

“Wake up and smell the internet, Grandma”:
Literacy, Masculinity, and Sexuality in *Modern
Family* and Fan Culture

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In a 2011 episode of the mockumentary comedy series *Modern Family*, Luke Dunphy (Nolan Gould) asks, “You know more people have died hiking than in the entire Civil War?” His sister Alex (Ariel Winter) asks, “Okay, what book did you read that in?” Luke replies, “Book? Wake up and smell the internet grandma” (“Mother’s Day”). This conversation draws on several stereotypes associated with U.S. culture, gendered identity, and the Internet. Ultimately, the conversation reinforces contemporary notions of male behavior (many boys are uninterested in intellectual pursuits), as well as a belief that information disseminated online is inaccurate and anyone who reads it automatically and uncritically believes it. Moreover, the conversation suggests that young people have no need for or interest in books unless they are nerds. The conversation further reinforces a larger social fear of information contained online, particularly information that is widely available, information that might “corrupt” young people’s minds, as it has clearly done to Luke. Still, in the United States and particularly within popular culture, a perception exists that young people today spend most of their time within virtual worlds, whether they’re using these spaces for fun or for work.

Popular television series like *Modern Family* tend to reinforce this notion. In the pilot episode, for instance, the show opens on a scene at the Dunphy family’s home. Claire Dunphy (Julie Bowen) yells for her kids to

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come down to breakfast. Her daughter Haley (Sarah Hyland) enters the room texting and asks, “Why are you guys yelling at us when we’re all the way upstairs? Just text us” (“Pilot”). The stereotypical teenage girl, dressed in a skimpy outfit and only halfway engaged in the conversation, Haley relies on her cell phone to communicate with her friends. Her sister Alex, on the other hand, stands in for a different stereotype of the pre-teen girl, one who utilizes technologies for academic success. For instance, when her parents Claire and Phil (Ty Burrell) decide the entire family needs to go a week without using technology, Alex complains, “I have a huge science paper due” (“Unplugged”). Whereas Haley uses technology primarily for social networking, Alex uses it primarily to be a successful student. Luke, meanwhile, uses technology to get information as quickly and easily as possible, even if that means approaching that information completely uncritically.

Literacy, technology, and identity are thus intimately tied with portrayals of characters using literacy and technology on the show. Within *Modern Family* fan communities, literacy, technology, and identity also tend to work hand-in-hand. Indeed, fans utilize social media and other forms of new and digital media to respond to the series, to develop their own identities as fans of the series, and to influence the series’s production. Technology and literacy, therefore, function as important parts of the fan experience in response to this and other popular television shows. In *Modern Family*’s case, social media and literacy practices function within fan culture as a means of protest against social norms of behavior and sexual identity. While fans have mostly refrained from overt critiques of the series, in one case, which will be discussed at length in this essay, fan outrage over the portrayal of gay characters on the series ultimately and significantly influenced how *Modern Family* dealt with the issue.

The Internet, then, which has served as a site of fear for so many adults in contemporary U.S. culture, has enabled protest to move in new

directions not previously afforded by earlier means of communication. Moreover, fandom has come to carry a more positive weight as an identity marker in the age of new and digital media, which have enabled fans to enact positive social change in ways they previously could not. Unfortunately, the term “fan” continues to carry a certain negative weight among many, particularly among academics, often eliding fan involvement in such important social movements. As academics, we need to pay further attention to the positive moves fans are making online in order to enact social change, seeing them as small but nonetheless important moves towards the social progress we claim to hope for in the twenty-first-century United States. Moreover, the kinds of participatory practices fans are engaging in within these online spaces are significant regardless of whether they ultimately affect social progress because they demonstrate new levels of engagement with issues of identity and social status, particularly with regard to gender and sexuality.

In order to develop this argument, I begin with an analysis of gender and literacy practices within the series *Modern Family*, demonstrating how the series simultaneously reinforces and attempts to subvert normative notions of the relationships between gender, identity, and literacy. Having analyzed the series’s portrayal of the relationships between gendered identities and literacy, I move into an analysis of a fan-led protest against the show’s portrayals of social norms of behavior and sexual identities in order to demonstrate the potential power of fan-led grassroots movements to alter the production of television series. Again, it does not much matter whether the fans ultimately change the directions the series take; what is more significant is the fact that fans are collectively participating in many of the same kinds of interrogations of identity and social status that we believe are important to develop, that we seek to get students involved in, and those are the types of conversations that ultimately lead to social progress.

The *Modern Family*

As its title suggests, *Modern Family* intends to portray the contemporary U.S. family. In the pilot episode, we are first introduced to the Dunphy clan: Claire, Phil, and their children Haley, Alex, and Luke. Next, we meet the Pritchett family: Claire's father Jay (Ed O'Neill), step-mother Gloria (Sofia Vergara), and Manny Delgado (Rico Rodriguez). Finally, we meet the Pritchett-Tucker family: Claire's younger brother Mitchell (Jesse Tyler Ferguson), boyfriend Cameron Tucker (Eric Stonestreet), and newly adopted Vietnamese baby Lily, who is aged to a preschooler in season three (Aubrey Anderson-Emmons). It appears that we meet the Dunphys first because they are the most "traditional" of the three family units; in addition to their significant age difference, Jay and Gloria are a culturally diverse couple, she being Columbian and he being from the U.S., and Mitchell and Cameron are also obviously a non-traditional family, as they are a gay couple. From the outset, then, *Modern Family* both reinforces and attempts to subvert traditional notions of family, particularly of the "modern" family. Ultimately, its portrayal of this "modern" family proves to be stereotypical despite the show's attempts to be progressive, as I will demonstrate later.

Being "part of the man club": Masculinity in *Modern Family*

As has been well established in the humanities fields, "Gender is a socially imposed division of the sexes. It is a product of the social relations of sexuality. . . . Far from being an expression of natural differences, exclusive gender identity is the suppression of natural similarities. It requires repression: in men, of whatever is the local version of 'feminine' traits; in women, of the local definition of 'masculine' traits" (Rubin, "Traffic" 546). In the United States, children are trained to adopt certain gendered characteristics, to behave according to certain rules of

“masculinity” and “femininity” in order to fit into society. The consequences for not adhering to these social norms are great, and so we continue to “perform” gender in sanctioned ways in order to fit in. This need to fit in, to be “part of the club” carries with it a great deal of insecurity. Moreover, “[i]n spite of the fact that identities are not fixed, individuals have a sense of unity and continuity about their identity” (Ivanič 16). I would argue that part of this sense of “unity and continuity” involves both fitting in to and resisting social norms, particularly of gendered behavior. Indeed, several of the *Modern Family*'s main characters find pleasure in both reaffirming and resisting culturally expected behavior.

Within U.S. culture, traditionally masculine men and boys are expected to follow a specific “code” of behavior. According to Thomas Newkirk, “The boy code sets narrow constraints in which boys must construct their relationships; these restraints offer a safety shield, allowing expressions of friendship while protecting the boys from appearing ‘gay’” (126). This notion of masculinity is often reflected and/or reaffirmed through popular media. For instance, on *Modern Family*, this archetype of the masculine man is represented through the character of Jay, whom, despite their aversions to his behavior much of the time, all the other male characters on the show somewhat inexplicably look up to and seek to emulate. Phil, in particular, is desperate to win Jay’s approval. Gendered identity, then, plays a significant role in the show. All the male characters on the show want to, as Cameron says of Mitchell, “feel like . . . part of the man club” (“Old”). At the same time, the show subverts the notion that this kind of male behavior is desirable by consistently critiquing Jay’s behavior and featuring several male characters who regularly fail to fit the mold. Rather than Jay, we are typically encouraged to identify with one or more of the other adult men on the show. Thus, while the show seems to reinforce stereotypical masculine behavior, it ultimately contends that

traditional masculinity is not entirely desirable and may, in fact, be a hindrance.

On *Modern Family*, all of the male characters struggle with a desire to appear “manly” enough to fit in with the other men they encounter. For instance, in the third season premiere, Phil explains, “I’ve been practicing like crazy all my cowboy skills—shootin’, ropin’, pancake eatin’. Why? Because sometimes I feel like Jay doesn’t respect me as a man” (“Dude”). For Phil, Cameron, and Mitchell, this insecurity about being masculine enough is paramount. And winning Jay’s approval is not their only concern. Cameron, for instance, worries about how he is perceived by his partner when Mitchell makes him breakfast in bed on Mother’s Day: “You think of me as Lily’s mother! I’m your wife! I’m a woman!” (“Mother’s”). To add insult to injury, when they go to a picnic with Lily’s playgroup, the other parents insist that Cameron be in a photograph of all the mothers because he’s “an honorary mom.” Mitchell tries to apologize for his own and the others’ behavior by telling Cameron, “We’re just a new type of family. You know, they don’t have the right vocabulary for us yet. They need one of us to be the man” (“Mother’s”). Cameron is understandably not appeased by this assertion; it seems like a pretty halfhearted apology for heteronormative behavior. Rather than being equally offended by his society’s insistence upon applying such standards to their relationship, Mitchell just accepts it as the way things are, which he would likely not do if he was the one being treated like a woman. Unfortunately, given its other concerted efforts to undermine social attitudes about masculinity, the show ultimately reinforces homophobic attitudes, which insist that all romantic couples must consist of a “man” and a “woman.”

Despite its ultimately heteronormative attitudes, the show does attempt to subvert normative notions of what constitutes manliness. The qualities that make Jay appropriately gendered fit neatly within social norms, including watching sports, building and fixing things, and resisting

emotional bonds with other characters, especially men. Jay also frequently exhibits a violent attitude toward other male characters. In the episode “Benched,” for instance, Jay becomes violently angry and threatens Manny and Luke’s basketball coach for yelling at the kids on the team. Later, Jay again becomes viciously angry when he and Manny ride to the mall with Phil and Luke and another man steals Phil’s parking space. Seeing that Phil remains calm and has no intention of confronting the “snake,” Jay tells Manny and Luke, “Boys, here’s the only thing you got to know about being a man—never let someone take what is yours” (“Dance”). Jay does not just undermine Phil’s authority here, but he also associates being a man with behaving angrily and violently. However, later, upon learning that the man did not know he stole their parking space because he is just wandering around after putting his dog to sleep, Jay says that perhaps the boys would benefit from behaving more like Phil. The series, then, reflects cultural attitudes about masculinity, by associating “being a man” with anger and violence, but it also subverts the notion that manliness necessarily has to involve anger and violence by upholding Phil’s character as the more appropriate role model for young boys.

While Jay certainly meets the cultural standard of masculinity, he clearly does not represent *Modern Family’s* vision of manliness or masculinity. Instead, the other three adult male characters serve as examples of how men should behave. On one of the rare occasions when Phil stands up to Jay, he asserts, “I get that I wasn’t your first choice to marry Claire, but it’s been eighteen years, and there hasn’t been a day when I wasn’t a loyal husband to your daughter and a great dad to your grandkids, so if we’ve still got a problem now, it’s your problem” (“Dude”). During this speech, Phil defines manliness quite simply as being loyal and supportive of one’s family, a view quite clearly upheld by the series itself. A conversation between Cameron and Jay from an earlier episode further exemplifies this view of manliness:

Cam: "Mitchell just wants to feel like he's—part of the man club."

...

Jay: "I just think it's crazy, that's all. So what if he can't swing a hammer. Look

at all he has done. Law school, great career, providing for his family, that's manly, too, isn't it? I mean in the classical sense."

Cam: "Well, yes, I mean I think it also takes a big man to quit his career as a music teacher and raise a child."

Jay: "You're a man, too, Cam." ("Old")

Manliness (and perhaps also masculinity) is again defined here as supporting one's family in a variety of ways. *Modern Family*, thus, drawing on what might be seen as "the classical sense" of manliness, argues that manliness means being supportive. While "providing for . . . family" is certainly a traditional element of masculinity, the show clearly attempts to redefine masculinity by associating this element of masculinity with three characters who are regularly portrayed in ways that would seem effeminate in most social circles. As I will demonstrate in the next section, these two models of "masculine" or "manly" behavior are reinforced in Luke and Manny, particularly with regard to their literacy practices.

"I have a book already": Male Literacy Practices in *Modern Family*

Luke: "Dad, I need help. I was supposed to keep a journal all summer. It's due today."

Claire: "Wow, first day of school and you're already behind?"

Luke: "I'm dead."

Claire: "All right. Tell me how far you've gotten."

Luke: "Okay. 'June 21. Found a stick.' 'June 22.' That's it."
("Run")

This conversation, which Luke has with his parents in the second episode of the series, is fairly representative of Luke's literacy practices. Later in the season, when Luke receives a book for a Christmas gift, he complains, "I have a book already" ("Undeck"). For Luke, literacy is a form of punishment, not a form of pleasure. Manny, on the other hand, takes great pleasure in reading and especially in writing. In the pilot episode, Manny asks Jay to drive him to the mall to see a sixteen-year-old girl for whom Manny has written a poem expressing his love: "I put my thoughts into words and now my words into action" ("Pilot"). For Manny, then, literacy is its own reward, a way of conveying his feelings and sharing who he is and what he believes with important people in his life. Within the world of *Modern Family*, then, it seems that young boys fit into two categories with regard to literacy—stupid and violent or nerdy and effeminate.

Studies of boys' reading and writing practices have shown that many young boys prefer to read and compose texts that are violent or otherwise inappropriate in nature. According to Thomas Newkirk, "[T]he materials that boys try to import must often violate stated or unstated rules of appropriateness" (xix). Within U.S. culture, boys are trained to find pleasure in these kinds of "inappropriate" texts, so it comes as little surprise that when asked what they want to read and/or write about, they often choose these kinds of texts. Further, as Christopher Grieg and Janette Hughes discuss in their study of poetry and boys' reading practices in Canada, "poetry is currently gendered differently than other literary genres . . . [,] marked as 'unmasculine' and more closely affiliated with 'feminine' values such as emotion, reflection and introspection than say

fiction or non-fiction” (92-93). While I would not necessarily agree that fiction and non-fiction are less associated with “emotion, reflection and introspection” than poetry, poetry tends to be gendered “feminine” because it tends to focus primarily on the writer’s emotions. As a result, young boys often seem uninterested in poetry, as they are often uninterested in most literary works, because they do not want to appear to be effeminate, or worse “gay.”

Modern Family’s two young male characters take very different approaches to literacy, as demonstrated above—Luke resists it, and Manny glories in it. It comes as little surprise that Manny, the less traditionally masculine of the two, enjoys writing poetry and songs, while Luke only engages in literacy practices when he is required to do so. As his parents explain:

Phil: “Well, there’s book smart, and then there’s street smart.”

Claire: “And then there’s Luke.”

Phil: “Some people ask ‘why?’ Luke asks ‘why not?’” (“Coal Digger”).

Luke clearly represents a certain type of young boy, then, one who is not necessarily unintelligent but who avoids intellectual pursuits to his own detriment. His pleasure in life comes almost solely from engaging in violent and aggressive behavior. In a first-season episode, Luke is working on a collage and presentation on Vincent Van Gogh. At the end of the episode, he practices his presentation for Alex: “Why did he paint *The Starry Night*? Maybe because the sky is beautiful, and everybody likes looking at it, and it reminds us that something’s up there watching over all of us—aliens, who could be here in a second to liquefy us and use us as fuel. So wake up, people. We’re next” (“Starry”). What seems initially to be a “normal” presentation about Van Gogh swiftly shifts to a science

fiction influenced, violent image of the destruction of humankind. While the show does seem to suggest at times that Luke might be slightly disturbed, having him undergo a psychological evaluation in one episode, he clearly represents a particular type of young boy, one not uncommonly found in the elementary or middle-school classroom, but one who is troubling to teachers, nonetheless. Newkirk writes of a young boy similar to Luke, “[a] reclusive student, obsessed by video games . . . , his stories are complex series of battles with complex weapons in which a band of friends single-handedly kills off the enemy, both mechanical and human” (136). Luke, too, is obsessed with videogames (which he plays with his “best friend,” eighty-something-year-old next door neighbor and racist curmudgeon, Walt) and regularly engages in violent behavior. And yet, though Luke occasionally appears to be somewhat disturbed, he is regularly portrayed as a “normal” young boy.

Manny is clearly portrayed as the more abnormal of the two young boys. While Luke is engaging in typical boyhood pursuits like shooting off rockets, playing video games, and avoiding such “feminine” activities as reading and writing, Manny spends most of his time reading and writing and acting like an adult. In a third-season episode, Manny complains to Gloria, “I have a big report due, and the teachers don’t seem to care about the substance. All they care about is the flash” (“Hit”). No typical twelve-year-old boy would have this concern. Clearly, Manny is an anomaly. While Luke is playing video games, Manny is writing poetry for his various romantic interests. In the episode “My Funky Valentine,” for instance, Manny’s entire plot revolves around what Mitchell calls the “theft” of Manny’s “intellectual property” by a school bully. Unfortunately for Manny, even after the girl learns that the bully Durkas stole Manny’s poem and passed it off as his own, she continues to find Durkas adorable and Manny loses the girl, as he always does. Manny is “nerdy,” and, thus, he always misses opportunities for romantic involvement. Girls, it seems, prefer Luke types. Thus, his lack of

appropriate “masculine” behavior is a consistent hindrance to Manny. Still, the series does not exactly argue that boys should behave like Luke; rather, it encourages them to strike a balance between behaving like Luke and behaving like Manny.

Cultural Capital, Fandom, and Identity in *Modern Family*

In a 2010 episode of *Modern Family*, Manny anxiously awaits the arrival of his date Whitney (Kristen Schaal), a girl he met “in the online book club. We both like vampire fiction and the romance of eternal life” (“Fifteen”). Gloria excitedly opens the door upon Whitney’s arrival, only to learn that Whitney is a thirty-something-year-old woman, who thinks Manny is an adult. As audience members, we can forgive Whitney’s mistake, understanding why she proclaims, “He just seemed so mature online. . . . I mean, what kind of eleven-year-old talks like that?” (“Fifteen”) because we regularly witness Manny behaving like an adult (albeit a somewhat unusual adult), wearing a burgundy dinner jacket, reading the morning newspaper while drinking tiny mug after tiny mug full of espresso, taking steams, and complaining about “kids today.” His perception is much too astute for a boy his age. In a third-season episode, Manny demonstrates his maturity when he says, “Poor Reuben, huh? Having to rebuild his whole life at age 12” (“After”). Again, this bit of dialogue exemplifies Manny’s behavior, showing why an adult might mistake him for another adult online. Thus, the writers successfully justify Whitney’s mistake in choosing Manny as a potential mate.

Throughout the episode, Whitney becomes a stand-in for the female book fan—a socially awkward, dowdy-looking woman who is so obsessed with reading and with the fantasy of a fellow fan as a potential lover that she does not understand how to attract a man. The episode’s portrayal of Whitney as a female fan is fairly representative of larger cultural stereotypes of female fans, who are treated as obsessive. Though Whitney

is not sexualized, as Henry Jenkins argues female fans tend to be, “manifested in the images of screaming teenage girls” (Textual 15), she is certainly deemed inappropriately involved in her fandom and, thus, out of touch with how real romantic relationships work. Enter Gloria. This stunningly sexy woman gives Whitney a makeover, showing her how to accentuate her beauty so that she can attract men through her looks rather than her intellect. Of course, in this case, Gloria’s plan backfires because Whitney is so caught up in her fantasy world of romance novels that she falls in love with the next man she sees, a fellow vampire romance fan, Cam. Thus, the episode ends with the image of the female book club member declaring her love for a gay man to the cameraperson. Whereas we could forgive Whitney for failing to realize that Manny was a child due to his adult writing style, we cannot forgive her for failing to recognize that Cameron is “obviously” gay. As viewers, we are left to judge Whitney for her failure to pick up on these clues, to see her as socially awkward and deficient. Female book fans, then, are portrayed as socially inept, unable to understand social cues and norms of human behavior.

This portrayal of Whitney’s character is symptomatic of a larger cultural view of fan behavior, particularly female fan behavior. Female fans are either sexually and culturally deficient or “erotic spectacle[s] for mundane male spectators” (Jenkins, Textual 15). Indeed, female fans’ “abandonment of any distance from” (15) the objects of their fandom is viewed as a significant problem socially, particularly among the elite. As Jenkins eloquently explains,

The stereotypical conception of the fan, while not without a limited factual basis, amounts to a projection of anxieties about the violation of dominant cultural hierarchies. The fans’ transgression of bourgeois taste and description of dominant cultural hierarchies insures that their preferences are seen as abnormal and threatening by those who have a vested interest in the maintenance of these

standards (even by those who may share similar tastes but express them in fundamentally different ways). (*Textual* 17)

Fans' behavior is deemed most problematic because of their lack of emotional distance from the objects of their fandom. Within academic circles, in particular, and other elite social groups, in general, being too emotionally attached to a cultural product makes it "impossible" for a person to approach it objectively.

While female fans are represented as obsessive but sexually deficient, male fans are represented in similarly negative ways. As explained above, Manny is a fan of vampire romance fiction, and he clearly does not represent the typical pre-teen boy; his behavior is more reflective of an effeminate man. Within this episode, Manny becomes one stand-in for the male book fan. The other representation of a male fan in the episode is Cam, who is not just a book fan but also a sports fan. In one episode, Cam even goes so far as to paint his face orange and blue to watch a football game at Jay's house ("Coal"), an act that might be mocked within many social circles, but which does not attract the same level of contempt as being a loyal fan of certain popular media, such as popular book series. If Cam were to wear this makeup publicly and on a regular basis or were he to shout or paint other parts of his body, it is worth noting, his behavior would warrant a stronger reaction. But he does not do that; he simply paints his face for a family gathering, so whereas Manny's and Whitney's fandom are mocked, Cam's seems to be relatively overlooked. His behavior is treated as normal. After all, as Jenkins notes, "sports fans (who are mostly male and who attach great significance to 'real' events rather than fictions) enjoy very different status than media fans (who are mostly female and who attach great interest in debased forms of fiction)" (*Textual* 19). Thus, the show sends a message that certain kinds of fandom are acceptable, even normal, while others are freakish. Being a fan in and of itself is fine, even normal; being *too much* of a fan is a problem.

Despite the fact that Whitney and Manny are both treated as obsessive freaks as a result of their chosen fan practices, *Modern Family* does not uphold traditional notions of taste. In fact, the series also mocks academic and elite or “high culture” fan practices. Claire and Phil pride themselves in being intelligent, even intellectual. But their personal tastes tend to diverge pretty significantly from normative “intellectual” tastes. To borrow from Jenkins, “Unimpressed by institutional authority and expertise, the fans assert their own right to form interpretations, to offer evaluations, and to construct cultural canons” (*Textual* 18). While Phil and Claire cite their academic achievements as evidence of their intelligence, then, they resist academic pursuits in favor of developing their own cultural tastes. By proxy, *Modern Family*’s writers assert that individuals should develop their own tastes rather than simply adopt proscribed ones. During the second season, Claire and Phil reveal that they are huge fans of bad science fiction and fantasy movies when they decide to go see the movie *Croctopus*. In the same episode, Alex complains of her classmate and educational rival: “Sanjay’s dad’s a surgeon and his mom’s a professor. I can’t compete with that. I’ll just have to do the best I can with what I was given” (“Our Children”). While Phil simply replies, “Good for you” (“Our”), Claire is embarrassed, and her embarrassment intensifies when they run into Sanjay’s parents at the movie theater, so she decides that she and Phil should go see the foreign film Sanjay’s parents are going to see. Phil responds, “Why do I have to watch a French movie? I didn’t do anything wrong” (“Our”). Partway through the film, Phil leaves and sees *Croctopus* alone. As they leave the theater, Sanjay’s parents ask what they thought about the film, and Claire, adopting an academic tone, says that the film failed to impress her.

Of course, the fact that Claire and Phil are able to make such critiques, mimicking academic tones, demonstrates that they possess a certain level of cultural capital associated with the middle and upper classes. That is, as upper-middle-class college graduates, Claire and Phil have learned how to

resist elite attitudes and beliefs about culture and taste by first learning and participating within elite educational systems. Indeed, without having been properly trained in such a system, the two would lack the requisite knowledge to critique it. On the other hand, their intellect is undermined at the end of the scene when, referring to one another as “doctor” and “professor” they attempt to push open a “pull” door. Still, the episode’s message is clear—cultural capital and elite notions of taste are overrated; individuals should choose for themselves what to like, and those who do not do so, like the Patels, are dupes. While the show encourages viewers to develop their own tastes, then, it suggests that elite tastes are worthy of mockery, based on pretension, on wanting to appear intelligent, rather than on personal preference. These representations of Claire and Phil’s taste, thus, suggest that *Modern Family*’s writers and producers embrace a similar approach to fandom, which will become significant in considering how fans have responded to the show’s representation of sexuality and the producers’ response to those fans’ reactions.

“Let Cam & Mitchell Kiss!”: How Facebook Affected *Modern Family*’s Production

Up to this point, I have focused on the series itself, demonstrating how issues of identity, literacy, and fandom play out within *Modern Family*. I argue, as well, that for all its claims of being a progressive show, the series ultimately reinforces normative behavior by placing its characters in stereotypical roles and situations in order to promote comedy. These issues play an important role in fan response to the series. In the following section, I shift my focus to *Modern Family* fans, demonstrating how they have utilized literacy within online communities to discuss and at times protest the series’s dealings with issues of identity. Fans of the series have picked up on this issue, critiquing it within their online communities. Specifically, numerous fans have objected to the treatment of Cameron

and Mitchell's relationship on the series, utilizing social media to protest this portrayal. While most online fan protests are ultimately ineffective in terms of altering the production of the series, this movement had a significant impact on the series. More important, this protest demonstrated the power of literacy and digital media in creating collective response to social issues raised within popular television series like *Modern Family*.

In an article published in The New York Times about a season two episode, columnist Bruce Feiler quotes from an interview with the series's co-creators and several cast members, noting in particular their responses to fan outrage over the treatment of Mitchell and Cameron's relationship, specifically the desexualization of these characters throughout most of the series. Eric Stonestreet confesses, "While I appreciated that fans care about our characters, . . . I never understood why people put their focus on '*Modern Family*,' a show that introduced a loving, grounded gay couple on television who adopted a baby, and accused it of being homophobic" (qtd. in Feiler). Though Stonestreet makes a fair point—the show does present an openly gay couple in a positive light, an image that is severely lacking within much popular culture, particularly among major characters on television series—it is really no wonder that fans and critics alike find the portrayal of Mitchell and Cameron's relationship problematic and even offensive. Moreover, a straight man who plays a stereotypically and borderline caricature-like gay character may not be the best spokesperson for the progressive nature of the series.

Indeed, the fact that Stonestreet is not gay and that the only openly gay man who plays a role on the show (Jesse Tyler Ferguson) does not comment on the subject makes the show's claim to progressivity questionable. Further, series co-creator Christopher Lloyd's defense of the show's subversiveness, that "[t]here are different ways of being challenging. To find real, raw emotional moments about the difficulties of growing up, the challenges of dealing with children or unresolved stuff with your parents is as real as dealing with a big crazy event like a rape or

a crisis of faith” (qtd. in Feiler), while compelling, refuses to deal with the reality that *Modern Family* consistently treats Mitchell and Cameron’s relationship as asexual. Thus, while the series features a prominent gay couple and thereby attempts to “normalize” homosexual relationships, it ultimately falls short of its claims of progressivity and subversiveness.

Feiler writes, “But all the attention on Mitch and Cam’s lip life overshadowed deeper strands that make the show even more probative of contemporary culture” (par. 10). In other words, “quit complaining about the lack of kissing and see how progressive this show really is.” While I would argue that the series is subversive in many ways, I cannot help being deeply disturbed by Feiler’s, Lloyd’s, and Stonestreet’s refusals to engage with the issue at hand—why do *Modern Family*’s creators continue to insist that the portrayal of a gay couple with an adopted daughter is progressive but refuse to acknowledge that Mitchell and Cameron’s relationship is not equivalent to Claire and Phil’s? Why do we witness sexual encounters between Claire and Phil but not between Mitchell and Cameron? Moreover, why do we not witness sexual encounters between Jay and Gloria? Ultimately, why is Claire and Phil’s sexual behavior the norm against which all other couples’ behavior must be compared? Why is their sex the only sex that matters?

By repeatedly showing Claire and Phil’s sexual behavior and hiding the other adult characters’ sexual behavior, the series reinforces what Judith Butler calls “compulsory heterosexuality” (xxviii). Indeed, *Modern Family* participates in a system which, as Gayle Rubin contends, “permeate[s] . . . ideas that erotic variety is dangerous, unhealthy, depraved, and a menace to everything” (“Thinking” 280). That is to say, *Modern Family* normalizes middle-aged adult, consensual and marital sexual behavior, treating all other sexuality as abnormal, as something to be kept hidden behind closed doors. While, due to programming laws, which, as Rubin indicates make “it . . . legal for young people to see hideous depictions of violence, but not to see explicit pictures of genitalia”

(“Thinking” 290), the series could never satisfy queer theorists’ desire for art that “chafes against ‘normalization’” (Edelman 6), the series could more satisfactorily represent non-heterosexual identities. The drive to present Cameron and Mitchell’s sexuality more overtly seems particularly compelling in light of President Obama’s recent overturning of the military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy and his embrace of gay marriage, as well as the U.S. Supreme Court’s landmark decisions in 2013 making the Defense of Marriage Act and California’s Proposition 8 unconstitutional and the 2015 Supreme Court ruling legalizing same-sex marriage in all fifty states. As the United States adopts a more progressive view of marriage, *Modern Family* almost seems to present its own “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy by refusing to portray Mitchell and Cameron in the same light as heterosexual couples.

Cameron and Mitchell are consistently desexualized on the show; Claire and Phil, on the other hand, are free to engage in sexual behavior in a variety of ways. In the pilot episode, Luke gets his head stuck in the banister, and Phil has to extricate him. When he asks Claire where the baby oil is, she begins to say that it is on the nightstand in their bedroom and then, realizing her children can hear her, tells him he will have to find it (“Pilot”). Later, when the couple tries to create a romantic Valentine’s evening by roleplaying at a hotel bar, Claire walks into the bar wearing nothing but a trench coat (“My Funky”). In yet another instance, Haley, Alex, and Luke walk in on their parents having sex on the morning of their anniversary. While Claire and her children are all humiliated by the situation, Phil treats it as perfectly normal (“Caught”). The message is pretty clear—consensual sex between married, heterosexual adults is normal and perfectly palatable to U.S. audiences. One viewer comments on this message in response to Vulture’s article “Cam and Mitchell Kiss on *Modern Family*: Short and Sweet”: “We wonder why four gay teens have committed suicide in the past three weeks when something as ordinary as a kiss between two characters playing a committed gay couple

on TV makes news. Meanwhile, how many straight couples were kissing and more on TV last night, but it was all considered normal enough to ignore” (NELSPHIGHTBERG). In fact, viewers would find it strange today not to see Claire and Phil engaging in sexual acts with one another, as the portrayal of sexual behavior among heterosexual adults is a standard part of the contemporary U.S. sitcom. However, sex acts between non-heterosexual couples are still treated as aberrant, no matter how innocuous they might seem to progressive viewers.

During the series premiere, Mitchell mentions that his father always knocks loudly before walking into any room to avoid having to see Mitchell and Cameron kissing because one time he accidentally did. Cameron responds, “I wish my mother had that rule. Remember?” (“Pilot”), which seems to imply that Cameron’s mother witnessed a sex act the couple was engaged in. Other than this quick reference, Cameron and Mitchell’s sex life seems nonexistent. To defend the fact that we never see Cameron and Mitchell’s romantic or erotic behavior, the series’s creators devised a plan, carried out in the episode “The Kiss,” wherein Mitchell avoids “public displays of affection” according to Cameron. Nonetheless, this move seems like a cheap ploy on the producers’ part to avoid actually dealing with the justifiable critiques leveled at the series for never showing Mitchell and Cameron overtly engaging in sexual behavior. Moreover, the emphasis on the word public implies that Mitchell has no problem with private displays of affection, while even those displays rarely occur on the show. As a contributor to the Facebook campaign “Let Cam and Mitchell Kiss on *Modern Family!*” writes, “That doesn’t explain why we’ve never seen them kiss or be affectionate in the privacy of their home. . . . Seems like that fear of same sex public displays of affection by a character translates to the PORTRAYAL of same sex affection by those running the show” (Javier). Why is it Mitchell, one of only two openly gay characters on the show, who suffers from this fear of public displays of affection? And why is it that Phil and Claire and Haley and Dylan, the two

stereotypical heterosexuals couples on the show do not have the same problem?

Series co-creator and producer Christopher Lloyd points out in one interview that “[w]e did an episode recently where Mitchell and Cameron were in bed together listening to their baby monitor. . . . And we thought for sure that this would get us in trouble, but there was none” (qtd. in Smith). What Lloyd fails to acknowledge here is that the image of Cameron and Mitchell in bed together in the scene he mentions is entirely chaste—there is nothing sexual about it, and it could easily be any two adults in any kind of relationship lying next to one another within the scene. While it is uncommon, then, to see a gay couple in bed together on television today, and, thus *Modern Family*’s portrayal of this scene is progressive to that end, there is nothing overtly sexual about Mitchell and Cameron’s relationship, and that is why fans who want the show to promote gay rights are so offended by its portrayal of this relationship.

Clearly, the series is actively resisting any overt displays of gay characters engaging in sexual behavior in order to maintain its fan base. Even in season five, when Mitchell and Cameron decide to get engaged after Proposition 8 is overturned in the state of California, both men kneel, hold out rings to each other, and say “Yes,” but before we can see them embrace or kiss, as any couple on a television show normally would after getting engaged, the scene cuts away (“Suddenly”). Indeed, conservative fans of the show might be “offended” and turned off by the image of two men kissing on the show and might thus stop watching the show. And some conservative fans did have that reaction. Responding to the article “‘*Modern Family*’: Cameron, Mitchell Share ‘The Kiss,’” one fan writes,

The kiss was not necessary. The show is certainly the funniest thing in a long time but now I have to give it up. I don’t have to see gay men kiss to have my life in sync with the world. The gay relationship was very obvious and comfortable on this series, the kiss was too much for me and too much for primetime in my

opinion, and yes I have the right to a conservative opinion.
(nanagirl)

Evidently, the portrayal of what to most progressive fans was an innocuous and “understated” (JMAHAK) kiss between Mitchell and Cameron was highly offensive to more conservative fans like the one quoted here. Thus, *Modern Family*’s creators clearly are subversive from certain audience members’ perspectives. By only rarely showing the more romantic aspects of Cameron and Mitchell’s relationship, the creators hope to subvert conservative notions of homosexuality as aberrant.

On the other hand, a significant portion of the series’s fan base begged producers to address their concerns, going so far as to create a Facebook fan page titled “Let Cam & Mitchell Kiss on *Modern Family!*” In 2012 the page had been liked by 13,014 Facebook members, indicating that there was strong support for its aim. Unfortunately, the page has since been deactivated, though it clearly had an active presence prior to “The Kiss.” Moreover, in response to the article “Facebook Campaign Seeks *Modern Family* Cameron-Mitchell Kiss,” a fan comments, “This fact is really one of the reasons I cannot enjoy the show. They’re supposed to be this happy couple and all they can do is share chaste hugs” (RUNYON). The fact that the series refuses to portray the romantic aspects of Mitchell and Cameron’s relationship while simultaneously broadcasting Claire and Phil’s exploits suggests that its producers are not really comfortable pushing boundaries when it comes to sexuality, regardless of fans’ opinions on the matter. It seems pretty evident at this point that the series is more concerned with maintaining its fan base than with pushing boundaries. When Mitchell and Cameron finally do kiss, it is a quick peck on the lips in the background of a scene featuring nearly every character on the show; viewers who were not watching very carefully missed it, as demonstrated by the comments “I didn’t even notice it when it happened” (DANIELF23) and “honestly I completely missed the kiss while watching last night. if it wasnt [sic] for this article I never would have known that

they actually did it” (JMAHAK). Clearly, the series wanted to appease (or shut up) these fans without actually dealing with the issue at hand. Kids watching the show might learn to see gay couples as “normal” and “equal” to straight couples, but gay children and teens watching the show clearly learn that their sexual identities are still marginal, still ultimately unacceptable within U.S. culture at large.

Literacy as Protest and Power

Literacy has a rich history as a form of protest and power in the United States, enabling individuals to draw widespread attention to important social issues. The advent of new and digital media has only made such forms of protest and discussion more widely available or accessible. Fans of popular television series like *Modern Family* have begun to realize the significance of such media in protesting issues of significant social import. The Facebook fan page dedicated to the “Cam and Mitchell kiss” received over 10,000 “likes” and the attention of numerous news media outlets. Clearly, this fan protest has had an impact. Of course, there is a question of how significant this fan page’s impact has been. After all, series co-producer Steve Levitan announced at a BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) event that he found the critiques of *Modern Family*’s portrayal of Cameron and Mitchell’s relationship “unfortunate” as an explanation of the character’s lack of displays of affection was “part of the natural development of the show” (qtd. in Guider). However, as I discussed earlier, fans were not buying this claim. *If* the plot was already in the works, why did *Modern Family*’s producers wait so long to announce it? Assuming that Levitan’s claim is legitimate and the producers did intend from the outset to write Mitchell’s fear of public displays of affection into the series, that does not negate the impact of this fan group on the production of the series. Clearly, Levitan, Lloyd, and the cast had some familiarity with the fan page and felt it necessary to

comment on it during interviews. Moreover, the fan page caught the attention of numerous media outlets and Mitchell and Cameron's kiss became a big news story when it finally happened on the show. Thus, whether these fans of *Modern Family* altered the Mitchell-Cameron plot line is ultimately irrelevant. What is more interesting and more significant is the fact that these fans became rightly dissatisfied with the portrayal of a gay couple on mainstream television and took to social networking media, utilizing literacy practices, to effect social change.

Despite the fact that the show clearly refuses to deal with the larger issue at hand—the treatment of gay adults in U.S. culture, it is important to consider the power of fan influence at work here. A relatively small group of people—13,014 in a world of seven billion—began an online campaign demanding that two gay characters on a popular television series be permitted to kiss, and they won. Thus, being a fan in the twenty-first century means something very different than it ever has in the past; it means having an influence on cultural products, having a voice in how those products are produced and disseminated. Fans' influence on *Modern Family's* portrayal of Mitchell and Cameron's relationship fulfills an earlier prediction of Henry Jenkins's, that "fans of certain cult television shows may gain greater influence over programming decisions in an [sic] the age of affective economics" (Convergence 62). *Modern Family* is by no means a "cult television show," as it is currently one of the most popular series on television; however, the rest of Jenkins's statement applies—*Modern Family* fans have, indeed, swayed certain developments within the series through their fan activism, whether that influence has been positive (in the case of forcing the series's producers to address the overt discrepancies between the treatment of gay and straight couples on the show) or negative (insofar as fear of conservative fans walking away from the show has prevented the show's producers from presenting Mitchell and Cameron's sexuality as normal). Moreover, it is particularly interesting that, in a society that constantly complains that young people

today “can’t write” and are “bad readers,” young viewers of a popular television series like *Modern Family* are utilizing literacy practices in order to engage with elements of popular culture they find problematic.

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