What in the World is a Gleek?  
Adapting *Glee* for Italian Audiences

*Glee* (FOX 2009-present) is colloquially known as ‘one of the gayest shows on television’ due in large part to the inclusion of a diverse range of gay characters and frequent depiction of issues including coming-out narratives and bullying, same-sex sex education and gay marriage. Though more explicit instances of these issues on occasion read like public service announcements, *Glee* also interrogates everyday matters related to sexuality, gender, race, class, and ability. The series first premiered in May of 2009 in a successful ploy to get viewers excited. By the time *Glee* returned that September, it had already cultivated an energetic fan base, in part thanks to the promotional work of its young and vivacious cast. *Glee* would become the first successful scripted musical program in the United States and, aided by its phenomenal record sales and iTunes success, develop a fan base of dedicated “gleeks” throughout the world. As a widely popular and liberal-minded scripted series, *Glee* offers a unique opportunity to interrogate the ways in which American constructions of identity categories (gender, sexuality, etc.) are adapted across national and cultural borders. This paper uses Italy as a case study for exploring *Glee*’s adaptation through promotional materials that introduced foreign audiences to the series.

In examining what it is that makes a program successful around the globe, we must consider the linguistic, cultural, and rhetorical choices made during the adaptation process. Changes made to the American texts before they are not limited to the language of the dialogue. For example, to call the Italian-dubbed *Glee* a translation is to suggest that the words are changed from English to Italian on a line-by-line basis, when the reality is in fact far more complex. It would be more useful to adopt Georg-Michael Luyken’s description of the process as “language transfer” (1991, p. ii) and to understand the Italian *Glee* as an interpretation, as
Jeremy Munday (2001) suggests, or as an adaptation. Frederic Chaume Varela (2002) echoes Munday and promotes consideration of both the process of transformation from one text into another, as well as those products of translation in terms of linguistics, culture and ideology.

As important as the text itself are paratexts, such as promotional materials, that accompany the program as it travels the globe and is made to appeal to heterogeneous audiences. Promotions shape textual readings of the program through their linguistic and cultural approaches to translation, and therefore call for scrutiny. Jonathan Gray explains that “[e]ach paratext acts like an airlock to acclimatize us to a certain text, and it demands or suggests certain reading strategies.” (2010, p. 25) In this way the paratext offers foreign audiences an introduction to a popular American show with which they may have little familiarity. The decisions made about how to promote such a show have serious consequences on the ways in which that program is understood by its new potential viewers.

*Glee*’s ever-expanding cast of characters includes many stereotypes, including a large and sassy African-American female, a Latina from the wrong side of the tracks, and an effeminate gay male teen. In addition to socially marginalized characters are the hegemonically powerful white heterosexual quarterback and head cheerleader. However, the intrinsic power bestowed in the U.S. by certain positions (maleness and masculinity, heterosexuality, whiteness, wealth, able-bodiness and Christianity) are challenged by the characters’ interactions; whatever their individual subject positions, the characters unite and use music to navigate the social and political pitfalls ubiquitous in American high schools. Episode themes address gendered issues such as sexuality, sexual orientation, gender constructions, double standards, and body image. Unfortunately, much of this diversity and social conflict is absent from Italian promotional paratexts. When *Glee* is aired abroad, its success and reception can be affected by the way it is
presented to new audiences, particularly those who are not familiar with the original. Attention to cross-cultural adaptations has been noticeably limited to the program itself, with little consideration extended to paratextual ways of presenting the program to its scattered audiences.

Denise D. Bielby and C. Lee Harrington (2008) find that most paratextual elements are interrupted by distribution processes, and that paratexts must be reconstructed in those markets that import a given program.

In the United States, *Glee* is understood to be comedic, dramatic, and uniquely musical, with frequent elements borrowed from the music video and public service announcement genres. Bielby and Harrington suggest that genres are best understood as constructed from creators’ social relationships with audiences, and that they delineate among texts’ similarities and differences. Although they propose that artists and audiences agree on generic boundaries most fully within the medium of television, their greater emphasis is on genre’s fluidity. While genre is a component of promotional campaigns, the global TV market is more concerned with quality. Bielby and Harrington argue that genre classification is a relevant programming strategy, though not a reliable indicator of a show’s success in foreign markets, and that it serves a rhetorical purpose in promotion and marketing. Classifications of genre, they say, are continuously contested and reinterpreted throughout the process of cross-cultural recontextualization, or what Munday would call interpretation. Genre’s conceptual fluidity makes aesthetic elements all the more important, and these elements signal the demographics of potential audiences.

Bielby and Harrington analyze production company brochures to explore the ways genre-related aesthetic elements are utilized. The authors find that programs’ unique qualities are emphasized rather than a mere reliance on generic categorization. To the extent that genre remains a factor, it is particularly useful at the global level in terms of content and format.
Extending this to promotional materials in importing markets, we might expect to find a similar emphasis on *Glee*’s distinct content, much of which engages with issues of gender and sexuality, rather than a simple reliance on its generic fluidity as a musical dramedy. Generic categories serve the purpose of stabilizing audiences, but since generic categories are particularly fluid across cultural borders, they become less useful for constructing promotional materials.

Promotional materials shape the way potential viewers construct their understanding of a given program. As Chiara Bucaria (2011) points out, these materials may even determine which potential viewers perceive themselves as being a part of the program’s target audience. Launching on an Italian cable network in December 2009, *Glee* was accompanied by dubbed Italian versions of American promos. Much of these materials utilized the popular American symbol for “loser” created by the shaping the thumb and forefinger of one’s right hand into a “L” shape and holding it to one’s forehead; this symbol also appears in the show’s title with the ‘L’ in *Glee* made up of a hand in this position. Rachele Antonini’s (2009) concern about the ability of Italian audiences to identify and understand American symbolism such as the ‘Loser L’ is perhaps more pertinent here than in any other aspect of *Glee*. The use of this symbol is key to American viewers’ construction of *Glee* as dealing with characters who are considered to be losers by their peers, often for failing to perform traditional norms of gender and sexuality. The significance of this symbol, and of the gesture it often entails, is essentially lost on Italians, as their word for “loser” does not being with an L.

Although Italian television programming is difficult to access from within the United States, descriptions of programming and promotional material are available online. Bucaria describes an Italian promo which dubbed and severely edited an American promo, to the detriment of the promo’s message. In the original promo, *Glee* characters speak into the camera
about the ways in which the sentiment of glee improves their lives, and each shot is juxtaposed with a very short clip from the program in which they are shown to suffer, for example by getting a slushie thrown in their face. In the Italian version, the clips extracted from *Glee* are removed, so that Italian viewers are left with a series of shots in which the American actors smile and speak to the camera. The omission of scenes depicting the characters’ suffering combines with the use of the unexplained hand symbol indicating the nastiness of the popularity/loserdom (or, hegemonic/resistant) dichotomy to present Italian viewers with a warped perspective on the program.

That said, the omission of distress from the text through unexplained gestures and erased depictions of bullying may be for the purpose of promoting the program as part of a conventional teen genre, in which case the depiction of aggression and hostility towards the protagonists might detract from the particular attempt at a more fluid generic branding. Consideration of cultural difference also suggests that the content of those clips which were erased from the original promotion might signal other unrelated genres for Italian audiences, in which case these eliminations would or could be important and necessary. The Italian version of this promo also provides the song “Don’t Stop Believing” as background music, arguably attributing to the Italian version of *Glee* a stronger self-assured idealism than is found in the comparably jarring American original.

A second promo juxtaposes the show’s geeky protagonists with other characters who criticize the members of the original Glee club, as well as the teacher and guidance counselor who are its greatest supporters. Although there are no clips from the show in either the Italian version or the original, the American version relies heavily on the use of the word “Gleek,” a clever term combining “glee” and “geek” which was coined to describe *Glee* fans. As a made-up
word that relies on English vocabulary, there is no Italian translation for this word. Italian translators thus prioritized lip synchronicity and simply replaced every use of “geek” and “gleek” with “glee,” so that instead of a back and forth of students proclaiming “You’re a geek” and “I’m a gleek,” Italian viewers hear the dubbed voices of their native tongue saying, “I am Glee” and “Are you Glee?” The adaptation of this particular promotional paratexts erases the aggressiveness inherent in the verbal attacks of the American original, and fails to demarcate the two groups of the glee club members and the popular kids. A more complex adaptation of the promo to include an explanation of the relational dynamic between the two groups would be necessary to fully convey the show’s tone if the American glee club has no analog within Italian high schools and the Gleeks are, consequentially, not recognized as geeks, nerds, or losers. Here, the continued use of the upbeat “Don’t Stop Believing” once again contributes to the erasure of the program’s ubiquitous theme of conflict, replacing in this instance the darkly dramatic classical music featured in the original.

What guidance, if any, do FOX and the American producers of Glee provide for the Italians responsible for repackaging Glee for the Italian public? The drastically different programs constructed by the American and Italian promotions suggest that there might be no direction given at all to Italian producers or broadcasters as to how they might interpret and reconstruct the American promotional materials for their own audiences. It would be one thing for Italian producers to decide explicitly to translate the program in such a way that makes it more accessible to Italian audiences, but the choices made in the adaptation of the promotional materials strip the original Glee of many of the elements to which it owes its success. The Italian promotional materials strip Glee of its central theme of overcoming adversity in the hellish halls of high school, an experience perhaps not shared by teens in Italy.
Promotions for the second season, once Italian viewers were more familiar with \textit{Glee}, were noticeably different than those which aired prior to \textit{Glee}’s original Italian broadcasts. This is perhaps due to a failure on the part of the previous promotional materials to accurately or successfully communicate the content or format of the American program’s unfamiliar generic hybridity. Rather than relying on genre-specific promotional materials, they seem to have moved on here to capturing the series’ playful and youthful format. This characterization was consistent with the brand of the Italian network on which it aired, which was aimed at younger audiences. One new adaptation was the changing of the spelling of plural Italian words, which traditionally end in ‘i’, to an ‘ee’ ending, which is phonetically similar but makes playful use of the program’s name. So, for example, the Italian word for ‘songs,’ \textit{canzoni}, was changed to \textit{canzonee}. This creative practice was decidedly more playful and in keeping with the format of the original program’s tone, particularly with regards to the playfulness inherent in the term ‘gleek.’ It further differs from the previous promos in that it did not simply cut and paste clips from the American promos to create a condensed, scene-free version. Instead it included scenes from \textit{Glee} in which the content of minority issues such as race and orientation, exceedingly frequent in the original American series but entirely absent from early Italian promotional materials, are explicitly referenced.

When \textit{Glee} started airing from the beginning on a second network, Italia 1, which focuses primarily on attracting younger viewers, the network continued to evolve promotional strategies by creating its own promo. Following the trend of clever wordplay, Italia 1 put together a promo in which Italian celebrities made and displayed the ‘Loser L’ with their hands while exclaiming “Glee-talia Uno!” once again making use of the ‘ee’ sound so common in Italian language. While there is nothing to suggest that the ‘Loser L’ is any more understood within the context of
this promo than it was in the originals featuring the American cast, it is possible that Italia 1 attracted viewers who had watched the original airing of *Glee* on Fox’s Italian network; these repeat viewers may have come to contextually understand the significance of the ‘Loser L’ during their original viewing, and therefore brought to Italia 1 their understanding of this symbol’s use in promotional materials. More noteworthy is the choice to use Italian celebrities in the promo, given the status of *Glee*’s many primary characters as the underdogs of William McKinley High School. Though the exact identities of these celebrities is unknown, Bucaria constructs them as being significantly marked by their youth and hipness, which could serve a dual purpose of branding *Glee* as a program for teens and college students, and reiterating the FOX network’s emphasis on attracting this highly coveted target demographic. This technique brands both the program and the network without the necessity of properly understanding or attempting to deconstruct the show’s fluid generic boundaries in a conventional fashion.

While an increasing number of scholars are turning attention to the importance of promotional materials and other paratexts for the understanding of a program’s distribution across cultural borders, most have yet to address the ways in which industry outsiders are participating. Audience-driven promotional efforts are another important factor of a program’s paratextual library, and they must be attended to when scholars examine the adaptation or reinterpretation of a foreign text. In an increasingly digital era, industry insiders are not alone in the ability to shape paratexts, but audiences as well. When outsiders do participate, we should be concerned with how their participation has come about.

Perhaps more interesting than any of the promos aired on Italian television are the nontraditional strategies Bucaria describes. One such promotional event was a flash mob in a busy Rome shopping mall over the Christmas 2009 holiday season, just days before *Glee*’s
premier on FOX Italia. In this flash mob, a growing number of choreographed dancers swayed to the sounds of the *Glee* cast singing Journey’s “Don’t Stop Believing,” Kanye West’s “Gold Digger,” and Queen’s “Somebody to Love.” The flash mob performance, lasting just under four minutes, ended with the dancers all yelling “Glee!” and thrusting their right hands, formed in the ‘Loser L’ symbol, into the air for five seconds before dissolving back into the crowd around them. Although the hand gesture was likely no more understood for its meaning in the flash mob than in the televised promotions, its coordinated use with those promos would have, at the very least, facilitated viewers’ associations of this event with FOX Italia’s on-air promotions. Bucaria supposes that the flash mob was the work of FOX Italia, but this would not necessarily the case. If it is true that the network is responsible for this strategy, what hand, if any, did the Americans involved with *Glee* have in the idea behind or implementation of the flash mob? These are some of the questions I hope to further explore as my research into Italian *Glee* continues.

When an American program is sold internationally, its distributors play some as yet unidentified role in the creation or adaptation of promotional paratexts. Their participation, as well as any on the part of a program’s creative team, should be more thoroughly examined so as to better understand the ways in which Americans continue to influence the reception of American texts after they have left our airwaves and cables, particularly with regards to the ways in which diverse constructions of gender and sexuality are represented. What remains to be seen is the extent to which these industrial actors engage with these issues at all, whether they act on an active interest to assist each other in making the right decisions for the program or whether their work is conducted with indifference.
Bibliography


