

THE EVOLUTION OF SANTANA LOPEZ

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Glee is arguably one of the biggest phenomena in the contemporary world. It certainly belongs among the most popular shows in the USA as well as the rest of the world. The number of singles and albums sold via iTunes only supports this assumption. But what makes *Glee* the show it is. To a certain extent, it is the writing, setting at the American high school, etc. However, probably the thing that helped the show to become as popular as it is right now lies in the choice of characters portrayed.

The main characters that create the spectrum of different ethnicities, social classes and genders include among others the following – Rachel Berry (Lea Michele), Kurt Hummel (Chris Colfer), Michael ‘Mike’ Chang (Harry Shum, Jr.), Finn Hudson (Cory Monteith). This article will discuss and analyze the ‘evolution’ of another character that became more and more important and well rounded in season two and three – Santana Lopez (Naya Rivera). [“TV.com”]

Gender identity is a label used in contemporary society to ascertain an individual, whether an actual individual or a fictional character, based on three categories. These categories are biological sex, sociological gender and sexual orientation (Butler prefers the term desire). There are many different gender identities; however, the contemporary media only provides space for a fragment of the spectrum. [Butler 2002] Concerning the sociological gender, there are three different categories – masculinity, femininity and androgyny. These genders are created through “shaping [that] happens through large scale social organization and through everyday interactions that we usually take for granted.” [Holmes 2008:3].

Even if the majority of people nowadays consider men and women equal, it is important to stress that the society is still patriarchal to a large extent and thus the norms and values are hugely controlled by men. Traditionally, femininity is understood as the opposite of masculinity and since traditionally men are supposed to be masculine, it was expected from women to be feminine. These divisions are rooted in the cultural subconsciousness that the majority of population does not even consider them as culturally or sociologically based. [ibid.] Such a notion for female femininity is especially visible in the Hispanic culture, where women fall directly into the gender stereotypes with highly feminine figure and overall appearance. [Mendible 2007].

The Latina culture and society is connected to traditional Catholic and family values. This creates a crucial problem for Latina lesbians, who are not easily categorized in such society. In the US, Latina lesbians are faced with double marginalization – as women of color and as women of different sexual desire. [Zimmerman 2000] This directly leads to not overall favorable depiction of Latina lesbian on American television shows, if there even is such depiction. One of the notable exceptions to the marginalized view is the already mentioned character of Santana Lopez.

This character is portrayed by an American actress Naya Rivera, who according to one of the producers of the show Ian Brennan “was sort of cast as a pretty face”.

[Brennan in Snarker] Throughout the season one of *Glee* this character was virtually invisible, used mainly to provide viewers with snarky comments on other main characters. Her personality was not developed and the character could be viewed as one-dimensional. The only thing viewers learned from season one about Santana was that she was a highly feminine looking Latina, obsessed with money and sexual relationships with boys (1.04 “Preggers”, 1.12 “Mattress”, 1.15 “The Power of Madonna”). The only moment when the character was assumed to have other than traditional gender identity can be traced to the episode 1.13 “Sectionals” where an ‘innocent’ remark was made by Brittany, the best friend of Santana, that “Sex is not dating” because if it was then Santana and she would be dating. This comment was not further developed; however, the status as friends-with-benefits was cast upon this relationship.

The second season started similarly to the first one considering the development of then perceived minor characters, although credited as series regulars. The crucial change in the development of Santana came with episode 2.4 “Duets”. In the beginning of the episode, viewers see Santana and Brittany lying on the bed in an embrace, Santana lightly kissing Brittany’s neck. After Brittany’s proposal that they should sing a duet together – a song by Melissa Etheridge, a lesbian icon – Santana panics and states that she is not gay, she is only using Brittany. This moment can be stated as the beginning of the internal struggle of Santana to, at first suppress her lesbian identity and later on to come to terms with the fact that she is a lesbian.

This struggle continued until episode 2.15 “Sexy” when Santana was forced to confront her feelings towards her best friend. Since the whole friends-with-benefits situation from the season one continued between the above-mentioned two female characters, viewers are once again privy to a bedroom conversation. Here, Brittany openly questions Santana and her motifs for them to have sexual relations but no open emotional relations. Later in the episode, Santana agrees that she indeed has feelings of love towards her best friend, however, she is unable to come out of the closet because she is terrified of the social ostracism she will be faced. This is only underlined by the story of Kurt Hummel, an openly gay student at the William McKinley High School.

To add to the confusion of the analyzed character, her love interest – Brittany – at the time dates another member of the Glee Club, Artie Abrams. Since, for Santana the biggest problem was constituted by the inability to come to terms with her sexual orientation, she naively thought that the moment she would be able to articulate her desire that her love interest will immediately return her affections, will terminate her current relationship, and will be willing to start a relationship with Santana. Whereas, Brittany stated that she loves Santana and Artie and she cannot break up with him immediately. Santana, thus, goes further in denial – at least publicly, since she is not out to the whole student body at the school – and starts dating another boy (the boy in question is Dave Karofsky, another closeted gay student and a football player), trying to reinforce her persona as heterosexual. The end of the season depicts Santana as fully understanding and accepting her sexual orientation, however, unable to be publicly out.

At the beginning of the third season, viewers are subjected to a change in depiction of Santana Lopez. She is slowly becoming one of the main characters with a larger timeframe devoted to her personal storyline. The situation between Santana and

Brittany changed as well. Brittany is no longer in a relationship with Artie (this relationship was terminated in the end of season two) and is more and more seen with Santana, who acts like a very supporting girlfriend (3.02 “I Am Unicorn”). However, this situation is still far from being perceived as perfect, since Santana is still deeply in the closet. She is able to display her feelings but only when they are not in full public attention.

As relations between the individual members of Glee Club take a turn for worse, it results in a rather unfortunate and even outrageous event that takes place in episode 3.06 “Mash Off”. After a heated discussion full of insults, Santana is publicly outed in the corridor of her high school. This, although perceived as threatening, was not the main problem. The debate and outing was overheard by other students, one of them submitting this information to creators of political campaign that took place at that time. The persona of Santana Lopez – a lesbian was used in television spots, thus successfully outing the character in the entire state. Other contestants in the elections were able to see the incriminating spot before it was aired and informed Santana about its content. This led to heartbreaking confession that she was unable to come out to her parents till that time.

The storyline progressed further through episode 3.07 “I Kissed a Girl”, where viewers learn that Santana managed to confront her parents about her sexuality and that, they were very accepting. The only other member of family that still did not know anything was her abuela (grandmother). Following this is a very emotional scene where Santana comes out to her abuela, who reacts in a negative way and forces Santana out of her life. This helps to underline the stereotypes in describing the Latina community as very Catholic and family oriented and not accepting other gender identities. The romance between the two female characters continues, despite all, in further episodes.

The development of the character from the rather one-dimensional snarky and unhappy cheerleader towards a more and more developed and tri-dimensional character in later seasons was accepted and praised by audience of *Glee*. Even the start of the development can be traced to the reaction of the audience towards that one single ‘innocent’ comment made in the season one. The viewers were very vocal on many levels and every opportunity they had, they used to make their views known (Twitter, forums such as Comic-Con, Paley Fest). Naya Rivera also helped the evolution of the character through her support of the road writers have chosen and became very vocal in supporting Santana as lesbian. Furthermore, she stated that characters such as Santana are needed in many communities, but especially in the Hispanic community where the role of women is still perceived as inferior to the role of men in the society. She further stated that young Latina women who might be of gender identities other than the traditional one need role models presented in a positive light on television shows (interviews at ALMA Awards 2011 and GLAAD Awards 2011 and 2012).

The contemporary culture is full of different television and film characters that are used as role models for children in the society. However, there are certain identities that are not represented in the culture and thus it only reinforces the feeling of invisibility for people who belong to these cultural minorities. This is the reason why characters like Santana Lopez are important, further analyses of similar characters will bring understanding in the way in which cultural, and gender minorities are portrayed in

contemporary television shows. The research should include characters that combine several under-represented groups and show how and if they are presented.

Literature

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Summary

This article is analyzing the development of a female character in the television series *Glee*. The character in question is Santana Lopez, a young Latina girl attending the high school. The article provides general information on the evolution of the one-dimensional character into the fully developed one in latter seasons. This evolution is based on the analysis of the questioning of the gender identity of the character and finally acceptance and coming out. This character was chosen as one of very few representatives of alternate gender identities that are portrayed by women of color, especially Latinas.