempt the largest ramp in all of Lima, which is the town where the characters reside. Finally, when Quinn suggests a Six Flags theme park for Senior Ditch day (a day when all high school seniors skip school), Artie convinces her not to go, and to go on a special trip to a skateboarding park for people with disabilities. He says, "Going to an amusement park when you are in a wheelchair, especially when you're first getting used to it, can kind of be a drag."

These examples highlight the physical obstacles a person can face when the environment is not designed to accommodate them, and the emotional barrier of isolation these physical barriers can create. It was also interesting to bring up the fact these barriers were not used intentionally. The school could not afford the basic things Artie needed and the club members simply did not think about the ways things could affect their friend, because it was not seen as a priority.

"Curing the disability."

Also prominently seen within the show is the theme of "curing" one's disability. This topic involves the idea that disabilities need to be fixed or corrected for the person to have a happy and fulfilled life. Artie, especially struggles with the fact that he is in a wheelchair. In "Dream On," a school board representative asks the club to write down their dreams, and it is Artie's written dream that he balls up and throws into a trashcan. Tina, Artie's girlfriend at the

time, discovers he wants to dance, and fans Artie's hopes for a future cure with scientific studies that would lead him to achieving his dream. After an embarrassing incident where Artie falls on his face in front of Tina while attempting to dance, Artie gets frustrated asking her to go away and he says, "We shouldn't have done this, you pushed me to do this." This expresses how upset he is by being reminded of his disability and how it hinders his ability to walk and dance. His wishes are expressed in a dream sequence later on, where Artie tells Tina "My doctor is starting me on the treatments you'd mentioned...and guess what they're working," and he gets out of the wheelchair to dance and sing in a flash mob. This seems to portray that with a disability, one cannot achieve their dreams, and finding a "cure" is the only answer. It also is interesting, that the largest highlight of the character Artie Abrams within the concert involves him not in his wheelchair, dancing to the song portrayed within this dream sequence.

Artie brings his newfound belief in his ability to walk to his guidance counselor, Emma, saying, "When I start walking, I'm going to need help adjusting to my drastically altered lifestyle." Emma reveals she has read his file previously and the damage to his spinal cord was severe and irreversible and that the research was in very early stages. She suggests that he should come to see her once a week for a while, and he leaves dejected. Her message in the episode is that the Hollywood presentation of a miracle cure does not reflect real life circumstances, and that the regular curing of severe disability is still far out of the reach of today's medical science.

Artie ends up not dancing, calling himself half a partner, and saying he will never dance, but he has accepted it saying, "I have to focus on dreams that can come true." Inevitably this portrays that with a disability, there are things someone cannot do, which is not necessarily true. The only solution provided by the show to actually be able to achieve a physical dream like dancing is curing the disability that hinders it. Later on, in "A Very Glee Christmas" Brittany,

(Artie's new girlfriend that is also in glee club) makes a wish with Santa Clause for Artie to walk, which does not offend him. He tells her, "Hey, look at me. I'm fine," which shows that he is more accepting at that time of his disability. He works the rest of the episode to get Coach Beiste (the school's new football coach) to tell Brittany it is not possible for him to walk. Coach Beiste ends up getting Artie a ReWalk machine, which is a form of assistive technology that allows him to take steps when he uses it.

Yet even with his acceptance, Artie is again seen dancing in the episode "Michael" without the wheelchair. Right before the sequence Artie expresses his anger at the fact the Warblers threw rock salt in fellow glee member Blaine's eye, possibly damaging it permanently and yet get away with it. Some of his inner frustrations seem to come out as he says, "Don't give me any of it gets better crap, because I'm not interested in it getting any better. I want it to be better, like right now! I want them to feel my pain, because frankly, that's all I have left to give," Some of this seems to be residual anger that could be reflected to the person who caused the car accident that left Artie in a wheelchair. In the dream sequence Artie expresses his anger at the wheelchair, kicking and screaming at it, and tossing it to other parts of the room, while singing the song "Scream". In the "Spanish Teacher" episode, Artie says that by 2025 he will be walking, further revealing his belief and desire for curability. Overall, he is angry at the fact he has the disability and feels limited from reaching his dreams because of it.

Also highlighted in this theme are Quinn Fabray and Blaine Anderson (both club members), who only briefly experience disability. On the way to a wedding, Quinn gets distracted by a fellow club member's texts, and gets hit by a car. This causes her to become paralyzed for several episodes. Quinn is entirely convinced she will be walking again quickly. She states that she is starting to regain feeling, "So with a lot of physical therapy and your

prayers, I stand a chance for full recovery. I promise that by the time we go to nationals, I'll be out of this chair and dancing on that stage." This declaration seems to really bother Artie, who does not agree she should be completely sure of recovery. He shows her how to use the ramps and have fun with a disability, taking her to a park where people with disabilities are skateboarding and rollerblading. This scene somewhat contradicts Artie's belief that with a disability, one cannot achieve a physical goal that was reflected in "Dream On." Artie and Quinn end up arguing because Quinn says her disability is only temporary and Artie claims she is in denial. She states, "I'm not denying anything, ok? You're not me. I'm not like you. This isn't my life. I'm going to Yale, I'm getting out of Lima, and I'm gonna walk again." Artie asks her to think about the possibility she might not walk. Quinn's refusal to accept the possibility she might be permanently in a wheelchair shows that she seems to view that fate as becoming a permanent victim who is stuck. Having her disability cured is the only option she is willing to accept. While Artie's intentions seem to be based on attempting to make her perceive reality, it also seems there could be some jealousy present in the fact she may still have the possibility to be "cured." Quinn eventually does reveal she can walk again and shows everyone at prom, with her disability lasting only four episodes. Blaine's eye injury is mainly used as cause for the New Directions to be angry with the competing team, the Warblers, for throwing the slushy in Blaine's face. Within two episodes, Blaine's disability is corrected, and never mentioned again. Finally, within this theme is the pressure from others to be "cured" of disability. Most of school counselor Emma's boyfriends all struggle with her Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, and feel that their support and love will eventually cure her; this becomes a large goal of the men in Emma's life: to make Emma better. Although, wanting to be cured may be an issue some people with disabilities may

consider, all of these storylines detract from presenting portrayals of characters with disabilities who are still truly content and feel fulfilled with their lives.

Coping with Disabilities.

As mentioned above, Artie's dream sequences where he can dance are one major example of his attempts to remove himself from his disability. He also attempts to disassociate himself from the disability by focusing on talents that do not challenge it in any way, such as his directing and filmmaking aspiration. Additionally, "Wheels" addresses the subject of equal treatment with the introduction of Becky Jackson, who has Down's Syndrome. Cheerleading coach Sue Sylvester chooses her for the team and expects her to be able to jump rope just like the rest of the team can. When Will Schuester (the glee choir director) scolds her for her treatment she points out that Becky just wants to be treated the same way everyone else is. This points to an overall message that having a disability does not mean the need to be treated differently. Becky turns to things such as cheerleading, sewing, playing poker, and other talents because they make her feel like everyone else. Similarly, Sean Fretthold (the friend of a glee member), who is a quadriplegic, eventually chooses to focus on his ability to sing and his talents with mathematics instead of focusing on his disability.

Other characters focus on other areas to cope with their disabilities. For example, Quinn frequently goes to physical therapy after her accident, in the hopes she will be able to regain her ability to walk. She tries to keep things in her life such as the same locker, in hopes one day she can return to that life without a disability. She tells Artie she is not like him, and is going to get better. She does not attempt to discuss her feelings for fellow glee member, Joe, because she feels her disability would keep her from being appealing to him. Guidance counselor Emma Pillsbury attempts to disassociate herself from her disability for a long time, by completely

denying its existence. For example, she is seen telling Will, “I don’t have a problem” and in “Born this Way,” when she is supposed to reveal a shirt to the kids saying she is proud of herself despite her disability, she completely denies it by saying she is now “proud to be a ginger.” She eventually begins to go to therapy and take medications to try and manage some of her behaviors, and admits that she has Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Emma also attempts to utilize the role model of Madonna and her music to attempt to break free from her problems with intimacy due to her Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.

“Regular” People with Disabilities.

The final prominent storyline revolving around disability involves characters that simply happen to have disabilities in the sense that their disabilities are not always the main focal point of their characters. Most obvious in this category is glee club member Sam, who briefly mentions having dyslexia. Throughout the seasons, there is never any attempt to discuss the struggles or issues that may be involved with dyslexia; the show just portrays Sam as a regular teen struggling with typical teenage topics. When the storylines revolve around some other issue, the people with disabilities are involved in the storyline as regular teenagers, and, for the most part, their disability is minimalized. By including recurring characters with disabilities, these characters appear in storylines about other issues. Artie, in his wheelchair, appears in all episodes of *Glee*, regardless of the topics covered in the episodes. Artie is not just a character in a wheelchair- he is also a student, glee club member, filmmaker, friend, and boyfriend, who faces other challenges of being a teenager. For example, in the episode, “Blame it on the Alcohol,” which focuses on teenage drinking, Artie imbibes with the rest of the glee club members and flirts with his girlfriend, Brittany. Similarly, most episodes with the character Emma do not revolve around her disability, especially in the later seasons. Sue Sylvester, the cheerleading

coach, constantly spends time with her cheerleader, Becky Jackson, who has Down's syndrome. Becky appears as Sue's sidekick, without focusing on her disability, such as when she helps rob Christmas presents, comforts Sue when she is upset, helps make *Saturday Night Fever* suits, and functions as co-captain of the Cheerios, the school's cheerleading team. When the episode does not discuss the disability, the character is barely noticeable. For example, Quinn is not present in several episodes during the course of her disability.

Interactions with People with Disabilities

One of the most dominant themes seen in *Glee*, in general, focuses on relationships. The show elaborates on several types of relationships: co-workers, friends, family, romantic, and teacher/student are all relationships depicted within the show. Some relationships last over seasons while others last the length of a single episode. Throughout all of these relationships, it is imperative to look at how the characters with disabilities are regarded. As discussed previously, these relationships and storylines can cause viewers to develop certain perceptions of how people with disabilities should be treated, especially when their main exposure to a stereotyped group is within the show itself instead of actual interactions of people with disabilities.

Everyday Interactions.

For the majority of the first three seasons, the glee club is considered to be an unpopular club filled with several kids who regularly get harassed by the more popular crowd, even for the club members with disabilities. Artie is often seen being teased by football players, like other glee club members, has regular romantic relationships with some of the characters, and is included in other outcast situations with other members, such as the "Hot or not" list where he is listed as "not hot" with several other members.

However, it appears that characters with disabilities are treated a little differently than their peers. The bullies of the school either avoid mocking characters with disabilities or they relish in ridiculing them. Before Noah Puckerman, a popular football player, joins the glee club, he welcomes Finn Hudson, the football quarterback, back to being “normal” after a stint in the glee club, by giving him the gift (his bullying interpretation of what he perceives a gift) of the wheelchair kid (Artie) in a port a potty bathroom to roll down the hill, rationalizing, “He’s already in a wheelchair.” Interestingly, the football team later disengages from beating up Finn for being in glee club because Artie comes in between them and one member states, “I don’t hit crippled people.” In this case, the disability evokes some semblance of pity, and causes them to leave. The bullies’ stance is later reversed as they try to hit Artie, stating equal treatment. This constant flip-flopping is not present when they bully any of the other glee club members. It is almost as if they are in a constant fluctuating debate among themselves about how to treat people with disabilities.

Similarly, Artie is treated differently, in particular, by the positions of authority within the school, which sometimes further his isolation and diminish him in comparison to other characters on the show. In the “Pilot” Figgins, the school’s principal says, “What is it with you and this club? You’ve got five kids. One of them’s a cripple,” which insinuates that Artie’s disability puts him on a lesser level than the other glee club members. Also, in “Acafellas,” when the choreographer Dakota Stanley comes in, he kicks Artie out right off the bat saying, “Artie you’re cut, you’re not trying hard enough...at walking! Can’t be wheeling you around every number, throws off the whole dynamic, and it’s depressing.” Likewise, Coach Sue Sylvester tells Will Schuester, the choir director, “You need twelve kids to compete at Regionals. Last I looked, you only had five and a half: cripple in the wheelchair.” In this circumstance, Artie does not even

count as a person in Sue's eyes, which is a confusing stance since Sue herself has a family member with disability. And in "Throwdown," Sue Sylvester includes "Wheels," referring to Artie, in her elite glee club of people she feels are minorities within the glee club. In "Audition," when Artie wants to join the football team, Coach Beiste yells at quarterback Finn Hudson for having to tell a "cripple he can't play," without even seeing what Artie can do. All of these circumstances reflect the tendency of characters with authority to isolate, limit, and minimize those with disabilities.

Examples of discrimination towards disabilities abound within *Glee*. In "The Substitute," Sue Sylvester tries to convince some of the glee club members to donate their sperm for her future baby, but she tells Artie he is not included even though he is in a wheelchair due to an accident, discriminating against him in comparison to other members of the glee club. In "Wheels," Sue again discriminates by complaining that a cheerleader wheeling herself out onto the field would be "decidedly less effective at cheering people up." This discrimination is interesting, as it seems that cognitive disabilities are looked at more favorably overall by Sue Sylvester than physical disabilities. Sometimes the discrimination actually results in opportunity, as Artie is chosen to direct a television special due to the fact he made the owner of the station think of Tiny Tim, reflecting the common stereotype that has been constantly utilized by media.

Despite the negative attitudes toward Artie and his physical disability, other characters with disabilities do not experience the same obstacles. For example, after cheerleader Quinn Fabray requires a wheelchair, other characters sympathize with Quinn about her disability and become inspired by her perseverance. Possibly, this is due to the fact that everyone knew Quinn before the accident, and so their perceptions of her did not change much. Similarly, Becky

Jackson, who has Down's syndrome, primarily does not receive the negative responses often associated with Artie's character.

Within the glee club, it seems that disability is equated with being even more of an outcast. In the "Pilot" episode, glee club member Rachel protests having Artie as her male lead. When Will Schuester says he can coach Artie to be the male lead, Rachel says, "I'm not gonna keep making a fool of myself," basically insinuating that having Artie as her male lead is uncool, and that she does not see him as an adequate man to match her talent. In "Acafellas" Mercedes Jones, another glee club member, compares the New Directions to their competition saying, "Those Vocal Adrenaline kids are so cool and confident. We look like we just stepped off the short bus." For people who interact with disabilities every day, they speak very flippantly about disability, and make it something negative to compare themselves. Those statements say that kids with mental disabilities are seldom able to be sexual and are unable to be cool. Quinn, at that time recently new to glee club, also makes the comment in "Wheels" that the reason no one will buy cupcakes from them is because they are "losers" by being in glee club and in wheelchairs. So, not only are they on a lower level by being in glee club, but the wheelchair adds a whole new layer of un-cool to their image and have internalized the disability oppression; this is ironic since Quinn has no problem maintaining popularity when she actually ends up in a wheelchair. This scene is yet another insinuation that having a disability changes people's perceptions of a person to reflect that they are outcasts. Surprisingly, even Artie makes a comment against disability, despite possessing one himself. In "Vitamin D," when Will reveals that the glee club will compete against a school for the Deaf and one for juvenile delinquents, Artie responds, "People who can't hear what they're singing and criminals who don't care. It's gonna be a cakewalk," suggesting that even Artie sometimes discriminates against others with

disabilities. Will Schuester reinforces this perception by only inviting the delinquent choir to scrimmage, angering the deaf choir director, Mr. Rumba, who accuses him of discrimination.

Not only does the glee club make disparaging remarks against disability, it also discriminates (sometimes unintentionally) against Artie's disability, causing further isolation and causing disability to be a minority within a minority. When Artie wants to try out for the football team, he goes to Finn Hudson, a fellow glee club member and the school's quarterback, for assistance. Finn's initial reaction is not positive; in comparison to Artie's attempt to compare himself to Kurt, who is Finn's gay stepbrother, Finn says, "Being gay isn't a handicap Artie. How can you play football in a wheelchair anyway?" Although Artie eventually convinces Finn to help, his doubt suggests that people tend to have preconceived notions about the limitations of disabilities, Glee member Santana cruelly tells Artie that the only thing he has to offer her friend Brittany in a relationship is "super choice parking" due to his disability, conveying that he cannot bring anything to a relationship due to being in a wheelchair. When glee director Will Schuester brings up the idea of paying for a bus that will allow all members, including Artie, to go to sectionals together, they all protest so they don't have to have the bake sale to raise the money. Glee member Mercedes says, "Can't Artie's dad just take him?" Other members say they don't have time and fellow member Quinn says, "Artie understands, don't you Artie?" The people at the school are completely oblivious to how the environment, along with their own disregard for his inclusion, unintentionally makes his disability even more prevalent to him.

Interestingly, people with cognitive disabilities are treated differently than are the physical disabilities. Characters such as Emma, Becky, and Jean, who all have intellectual disabilities, are treated a bit more like children that need to be taken care of and protected. In the episode, "Yes/No" the glee club does a "Beckyvention" because Artie went to dinner with Becky

Jackson, showing stigmas the glee club members hold and their belief that Artie must have an angle for dating her. Artie states how narrow minded they are being. This is one of the only times that pretty much the entire glee club protests a relationship developed on the show. Will Schuester tells Coach Sue Sylvester to be nice when Becky comes in to try out for the cheerleading team, and feels that Sue must have an ulterior motive by letting Becky on the team. These are instances where Becky's intellectual disability is all that people in the school can see, and she is discriminated against because of it. In "Promasaurus," Becky rails about not being elected prom queen saying the queen can look different. Technically, at the time both she and Quinn Fabray had a disability when elected, yet there is a clear ranking of one disability (physical) being more acceptable to the school than another (intellectual). Also, in "Promasaurus," Sue is shown treating Becky like a child by designating her Chief Deputy in charge of the punch bowl, which is later undermined as Becky and glee club member Puck spike the punch. Throughout the show, Jean Sylvester, who has what is perceived as Down Syndrome, is visited by her sister, Coach Sue Sylvester, who takes care of her. Jean dies later in the second season, though it is unclear of the cause of death. The glee members use Jean's favorite movie, *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, as inspiration at her funeral. This theme reflects the child like element that seems to be associated with people who have disabilities. Similarly, guidance counselor Emma, who has OCD, is also treated like a child at times. During the "Spanish Teacher" episode, Will attempts to acquire a recently opened tenure position. At the same time, Emma (Will's current girlfriend) creates a whole new batch of pamphlets for her students. When she tries to excitedly show Will and cheer him up, he says, "Emma enough, can't you see I am doing this to take care of you?" and he calls her pamphlets "silly." She says she can take care of herself and is really proud of her pamphlets. They end up being widely successful,

with football coach Beiste calling them “genius” and Emma surprises Will by earning the tenured position, even though he had never considered her a candidate-likely because he somewhat treated her like a child himself.

Romantic Relationships.

Glee provides viewers with a look at how people with disabilities and those without disabilities interact through romantic relationships. The relationships provide several opportunities for a variety of messages to be constructed. Almost all of the romantic relationships with characters having disabilities delve into sexuality as well, which is often a taboo subject when addressing disability issues (McNutt, 2004). These relationships mainly revolve around three characters in, Artie Abrams, Emma Pillsbury, and Quinn Fabray. For example, both of Artie’s romantic relationships present his girlfriend as a nurturing caregiver to Artie, making him appear somewhat emasculated and child-like at times. Both his girlfriends wheel Artie around everywhere when they date him, even though he can transport himself. Though the gesture can be construed as something intimate, similar to the handholding, it could also be viewed symbolically as a mother-child relationship-reinforced through glee member Brittany’s comment that she thinks he reminds her of a “baby” that she “wants to get in a stroller.” This constructs the people who do not have a disability as wanting to be caretakers of those with disabilities in relationships.

Another theme perpetuates a desire to change the person with the disability. In the episode “Dream,” Tina finds research on stem-cell research, as she encourages Artie to never give up on his dream of walking. Similarly, in the episode “A Very Glee Christmas,” Brittany’s only wish is for Artie to be able to walk. Artie and the other glee members convince the football coach, Coach Beiste, to dress up as Santa Claus, who then surprises Artie with a rehabilitation

machine called a ReWalk, which allows Artie to walk with his arms as controllers, able to be used every so often. Brittany never says why she wants Artie to be able to walk, unlike Tina's very clear reasons, so it is possible a viewer could interpret Brittany's wishes as wanting to change Artie's disability for both him and herself.

Similarly, Emma's romantic partners attempt to "fix" Emma and see her disability as a hindrance to the relationship. Football coach Ken is the least interested in trying to change or "cure" Emma. In the episode "Showmance" he states, "I'll put up with all your crazy. In this town, you're not gonna do much better." This statement seems to imply that her disease keeps her from being able to attract men, which is a fear constantly reinforced by other characters in the show, leading her to settle for a good amount of the first season, on Ken. Unlike Ken, choir director Will Schuester really wants Emma to get better, and attempts to help her in this endeavor. Even before they are a couple, Will asks if he can help with one of her problems, putting chalk on her nose and leaving it there for ten seconds. Carl (Emma's dentist and boyfriend at the time) describes ways he is helping Emma with her illness, by instilling his carefree demeanor, getting her to mix her green and purple grapes together and visit a theater showing of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Will insists that Emma see a therapist to help her with her issues. When Will attempts to ask Emma's parents for permission to marry her, which they deny. Emma's parents warn Will about marrying their little "freakie deakie," causing him to have doubts. They state "Marriage is messy. And the one thing Emma can't handle is a mess. And that's before babies. I am telling you, she will not know how to deal with it." He confronts Emma about these issues, saying, "How are you going to handle spit up on your special Wednesday sweater. What if it's all just too much?" He calls her "hopeless" sometimes for having the disease, revealing the idea that those in relationships of people with disabilities might

sometimes just wish the disability did not exist. This shows sometimes it is the “normal society” that really causes a disability to be an actual disability. Yet, Emma retaliates, making a telling point that she cannot promise she will get better; “this is what you get, this incomplete person, with toothbrushes and with rubber gloves, and with so much love for you.” Reminding him of her imperfection, Will proposes to Emma with the song, “We Found Love in a Hopeless Place,” assisted by the glee members. He states, “Life is messy, it just is. And I know that’s hard for you. But that’s why you have me, to balance things out. But you have to realize you do that for me too, every day.” Their relationship, overall, really shows that people can be in a healthy relationship together, despite any disability, especially when treating one another equally with respect, and when the “abled” person stops constantly trying to fix the person with the disability.

Also commonly suggested is the tendency for people with disabilities to be attracted to one another, resembling the member community suggested by Dyer (1993). One of the largest issues that hinder the beginning of Artie and Tina’s relationship revolves around the authenticity of Tina’s stutter. One of the main attractions Artie held for Tina was the fact she had a stutter, making her able to relate to the struggles that he goes through. However, when Tina eventually reveals that she had been faking the stutter, Artie responds, “I thought we had something really important in common. I’m sorry you get to be normal and I get to be stuck in this chair the rest of my life, and that’s not something I can fake.” This somewhat realistic portrayal demonstrates how faking disability would make someone with a disability feel.

Similarly, Artie Abrams is attracted to glee member Sugar, who has “self diagnosed” Asperger’s disease. However, even though identifying herself with a disability at the very beginning of her role on the show, Sugar turns Artie down in the episode “Yes/No” due to his disability, stating he is not her type and that ‘they would look really weird together, not because

you're disabled, but because I am abled, and people are really mean, and I am really worried people are going to think that your legs look thinner than my arms." In stating this, she constructs the disability as the sole reason for rejection. Unlike the other girls, she obviously does not want to date someone with a disability, and thinks that Artie's difference should be cause for ridicule in a relationship with an "abled" girl.

Becky Jackson, who has Down's syndrome, mulls over her choices of men and settles on Artie, with one of the primary reasons being the fact he is "sweet, sexy and handicapable, just like me." Directly following Artie's rejection by Sugar for his disability, Becky asks him on a date. Artie proceeds to treat her more like a child than a young woman with mature romantic feelings. He invites her to a song performance hoping she will see that as a date, but they end up going to dinner and he realizes she is just a normal girl, and he likes hanging out with her. However, of all the girls that Artie dates, Becky is the only one that the Glee club members do an intervention about. Through this we see Artie's reasons for liking Becky are due to the fact she knows how he feels about disability and being "trapped" and that she is optimistic despite what life has handed her, showing his desire to have someone who can relate to him, but also almost a small resemblance of pity. During this confrontation, Artie brings up some pent up frustration, saying he thinks they are just as narrow minded as the rest of the school. This reveals Artie's pent up frustrations about the treatment of those with disabilities, especially himself.

Finally, sexuality and disability are addressed on several different occasions. In the case of Emma, her OCD makes it difficult in the beginning for her to be intimate, and she eventually progresses through stages during the show when it comes to being comfortable with sexuality. In her first relationship, she cries when Coach Ken Tenaka accidentally grazes her breast and will not hold his hand. Some of this aversion to intimacy is really due to the fact she is in love with

Will Schuester, but it also demonstrates and sets up the hurdles Emma has to overcome to have a functional physical relationship. When she dates Will the first time, she has to use a cleaning kit to even kiss him. This issue is fixed in Emma's relationship with Carl, her dentist, as tackling kissing becomes second nature and Emma begins to be a bit more seductive, yet retains a child like innocence in reference to sex itself. She marries Carl, yet it is revealed that after months of marriage they have yet to have sex, and she shows her inexperience by picking "Afternoon Delight" as her song of choice in reference to abstinence (because that is what she thought the subject of the song was about); this marriage is annulled since the marriage is never consummated. Finally, after Emma and Will become engaged, Emma is able to fully claim her sexual independence by giving Will a pamphlet letting him know she is ready for sex, and they accomplish the task with no issue whatsoever.

In "Duets", glee members Brittany and Artie have intercourse at Brittany's insistence. This scene is interesting because Artie could be viewed as both masculine and emasculated contiguously. On one hand, Artie is with one of the most popular girls in the school, however, in the scene, he is awkward since it is his first time and she takes control, lifting him out of the chair and placing him on the bed with her, giving all the power in the scene solely to her. Also, when he discovers Brittany did it to get back at fellow member Santana (who she had a crush on), he reveals even more vulnerability when he talks about the doctors were not even sure he would be able to have intercourse, and she ruined his first time. Also, touching on sexuality, the episode explores Becky's desire to experience a sexual relationship, and an extension of the portrayal that Artie saw Becky as more of a child, based on his rejection and somewhat evident disgust to the idea. He goes to Coach Sue freaking out and she points out the fact Becky just wants to be treated like everyone else. Sue points out that even Artie held some of the narrow-

mindedness that the other glee members held towards Becky. This can lead to the construction that even people with disabilities can stereotype or misread a different disability from their own. Artie assumed Becky to just be a child, and to not actually hold woman-like desires, which is a common stigma. In the end Becky knows that his rejection is due to her disability and that some days she hates being her. This episode taps into deeply rooted issues of people with disabilities and reiterates a common stigma of society that people have towards those with mental disabilities and relationships, which revolves around a perception that disability makes someone unattractive. Also, briefly touched on is the idea a person with disability will not feel desirable, as shown by Quinn Fabray's belief that glee member Joe cannot be attracted to her, and that no one should be. She expresses to the other girls, "doesn't matter what I want. I'm saying goodbye to that part of my life. We had a moment, and before we kissed, he pulled away, grossed out by me and my chair. Joe's not into me. I don't blame him; who would be." Eventually, this belief turns out to be untrue, as Joe reveals he is attracted to her, and only resisted due to his faith. This belief is later countered by Joe's revelation he thinks Quinn is perfect and is extremely attracted to her. Quinn and Joe's relationship, along with the others, reflect a constant construction throughout the show of the characters with disabilities feeling undesirable or inadequate, with doubts that they are deserving of love. Luckily, for the most part, *Glee* follows up these doubts with the affirmation that people with disabilities can be loved, found attractive and sexually appealing, and are worth spending an entire life with.

Disability and Agency

In *Glee*, characters without disabilities repeatedly bring up disability issues. Other characters often speak up for Artie, for example. In "Wheels" Artie Abrams' issues of isolation are brought into light by the help of choir director Will Schuster first, before he actually speaks

up for himself. Also, before this episode, Artie is not featured much in the musical numbers, often staying to the side and playing guitar, instead of dancing along with the team. From then on he is featured far more in episodes, and especially in dance numbers. For example, in “Yes/No” Artie stars, sings and dances “The Moves Like Jagger” with two of the characters well known for their dancing abilities, putting him on complete equal ground with them.

When Quinn Fabray ends up in a wheelchair, she starts doing physical therapy to try and walk again. However, she quickly becomes discouraged and does not progress well. Her improvement is spurred on by having her friend Joe come to her therapy sessions for help and encouragement, leading her to be able to walk again. He also leads her to realize that she is still desirable even in a wheelchair. The same can be said of Emma’s improvement and acknowledgement of her Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), which had to first be voiced by the men she was in a relationship with. One of the most serious topics is brought on by Will’s insistence that Emma see a therapist for her problems. In the episode, “Born This Way,” Emma is having trouble accepting the fact that she has OCD. Emma holds this mental stigma about disability herself when she says, “Ok, fine. If you want me to wear a shirt that says ‘Batty’ or ‘Loon’ on it, I will.” The therapist reveals she has severe OCD and says, “There’s a stigma in this country about mental illness. I mean depression, anxiety, OCD, bipolar, they’re hard to diagnose so people don’t always appreciate that they’re serious problems, but they are.” The fact that the topic of a stigma in regards to mental illness is highlighted within the show is rare. However, the show only addresses the stigma of mental illness, and it is really only one stigma that people might hold of mental illness, and the fact that the topic is yet again addressed because of the “abled” person in Emma’s life, who wants her to get “better.”

There is an issue presented within the show, which involves the authenticity behind the characters with disabilities. While actors with disabilities play some characters, such as Jean Sylvester and Sean Fretthold, several actors in *Glee* do not possess the disabilities they are portraying. The best example of this would be the character of Artie Abrams, who is played by an actor who can walk, so that the storyline can still involve him dancing. In both “Dream On” and “Michael Jackson,” Artie gets out of the wheelchair and dances. During the *Glee Live 3D Concert*, the only one of the songs that Artie sings alone is Safety Dance from the “Dream On” dance, so they can utilize the actor’s ability to dance. It seems that the show contradicts itself by giving Artie dance scenes, constructing he is limited by only remaining in his wheelchair.

Also seen is the removal of voice for characters with disabilities, which is displayed in the character of Becky Jackson. The episode of “Yes/No” focused partially on her romantic infatuations with Artie Abrams. After a song, the episode swaps over to Becky, who has Down’s syndrome, pondering her choices of men at McKinley High School via voiceover. Instead of letting the actress do this herself, Becky’s voice is taken away by the decision to make her inner monologue a British person (played by Helen Mirren) as a humorous tactic. While the episode explores interesting issues involving disability, it is interesting that at the same time as giving voice to the issues, they remove the true voice of an actress who actually does have a disability in real life, especially during the end scene when she talks seriously about disability. The same tactic occurs again during the episode “Promasaurus,” when Becky’s inner monologue rants over not being elected prom queen, saying that sometimes the prom queen can look different. Also, Becky’s struggles and desires are most often explained through scenes of Sue talking to other people.

Perpetuating Stereotypes

“As Pitied or a Burden.”

There are several stereotypes commonly replicated throughout *Glee*. One of the main ones presented by Barnes (2006) and Nelson (2011) is the idea that people with disabilities are to be pitied or as a helpless burden. As previously addressed, in every relationship Artie is in, the girl usually pushes his wheelchair everywhere, even though he is fully capable to move around himself. In “Dream On” Artie tries to dance, first with tap shoes attached to his chair which he says resembles a dead horse, and then with crutches that a kid with cerebral palsy lent him. As he gets up to walk with the crutches he falls to the floor, and tells girlfriend Tina to go away. The episode ends with Artie singing as he watches Tina dance with another guy on stage. Also, with Artie, Coach Beiste reconsiders her objections to him playing on the football team and lets him play without even having him audition like the other players, since she feels bad for an earlier outburst she made. Fellow glee member Puck uses Artie’s wheelchair to incite pity while they sing and collect money. Glee club star Rachel also has fellow member Finn pretend to be in a wheelchair as a ploy to get hired, threatening to sue if the employer refuses to hire her “handicapped” friend. This repeated use of the wheelchair as a source of pity seems to construct that people with disabilities often purposefully use their disability to make people feel sorry for them or to gain something.

Also falling into the stereotype of pity, in “Laryngitis,” Finn introduces Rachel to his friend Sean, who is paralyzed from the upper chest down. Sean talks about how he feels saying, “I’m miserable. I miss my body. I miss my life. I miss my friends. I miss girls.” Sean says that when they gave him a chair that he could move around in by blowing in a tube, the first chance that he was unsupervised he drove himself into the swimming pool in an attempt to commit

suicide. During this point, there is a shot of all the medications he is taking. When Rachel returns later, Sean's cover is not fully covering his chest and he freaks out and his mom has to put the cover over him. Competing choir director, Mr. Rumba keeps emphasizing the fact his kids are deaf and his own disability of being deaf in one ear multiple times.

Football player Finn campaigns for prom king and queen with Quinn Fabray because he feels awful that she got into an accident coming to his wedding to fellow member Rachel Berry wedding. Coach Sylvester explains to Becky that she did not get elected prom queen because she is mean and that "with Quinn Fabray in a wheelchair, the sympathy vote was split." Quinn even wants the pity a bit, saying Rachel's "rough stuff" she is dealing with is nothing "compared to being in a wheelchair" trying to spur sympathy from Finn. She also thanks someone for calling her brave, saying "the atrophy in my leg is a constant reminder of the slow withering remnants of my past life. The toll can at times be emotionally and physically hard, knowing that I may never walk again. Your healthy normal legs are beautiful." This comment is used to be pitied and is also considered a little villainous, as discussed later, given the fact she was faking her disability at that point. Fellow member and friend Santana said that she figured it made sense Quinn won, since she was "a cripp and all."

"As Object of Ridicule or Amusement."

Characters who have disabilities within the show are sometimes viewed as being silly or an object of ridicule. For example, Barnes (2006) states that the mockery of people with disabilities is commonplace within comedic movies and television shows, and states that his mockery undermines opportunities for people with disabilities to be taken seriously within society. This stereotype is clearly demonstrated within the show on a number of occasions, and characters disabilities are used often as comedic devices.

Mr. Rumba's (a competing choir director) inability to hear leads to misinterpretations between him and the New Directions choir director, Mr. Scheuster. In "Hairography," Mr. Rumba, constantly tells Will and others to speak louder because he is deaf in one ear from Scarlet Fever. He misinterprets several phrases Mr. Schuester says. For example, Mr. Schuester says he didn't say anything, and Mr. Rumba says, "Yes, thank you. I take it black, two sugars." During their conversation, Mr. Scheuster also tells Mr. Rumba that his phone is ringing. Mr. Rumba says he has it on vibrate, but it is later revealed he has missed four calls. This comical play at the disability might construct people who are deaf as helpless and silly to the viewer.

The Deaf choir is also made fun of by one of the judges of sectionals who says, "This is a singing competition. I don't know how those deaf kids got it. They weren't singing. They were like, honking, and everyone was crying and I was like get off the stage, you're terrible, and you're making me super uncomfortable." This comment, made by one of the judges, is meant to be so blunt it is comical, but making it funny and ok to mock disability seems to be a negative construction for the audience to receive.

As a form of entertainment, Puck (before he joins Glee club) and some of the other football players trap Artie inside an outhouse and tell quarterback Finn he should flip it since nothing worse can happen than him being in a wheelchair. The scenes in "Wheels" where other glee members are in wheelchairs can be seen as comical, where they get pushed around by students and have trays slammed in their face as gags. The idea of a wheelchair number can be constructed by some viewers as being used as a gimmick to win the competition.

In the episode, "Dance with Somebody," choir director Will tries to convince fiancé Emma to have their wedding at the KOA campground and she says with a look of disgust, "I have OCD. I throw away a broom after one use, and you think I want to get married at a

campground?” This is one of many times that Emma’s OCD is made out to be comical for the audience’s amusement. In “Choke,” Finn’s game plan involves Artie being used as bait to get Puck to go with them by pretending to drown in the pool Puck was cleaning. Overall, the comedy is so dramatic that it does seem as if the show is sometimes making fun of the stereotypes themselves, in a classic Mel Brooks fashion (a director known for making light of disabilities and stereotypes). However, this emphasis on humor related to disability can be misconstrued as making a bit of allowance to make fun of people with disabilities, as long as it is also followed up with understanding and respect in regards to them. This seems to be a bit of a paradox.

“As the Villain.”

There is also a small portrayal within the show of people with disabilities as villains. According to Barnes (2006), this is one of the most frequently depicted stereotypes as well as well as one of the most damaging. This stereotype is seen replicated through the choir teacher, Mr. Rumba. He and the other choir director competing against New Directions at sectionals cheat by stealing songs revealed by Coach Sue Sylvester. In “Hairgraphy,” Mr. Rumba does not protest to Sue’s plan like the other choir director does. In the episode “Sectionals” he says to the other choir director, “You’re money’s no good here. I’m buying. Celebratory pretzels.” When she says she does not feel much like celebrating he replies, “Why not, one of us is gonna take this thing.” When Emma shames them for stealing the songs Mr. Rumba says, “I think what we have here is a case of deaf racism. Shame on you!” He never once expresses any type of remorse, unlike the other choir director. This portrayal could possibly construct him as a villain who uses his disability to shame others and to attempt to incite undeserved pity. Also, in

“Wheels,” another member of the Glee club uses his pretend wheelchair as a way to get free drugs to put in cupcakes for the Glee club bake sale.

For the most part, Becky, who has Down’s syndrome, somewhat embodies the character of a villain, though more often a villain’s apprentice through her assistance of Sue Sylvester in her schemes against the glee club such as tearing up the purple pianos and taking all of the glee club’s Christmas decorations. This assistance is interesting because she both meets a common stereotype, yet she also has a loss of power in the role because she takes most of her orders from Sue, such as when she takes the role of the dog in “You’re a Mean One Mr. Grinch” while she and Sue steal the Christmas decorations. She tends to bully other people and say several hurtful things. She tells Will Schuester that if he does not give her a piece of candy, she will cut him and mocks Finn Hudson for trying out for the cheerleading team when he gets kicked off the football team, saying it is so embarrassing. During “Promasaraus” she tells glee member Rachel to take her loser talk somewhere else so she will not catch her failure. When she loses prom queen nomination, she destroys the sound system music equipment in a rage, declares war on all xylophones, and ransacks the cafeteria line. Even Sue Sylvester tells Becky that one of the reasons for not winning prom queen is, “I mean this as a compliment: you’re a bitch, Becky, with a bad attitude.”

Though, Quinn’s reasons for wanting to hide she can walk in “Promasaurus” have to do with surprising everyone, her comments suggest she was trying to purposefully incite pity, especially when getting Finn to campaign with her. Finn calls her a little creepy and is angry when he finds out she can walk again. She tries to pretend he is seeing her take her first steps, but Finn said, “You’re just the same old Quinn. All that matters is you.” He yells at her on the dance

floor, calling her a crazy liar and leaves to go to the anti-prom. In the end, Quinn redeems herself, by giving fellow glee member Rachel Berry the crown.

“As Lacking Sexuality.”

According to Barnes (2006) the exploration of sexuality in regards to disability is often avoided, with more focus on sexual impotency. Particularly in regards to females, the image of perfection often seems to exclude women with disabilities (Our Bodies, Ourselves, 2005). The show frequently touches on this topic, with several of the characters dealing with feelings of undesirability in terms of sexuality.

In “Dance with Somebody,” Quinn reveals that she thinks her crush Joe is disgusted by her in a wheelchair and believes no one will want her. The episode later reveals that Joe did not pursue Quinn due to religious reasons, and she realizes she can still be found desirable. Being viewed with a lack of sexuality is especially seen in Becky Jackson’s attempt to seduce Artie Abrams with a dirty picture, which results in the opposite effect. However, she regains some confidence when popular football player Puck plays strip poker with her and takes her to the prom and dances with her.

There are also struggles with being comfortable with sexuality. In the beginning, Emma Pillsbury is unable to have physical contact without extreme effort, due to her OCD. Her inability to have intimacy is utilized as ammunition for a berating from colleague Sue, especially during the “Madonna” episode. In this episode, Sue plays Madonna music everywhere except for Emma’s office because “you have none of her self-confidence, her power over her body, or her sexual magnetism. Simply put, you have all the sensuality of one of those pandas at the zoo who refuse to mate.” However, Emma begins to develop a power in her sexuality, and this gradual development of Emma’s sexuality over time demonstrates that sexual confidence does not mean

having sex right away. Emma's power was in her ability to choose with whom and when she wanted to have sex; when she was ready to have sex with Will, she let him know, taking charge of the situation and of her disability. This shows that a disability does not mean that someone will be unable to have and enjoy sex, and also that a person with a disability can hold the sexual power. It is a little different from Artie's first sexual experience, where girlfriend Brittany held the sexual power, helping Artie into bed and assuring his fears of his first time. Afterwards, when Artie realizes that Brittany was somewhat using him to get even with Santana for not wanting to be with her. Artie describes how the doctors were unsure if he would even be able to have sex, and that Brittany took something really special away from him, since she did not seem emotionally invested in him. In a way, Artie's first sexual experience was very emasculating with his disability constructing him as the "other" in the sexual relationship, while Emma's first experience was eventually sexually empowering.

Disability as a Fear Tactic

On one distinct occasion, disability is utilized as a fear tactic to discourage viewers from a habit, such as texting or drinking and driving. Quinn Fabray is driving to a wedding and gets hit by a car because she is texting and ends up going through a stop sign. Because of this, she is in a wheelchair for several episodes. Her character states on a few occasions that people should not text and drive, and her scene where she is in the accident was placed within a public service announcement against texting and driving. While the message is noteworthy, using disability to deliver it could be misconstrued. Viewers could potentially receive the message that disability is punishment or that it is something to be avoided, which can have dangerous implications. This seems reinforced to a point by the fact Artie also is in a wheelchair due to a car accident, and expresses on multiple occasions how he wishes he did not have his disability.

Challenging Stereotypes

The show challenges stereotypes by presenting people with disabilities are just like those without, with their own dreams and passions. The best example of this would be the character of glee member Sam. Right when Sam is introduced he says “I like comic books, sports...I’m dyslexic, so my grades aren’t that good, but I’m working on it.” After that, we never hear about his dyslexia again, showing that the disability does not have to necessarily be the sole driving force for a character on a show. He has several relationships, is highlighted for other issues, such as his family becoming homeless, but his disability fades out of his storylines.

Even with Jean’s development delay, she repeatedly offers good advice to her sister, Sue Sylvester. In “Bad Reputation” Sue says to Jean, saying, “You always know exactly what to say to me when I lose my way...After all these years, how is it that you still know so much more about everything than I do?” In another episode, “Grilled Cheesus,” it is Jean who calms Sue’s doubts about having faith by saying, “God never makes mistakes. That’s what I believe. You want me to pray for you Sue?” Jean is Sue’s confidante, as her character functions as Sue’s life coach, with her disability as a non-issue.

The show also highlights all of the talents people with disabilities possess, that further normalize their characters. In Laryngitis, Sean (a former football player who became a quadriplegic) says, “I’ve got other stuff going on. I’m more than just one thing. You know I’m good at math. Seriously, I flew through Calc. one in like, two months. And I can sing.” In “Acafellas,” the Glee club hires a choreographer that discriminates against members based on looks and disability. The members retaliate saying, “Curtis Mayfield was more successful after he became paralyzed” and “Jim Abbott...he was a one armed pitcher for the Yankees. Pitched a no hitter.” Becky Jackson, who has Down’s syndrome, is shown having multiple talents, such as

sports (rhythmic gymnastics, cheerleading, and dance), is a great seamstress, likes *Schindlers List* as her favorite movie (breaking the stereotype that someone with a mental disability cannot understand something more complex and mature), and is a skilled poker player. Artie is also a director and filmmaker, as well as a talented guitar player, none of which are negated by his inability to walk. Emma's exceptional abilities as a guidance counselor earn her tenure over all of the other teachers at the school, despite her OCD.

Ultimately what all of the characters with disabilities on the show truly desire is to be seen as normal people, and not have their disability be the main highlight of their lives. For example, when Becky plans another date, Artie does not want to go out with her, and Coach Sue says, "Well here's a radical idea, why don't you treat her like a normal person, and tell her. Becky just wants to be treated like everybody else." Quinn Fabray is nominated and wins prom queen, despite being a wheelchair. In "Wheels," choir director Will Scheuster makes all of the members of the Glee club use wheelchairs for a few hours every day, to help them understand how Artie feels, and the club performs a wheelchair number. This episode addresses feelings of isolation that people with disabilities may feel at times, and discusses their desire to be seen as normal. Coach Sue Sylvester casts Becky Johnson, on the cheerleading squad, and makes her learn the routine with the same expectations she holds for the other cheerleaders. When Will corrects her, Sue says, "I bully everybody Will it's the way I roll. You're asking me to treat this girl differently because she has a disability. When actually, it seems to me, she just wants to be treated like everybody else." Some of these are examples of characters on the show looking beyond the disability and seeing a person who just wants to be accepted and treated like everyone else.

Finally, the show sometimes uses a character's changing perspective to show how people can change their opinions of disabilities when they truly get to know a person with a disability. The best example of this would be that of popular football player, Puck and Artie Abrams, who is in a wheelchair. At the beginning of season one, Artie is harassed by Puck and this first encounter shows Puck's total disregard for Artie as a person, based on his disability. When Puck joins the glee club, however, slowly changes occur. He is seen with other football players in the club, helping carry Artie out of the auditorium. However, he still feels that Artie's disability somewhat makes him a person to be taken advantage of. On his community service report, required to stay out of a juvenile detention center, he puts "hanging with a crip," which meant hanging with Artie and teaching him how to get girls and money. He somewhat uses Artie and his wheelchair to get money while they are singing. When Artie and Puck are at a celebratory dinner with Brittany and Santana, Puck wants to leave without paying for the meal, and when he discovers Artie paid anyways he just leaves Artie at the restaurant and takes off with the girls. This gesture shows he still does not completely respect Artie. However, when Artie sticks up for him, and talks to him about his fears of going back to the juvenile detention facility, Puck's perspective changes, and they form a friendship, with Artie even helping him multiple times to study for his tests. We also see Puck being incredibly kind to Becky Jackson at the prom, showing that his perspective and treatment towards people with disabilities has changed, and he realizes they are a normal people just like him, going through their own struggles and issues just like everyone else.

Discussion

Overall Depictions and Storylines

A show such as *Glee* allows for the potential to have many different characters and to discuss varying topics. Among those chosen, disability was frequently highlighted. The frequent portrayals of disability characters and storylines within *Glee* give audiences ample exposure to information about disabilities, whether portrayed negatively or positively. The majority of the twelve characters depicted with disabilities are major characters. With shows like *Glee* including so many characters with disabilities, there may start to be a trend among other shows of more frequent and positive representations of disabilities, which could more accurately reflect the numbers seen in the disability population today.

The majority of the characters with disabilities in the show are Caucasians, and most are teenagers. Only three adults with disabilities are represented in the show, with only one recurring character. This program, as the Inclusion in the Arts and Media of People with Disabilities states, “represents a disproportionate view of reality because people with disabilities cross all diversity lines” (IAMPWD, 2010). It would be interesting to see more characters that cross into multiple diversity categories, and to see if that affects the way they are perceived versus their counterparts.

Also, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder was one of the only mental illnesses presented. Part of this could be because this illness is so easy to depict visually to viewers, making it easier to come across. However, the “routines” developed by Emma Pillsbury’s character can potentially verge on making the disability more of a spectacle and can be perceived as comical by viewers. It does seem that there is focus on the anxiety behind Emma’s disorder (contamination-related), which does lead to her obsessive need for cleanliness. However, as

Barnes (2006) stated, the comical portrayal of disabilities can lead to people with disabilities not being taken seriously within society. This seems detrimental, as the National Institute of Mental Health (2013) reveals that one in four adults will suffer with a cognitive disorder in a given year.

There are a few temporary disabilities represented within the show alongside the permanent disabilities. Both Quinn and Blaine sustain injuries that cause them to temporarily deal with a disability. Glee member Blaine's disability of lack of sight in one eye is very quickly remedied, but Quinn's being in a wheelchair lasts a bit longer, and requires more effort to be cured. It does seem that both temporary disabilities are used to contrast with Artie's permanent disability, and reveal the underlying frustrations he possesses regarding it. Quinn's recovery sticks to the frequent portrayal of miraculous cures people with disabilities inevitably undergo, and her attitude towards disability combined with the cure make it seem that the only happy ending involving disability is to be cured. This seems reinforced by Artie's dream sequences that he will one day be able to walk and do the things he is currently limited from being able to perform. Overall there are 23,000 cases of spinal cord injuries that occur within a year in the U.S. alone, and while rehabilitation and other treatments have been found to be successful, they are not guaranteed (National Institute for Neurological Disorders and Strokes, 2013).

The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability (2013) breaks down the barriers of disability into two parts: physical accessibility to the environment and attitudes of people towards those with disabilities. Both of these are prominently depicted within *Glee* as a main theme. Overall these barriers can help to emphasize or create disability both intentionally and unintentionally. The discussion of these topics and others provide opportunities for viewers to understand some challenges faced by people with disabilities on a regular basis.

In regards to the environment, the show does address several important issues, such as the lack of access to buildings and transportation and how these issues can be resolved. Also of note, is the discussion of the creation of assistive technology. This discussion emphasizes a point made by Winner (1986) on how issues of technologies and structures can be brought to light later on. Winner's (1986) article gives the example of the political movement of people with disabilities to remove the environmental barriers that excluded them from living normal lives. Similarly, Marini and Stebnicki (2012) confirm that the most current thought on disability is that it is not a person's impairment which is disabling, but rather a lack of accommodation, which can result in physical and social conditions that bar many of people with disabilities from being full participant within society. *Glee's* emphasis on the needs for changes to environmental barriers through episodes such as *Wheels*, help viewers without disabilities to see issues they may not normally consider since they do not affect them.

Glee contains several storylines that focus on curing disabilities. Physical therapy and surgery cure Quinn and Blaine of their disabilities. Emma, who has OCD, works toward a "normal life" with therapy and medication. Throughout the program, Artie tries to find a way to walk again. These storylines that fixate on a "cure" negate messages about acceptance and tolerance, conveying the notion that disability means limitations and sacrificing dreams. In real life, the focus on curing people with disabilities has undermined disability rights activism, and at its most extreme, has served as justification for eugenics, sterilization, and even euthanasia—all horrific attempts to purge society of people with disabilities. For example, during World War II, eugenics was utilized to attempt to breed out the unfit populations in the countries taken over by Nazi Germany, including those with disabilities (Douthat, 2012).

Current scientific discoveries could lead to similar temptations, under the guise of curing disability by having it not occur at all (Douthat, 2012). For example, stem cell research and genetic engineering have led to embryo screening, which entails the detection of a predisposition to genetic disability in IVF embryos before they are implanted, with the suggestion of throwing away those that are affected (Davis, 2001). Even today, an estimated 92 percent of women receiving prenatal diagnosis of Down syndrome choose to terminate their pregnancies, according to research reviewed by a pediatric geneticist (James, 2009; Douthat, 2012). This seems to lean back towards the past trend when women with Down syndrome were sterilized in attempts to eradicate the possibility of the disability.

Another common negative theme is that having a disability is a fate worse than death. The idea that living with a disability is not ideal might breed an atmosphere where some could contemplate the possibility of euthanasia, ending the suffering of someone living with a disability. For example, in London, a man petitioned for euthanasia because he believed living with his disability had provided him no privacy or dignity within society (Cheng, 2012). Beth Haller (2010), looked at news frames discussing physician assisted suicide and found that it was presented to people with disabilities as a way of self-termination in accordance with a dominant ideology that people with disabilities are not worth keeping alive. When media further emphasizes the cure in its storylines and displays characters unhappy with their disability, it further encourages potential remedies to “cure” these disabilities in society. These are radical examples of attempts to “cure,” though the forced cure was depicted even on *Glee* in the form of Emma’s boyfriends. In the end, however, the viewer finds that Emma holds a belief common to many people with disabilities: she just wants to be treated like everyone else (United Spinal Association, 2011).

The majority of *Glee* revolves, obviously, around the interaction of the characters and development of their relationships with one another, both those with disabilities and those without. Depictions of the relationships constructed through *Glee* allow the possibility to both challenge some stigmas involving disabilities as well as to sustain them.

It seems at times there is an over-emphasis on disability, as though the disability is all there is to the character. This overemphasis can be seen in the introduction of the characters where, on several occasions, the disability was introduced as the first thing we know about the character. Artie is first seen only signing up for glee club in his wheelchair, and that is all the information we are given at the time. Emma is first depicted obsessively cleaning, hinting at her Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Some characters are particularly developed just for their disability and how it furthers the plot. The deaf choir that the glee members compete against is automatically introduced as consisting of deaf teenagers, and the disability is what ends up being significant about them.

Romantic relationships are a constant focal point in *Glee*, and this is no different for characters with disabilities. Since these relationships occur over several episodes and with constant characters, it is important to see what messages they might perpetuate about people with disabilities and those without. The strengths of these relationships provide potential for viewers to construct the idea of healthy and normal relationships between those with disability and those without. However, negative construction has the potential to reinforce stereotypes about being in a relationship with a person who has a disability. In regards to relationships and disability, Goldstein and Johnson (1997) found that people dating a person with a disability were classified as nurturing, more than other characteristics such as athletic or smart. When watching *Glee*, viewers are exposed to and become invested in characters before they are ever introduced into a

relationship with a character who has a disability. For example, with Brittany, the viewer is introduced to her athleticism through her cheerleading and dancing in *Glee* long before she ever enters into a relationship with Artie. Similarly, several thoughts and perceptions are developed in regards to the character Coach Sue Sylvester, long before depicting her relationships towards Jean Sylvester and Becky Jackson, who both have Down's syndrome. Choir director Will Schuster is introduced as a driven and intelligent teacher, long before he starts dating Emma. Being in a relationship with a person who has a disability does not limit someone to certain characteristics.

The subject of disability is most frequently brought up by characters who do not actually have a disability, and these comments are often negative. Several times during the show, the principal and head teachers make insulting comments in reference to disability. These comments are often presented in front of the people who have the disability and their other peers. Hinshaw (2007) argues that for stigmatization to occur, perceivers who devalue others must be in a position of power. When the principal or main teachers at the school are seen to mock disability or discount one of the characters due to their disabilities, it could potentially have a negative impact on the viewer. As seen in literature, according to Bandura (1986), behaviors are learned quickly through observation and imitation of others. This negative example seems to lead to other students in the school regarding people with disabilities in a negative fashion, similar to those by the bully characters, such as football player Puck, and several other *Glee* members. Negative stereotyping or insults by these characters could also affect viewers in their treatment of disabilities as well as those viewers who have disabilities themselves. For students who have disabilities to achieve their potential, there has to be a socially accepting and supportive environment in high school (Christensen, 1996; Simeonsson, Carlson, Huntington, McMillen, &

Brent, 2001). This environment does not always seem to be present with the high school of *Glee*. Russell and Stern (2006) state that if a person holding authority on a television show does not show respect towards a certain group, such as those with disabilities, viewers without disabilities might perceive that the character's opinions might be the dominant social opinions.

The most ambivalent character of authority within the show is Coach Sue Sylvester, who has a sister with disability that she treats with love and respect, as well as a sisterly bond developed with student and assistant Becky Jackson. However, she often does not extend this same respect towards Artie Abrams and Emma Pillsbury, as she is constantly seen berating them throughout the show. For example, Sue expresses a fear of "contamination" as her reasoning for not allowing Artie to be a donor for her potential baby, despite the fact he is in a wheelchair due to a car accident. Sue's unequal treatment of characters with disabilities may suggest that certain disabilities are deemed more acceptable than others. At the same time, her character is also depicted as the most positive and extensive representation of a familial relationship to a person with a disability.

Glee provides the potential for advocacy, due to the popularity of the show. This is especially true for those actors who actually possess the disability they are portraying. For example, the actress Lauren Potter, who portrays the character Becky Jackson within *Glee*, was chosen as a member of the President's Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities (Etkin, 2013) as well as retaining a place on the Board of Directors for Best Buddies, which is a non-profit organization dedicated to creating opportunities in the workplace, leadership, and community for people who have intellectual and developmental disabilities (Best Buddies, 2013). Part of the reason for her involvement is due to her popularity and prominence within the show. Her character's involvement in the show, as well as the actress' involvement in the

committees provides viewers of the show with a positive and more accurate example of people with disabilities. Additionally, this gives people with disabilities a positive role model within the media.

Glee has cast several actors without disabilities to portray characters with disabilities, but this leads to a large controversy expressed by those with disabilities in regards to an element that has been called “cripface” (Smith, 2010). Similar to “black face,” this term involves casting an actor without a disability in the role of a character with a disability. The characters of Artie, Emma, Mr. Rumba, Quinn, Blaine, Sugar, and Sam, and even Becky Jackson’s monologue voice are all played by actors that do not actually possess the disability, with only characters Becky, Jean, Sean, and the teenagers in the deaf choir played by actors with disabilities. According to Smith (2010) representations of people with disabilities are often limited and negative. These portrayals are more likely to be positive if actors with disabilities are cast in the role, which would also expand the very limited opportunities for these actors.

It seems that some of the protests of the disability community towards *Glee* revolve around their choice of casting Kevin McHale to play the role of Artie Abrams (Smith, 2010). Similarly, the casting of Helen Mirren to play the narrative voice of Becky Jackson’s character (Bell, 2012), could seem to also be a way of stripping Lauren Potter (the actress who plays Becky Jackson) of her own voice as a person with a disability. It seems that the constant casting of those without disabilities can be constructed that actors with disabilities are not good enough to play a character with their own disability or are not capable of doing certain acting parts for their role (in the case of Becky).

On one hand, casting an actor with a disability could provide a deep insight and understanding into the character, while providing a positive role model for people with

disabilities. However, the idea of giving the role to a person specifically because they have that disability could be constructed almost as reverse discrimination, and the best actor should be cast for the role. According to Lynn Elber (2009), a *Glee* producer reported that they cast charismatic people who could act, sing and dance, regardless of physical or cognitive difference. This is not the only case of such casting, as several television shows follow this same trend, with a current example being a recent revision of the television show, *Ironsides*, which was promptly cancelled (Gilman, 2013). Similarly, historically people without disabilities have produced representations of those with disability (Mercer & Barnes, 2003).

Stereotypes

As Dyer (1993) predicted, there is a regeneration of stereotypes seen within *Glee* in reference to disabilities, which have been replicated from past television and film. Both in the past and currently, television and film creators attempt to attract audiences by creating larger than life, identifiable, and caricatured characters, especially in regards to mental disabilities (Hinshaw, 2007). According to Hinshaw (2007), “Stereotypes are beliefs about social groups that characterize a group as a whole while dismissing individual differences or the unique characteristic of persons within a group.” Even utilizing the term “handicapped” can be constructed as a derogatory stereotype, as it was originally based on the historical tendency of those with disabilities to have cap in their hands for begging (Hinshaw, 2007).

The three dominant stereotypes identified in the show are people with disabilities as a burden/helpless/to be pitied, the object of ridicule or silly, and the construction of the villain. All of these stereotypes paint one-sided portraits about people with disabilities. The first type, as Barnes (1992) points out, fails to recognize that with appropriate support, people with disabilities can achieve the same autonomy and independence as those without disabilities. Coinciding with

this it seems stressed within *Glee* for there to be a required mourning for the acquirement of a disability which is reflected in disability psychology theory; the person with the disability is expected to grieve their loss and slowly adjust to the misfortune (Marini & Stebnicki, 2012). For example, in the show, people such as glee members Rachel and Artie cannot grasp Quinn's ability to adjust to her disability. Though some of her reaction is based on the hope she will walk again, not everyone who acquires a disability is expected to fall into a pit of despair.

Having characters with disabilities become objects of ridicule could limit the ability of those who have disabilities to be taken seriously within society (Barnes, 1992). For example, jokes made about a disability within the show tend to trivialize the disability, can be considered to be deeply offensive to those with disabilities who have watched the show previously (Smith, 2010; Stronach & Allan, 1999). The small references and jokes made about disability seem unnecessary and are conflicting with the overall message the show seems to be trying to portray. For example, Will's first wife Terry refers to her desire not to have a "mongoloid" baby, an archaic and offensive term utilized in the past to describe a person with Down syndrome. While the overall reasoning may be to depict Terry Schuester as an awful person, it seems that a less offensive term could be utilized that does not make a spectacle out of a disability. Additionally, using this term could potentially "teach" the audience a new term of derision, which is both archaic and possibly unfamiliar to them.

Finally, the third type of stereotype, which depicts those with disabilities as villains, such as Becky when she is seen plotting with Coach Sue Sylvester against the glee club and Mr. Rumba's character (the deaf choir director), could potentially create negative attitudes towards those with disabilities, and can hinder their integration within society due to a desire for avoidance of those with disabilities (Barnes, 2006). These depictions could construct a person

with disabilities as “less than human” or something to be feared. However, it does also point out the fact that not everyone with a disability will necessarily be a “good” or nice person, which is realistic to how society is in general, as some humans possess characteristics of anger and vengefulness, despite whether they possess a disability or not.

Disability as a Fear Tactic

The largest negative construction, which I viewed as particularly damaging, involved the storyline with Quinn Fabray, which perpetuated the use of disability as a fear tactic. Though this message is only perpetuated through one character briefly, the impact it can have on viewers is still potentially strong. Quinn Fabray ends up in a wheelchair because she was texting while she was driving. When she returns in a wheelchair, she preaches the message not to text and drive to her fellow glee club members, reiterating the same message again later to glee member and former boyfriend Finn Hudson while he is texting and walking in the hallway. The actual scene from the episode where she was hit by the truck was also utilized within a public service announcement against texting and driving and utilizing the fear tactic that texting and driving could lead to being in a wheelchair.

By using this tactic, the show unintentionally sends the message to people with disabilities that they are what everyone wants to avoid becoming and stating that a person’s quality of life will become diminished by a disability. A study by Caroline Wang (1992) confirmed this belief that there are some negative impacts of using disability along with prevention efforts for things such as texting and driving or drinking and driving. Wang (1992) encouraged those who create these messages to consider the possibility they are creating disability as a stigmatized other and making them look like something undesirable or unwanted.

Breaking Stereotypes

Throughout the show, there is also a countering of the stereotypes set up in past films and television. For example, a study of college students found that a person labeled “mentally ill” was more likely to be linked to being dangerous and an increased need to maintain social distance (Phelan & Basow, 2007). *Glee* challenges stereotypes of people with cognitive disabilities through the characters Emma or Jean, who give sound advice and are well loved by other characters. When viewers see positive depictions of people with disabilities and the positive relationships between those with disabilities and those without, it provides opportunities for the viewers to acquire positive perspectives of those disabilities. This inclusion of multiple characters with disabilities seemed to be an addition approved of by the viewers themselves. A You Gov poll (2006) found that the majority of television viewers would like to see more people with disabilities on screen, with 77 percent reflecting they would not find inclusions of disabilities offensive. In addition, 43 percent of viewers polled affirmed the desire to see characters with disabilities portrayed in a wider variety of roles (You Gov, 2006).

Overall, *Glee* strives to touch on serious topics regarding disabilities, and to attempt to overcome some stereotypes involving those disabilities. However, there are several issues involving a large majority of people with disabilities that have yet to be addressed within the show. For example, *Glee* does not address the challenges of gainful employment for characters with disabilities. The only depiction of actual job representation by a person with a disability is Emma’s job as guidance counselor and a brief moment where Finn uses his fake wheelchair to get a job. According to Marini and Stebnicki (2012), people with disabilities remain the most disenfranchised population in almost every society, with over one third of the American population with disabilities having an annual income of \$15,000 or less. People with disabilities

also struggle with affordable health care. Finally, Rubin and Roessler (2008) found that over five million people with disabilities have no health coverage at all. These topics could easily be addressed within the show, encouraging viewers to think about macro issues, facing people with disabilities today. Also, it would have been great to see the show touch more on the acceptance of disability with Quinn's character than falling back on the solution of curing it within a small number of episodes. The show does touch on this somewhat with Artie and Sean, but these characters had already their disabilities for quite some time, whereas Quinn would have provided an entirely different perspective.

Similarly, the show does a good job of discussing the issue of stigma and the different variations that stigma can appear in. Marini and Stebnicki (2012) found that stigma commonly affects people who are different to majority expectation and mentioned perceived stigma as a main cause of depression for those with physical disabilities. Goffman (1963) states stigma presents a discrepancy between a person's "virtual social identity" (what society assumes about a person) and their "actual social identity" (the attributes a person actually possesses). The elements of stigma addressed within the show allow the viewers the opportunity to ponder if they also have potential stigmas involved with disability. For example, the show presents an overall depiction of the fear of ostracism people possess, especially in regards to the subject of disability. One example from the show is glee member Sugar Motta's rejection of Artie due to his disability. Marini and Stebnicki (2012) suggest that this category of stigma is formed around a "guilty by association" phenomenon where the person without a disability fears association would be interpreted by others as a maladjustment on their part. Goffman (1963) branded this concept as courtesy stigma, where stigmatization may be extended to subgroups associated with

disabilities. This is particularly harmful to people with disabilities and is embedded in the concept of stigma.

One of the largest problems of stigma involves the reception of stigma by people with disabilities. People who have disabilities can internalize the stigma upon them, and begin to perceive themselves as they think others perceive them (Marini & Stebnicki, 2012). There is evidence that this internalized stigma can negatively impact self-esteem, recovery from mental disabilities, willingness to seek treatment, and adherence to treatment (West, Yanos, Smith, Roe, & Lysaker, 2011). According to Hinshaw (2007), several people with mental disabilities delay seeking help for years or even decades. *Glee* does a wonderful job of addressing the issue of internalized stigma and how it affects guidance counselor Emma's willingness to disclose to people she has Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Further expansion on the subject could be addressed. For example, internalized stigma could be discussed, as the show addressed more of the stigmas others in society hold towards disabilities. *Glee* could also be used in comparison to other current shows depicting disability, to see what differences there are in how disabilities are depicted. Also, a newer content analysis of disability in film and television today would provide a more accurate perspective on how frequently disabilities are represented within the media.

Implications

Glee's presentment of disabilities has the potential to alter people's perceptions towards disabilities and the issues involved with them. According to Lennard Davis (2006), media, similar to doctors or the state, serve as authority figures derived from the images and the characters that they produce. If viewers use television to garner knowledge about experiences they may be unfamiliar with, then it is important for those portrayals to be as accurate as they possibly can. In regards to disability, it is important for *Glee* and other shows to realize what

kinds of potential messages are being sent to the viewer about disability. Negative messages and perceptions could cause viewers to develop certain stigmas about disability, impacting the way in which that may not be true, which could in turn affect the way they view, perceive and treat people with disability throughout their lives. It is important for shows that contain characters with disability and storylines highlighting disability to work with organizations that advocate for the rights of people with disabilities. One of *Glee's* writers, Brad Falchuck, has personal experience with disability, as he struggled with undiagnosed dyslexia growing up and with spinal cord issues later in life (Weiss, 2009). However, understanding of disabilities would probably be further enhanced with involvement with organizations such as the National Stigma Clearinghouse, which tries to confront negative depictions of people with mental disabilities would help to ensure that fair treatment to disabilities is being given (Hinshaw, 2007). Historically, people without disability have produced representations of those with disability (Barnes, Mercer, 2000). It seems that even with the best intentions, portraying people with disabilities would be most accurate by the actual group being represented. Inaccuracies may occur when attempted by those who are not members. It would be prudent to involve consultants who have that disability themselves, to better portray that disability accurately, in addition to the experience one of the writers might provide from having a disability.

Discussion of topics such as barriers and stigma provide opportunities for people without disabilities to understand challenges faced on a daily basis by those with disabilities. As Russell and Stern (2006) notated, viewers can become invested into characters and interact with them as though they were real. An emotional investment with these characters could potentially lead to increased sympathy and understanding of disabilities. Additionally, viewers could also better retain information about disabilities, as demonstrated by the *Friends* study on condom efficacy

(Collins, Elliott, Berry, Kanouse, & Hunter, 2003). The popularity and investment of *Glee* gives the show possible potential for education of viewers on disability topics.

However, these topics also provide those with disabilities prominent examples affirming their challenges. If a person with a disability begins to perceive a certain stigma, and comes to believe this stigma to be true, it can affect several elements of their life such as seeking treatment or having positive self-esteem. For this reason, treatment of disabilities is extremely important and should involve input from disability organizations to try and minimize stereotyping and stigma.

It is also imperative to consider the attitude being perceived by people whose occupations or positions can have a limiting effect upon those who have a disability. If a character of authority within a show makes fun of disability, it potentially has a greater impact on a viewing audience, due the character's authoritative position within the show. People of importance are often seen as more credible to a viewer, so negative depictions from them might have even more potential to sway a viewer's perceptions negatively towards disability. Also, though romantic relationships are shown, familial relationships are also important, and more positive relationships between family members of people with disabilities should be depicted. While Jean and Sue's relationship as sisters is very positive, the same treatment is not given by Emma's parents and other family relationships of characters with disabilities are barely depicted.

Finally, it is important to try and develop storylines for characters with disabilities that do not necessarily always involve the disability. As mentioned previously, it seems that anytime a character with disability is highlighted within the plot, they are struggling with some with some element of their disability. This might construct to viewers that a person's disability is all there is to that person. This misconception could potentially further enhance stereotypes and stigmas

held about disability by viewers. This overuse can cause viewers with disabilities to experience some discomfort. Martini and Stebnicki (2012) argue that when too much or too little attention is directed at one person, the results could be embarrassment and shame, with the attention being a constant reminder of their difference. This presents a great challenge to the show in its representations, and further emphasizes the need for cooperation with people who have disabilities to construct the most positive and balanced representations possible.

Limitations

There are a few limitations that could be addressed through further study. First, the analysis was performed on only one show. Other studies could compare *Glee* with other popular shows depicted in the same time frame in terms of frequencies of disabilities seen within the show as well as construction of those disabilities. One example of a possible show for study would be *Switched at Birth*, which has several characters who are deaf as main characters, as well as whole scenes using sign language for dialogue. Several currently popular shows depict a singular person with disability. It would be interesting to attempt a far larger study looking at all current representations of characters with disabilities to see what themes might be repeatedly reflected.

Secondly, *Glee* has finished its fourth season, with two additional renewal seasons promised after, and the creators have also produced spin-off versions that could be studied. It would be interesting to do a follow-up analysis upon the completion of *Glee*, to see how the show maintains disability constructions throughout the show as a whole. For example, the current season has introduced a more expansive storyline by casting another character with dyslexia and an episode in the season depicts a girl in a wheelchair who ends up being Artie's date for a wedding. There is also further expansion on previous characters with disabilities. Also,

any additional spin-offs that were done involving *Glee* such as *The Glee Project* and the *Glee: 3D Movie* could be covered more in depth to see how prominent their focus on disabilities is, and what messages are constructed about disability from the show. Particularly, the most current season of *The Glee Project* involved two contestants with disabilities, one of which was included in an episode of the fourth season.

This analysis is based on interpretations of the text by only one individual. Since the subject for study is how *Glee* possibly impacts perceptions of disabilities, it would make sense to do a study with high school or college students, the two main demographics who watch *Glee*, to see what types of meanings they take away from the show. This would give a better understanding of the messages students take away from *Glee* about disability, or if they even take away any messages at all in regards to the subject. Particularly, it would be interesting to do a separate focus group or survey of people who actually have disabilities, to view their thoughts on the coverage of disabilities. This is particularly important given the fact that people with disabilities have often complained over some casting choices as well as portrayals.

Finally, it would be interesting to take into account the creation of the show. For example, certain techniques are often included within a genre that may not reflect on a show's views on disabilities. The show might simply be employing typical conventions involved with comedies or dramas, such as sensationalism or a tendency to pick on everything. It would be interesting to interview the creators of the show, to find out their intentions, as well as to study production elements in further detail, and how they might construct disability (both intentionally and unintentionally).

Conclusion

It is imperative to have positive examples in the media of people with disabilities, in order to help provide an accurate example of this group of people. Positive examples would lead to a better understanding and hopefully to better treatment of people with disabilities. These positive examples should be as accurate as possible. Disabilities need to be featured among characters regularly, as a large number of the population in the United States possesses some type of disability. Negative stereotyping should be avoided as it paints all people with disabilities as possessing a certain attribute. Finally, to what extent it is possible, involvement of disability agencies should be utilized within the writing of shows and actors should be cast when possible who actually possess the disabilities being portrayed.

Overall, *Glee* is a show that tries to highlight disabilities and the struggles involved with having a disability. The prominence of disabilities within the show allows the viewer ample opportunities to develop perceptions of disability as several characters who have a disability are highlighted either throughout the length of an episode, throughout multiple episodes, and, in most cases, throughout the show as a main character. If viewers do not have personal experience interacting with people who have disabilities, the show might present an opportunity for them to develop different perceptions about disabilities. However, there are some mixed messages within the show that might provide the viewer with a more negative depiction of people who have disabilities. This can potentially be enhanced by some stereotypes that are also seen replicated within the show as well as the comments made by characters within the show that hold a position of authority that create the most negative influence for the viewer. Also, at times, it seems that disability is overused and under covered, as well as presented in a negative and offensive fashion. This is particularly seen by brief comments made throughout the show. Also, though

several important topics are covered, there are some larger issues such as healthcare, jobs and abuse that could be covered within the show, providing a greater understanding of barriers. Overall the show makes great attempts to cover a group that has often been marginalized in media and in dealing with trying to cover challenges in a positive light.

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