Pop Culture

FREAKS

Identity, Mass Media, and Society

Dustin Kidd

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The Matrix Is Everywhere

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SOCIOLOGY OF POPULAR CULTURE

Image 1.1. Amber Riley, who plays Mercedes Jones on the Fox television show *Glee* (Source: Everett Collection).

THE SOCIOLOGY OF *GLEE*

Hold up your right hand. Form a right angle with your thumb and index finger while folding the other three fingers down. Keeping that shape, place the back of your hand against your forehead and look in the mirror. Loser! That is what you have just called yourself. If you were a character on the Fox television show *Glee*, you would deserve a slushy. In case you never saw the show, *Glee* is a dramedy about a high school chorus formed by a group of (mostly) losers, assembled by a frustrated Spanish teacher named Will Schuester. Whenever these so-called losers start to achieve some modicum of success or even popularity, they are quickly cut down to size by a jock dumping a red slushy on them. *Glee* deliberately explores what it means to be a loser in contemporary American society, both for high school kids and for adults like Will Schuester.

Image 1.1 depicts Mercedes Jones, one of the founding members of New Directions, the glee club at William McKinley High School. Is Mercedes a loser? She's a beautiful woman with a tremendous voice. Sure, she has a larger body type than is glorified on television and in magazines, but no one really looks like those women anyway. She is a black woman in a majority white school, but McKinley High has plenty of black students, many of whom are not outcasts in the least. Maybe calling Mercedes a loser is unfair. But *loser* certainly describes how she feels—not about her character, but about her position within the hierarchy of the high school. "Loser" also becomes a rallying cry for Mercedes and the other glee club members, who embrace the term as a description of what makes them unique and special in a world that turns everyone into cookie-cutter cheerleaders

and football stars.

Glee presents us with an array of archetypes for the loser. Mercedes Jones is the curvy blac[k] woman. Rachel Berry is the awkward, artsy Jewish girl. Artie Abrams is the wheelchair-bound ner[d.] Tina Cohen-Chang is the shy, stuttering Asian. Kurt Hummel is the obviously gay white kid wit[h] flamboyant fashion taste. Santana Lopez is the loud, angry Latina from Lima Heights Adjacent.

LOSERS, STRANGERS, AND FREAKS

Losers, freaks, misfits, cripples, and queers: the world of popular culture has a way of telling us th[at] we do not fit in, then turning around and selling us a ticket to conformity, to the pop culture prom wi[th] a gorgeous date. But the ticket is always a counterfeit; we never get into the prom, at least not f[or] long, and we have to buy yet another ticket. Unless we fight back, organizing our own alternativ[e] prom and turning around the weapons of mass culture.

We might compare the loser in *Glee* to the stranger in a 1908 essay by the early sociologist Geo[rg] Simmel. He begins "The Stranger" with a discussion of wanderers—traveling merchants in particul[ar] —who roam into a new community, bringing with them an awareness of everything that is beyond an[d] outside of that community. Simmel is most intrigued by the wanderer who then lingers, settling in[to] his surroundings, but always being identified as an outsider, someone who never attains fu[ll] membership in the community because he is not organically a part of it. The persistent presence [of] this stranger provides for the larger community what Simmel calls a "union of closeness an[d] remoteness involved in every human relationship . . . an element whose membership within the grou[p] involves being both outside it and confronting it" (2010, 302–303).

In the same way, the loser is a member of the high school social world who is neverthele[ss] excluded from full participation in that milieu and whose refusal or inability to be just like everyon[e] else creates a persistent confrontation with the world. The popular kids' status depends on having [a] large mass of other kids who seek to mimic them. The losers cannot or will not mimic the cool kid[s.] They may have the wrong body, the wrong hair, the wrong skin tone, or simply the wrong tastes, th[e] wrong desires, or the wrong values. Indeed, a survey of the nonlosers often reveals a little "losernes[s"] in everyone, just as many of the popular kids at McKinley High eventually cycle into the glee club [as] they confront their own inability to fully embody the popular ideal. Consider the following scene fro[m] a season 1 episode of *Glee*. A popular boy named Finn, who has joined the glee club and befriende[d] the losers there, has been pressured by his football teammates to cut a glee kid down to size. The[y] want Finn to confirm that he is one of the ruling cool kids, not a loser, so he has been ordered to thro[w] a slushy at confirmed loser Kurt. Kurt's glee club friends Mercedes and Rachel intervene.

Mercedes Jones: "You are not gonna slushy on my man Kurt."

Rachel Berry: "Why wouldn't he? He's made his choice. He doesn't care about us losers anymore."

Finn Hudson: "No, that's not true! It's just if I don't do it, the guys on the team are gonna kick the crap out of me!"

Kurt Hummel: "Well we can't have that, can we?" [*Grabs the slushy from Finn*.]

Finn Hudson: "What are you doing?"

Kurt Hummel: "It's called taking one for the team." [*Splashes himself in the face with the slushy, then pauses*.]

Kurt Hummel: "Now get out of here. And take some time to think whether or not any of your friend[s]

on the football team would have done that for you." (Brennan, Falchuk, and Murphy 2009c)

The slushy confirms both the "closeness and remoteness" between Kurt and Finn, and in turn betwee[n] the losers and the jocks. Finn and Kurt know each other and even care about each other, but the soci[al] distance remains, even though these two students and the groups they represent live in the same tow[n,] attend the same school and the same classes in that school, and eat in the same cafeteria.

This book explores how the popular culture we produce and consume creates a sense of closene[ss] and remoteness for all of us, living in a world in which we are pressured to conform, in ways that fe[w] of us can fully achieve. The very same traits that make us unique individuals also prevent us fro[m] realizing the popular ideals of our time, which we affirm and produce through the music we dance t[o,] the television shows and films we turn to for entertainment, the books we read, and even the websit[es] we access for diversion or information. This is a book about the intersections of identity—th[e] associations that make us who we are and give us a sense of belonging to the tribe—and popul[ar] culture, the somewhat mechanical set of meanings and values that dominate our world, regardless [of] our tribal membership.

Why freaks? The word *freak* can be very off-putting; it is an insult. Interestingly, it is a slur th[at] has never attached itself to any particular group. Kids who are gay have been called freaks for the[ir] sexuality. Christians have been called freaks for their faith. Artists have been called freaks for the[ir] self-expression. People with disabilities have been called freaks for the unique qualities of the[ir] bodies or minds. Smart people have been called freaks for their high IQs. Anyone is susceptible [to] being called a freak. The word is a mechanism for undermining the social power of the person [to] whom it is targeted. It implies that the recipient has been poorly socialized to be a member of th[e] community. On the surface, *freak* is an accusation against the individual target, but it also implies th[at] our mechanisms of socialization may be suspect. Who is responsible for these freaks? Parent[s?] Neighborhoods? Schools? The media?

I embrace the word *freak* in this book, first because I believe that we operate within a commerci[al] culture system that treats us all as freaks. The system's goal is to push us to spend and consume, an[d] that means that we can never be satisfied. We are told that we can find peace and satisfaction when w[e] achieve the right lifestyle, but nothing is ever good enough. There is always another gadget to bu[y,] another imperfection in our bodies, another reason to feel like a freak. If we are not maligned for o[ur] race, class, gender, sexuality, or bodies, then we are maligned for our religion, age, ethnicity, politic[al] ideology, or cultural tastes.

How do we escape the freak cycle, in which popular culture tells us that we are not good enoug[h,] then sells us a path to supposed perfection, then says we failed to follow that path successfully an[d] have to buy into the next path that it offers? As I look at audiences, the people who consume popula[r] culture—which is to say, all of us—I notice that those who seem to find some peace and satisfacti[on] are the ones who lean into the identity of the freak. When commercial culture says they are not goo[d] enough, they say "hell, yeah!" and laugh. They take the messages embedded in popular culture an[d] twist them around to find new kinds of meaning that allow them to experience empowerment an[d] pride.

I argue that we are all pop culture freaks in a commercial culture system that is inescapable an[d] needs all of us to feel insufficient. But I also argue that embracing our freak status may provide [us] with the tools to find some agency within that system and have some control over how the cultu[ral] industries influence our lives.

DEFINING POPULAR CULTURE

The term **popular culture** has a variety of meanings, and I will be very specific about which ones I a[m] using in this book. The word *popular* is from the Latin *populus*, meaning "the people." Historicall[y,] both in Roman times and in other societies, "the people" referred not to all people, but rather to a ve[ry] specific and very large mass of poor and working people. It excluded a tiny group of ruling elites, wh[o] were associated with a very different kind of culture—a privileged set of cultural goods like painting[s,] classical music, literature, and other forms of creative expression—that we now refer to as **hig[h] culture**. Everyone else had what we now call **folk culture—**local music, crafts, oral tradition[s,] morality plays, and many other types of expression. If *popular* means the people, then popular cultu[re] could be associated with this folk culture, and many analyses of popular culture do focus on it. B[ut] folk culture is just one of the meanings associated with popular culture and is not the focus of th[is] book. Folk culture is local, rooted in regional identity. The popular culture that I discuss in this bo[ok] has been carefully scrubbed of that kind of localism to make it appealing across regions.

Although categories like high and folk culture are still relevant, both in the United States an[d] around the world, they do not apply to a lot of the culture that is now produced and consumed. This [is] attributable in part to the growth of the middle class, as sociologist Herbert Gans explains in *Popula[r] Culture and High Culture* (1999). *Middle class* is both an economic and a cultural category. As a[n] economic category, it refers to a vast middle ground between wealthy elites and the poorest of th[e] poor. In the United States, despite tremendous and growing economic inequality, nearly all American[s] identify themselves as middle class. As a cultural category, middle class refers to a set of lifestyle[s] that are characterized largely by **consumption**, the purchase of goods on the market. Members of th[e] middle class have enough money to purchase almost everything they need, rather than making the[ir] goods at home. But they do not have so much money that they can commission a craftsperson to mak[e] these goods for them individually. For example, they do not typically sew their own dresses, nor d[o] they hire dressmakers; instead, they purchase mass-produced clothing.

The growth of the middle class, both economically and culturally, has resulted in a shift in how w[e] think of popular culture, from the working masses to the vast middle class. Middle-class cultur[al] practices are so ubiquitous that middle-class consumption has become the norm for everyone. Eve[n] those who might sew their own dresses out of economic necessity or commission custom-mad[e] dresses because they are economically privileged probably also purchase most of their clothing at th[e] fashion mall. This book focuses on the culture associated with this middle class, which has become s[o] broad as to functionally include all Americans, even those who are desperately poor or fantasticall[y] rich.

This brings me to the word *culture*, which also has a variety of meanings, some of them rath[er] contradictory. On the one hand we have the notion that something "cultured" is somehow refine[d] because it has been cultivated. Some process has occurred to move it from a raw, uncultured state t[o] an elevated, cultured state. In this sense, *culture* may refer to sacred elements of society such a[s] religious artifacts or high culture art. But in sociological analysis, culture is much broader than ju[st] high culture and much bigger than just the sacred. It is also everyday, or as the scholar Raymon[d] Williams puts it, "culture is ordinary" (2002, 91). So what is this *thing* that is both sacred an[d] everyday? It is shared meaning.

Shared meaning is the meat and bones of culture. Meaning ranges from our highest beliefs abo[ut] god and the sacred to our everyday tastes about food and fashion. It is the political ideologies we fig[ht] over and the everyday assumptions we take for granted. These meanings are structured into o[ur]

languages and the various other ways that we communicate. Some meanings are relatively fixed and hard to change; others are constantly being debated and negotiated. Culture is produced within families, neighborhoods, schools, and churches—and it is also produced by the entertainment industry. The mass media floods our homes and lives with stories about the human experience, and each story includes a set of claims about what the world means. Two critical theorists of the twentieth century—Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer—referred to the mass media as the **culture industry** because it is capitalism's mechanism for producing art as a market commodity, and in turn capitalism's primary mechanism for the production and distribution of meaning.

The culture in question in this book is that of the culture industry: commercially produced meanings embedded in expressive works that include text, audio, and video. I said that we are looking at the culture of the vast middle class. To be more specific, we are looking at the **commercial culture** that is produced in a society driven by middle-class identification, even for those who are very rich and those who are very poor.

Unlike culture that is produced and enjoyed within a community, commercial culture separates the **production** and **reception** processes in very clear ways. *Reception* refers to the ways that audiences receive a cultural good, such as a television show, and make use of it. It refers to both *consumption*—how we access and select a cultural good—and ***interpretation***—how we determine what the cultural good means and how we act on those meanings. When a cultural object is made within a community, production and reception are part of the same social moment. The local singer, performing in a coffee shop or bar, stands immediately in front of her audience. The sociologist examining that moment is able to study both production and reception and unlikely to invest in a distinction between the two. In commercial culture, a very clear division of labor separates producers from audiences and separates the process of production temporally and geographically from that of reception. Television shows are made in Hollywood and distributed across the United States; films are shot in Hollywood or "on location" and shown in theaters across the country. Fashion magazines are edited in New York and devoured by readers all over. Music is recorded in Los Angeles, New York, or Nashville and downloaded on computers, phones, and iPods everywhere. It might make sense to ask Ryan Murphy, creator of *Glee*, what television shows he watches when he gets home from the set, but we would not ask the average *Glee* fan what new TV show she is working on. Production is reserved for a lucky few.

Wendy Griswold (1994) provides a visual representation of the relationship between producer and audience in her concept of the **cultural diamond** (see following diagram). We see that creators and receivers—that is, producers and audiences—are placed at opposite ends of the diamond, as are the social world and the cultural object. *Social world* refers to the totality of the community in which the cultural object acts. It might be hip-hop culture, America, global culture, or any other social unit we could imagine. Of course creators, objects, and receivers are embedded in this world, but for our analytical purposes we are teasing out cultural objects to better understand how they work. As we do so, we learn that these cultural objects are connected to the larger social world through both production *and* reception, so we need to study both to understand the objects.

THE
CULTURAL DIAMOND

SOCIAL WORLD

CREATOR ← → RECEIVER
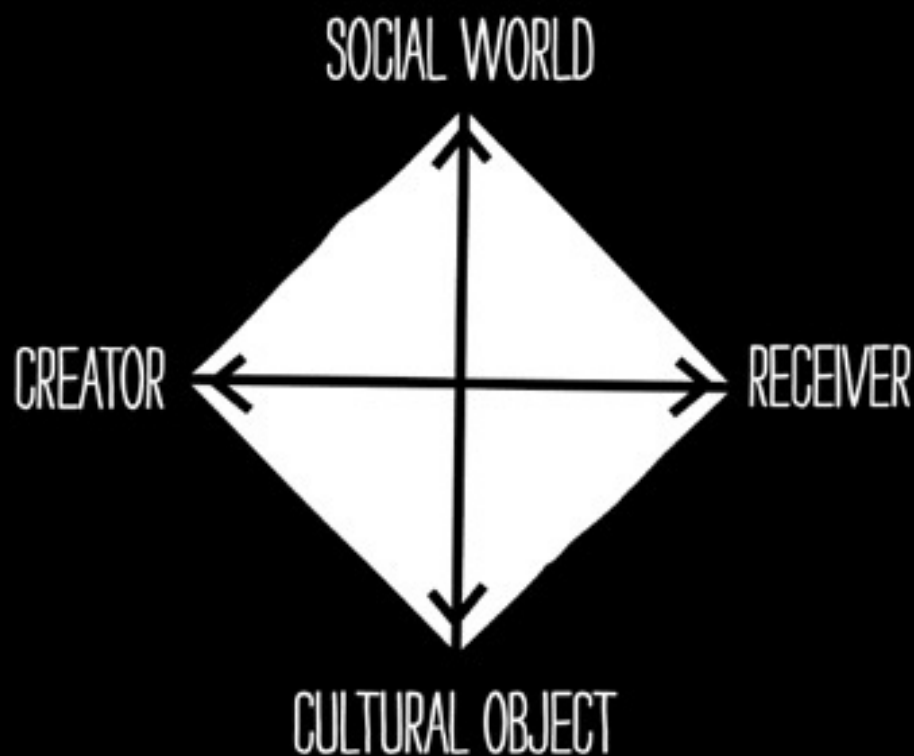
CULTURAL OBJECT

Consider the example of *Glee*. The show is a cultural object created by a team of producers, writers, directors, actors, and many others. It depicts a social world that centers on a high school in the small city of Lima, Ohio. But it is meant to represent the social world of high schools in general, not just that of William McKinley High School. To get from the real high schools of the social world to the fictional representation, the content of the show is filtered through the perspectives and interests of the people who make it. Those creators are acting in part on the perceived desires of their audience. The interests of the creators and the desires of the audience probably disrupt the show's capacity to offer an accurate reflection of the social world of American high schools. **Reflection theory,**

sociological approach to literature and other forms of cultural objects, examines the ways that cultu[re] reflects the social world. Although the theory has its critics,* it nevertheless offers a powerful way [of] understanding the content of culture. Ryan Murphy did not invent the high school that we see in h[is] television show out of thin air. He built it with elements from the social world: his memories of hig[h] school, other shows and films that feature high schools, stories about high school that he has seen [in] the news. There are probably some aspects that he creatively invented, and certainly the accumulatio[n] of those elements into this particular fictional school can be credited to Murphy and his creative tea[m,] but for the most part William McKinley High School is a reflection of the creator's experiences an[d] interests *and* of the intended audience's desire. The influence of the audience is probably limited [to] focus group tests and market research in the early stages of a show, but it grows over time as rating[s] and other mechanisms allow audiences to weigh in.

As audiences watch the show, they may internalize the meanings they make from it. That is a[n] important claim that we need to examine. I am not saying that audiences internalize the meanings th[at] Murphy and the other creators infuse into the show. Rather, I am saying that the meaning is made b[y] the audience itself. The audience has limited tools for this meaning-making work, but the work [is] theirs. Audience members are limited by the available interpretations of the content and by th[e] personal experiences they bring to the viewing, including those with similar content. But the[se] interpretations and experiences generate what one sociologist calls a **tool kit**. Ann Swidler sugges[ts] that "cultures provide a 'tool kit' of resources from which people can construct diverse strategies [of] action" (1986, 281). If Swidler's notion is correct, then we draw on past cultural experiences [to] construct meaning and make choices in new situations. Even though I graduated from high scho[ol] many years ago, I may draw on my exposure to the episodes of *Glee* to decide how to act when I fe[el] the world is treating me like a loser. If I were a current high school student, this exposure might b[e] especially useful—or especially harmful. But I might learn from what Finn says to his friend Puck [in] the pilot episode:

> Don't you get it, man? We're all losers—everyone in this school. Hell, everyone in this town.
> Out of all the kids who graduate, maybe half will go to college, and two will leave the state to
> do it. I'm not afraid of being called a loser 'cause I can accept that that's what I am. But I am
> afraid of turning my back on something that actually made me happy for the first time in my
> sorry life. (Brennan, Falchuk, and Murphy 2009a)

Maybe, just maybe, remembering a moment like that would help me choose my own happiness ov[er] the fear of being called a loser.

In sum, this book asks questions about the ways the culture industry generates a wide array [of] social meanings through the production, content, and reception of commercial culture objects tha[t,] taken as a whole, are consumed by the mass of society. Attention is given to all four points of th[e] cultural diamond: creators, cultural objects, audiences (receivers), and the social world.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND ARGUMENTS

Now that I have clarified what *popular culture* means in this book, let me articulate the researc[h] questions that I am asking about popular culture. *What is the relationship between popular culture a[nd] identity?* This seems like a relatively straightforward question—setting aside for the moment th[e] definition of identity, which I address later. However, from a social science perspective, it is not clea[r]

what direction of influence I am querying. Asking how popular culture shapes identity is very different from asking how identity shapes popular culture. To do the former, I would need to examine the stages in the formation of various identities—racial identities, gender identities, class identities, and so forth—to see where popular culture plays a role. That is *not* what I do in this book; although it is a very important question—aspects of which appear from time to time throughout the book—it is not the focus.

I ask the opposite question: *How does identity influence popular culture?* To answer this question, we need to make our way around the cultural diamond—from the social world, to production, to cultural objects, to audiences, and back again to the social world—to see where and how identity shows up at each point. I focus on five dimensions of identity: race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability. The first three dimensions—race, class, and gender—have been heavily studied by sociologists for years, including in the context of popular culture. The last two—sexuality and disability—are now being studied by sociologists to an increasing degree, but have received less attention in the context of popular culture. These five dimensions are not by any means the only aspects of identity. We could also ask about religion, region, age, political ideology, and many other factors that both make us who we are and give us a connection to others like us. The kinds of identity that I am examining are all collective rather than individual. They are associations we make that connect us with others. The choice of these five dimensions may seem somewhat arbitrary in comparison to the longer list of collective identities that we could formulate, but what links them together is the particular prominence they have in contemporary US *and* global politics. I have devoted a chapter to examining commercial culture systems in a few select locations around the world.

Although I have not limited the formats of popular culture discussed in this book—there are many, and technology continually allows for new formats to emerge—some have been so prominent and so heavily studied that I discuss them at length. These include television, music, film, magazines, books, and the Internet (including variations on telephones, iPads, and other devices).

To formulate my question one more time: *How do race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability influence the production, content, audience, and social world for television, music, film, magazines, books, and the Internet, both in the United States and abroad?* Now I have a large research question that is also very specific. It spells out the variables (types of media, types of identity), gives some indication of how I operationalize them, and clarifies the locations where the question is addressed. The work of answering this question is limitless. For some aspects of the question there are excellent studies that I can draw from and synthesize. For others there is enough relevant work that I can begin to speculate what the answers might be. And yet for some aspects of the question the best I can do is suggest what finding the answer might look like. Even as I, and other researchers, work on answering this enormous question about the relationship between popular culture and identity, the terrain is moving. New technologies create new media formats with new possibilities. Changing political and economic climates shift the meanings that we attach to various aspects of identity. So even the questions that we have answered before need to be answered again. The notion that everything we could possibly say has already been said is the farthest thing from the truth. We have only just scratched the surface!

Although the work of examining the relationship between identity and popular culture is vast, the process of synthesizing the work to date into this book does allow me to make some preliminary arguments.

Argument 1: Popular culture serves the dual and contradictory role of integrating us into the soci[al] world while also insisting that we have failed to fully integrate. We are invited into the mass med[ia] matrix, but after accepting that invitation we are constantly made to feel that we do not deserve to [be] at the party. Popular culture normalizes our identities even as it also brands us as freaks and stranger[s].

Consider the characters on *Glee*. Their glee club, New Directions, gives them a place where the[y] can be themselves and connect with others. It does not automatically make them popular, but [it] certainly makes them less alone. It pulls them collectively into the social world of the high scho[ol,] where before they had just been marginalized individuals. As New Directions finds some success, an[d] as more popular kids begin to join it, all of the characters become more integrated into Willia[m] McKinley High School. But that integration is never fully complete, and we learn from *Glee* th[at] everyone is on the verge of descent into loserdom.

Fans of the show may get the message that being a loser is fine, and that even losers will get the[ir] moments to shine. That is a great message. But in my lowest moments, when I am making a decisi[on] to stand up for myself, I never have the luxury of a backup orchestra ready to play the latest pop so[ng] that reminds me of my inner power. No matter how many power ballads I break into as I walk dow[n] the halls at work, the music never kicks in. That is the impossibility of popular culture. It presents [us] with cultural goals—physical perfection, relationship bliss, fantastical sex—but the means to achie[ve] those goals never actually get us there.

TABLE I.I. Robert Merton's Five Types of Cultural Adaptation	Cultural Goals	Institutionalized Means
Conformity	+	+
Innovation	+	−
Ritualism	−	+
Retreatism	−	−
Rebellion	±	±

+ indicates access and/or acceptance; – indicates rejection; ± indicates rejection and the substitution of new goals or means
(SOURCE: MERTON 1938.)

Sociologist Robert Merton (1938) suggests that full social participation requires both embraci[ng] the cultural goals of a society and access to the means to achieve those goals. (See Table 1.1 f[or] Merton's five types of cultural adaptation.) He uses the term *ritualist* to refer to those who embra[ce] the means—in this case consumption—but never achieve the goals. So we could say th[at] contemporary popular culture transforms us all into ritualists. We keep consuming popular culture a[nd] buying the products that it sells, even though we never attain the perfection that it promises.

I am suggesting that the goals celebrated by commercial culture are actually unobtainable throu[gh] the means presented by that culture. Merton's notion of conformity simply is not possible. F[or] example, if you want to achieve the body the media keep telling you to have, you cannot eat the fo[od] that the media tell you to eat. A few people manage to achieve the cultural goals, but only by rejecti[ng] the official means. These are the models and actors who attain gorgeous bodies, but only by rejecti[ng] all the food that is advertised in the commercials that punctuate their work. They are the successf[ul] business elites who attain influential careers, but only by rejecting the lifestyle of leisure a[nd] consumption that is celebrated by the businesses they lead. In Merton's model, these people a[re] innovators because they achieve the goals of society, but only by rejecting the institutionalized mean[s.]

The ubiquity of commercial culture means that retreatism is also not possible. We may turn o[ff]
our televisions (though few do), but we are still faced with commercial culture on billboards, in store[s,]
in the magazines that litter the doctor's waiting room, and in a thousand other aspects of our day-t[o-]
day lives. However, although it may be impossible to retreat, creative audiences are showing us that [it]
is possible to rebel by taking the cultural goals and the institutional means and transforming them in[to]
something new. This creative work by audiences is discussed at various points throughout this book.

Argument 2: Production, content, and reception are deeply connected and are deeply embedded in t[he]
larger social world, so any attempt to understand popular culture without paying attention to all fo[ur]
points of the cultural diamond is inevitably flawed.

Consider the production, content, and reception of *Glee*. Using the Internet Movie Databa[se]
(IMDb), I identified the gender breakdown for the first-billed cast, just for the pilot episode. It is [a]
near-even mix: of the fifteen first-billed cast members, eight were men and seven were women. In th[e]
larger social world, the gender scales tip just slightly in the other direction, with about 51 percent [of]
the US population being women.* On television in general, studies have shown that women a[re]
significantly underrepresented, constituting just 41 percent of all prime time characters in the 2010[–]
2011 TV season, a *decline* of 2 percentage points from three years prior (Lauzen 2012). So *Glee* [is]
offering a higher proportion of female characters than most other shows. But who is responsible f[or]
making these images of women? As it turns out, the female characters in *Glee* come from [a]
predominantly male creative staff. Of the ten people who served as creators, writers, directors, [or]
producers for the pilot episode, only one was a woman—which means the lives of the women we s[ee]
o n *Glee* are largely authored by men. Could this skew the ways that women are represented[?]
Answering that question requires more evidence than we have at the moment, but it is a ve[ry]
important one to ask.

How might male executives misrepresent the lives of women? Certainly some persiste[nt]
stereotypes come through in the show. The women of *Glee* are obsessed with relationships, a[re]
consumed with doubts about their bodies and about sex, and show little interest in their academ[ic]
endeavors—although they appear to keep doing fine in school. The one character who seems mo[st]
confident is eventually revealed as a closeted lesbian—an interesting plot twist that neverthele[ss]
undermines her confident sexuality. Women and men who watch *Glee* are unlikely to internalize the[se]
stereotypes wholesale, because they do watch TV critically. But if they are bombarded with the sam[e]
messages about women in nearly every show they watch, then hear that same message in the mus[ic]
they listen to, repeated across a host of cultural formats, it becomes difficult for them to imagine th[at]
cultural images are anything other than a perfect reflection of social reality. I suggest that when th[e]
dominant cultural messages are that women are obsessed with relationships and men are obsess[ed]
with sex, it is even harder for either gender to be fully engaged with the political and economic issu[es]
of our time, including the politics of gender itself.

Argument 3: The primary way that identity influences popular culture is by creating deep dispariti[es,]
which are found especially in the labor force demographics for production, the quantitative an[d]
qualitative representations found in the content, and the interpretive experiences of the audience.

Identity is more than a marker of difference; it is also a mechanism of stratification. For an[y]
dimension of identity, there are some people who are socially privileged and others who fa[ce]
marginalization, discrimination, and oppression. We may all feel individually privileged to be th[e]

people we are, regardless of our gender or sexuality or any other aspect of our lives, but when w[e] move from the individual to the social level, those identities have very real consequences and crea[te] deep disparities. At the production level, the key disparity is found in the labor market and i[ts] recruitment processes. Women, racial minorities, working-class people, people with disabilities, gay[s] and lesbians, transgender (trans) men and women, and people who are not American (or not America[n] enough) often play little to no role in how their own stories are told through commercial culture. The[y] are either recruited less often than their privileged counterparts or recruited unevenly—pushed mo[re] into some jobs or roles than others.

In terms of content, the issues are both quantitative and qualitative. Quantitatively, we have [to] look at who is overrepresented, who is proportionally represented, who is underrepresented, and wh[o] is missing entirely from our cultural outlets. We can compare the demographics of content to th[e] national and global demographics, to the demographics of the audience, and to the demographics [of] producers. Qualitatively, we have to examine stereotypes and other kinds of images that produc[e] distorted notions about certain groups, including both minority and majority groups. Some of the[se] images are not widespread enough to qualify as stereotypes, but they still function as what sociologi[st] Patricia Hill Collins (1990) refers to as **controlling images**. These images are designed to remind [us] of social hierarchies and to put us in our place within them. Media culture is also full [of] counterimages, which offer a disruption from stereotypes and other controlling images. Howeve[r,] even as new counterimages are continually produced, the stereotypes persist, and they produce ve[ry] different stories for different identity groups. Consider the following review of the third season [of] *Glee,* posted by Alyssa Rosenberg on the website ThinkProgress. The name should clearly indica[te] that Rosenberg is critiquing the show from a liberal perspective, which is interesting because some [of] the most vocal criticisms of *Glee* have come from social conservatives. Rosenberg says:

> It's become impossible to escape the conclusion that Glee is an immoral show, but not for the reason cultural conservatives believe. It's become a show that's not just sloppy but exploitative and manipulative of serious societal issues and human experiences. And it's time to walk away, even for hate-watching purposes. . . . It's one thing for bringing the underexamined lives of gay teenagers, of abused women, of people of color into the mainstream of popular culture. But spotlighting them only to use their pain to accrue credit to yourself isn't admirable. (Rosenberg 2012)

Rosenberg laments the way that the show brings up serious issues facing one group or another, b[ut] only treats them across a one- or two-episode arc and contrasts them with much less important issu[es] —for example, intertwining a story about domestic abuse with the tale of two students' auditions at [a] drama academy.

Finally, for audiences, identity creates disparate patterns of interpretation. In other word[s,] audiences bring different experiences with them when they consume culture, and they access cultu[re] in uneven ways. Some groups watch television more than others, and economics plays a role [in] determining how we all access television.

Having laid out my questions and arguments, I now address two key issues: the mass media matr[ix] and the matrix of identity.

THE MASS MEDIA MATRIX

Popular culture is ubiquitous. I have students, friends, and colleagues who approach me all the time with questions about current trends in popular culture. They often preface their questions by telling me that they are not popular culture consumers. They presume that I am a pop culture know-it-all and insist that they are pop culture imbeciles. There are two problems with this. First, popular culture involves such a dizzying array of cultural objects that no one person—not even a scholarly expert—can keep up with more than a fraction of it. Second, the array of cultural objects is so insidious in our lives that no one really escapes it. When one friend told me she had no interest in popular culture, I asked her what kind of music she liked. Her answer was alt country. That genre of music does not come from the Tennessee hills or the back roads of Texas; it was created by the popular music industry and places my friend in a very clear category of cultural consumer. She likes the storytelling of country music, but not the religious values. She thinks of farms as the place where organic food is made. She probably drives a Volvo or a Subaru, definitely not a pickup or an SUV. We do not have to watch prime time TV, or go see the latest blockbuster, or download the number one pop song, to be engaged with popular culture. The film at the bottom of the box office is still a form of popular culture, as is the book that never cracks the best-seller list or the canceled show that a handful of people happen to discover and fall in love with when it comes out on DVD. They all come from the same industry.

The most important point to note about the culture industry is that it is controlled by a very small handful of corporations. In 1988 media scholars Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky complained that a mere twenty-four companies controlled the US media output (Herman and Chomsky 1988). In 1999 Robert McChesney updated that number to six: Time Warner, Disney, Viacom, Seagram, News Corporation, and Sony—although he noted also the significant holdings of AT&T and General Electric. The actual list of the major media giants shifts a little every year, because some holdings are sold or simply spun off as their own entities. Sometimes when this happens, the company names make it difficult for the novice researcher to keep track. For example, in 2008 Time Warner Cable split from Time Warner, making them separate financial entities. Or consider the case of Sony Music Entertainment, a division of the Sony Corporation. Moving backward in time, Sony Music Entertainment has also been known as Sony BMG (during a partnership with Bertelsmann), Columbia Records, and the American Record Corporation. Many Americans think of Columbia Records as an important part of American music history, but may not realize that it still exists as a corporate entity under the name Sony Music Entertainment, owned by the Japanese Sony Corporation.

How we identify the major media corporations depends in part on how we define the media. If we focus on types of media formats produced, then we would likely start with television, radio, film, music, print media, and digital outlets. If we also consider distribution mechanisms, then cable and telecommunications (such as mobile phones) are added to the list.

As an experiment, we will use the five major broadcast networks as an entry point to this analysis: NBC, ABC, CBS, Fox, and the CW. This analysis is accurate as of the publication of this book, but subject to change as holdings shift. NBC is part of the larger company NBC Universal, which was jointly owned by Comcast and General Electric until Comcast purchased GE's 49 percent share of the company in March 2013. ABC is part of the Disney-ABC Television Group, which is owned by the Walt Disney Company. CBS is part of the CBS Corporation, which is a subsidiary of National Amusements. Formerly, CBS was a division of Viacom, but it split off in 2005. Viacom is also a subsidiary of National Amusements. The CW is owned jointly by the CBS Corporation and Warner Bros. (a subsidiary of Time Warner). The C stands for CBS, and the W stands for Warner. Finally, Fox is owned by the media giant News Corporation as part of its Fox Entertainment Group. So the five

major broadcast networks point us to the powerful role of Comcast, Disney, National Amusement, Time Warner, and News Corporation. "5 Major Media Conglomerates" presents a visual indicator of the relative size and holdings of some of the major media conglomerates. These corporation constitute a *media oligopoly,* a term explained in Table 1.2.

An analysis of the major media conglomerates reveals four key observations that will help comprehend how powerful these corporations are and how insignificant the role of competition is f understanding their activities.

1. Each conglomerate has holdings at multiple points in the chain of production and distribution In television, a conglomerate may have holdings in production studios, national networks, ar local broadcasters. In film, the same conglomerate may have holdings in studios, fil distributors, and national theater chains. This is referred to as *vertical integration*, a ter explained in Table 1.2.
2. Each major conglomerate has broad holdings within the main media formats. Comcast ownership of NBC Universal gives it control not only of NBC, but also of Bravo, the Weathe Channel, Syfy, Telemundo, and USA. This is referred to as *horizontal integration*, a ter explained in Table 1.2.

3. Each conglomerate has broad holdings across the main media formats. News Corporation h[as]
holdings in publishing (HarperCollins, Zondervan), newspapers (*New York Post, Wall Stree[t]*
Journal), radio (Fox News Radio), sports teams (the Brisbane Broncos in Australia, th[e]
Colorado Rockies in the United States), film (Twentieth Century Fox), and television (Fox, F[X,]
Fuel). This of course allows for significant cross-promotion. In *Glee*'s first season, the te[en]
characters made frequent references to their MySpace pages, even though MySpace was swift[ly]
losing users to its rival, Facebook. Why would *Glee* promote MySpace? Because New[s]
Corporation owned MySpace at the time, before selling it in 2011 to Justin Timberlake an[d]
Specific Media Group. MySpace, now Myspace, has been transformed into a "soci[al]
entertainment" service, focusing especially on music.

TABLE 1.2. Keywords for Understanding Media Consolidation
Oligopoly: An industry that is controlled by a small handful of corporations that are functionally no longer competing with each other. The media industry is an oligopoly, because a small group of companies controls the industry, and they are deeply interconnected and share the same interests (McChesney 1999).
Vertical Integration: A cost-saving method for businesses that involves controlling every aspect of the creation and distribution process. For example, a corporation that owns a music studio may also seek to own a song publishing business, a music distribution business, etc. Moreover, corporations that own businesses across different media formats can cross-promote cheaply and easily, such as when *Glee* promoted MySpace during its first season (Peterson and Berger 1975).
Horizontal Integration: A cost-saving method for a business that involves controlling ever higher proportions of the market production within a field. A corporation that owns a music studio may purchase other music studios in order to control a significant segment of music production (McChesney 1999).

Interlock: The situation when a board member of a major media organization is also a board member of another corporation, making the media organization more favorable to the interlocking corporation. One team of researchers found that the boards of ten major media outlets are composed of 118 individuals who are on the boards of 288 different corporations, which indicates significant interlock. They also found that many of these media board members are also board members for major colleges and universities, and that many have served in political office, creating interlocks among the leadership of the media, the political leadership of the country, the educational leadership of the country, and the international corporate community (Thornton, Walters, and Rouse 2006).

Federal Communications Commission (FCC): An independent federal agency created by the Communications Act of 1934, charged with regulating the use of wire and radio communications, which are concerned public goods belonging to the citizens. The Internet was added to the FCC's charge by the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which also created new allowances for cross ownership. The FCC's ownership rules are reviewed and potentially revised every two years, which means that further deregulation is always a possibility. The FCC is funded entirely by licensing fees and fines.

4. The various conglomerates are interlocked by joint holdings and joint ventures. Hulu, th popular online service provider, primarily of television but also of film, is a joint venture Fox, NBC, and ABC. The popular television show *Scrubs*, which aired from 2001 to 2010, w produced by ABC Studios, but aired until 2008 on NBC. When NBC canceled the show, AB picked it up and aired it for two more seasons. These are just two among scores of joi ventures that significantly interlock the financial interests of these media conglomerates, whi also undermining the power of consumers. Table 1.2 explains the concept of interlocks and t various forms that an interlock can take.

The term *culture industry* is most associated with the mid-twentieth-century scholars Theod Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their 1944 book, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Adorno ar Horkheimer viewed the culture industry as the inevitable conclusion of capitalism, which the believed was a cultural process of turning everything into a commodity. Early discussions capitalism focused on factory production of the goods and resources necessary for survival and rare touched on the commodification of art. But Adorno and Horkheimer observed that capitalism w extending its grasp into every aspect of human life, including the arts. Their critique of the cultu industry was that it churned out mass-produced and dumbed-down works of culture that would on numb or deceive the masses:

> The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises. The
> promissory note which, with its plots and staging, it draws on pleasure is endlessly prolonged;
> the promise, which is actually all the spectacle consists of, is illusory: all it actually confirms
> is that the real point will never be reached; that the diner must be satisfied with the menu.
> (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 44)

The diner must be satisfied with the menu because, in the authors' view, the culture industry sel[ls] nothing other than itself—no life lesson, no enlightenment, no new possibility for the huma[n] experience. The institutionalized means never allow us to achieve the cultural goals. The strang[er] never gains full citizenship.

I refer to the culture industry as a matrix because of the incredible ways that media conglomerat[es] are interlocked across production chains, media formats, and the globe. Their size, and the fact th[at] they have no vested interest in competing with one another, leaves consumers with little influen[ce] over the industry. They are a large and powerful force that feels invisible in many ways. A studio ma[y] put its stamp on a particular product, usually in the opening or closing credits, but it remains difficu[lt] for consumers to see how interconnected all of these products are.

THE MATRIX OF IDENTITY

The mass media is just one of two major matrices that I examine in this book. The other is the matr[ix] of identity, or what Patricia Hill Collins calls "the matrix of domination" (Collins 1990, 18). Identi[ty] is ubiquitous. It is a central political issue in an era of identity politics—gay marriage, "postracia[l]" America, confusion over how to court women voters—and it is a growing research interest f[or] scholars in both the humanities and social sciences. Sometimes my students complain about t[he] constant focus on identity, not just in my classroom but also in many of their other classes. They te[ll] me that they do not feel discriminated against and do not discriminate against others, and they wond[er] why we have to talk about discrimination and oppression all the time. Although I am certain we do n[ot] discuss discrimination and oppression *all the time,* I have no trouble defending the centrality [of] identity and inequality in the college curriculum. Identity is a matrix of *social* mechanisms and is n[ot] reducible to individual interpersonal interactions, although it certainly has an impact on thos[e]. Scholars are not the inventors or authors of identity; at best, we can hope to describe its paramete[rs] and central organizing principles. Identity captures a core aspect of the human experience: the sortin[g] of humans into groups that give us a sense of belonging and connection and also clarify who [is] excluded (and when and why).

Identity is a structural principle. It creates the boundaries of social groups and defines the norm[s] of the people within these groups. Identity is an economic principle. It creates the basic divisions [of] labor, determining who will work in which occupations and how they will prepare for those field[s]. Identity is a cultural principle. It creates the central value systems that shape what we believe a[nd] what our lives mean.

In our time, the dimensions of identity that receive the most attention are race, class, and gende[r]. Key social movements, including the civil rights movement, the labor union movement, and t[he] women's liberation movement, have placed these dimensions of identity at the forefront of structur[al] change by extending full social participation to previously excluded groups. To a lesser degree, thes[e] movements have also created economic changes, opening up new possibilities in the labor market f[or] women and racial minorities and improving the lives of the working and middle classes. Culture, [by] comparison, has proven much more durable. The social meanings of racial, class, and gender labe[ls] are difficult to change. These identities may be performed—as suggested by the sociological conce[pt] of "doing gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987)—but that should never be misinterpreted as [a] suggestion that we can perform them any way we want at any time. Performances become scripted a[nd] institutionalized, making it very difficult to significantly alter them.

The key sociological concept that is used when we bring race, class, and gender together [is] *intersectionality*, a concept coined by the legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) in her early wo[rk] on critical race theory. Patricia Hill Collins expands on this concept in *Black Feminist Thought* (1990[). It refers to the overlapping effects of race, class, gender, and other dimensions of identity to shape th[e] human experience by situating the individual within a complex system of stratification. Althoug[h] intersectionality creates degrees of privilege and oppression for most people, it also creates importa[nt] categories for collective organizing and social challenge. In both Crenshaw's and Collins's wor[k,] intersectionality is defined primarily in terms of race, class, and gender, but the concept is defined [in] such a broad way that other dimensions of identity are easily included as well. Indeed, they must [be] included to fully understand how intersectionality works. These additional dimensions inclu[de] sexuality, disability, religion, and nationality. The core idea of intersectionality is that we canno[t] understand the full story of stratification if we look only at one dimension at a time. Take gender as a[n] example. If someone were to ask me to name key stereotypes associated with masculinity, I might us[e] words like toughness, leader, strong, and "can't cry." But if the question became more specific, and [I] was asked for stereotypes associated with black masculinity, or Hispanic masculinity, or ga[y] masculinity, then the words would change pretty significantly. That raises the question of whether m[y] original list of stereotypes refers only to white or straight masculinity. When we don't explicit[ly] identify an intersection, our assumptions are often directed at those groups who *benefit* from th[e] dimension of identity in question. When thinking about gender, whether masculinity or femininity, w[e] too often focus on whites, people who are straight, people who are not disabled, and those in th[e] middle class.

An important corollary to intersectionality, then, is **privilege**, a concept most associated wi[th] Peggy McIntosh's consideration of white privilege and male privilege. McIntosh discusses th[e] blithely privileged statements that her male students made in classes in which she explored gend[er] issues (McIntosh 2009). As she realized that these statements were not deliberately malicious, b[ut] rather reflections of deeply seated, taken-for-granted assumptions, she began to question her ow[n] assumptions, which resulted from her privilege as a white person. She refers to these assumptions [as] an "invisible knapsack," a set of tools and resources that privileged people carry around without ev[er] realizing that many people do not have the same resources. Bringing intersectionality and privileg[e] together allows us to see that most people experience some level of privilege *and* some level [of] oppression. For example, a white, gay, middle-class male might feel oppressed in a homophob[ic] culture, without recognizing that he is also privileged by his gender and class. A straight black woma[n] may feel oppressed by the combination of sexism and racism, without recognizing the ways that she [is] privileged by her sexual orientation and her status as nondisabled. Because of the important but ofte[n] overlooked role of privilege as a mechanism of inequality, I prefer the phrase "matrix of privilege an[d] oppression" over "matrix of domination." *Domination* is a much stronger term than privilege, to [be] sure, but it is too easy to focus on who is being dominated. The concept of privilege forces o[ur] attention to the question of who benefits from this system of inequality.

In a memorable scene from *Glee*, the cheerleading coach, Sue Sylvester, invokes identity marke[rs] to call out a set of students from New Directions: "Santana, wheels, gay kid . . . Asian, other Asia[n,] Shaft" (Brennan, Falchuk, and Murphy 2009b). She is referring, in order, to the Latina named Santan[a] (one of her Cheerios), the disabled student Artie Abrams, the as-yet-not-out gay kid Kurt Hummel, a[n] Asian student named Tina Cohen-Chang, another Asian student named Mike Chang (no relation [to] Tina), and a black student named Matt Rutherford. In that moment, Sue Sylvester is doing to the[se] students something that popular culture does to many minorities: reducing them to one dimension [of]

their identities. Only Santana, as one of Sue's favorites, is let off the hook and given the ful subjectivity that is implied when we are identified by our names, not just by a single aspect of who w are. The effect of these one-dimensional labels is to render each recipient a stranger in the very sen that Simmel discussed: both a part of the community and apart from it.

As mentioned previously, in this book I examine five dimensions of identity: race, class, gende sexuality, and disability status. I also address questions of national identity in a chapter on glob comparisons. Although I tease these dimensions apart for analytical purposes, I always include much intersectional analysis as possible. For instance, when discussing sexuality I try to inclu comparisons between gays and lesbians to allow for gender analysis and to include racial comparison as well. The fact that I discuss these dimensions separately should in no way obscure the fact that the are intricately linked. But it is very difficult to be fully intersectional at every moment of analysi The matrix of the culture industry and the matrix of identity are two powerful social forces that wo together to significantly shape modern life.

A FIELD GUIDE FOR ANALYSIS

This book is designed as a field guide for any student or scholar who is interested in studying the influence that identity has on commercial culture. It summarizes the ways that this influence has be explored, along with the major relevant findings. It brings a wide variety of sociological theories an methods to bear on this issue. I try to focus primarily on sociological research, especially from the sociology of culture, but I also draw heavily from both communications studies and cultural studie Communications studies offers an excellent perspective on the organization and influence of the media industries. Cultural studies provides a method for close textual analysis of cultural objects. The sociology of culture has emphasized the meaning-making strategies that audience members use transforming cultural objects into a set of meanings and values that guide their daily actions an preferences. In addition, I draw from both classical and contemporary theories and theorists. Table 1 summarizes the theoretical approaches used in this book.

In addition to a range of theories, I also introduce several methodological approaches. In each Chapters 2–6, I discuss three methodological approaches: production studies, content studies, an audience studies. These methods include both quantitative and qualitative approaches and demonstra a range of ways that social research questions can be answered. Table 1.4 summarizes the metho discussed in this book.

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