

Nickelodeon's America

HOW DOMINANT IDEAS ABOUT AMERICAN IDENTITY ARE
PORTRAYED IN TEEN POP-MUSIC SITCOMS

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Introduction

In the past decade, a new trend on TV-channels aimed at children and young-adults has been noticeable. The relationship between television and popular music is taken to a new level in sitcoms about teens making pop-music. The music itself not only plays a big role in the narrative, but also creates another cultural outlet to exploit. Besides forming a band or becoming a music star in a TV-series, the stars of the shows become musical acts in “the real world” as well, selling albums and giving concerts. In the early 1970’s, this marketing strategy was already applied in pop-music sitcoms like *The Monkees* (1966-1968, NBC) and *The Partridge family* (1970-1974, ABC), after which the genre grew quiet. Independent popular culture scholar Doyle Greene argues that it was the Disney sitcom *Hannah Montana* (2006-2011) that brought the revival of the pop-music sitcom genre.¹ He states that a cultural figure that can be seen as fabricated to embody “the American Dream,” like Hannah Montana, “reveals as much as conceals the ideological contradictions of American society.”²

Pursuing the path that Greene embarked upon, this research regards American teen pop-music sitcoms. While Greene studied Disney’s *Hannah Montana*, the present case studies are created by another big children’s network, and Disney’s most important competitor: Nickelodeon. This thesis aims to find out if and how ideas about an ‘American Identity’ are created or maintained in Nickelodeon teen pop-music sitcoms.

It is obvious that the word “teen” derives from the word “teenager,” meaning everyone in their teens (ages 10 to 20). When referring to target audiences, Greene, along with many others concerned with teen culture, briefly distinguishes between the terms “tween” and “teen”.³ Tweens are considered “in between” being a child and a teenager, being between 10 and 12 years of age, while teens are young-adults from ages 13 through 19. When referring to teen culture in this thesis, the target audience referred to is the latter, the adolescents.

Media and Communication professor Sonia Livingstone states that television, more than radio, accepted the marketing strategy that emerged in the 1950’s to specifically aim at an audience of children, separately from adult audiences.⁴ Children were now viewed and

¹ Doyle Greene, *Teens, TV and Tunes: The Manufacturing of American Adolescent Culture* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2012), 10.

² Ibidem.

³ Greene names both terms without further defining them. The explanation in this essay is derived from the further context of his book as well as the several definitions of ‘tween’, derived from different dictionaries, collected on Dictionary.com.

⁴ Sonia Livingstone, “Half a Century of Television in the Lives of Our Children,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 625 (Sage Publications, Inc., 2009), 154.

approached as consumers. The development of this audience differentiation strategy, along with technical developments, eventually turned into the distinguishing of separate youth audiences to aim at, like toddlers, tweens and teens. Nickelodeon caters to its different young audiences by providing different digital channels for each one, like Teennick (for teens) and Nick Jr. (for toddlers), which are all carefully styled to conform to the Nickelodeon brand identity.⁵ Greene notes that, while Disney has a more family oriented image, Nickelodeon presents itself as being a kids-only network.⁶

Case Studies

Since the turn of the century, Nickelodeon has created several shows incorporating pop music, and produced multi-talented young stars. This thesis will focus on three recent teen pop-music sitcoms: *iCarly* (2007-2012), *Big Time Rush* (2009-2013) and *Victorious* (2010-2013).⁷ They are TV-shows that make use of branding and the close combination of TV-shows and bubblegum music, which will be discussed in chapter 2, and can be seen as case studies of American teen pop-music sitcoms.

The narrative of *iCarly* does not revolve around music or musical aspirations, but around three young friends, Carly, Sam and Freddie, that create an own web-show that unexpectedly becomes wildly popular amongst American teens. They film the web show in a home-made studio in the apartment of Carly and her older brother, Spencer, who is her legal guardian.

⁵ Michael Schneider, "Nickelodeon Unveils New Logo," Variety (Variety Media, LLC, 30 July 2009).

⁶ Greene, *Teens, TV and Tunes*, 4.

⁷ Further references to the sitcoms will be in italics, while the names in normal fonts refer to the products "created" in and exported from the sitcoms (like the band Big Time Rush and the web show iCarly).

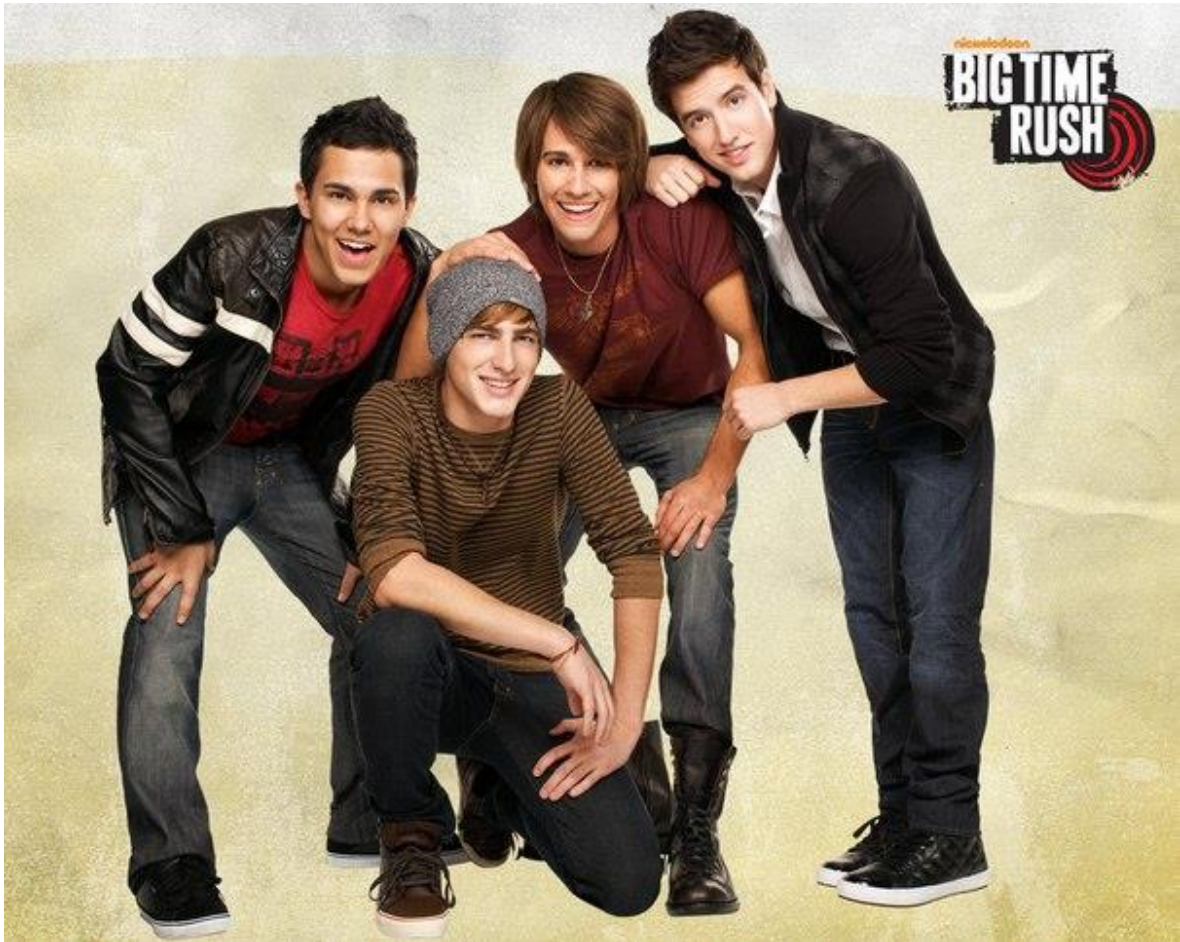


The main cast of *iCarly* during the first season. From left to right: Sam (Jennette McCurdy), Carly (Miranda Cosgrove), Freddie (Nathan Kress) and Spencer (Jerry Trainor).⁸

iCarly star Miranda Cosgrove pursued a musical career next to her acting job. She was signed by Columbia Records, the label that signs most of the teen pop-music crossovers related to Nickelodeon. Due to this clever collaboration, Nickelodeon maintained influence in, and benefitted from the several aspects of Cosgrove's career, instead of just hiring her as actress on TV-shows. Although music does not play such a central role in *iCarly* as it does in *Big Time Rush* or *Victorious*, Cosgrove's singing talents were incorporated into *iCarly*'s narrative on occasions. Even though music was not yet the focus of the TV-series, it is relevant for this research because the potential of the teen pop-music sitcom was being explored by Nickelodeon.

The full crossover between television and music, which allowed Nickelodeon to create and control both the musical and acting careers of its stars by incorporating both into one, came with the TV-series *Big Time Rush* (or in short: *BTR*).

⁸ Source of picture: <http://b2.pinger.pl/fe0c90c32748c0e90a83dd6fb7e09075/1seasonicarly.jpg>, accessed on February 1, 2016.



The band members of Big Time Rush during the first season. From left to right: gullible but sweet Carlos (Carlos Pena Jr.), leader of the group Kendall (Kendall Schmidt), vain James (James Maslow), and smart Logan (Logan Henderson).⁹

It is story about a group of four friends from a small town in Minnesota, who were discovered and formed into a boyband by once-famous record producer Gustavo Roque, and moved to Hollywood to record demos. The cross-marketing from the screen into the “real world” is taken to a new level with *BTR*, for example by giving the main characters of the sitcom (the members of the band) the same first name as the actors that portray them.

By smart partnerships with Columbia Records, Nickelodeon controls the many facets of the brand Big Time Rush. In episodes, we even see a (fictive) story about how several of the music videos, that are later actually released as music videos, were supposedly filmed. A similar process, although with a less “manufactured” air, is followed in *Victorious*, a TV-series revolving around a group of talented teens, grouped around new student Tori, on a Hollywood Performing Arts school.

⁹ Source of picture: <http://cs10685.vk.me/v10685460/d3d/29km1SE5hqE.jpg>, accessed on February 1, 2016.



The main cast of *Victorious* during the first season. From left to right: Robbie (Matt Bennett), Cat (Ariana Grande), André (Leon Thomas III), Trina (Daniella Monet), Beck (Avan Jogia) and Jade (Elizabeth Gillies).¹⁰

For *iCarly*, the internet is used to engage the audience, by Nickelodeon posting unseen clips of the (fake) web show on the internet, as if being the “real” product made by Carly and her friends. Both *BTR* and *Victorious* accomplish cross-marketing with music videos, and *Victorious* also promotes a social network website, the Slap.com, that was especially created for the show and “used” by the characters. It is an actual website, where promotion material and little video excerpts and messages from the cast can be found. Basically, in *Victorious*, the cross-marketing tools used in *iCarly* and *Big Time Rush* are combined.

There are several basic, exceptionally American traits identifiable in all three teen pop-music sitcoms. These things are obvious, and immediately inform the viewers of what to expect: an American based TV-show. Firstly, all three TV-series are also, not surprisingly, written and played in (American) English. Non-Americans are recognizable by their accent when speaking English, while all the main characters speak with American accents. Secondly, its placement in an American setting gives the TV-shows a distinctively American feel. *iCarly* plays in Seattle (but is in reality filmed in a studio in Hollywood), while *Big Time Rush* and *Victorious* are located in

¹⁰ Source of picture: http://nickalive.blogspot.nl/2012/09/nickelodeon-uk-to-premiere-brand-new_15.html, accessed on February 2, 2016.

Hollywood both in narrative and film location. In chapter 3, the importance of this setting in Hollywood will be discussed.

Relevance and justification

The academic study of popular teen culture is perhaps even more important than studying popular adult TV-series, because the viewers are children and teens. Broadcast journalist Edward R. Murrow, while talking about ideology marketing, felt that television can act as “the world’s largest classroom.”¹¹ When these children grow up, they take what they have (consciously and unconsciously) learned from their TV-series with them, applying these ideals and knowledge in their private and public lives. In other words, the TV-series that kids and teens watch today have a great influence on all our futures when they are adult. It is both the conscious and unconscious ideals that get transferred through these TV-series, that will be examined.

The decision to limit this thesis to teen pop-music sitcoms of the past decade is made because of the fascinating revived popularity of the pop-music and television crossover that occurred after *Hannah Montana* in 2006, and also a little for the unfortunate but necessary sake of brevity. This is also the reason why the analyses are focused on, but not restricted to, the first season of each TV-series. During my teens and, let us be honest, early twenties, many hours were spent in front the television watching Nickelodeon, and these three pop-music sitcoms were personal favorites. Who knew all those couch-potato-hours would lead to writing a master thesis on the subject.

Discourse

Greene argues that *Hannah Montana* reveals ideological contradictions of American society, while the Nickelodeon case studies in this thesis contain something similar. They embody an “imagined America” with matching hyperreal American identity, which will be elaborated on in chapter 1. In his book, Greene explores many topics concerning teen TV-shows like *iCarly* and *Big Time Rush*, such as gender, mass-culture, pop-music and hipness, in textual analyses. For example, he discusses the do-it-yourself element in *iCarly*, as well as the white, middle-class boyband-branding in *Big Time Rush*. He discusses these themes in the TV-series, and others, in relation to its American audience and American society. This research will build on his analyses of these two shows, and also explore how these themes are treated in *Victorious*, which he chose to exclude from his book due to the need for brevity.

The scholarly discussion on American Identity and Americanness in the field of American Studies will serve as the lens through which the teen pop-music sitcoms will be viewed and

¹¹ Murrow is quoted in Greene, *Teens, TV and Tunes*, 5.

dissected. There is no single meaning of American Identity, as it is a changing concept that can be approached in different discourses and from many point of views. There is no one American Identity but many opinions, of which this research revolves around the most prominent one. American scholars Campbell and Kean state that the dominant voice in defining American Identity in scholarly discussions, as in most others as well, has traditionally been male, white and heterosexual.¹²

Aim

Campbell and Kean outline the academic discussion by American Studies scholars on “the myth of American identity” in their book *American Cultural Studies: an Introduction to American Culture*.¹³ By means of this discussion, as well as other works by prominent American Studies scholars on what American identity could embody, it is possible to distinguish often mentioned factors, namely exceptionalism, a body of dominant national myths, and isolationism.

These are also visible in works that are overlapping with other study fields, like Television Studies, as can be seen in Greene’s analyses and Jaap Kooijman’s study on America in TV-shows as the “absolute fake.” These “American” factors manifest themselves in influential American teen pop-music sitcoms in several ways. Close-reading analyses of the chosen case studies will demonstrate in what way they reflect these factors, and the dominant idea’s about them. The TV-series can be viewed as being typically American not only because of the obvious location in America, or the fact that the shows are produced by an American TV-channel, but also because they contain certain other elements that transfer traditional ideas about American Identity.

Methodology

Focusing on the concept of American Identity, this research will revolve around the following main question: in what ways are ideas about an “American Identity” conveyed to a young audience in three American teen pop-music TV-shows of the past decade, on the world-wide watched Nickelodeon?

Firstly, the problematic idea of an American Identity, and the difference between the reality and the on-screen version of this matter is treated in chapter 1. Central are the sub-questions: what ideas, morals and ideals contribute to the formation of images of an American national identity and “Americanness?” And how can these images manifest themselves in popular (teen) culture in general? Theories from authors Campbell and Kean, Donald E. Pease, Michael Kazin and Joseph A. McCartin, and Jaap Kooijman, amongst others, will be discussed in order to form an overview of what prominent factors are often used to describe American Identity and

¹² Campbell and Kean, *American Cultural Studies*, 26.

¹³ Ibidem, 29.

Americanness in popular culture in general.

Then, it will be examined in what way (American) values and ideals can be communicated and suggested in pop-music sitcoms to its teen audience. Particularly interesting are specific tools that are present in pop-music sitcoms, and their role in the creation and communication of an imagined America to the young audience.

Now all the tools to answer the thesis question are at hand, the analyses of the Nickelodeon TV-series *iCarly*, *Big Time Rush* and *Victorious* will follow in chapter 3. Argued will be how the explored American Identity is exported through these series, and aimed to be consciously and unconsciously absorbed by its youthful audience. This is done by cultural analyses of the show's narratives and close-reading analyses of some of the episodes and incorporated songs, with the "typical American" factors discussed in the previous chapter in mind.

Chapter 1: The Construction of American Identity

The question “what is American,” meaning what is exceptional about America, has been at the center of a long, ongoing discussion in the field of American Studies. Pondering on a definition of the term “identity”, however, is not limited to the field of American Studies. Overall, the term identity is a problematic one that has sparked many debates in different contexts.

Sociomusicologist Simon Frith, for example, describes the currently popular view on identity as a process instead of a static thing by stating it is “a becoming not a being.”¹⁴ It is no surprise that trying to grasp the (or a, for that matter) definition of American national identity has preoccupied Americans for generations, and it remains a tricky business in the 21st century. American Identity is, after all, a fluid and slippery construct of society, and not a fixed fact. Maybe there are as many definitions of the term as there are Americans, for each person views it in their own way.

In their book on American cultural studies, Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean review ideas on the matter that have been put forward by scholars in this field over time.¹⁵ Drawing on their discussion and other sources this chapter will sketch an overview of the ideas, morals and ideals that have been put forward in this discussion in the field of American cultural studies. They are named as contributing factors in most formations of images regarding the “American dream,” American national identity and “Americanness.” Although there is no single definition of American Identity, some often mentioned trends can be distinguished. These trends will then be used in the exploration of popular teen pop music sitcoms in chapter 3.

1.1. Exceptional and isolated

A cornerstone of American Identity, according to many scholars, (American) politicians and others, is America’s exceptionalism. Historian Anders Stephanson, for example, views the concept of exceptionalism as a typically American trait. Stephanson argues that the United States adapting the role of hegemon in geopolitics is a seemingly logical result of a collective belief in America as an exemplary state for the rest of the world, which is in need of intervention.¹⁶ In this comparison, America could easily be seen as an improved version of the original European countries.

In politics, the claim that America is exceptional seems required of every (aspiring) politician, argues U.S. historian Michael Kazin. Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee,

¹⁴ Simon Frith, “Music and Identity,” Ed. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity* (Los Angeles/London: Sage, 1996), 108-27.

¹⁵ Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean, *American Cultural Studies: An Introduction to American Culture (Third Edition)* (London: Routledge, 2012).

¹⁶ Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), xii-xiii.

for example, said that “to deny American exceptionalism is in essence to deny the heart and soul of this nation.”¹⁷ Kazin, amongst others, acknowledges the criticism against the American exceptionalism idea, but suggests another way to approach and employ the exceptionalist thinking. He urges president Obama in particular to “use exceptionalism to suggest that the country has yet to live up to its ideals,”¹⁸ and to make people believe that in order to achieve the exceptionality that is so important to America, changes have to be made.

One of the opponents of the idea of American exceptionalism is American culture and literature specialist Donald E. Pease. He is one among several contemporary scholars who see American exceptionalism as a myth, stating that “American exceptionalism is a transgenerational state of fantasy, and like a family secret it bears the traces of a transgenerational trauma.”¹⁹ Pease describes the birth and history of this “state of fantasy” in his book *The New American Exceptionalism*, through a discussion of psychoanalysis, politics and culture. He defines the concept as “the dominant structure of desire out of which U.S. citizens imagined their national identity.”²⁰ Essentially, the state of fantasy allows citizens to believe that the rules, laws and morals of the state are synonymous with their own desires. Pease calls the fantasies “unacknowledged legislators,” stating that in this position “these state fantasies produce the national subjects who want the state to govern them.”²¹

The most important and malleable fantasy, according to Pease, is American exceptionalism. What makes the belief in a non-tangible, flexible fantasy like American exceptionalism particularly attractive, he says, is that citizens feel that they all share the same belief, although they each give it a different meaning.²² From the first settlers in America up to the cold war, ideas of America as having a “manifest destiny,” an exceptional historical role, or an exemplary function in the world are all different displays of America’s belief in its exceptionalism. Pease finds that “the fantasy of American exceptionalism was comprised of the assemblage of tenets and beliefs out of which the term’s ever-changing significance could be deduced.”²³

While explaining the role that the belief in and use of the supposed American exceptionalism had in history, Pease suggests that he himself does not think that America is as exceptional as many choose to believe. He also argues that the state actively “sustained the

¹⁷ Michael Kazin, “Stuff of Legend”, *New Republic*, February 14, 2011, accessed January 11, 2016, <https://newrepublic.com/article/83365/american-exceptionalism-obama-santorum-romney>

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ Donald E. Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 38.

²⁰ Ibidem, 1.

²¹ Ibidem, 6.

²² Ibidem, 9.

²³ Ibidem, 12.

attitude through which U.S. citizens willfully misrepresented their history as well as their place in the world.”²⁴ Nonetheless, the power of the myth of exceptionalism is undeniable.

The belief in the exceptionality of the U.S. has been, and still is, an important factor in the creation and sustainment of many volatile and mythical images of American Identity by scholars, media and others. Nevertheless, America is not the only country occupied with trying to define its national identity, and certainly not the only country debating its supposed exceptionalism. In the teen pop-music sitcoms that are the case studies of this thesis, exceptionality plays an important role.

Another keyword in the dominant image formation of American identity is the concept isolationism. In this case, this is not referring to foreign policy, but to supposed cultural isolationism. In the widespread and ever-continuing debate regarding the definition of American identity, several criticisms on the dominant trends have been voiced. Campbell and Kean feel these critiques mostly revolve around two “central weaknesses” that are pointed out.²⁵ Firstly, it is noted that many (American) commentators, as well as scholars, view(ed) America from an isolated point of view, and loose from foreign influences. In this tunnel vision, the possibility to compare with other societies, put things in perspective and view America a little more objectively, is bypassed. Cross-cultural comparison has not received enough attention in the identity-debate, according to the critics. However, in the past decade the tendency to move away from this isolated point of view towards the idea of America as being part of a global system has been evolving. In the TV-series regarded in this thesis, however, the isolation is still noticeable, as we shall see in chapter 3.

Besides Campbell and Kean’s valid point, the popular American view of the country as being isolated itself is also something worthy of critique. America is of course a country that was (mainly) built by immigrants, mostly coming from European countries. In many American minds we find a commonly assumed image of these immigrants as having detached themselves from their homeland and naturalizing as Americans as soon as they set foot on American soil.²⁶ But others note that this image neglects and overlooks the continuing relationships to the world that immigrants maintain(ed) even after their emigration from their home country.²⁷

²⁴ Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism*, 12.

²⁵ Ibidem, 4.

²⁶ French immigrant J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, for example, paints this overly idealistic image in his fictional autobiography *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782).

²⁷ Donna R. Gabaccia, *Foreign Relations: American Immigration in Global Perspective* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 27-28. In her book, Gabaccia argues that Americans continue(d) to overlook these transnational relations because of an important paradox in the building as well as maintaining of the

Nowadays this idea and belief of separateness is called isolationism,²⁸ and, like exceptionalism, it has been a prominent factor of American history and history writing. Although it is clear that there are opponents of the historically rooted belief in America's exceptionalism and isolationism, both ideas still remain sturdy pillars on which the dominant view of American identity leans.

1.2. American mythology

Another element that has a big part in shaping ideas about an American identity is the body of dominant American national myths.²⁹ As Pease says, "myths normally do the work of incorporating events into recognizable national narratives."³⁰ Campbell and Kean discuss how these patriotic myths aid in the construction of a national character by suggesting all people hold these patriotic beliefs unanimously, as if it is part of having the American nationality.³¹ The most prominent examples of these American national myths, according to them, are the American Dream, the idea of Turner's frontier thesis, and the promised land.

One of the dominant American national myths that is often called upon in explanations of what "American" and "American identity" entails is the American Dream. The concept of the "American Dream" represents the idea that every hard working American is entitled to the pursuit of happiness and has the possibility of achieving success in the United States. The myth revolves around the glorification of the opportunities America offers.

However, as with "identity", it is hard to give a confining definition of the concept "American Dream." The meaning of the dream differs for everyone having it, suggest Campbell and Kean, although feelings of promise and new opportunities are always involved.³² The explanation of the concept depends not only on the person formulating that explanation, and what they find important in life, but also on the kind of dream. For example, business magnate and Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump's American Dream is not the same as that of the Guatemalan young man who crosses the American border in order to find a place where he can build a better, safer, more stable future. One can fight to maintain the dream one thinks he already lives, spiritually or materialistic, while another will fight to have the opportunity to taste it. In the TV-shows analyzed in this thesis, the American Dream of the teen characters is being famous, as will be elaborated on in chapter 3.

American nation. This is the paradox of America wanting to stay separate and isolated from Europe's bad influences, while simultaneously welcoming large numbers of European (and other) immigrants.

²⁸ Ibidem, 29.

²⁹ Campbell and Kean, *American Cultural Studies*, 11.

³⁰ Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism*, 5.

³¹ Campbell and Kean, *American Cultural Studies*, 11.

³² Ibidem, 12.

Turner's Frontier Thesis has more definable historical roots. When the first settlers encountered the Native Americans, most viewed them as racially inferior savages. The natives endangered the emerging beliefs of the settlers, who were diverse in (former) nationality, background and religion, in a uniform national identity. This, amongst other things, created the ambition to destroy or aggressively "civilize" these natives as the American settlers saw fit, in order to guard their newly blooming feeling of national identity. Being opposite such a different people, realizing what American qualities, morals and virtues these natives "lacked" in comparison to the settlers on the frontier, is what formed the idea of the "American", according to 19th century historian Frederick J. Turner.³³ The natives were, in essence, too alien to be considered American. The "American myth" of Turner's Frontier thesis appears closely related to the before mentioned exceptional national narrative, or history. Here, however, the supposed exceptionality of America is not based on its history per se, but more on the feelings and ideas that were caused by historical events.

There are two important values that can be distilled from Turner's Frontier thesis, the first one being ambition, and the second one a Do It Yourself (DIY) mentality. It is the ambition of "civilizing" or eliminating the savages that threatened the budding American identity that supposedly awakened feelings of American unity amongst the frontier men and women. In the teen sitcoms there is (luckily) no quest for killing people, but there are situations where a sense of identity and ambition is not realized until met with an 'Other'.

Also, the people at the frontier needed to be prepared and capable to build a new house and life for themselves from the bottom up, because there was nothing there yet but uncharted territory. Therefore, the DIY mentality was a key factor in the success of their endeavor. In the 1970's, the punk youth culture took the form of a DIY movement, which manifested in independent operators in contrast to the commercial established, big record and media industries.³⁴ Greene discusses how the core of every youth culture has always lain in the positioning opposite the establishment. In the 21st century, the arrival of personal computers and access to the internet brought new possibilities for the production of home-made DIY material, and extended the reach of the distribution. According to Greene, teens nowadays again find their individual empowerment through the DIY culture, as we will see in the case studies.³⁵

The idea of America as a safe haven for all kinds of people dates back as far as the founding of the first colonies. Many of the first inhabitants came to the mythical promised land in search of liberation from religious persecution, money struggles and the class system. This image

³³ Campbell and Kean, *American Cultural Studies*, 53.

³⁴ Greene, *Teens, TV and Tunes*, 80.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, 81.

of America as the promised land is one that has persevered for a long time, reemerging at times when needed. Freedom of religion and more ways to earn money proved powerful incentives, which have lured many more immigrants to the shores of the United States. At the beginning of the twentieth century, for example, many Jewish writers marveled at the freedom of religion and prosperity that prevailed in the New World of their imagination, as Campbell & Kean point out.³⁶

Many immigrants, however, were disoriented and shocked because the promised land differed from their expectations, and assimilation was necessary here also. In reality, America was not a great deal more tolerant of different cultures brewing inside, or outside, its borders than other countries. This side of the medal does not show its face as much in pop culture. Here, the discrepancy between an “imagined” American identity in pop culture and the reality becomes clear. The promise of the promised land turns out to be a lie for many disillusioned immigrants and Americans alike.

Summarizing, the body of dominant American national myths, amongst which the mentioned American Dream, Turner’s frontier thesis, and the promised land, is often brought up when speculating about a national identity. It is a common way of solidifying America’s (supposed) exceptionality in recognizable form, as can be seen in the case studies. American Studies scholars recognize these myths as contributing factors in many people’s personal conviction of what American Identity and Americanness entails.

Despite the unity that the body of myths may suggest, there is actually a large variety of different people living in the country. After the isolationism, in the form of tunnel vision and lack of cross-cultural comparison, this is the second weakness in defining American identity, which Campbell and Kean discuss. The existence of many very different groups within the same borders is often overlooked, and some groups are overshadowed (the so called minorities). In the search for “essential singularity”, as Campbell and Kean call it, some groups are marginalized through generalization.³⁷ Campbell and Kean state that the dominant point of view, which overshadows the rest, is white, male, middle-class and heterosexual.³⁸ Differences regarding things like class, ethnicity, race and gender are often not (sufficiently) acknowledged. This generalization is present in the picture of America that is sketched by the media, as we shall see in the next section.

1.3. Hyperreality and an imagined America

American popular media scholar Jaap Kooijman’s book title, *Fabricating the Absolute Fake*, is a

³⁶ Greene, *Teens, TV and Tunes*, 66.

³⁷ Campbell and Kean, *American Cultural Studies*, 3-4, 16.

³⁸ This dominant point of view is also very noticeable in pop culture, as Doyle Greene argues in his analysis of *Big Time Rush* in chapter 12 of his *Teens, TV and Tunes*.

quotation borrowed from Umberto Eco.³⁹ Both Kooijman and Eco's studies concern American Identity in pop cultural context, as does this thesis. Eco, being a semiotician and literary critic (among other things), discusses the "absolute fake" in the context of his studies on media culture and the concept "hyperreality."⁴⁰ According to Eco, a hyperreal image of America, which is also described by Kooijman as the "imagined America,"⁴¹ along with its corresponding hyperreal American Identity, is an absolute fake. It is this hyperreal imagined America, as projected in teen pop-music sitcoms, that is the subject of analysis in this thesis.

Kooijman explains Eco's idea as follows: "the absolute fake is a form of hyperreality in which a cultural artifact is perceived as an improved copy, more 'real' than its original."⁴² Eco's theory does not concern the artificial, even flamboyant American pop culture world of Disney and blockbuster movies. Rather, it concerns the hyperreal America that has a less "created" air and resembles the reality more closely, even though it is as fake as the former mentioned. This particular fake, hyperreal America, which was given form by popular media such as teen sitcoms, is such a convincing copy of the reality that it eventually seeped into the collective American imagination and there began issuing its influence on reality.⁴³ The difference that Kooijman describes between the "real" America and the America that is imagined in popular culture, incorporates the previously discussed marginalization through generalization. Besides Eco, cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard also finds American pop culture a form of hyperreality. Baudrillard does not see it as an improved copy of an authentic original (absolute fake), however, but as a separated item, explains Kooijman.⁴⁴ In Baudrillard's idea, the American identity is not merely a copy of the "real" America, but it has become a reality on its own (simulacrum).⁴⁵

The application of the theory of hyperreality to the relation between pop culture and the "real world" nation of America is an interesting as well as useful way of analyzing, what Kooijman calls, "imagined America". He describes this as "an America that is based on the mass-mediated images of Hollywood cinema, television programs, advertisements, and pop music", in contrast to

³⁹ To be exact, from Eco's book *Travels in Hyperreality*, translated by William Weaver (San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1986), 7-8.

⁴⁰ Kooijman, *Fabricating the Absolute Fake*, 10.

⁴¹ When I mentioned this term earlier in the chapter, I was referring to Eco's term as well. At those instants, however, I felt that the words were self-explanatory enough to refrain from the further explanation at that point, knowing it would follow in this paragraph.

⁴² This is Eco's idea in *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays* (1986) as paraphrased in Kooijman, *Fabricating the Absolute Fake*, 10.

⁴³ Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, 7-8.

⁴⁴ This is Baudrillard's idea in his book *America* (1988) as paraphrased in Kooijman, *Fabricating the Absolute Fake*, 17.

⁴⁵ This is my explanation of the word in Baudrillard's context. The definition of 'simulacrum' according to the Oxford Dictionary is firstly "An image or representation of someone or something", and secondly "An unsatisfactory imitation or substitute."

the reality of the nation-state USA.⁴⁶ This imagined America is the glammed up, often unrealistic representation of America that is sketched in Western pop culture. It is purposely created and communicated through popular mass media to implement a positive image of the United States in the country itself as well as abroad, which is why in this thesis it is further referred to as the fabricated “American Identity.” The hyperreal American Identity and the imagined America will be evaluated, with the discussed, problematic concept of American national identity in real-life in mind.

So, the idea of hyperreality has proven a useful and not to mention probable way of approaching American pop culture. Kooijman finds it particularly helpful in studying American-inspired pop cultural items in non-American countries. While this thesis does not deal with cultural items made in other countries, like Kooijman’s research, applying the theories of hyperreality and the absolute fake he uses to popular television culture remains appealing. It provides a tool for approaching the hyperreal American identity, or imagined America, that is projected on our TV screen, and that teens become as familiar (or perhaps even more familiar) with as reality.

1.4. Nickelodeon’s imagined America

Both Nickelodeon’s audience differentiation with accompanying created teen world, the imagined America in this case, and Nickelodeon’s sweet, clean and carefully orchestrated brand identity are created and approved by adults. They feel reassured when letting their kids watch Nickelodeon, because they know that what their kids will see is an image of the America that they want them to see. In her book *Nickelodeon Nation*, media scholar Heather Hendershot explains the success of Nickelodeon because it pleases both adults and children: “Nick gives kids the fun they want by gently violating adult ideas of propriety, and it satisfies adults by conforming to their vision of ‘quality’ children’s programming.”⁴⁷

The teen shows work for adults because they project a vision of a violence-free world, with ethnic and racial diversity, and sensitive to racism and sexism. Hendershot states that in Nickelodeon’s programming for children, the differentiation between square adults and fun kids in the narrative is key.⁴⁸ However, she admits, most of Nickelodeon’s shows are enjoyable for the boring adults as well, as they contain a second layer of parody jokes about adult life that “make[s] more sense to adults than to kids.”⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Kooijman, *Fabricating the Absolute Fake*, 10.

⁴⁷ Hendershot, *Nickelodeon Nation*, 3.

⁴⁸ Ibidem.

⁴⁹ Ibidem.

1.5. Chapter Conclusion

In the academic debate on American Identity in American Studies, several ways to capture the unique feel of “Americanness” have been suggested. The belief in America’s exceptionalism is one of the most important factors of the sustenance of the idea of an American Identity. The most common way of solidifying this exceptionalism is through a body of often repeated patriotic myths, like the American Dream, Turner’s Frontier thesis and the image of America as the promised land.

Of course, there is also criticism on the ideas regarding the quest to define American Identity. A weakness in trying to determine one national identity, for which essential singularity is necessary, is the marginalization of minorities. Also, the point of view of some (American) scholars and commentators on America as being isolated and immune to foreign influence causes a tunnel vision, with insufficient cross-cultural comparison.

Despite the criticisms on popular ideas of American exceptionalism, myths, and isolationism, and on the incongruity of these concepts with the reality, this research will demonstrate that they are still clearly present in current American popular culture. A hyperreal version of the actual country, primarily based on the differentiation between adults and children, but created by adults, is being displayed in the Nickelodeon teen pop-music sitcoms in this research. The ways in which the traditional American ideas on American Identity as part of this imagined America, will become apparent in analyses of the case studies in Chapter 3. There, it is discussed how the sitcoms maintain the idea of America as exceptional, unified and isolated for their young American viewers.

Chapter 2: Tools in the support and transmission of an imagined America

Big Time Rush, *Victorious*, and in reduced manner *iCarly* as well, are teen pop-music sitcoms, which means that they rely heavily on music. Livingstone names not only television, but also music as an important tool in the quest for identity formation.⁵⁰ Besides this, the contribution that pop-music has in the transferring process is significant, thus will follow an exploration of the contribution of pop-music as a specific and powerful tool in the communication of an image to the audience. In the case of the case studies, bubblegum music aids in the formation of a protected and peaceful imagined America, with the corresponding image of American Identity. Besides this, the format of the TV-series supports the transmission of this image in a surprisingly similar way.

2.1. Bubblegum music

Bubblegum rock, a subgenre of pop-rock music, originated in the 1960's as a mellower alternative to rebellious anti-Establishment rock music, signifying young adults and their youth culture versus adult culture. Still very much alive, sweet bubblegum music was and is made by teen pop performers for a mostly female tween and teen audience.⁵¹ Although frowned upon by some because of the target audience, bubblegum brands have been and still are successful due to their strong, and very consciously produced, recognizability in connection to its fans. All teen pop-music sitcoms up thrive on the enlargement of the bubblegum image of their stars by simultaneously projecting it in the musical as well as the TV industry. The three case studies fit snugly into this category. These bubblegum 'brands', meaning the total package of teenage star, TV-show and musical career, were created by the TV industry for two reasons, explains Greene.⁵² They provided a clever way to cross-market into the pop music scene, as well as aid in the business of ideology marketing.

Cross-marketing is a great tool to increase the influence that television shows have on the lives of teens. Nickelodeon is extremely skilled in the employment of bubblegum brands in cross-marketing. *iCarly*, for example, aims at an imagined demographic audience on a musical as well as ideological platform, by portraying two female leads that resemble this audience. Carly mirrors downtown, white, middle-class teenager girls, while her best friend Sam is a lower-class 'white trash' girl, which presumably resembles a white Middle American conservative audience ("hicks"),

⁵⁰ Livingstone, "Half a Century of Television in the Lives of Our Children," 155.

⁵¹ Greene, *Teens, TV and Tunes*, 104.

⁵² Ibidem, 101-102.

states Greene.⁵³). This connection to a specific female adolescent audience is enlarged by the image both girls have in their musical careers, that corresponds with their image in the series (due to the cross-marketing ideology of Nickelodeon. Miranda Cosgrove (Carly) sings punky but very sweet pop/rock songs that revolve around self-determination, while Jennette McCurdy (Sam) can be categorized as a country-pop performer.⁵⁴

Even more interesting for this research is how pop music, and in this specific case bubblegum music, can be used as an ideological tool. This can be done in two ways. Firstly, sweet, harmonious music with little to no dissonance resembles the socially harmonious and isolated places and narratives that Nickelodeon has created in their TV-series. Greene's borrows from the Frankfurt School's musical expert Theodor Adorno when stating that bubblegum music "signifie[s] idyllic social organization."⁵⁵ The tonality in the music keeps the focus on the dominant melody and resolved any dissonance, which, along with the often sugar-sweet song lyrics, paints a picture of a socially symphonic America.

The second ideological use of bubblegum music, according to Greene, is that, again he cites Adorno, like other mass cultural expressions, its form and function is infantilization of the masses. Adorno suggests that "treating adults as children is involved in that representation of fun is aimed at relieving the strain of adult responsibilities."⁵⁶ As the teens that watch *iCarly*, *Big Time Rush* and *Victorious* are young-adults, this statement applies to them in a reduced manner. Greene quotes Adorno to address this perspective, but rightly so argues that comparing bubblegum music with the language of a toddler that's just learning to talk might be a bit of an exaggeration. He favors media and cultural scholar John Hartley's term "paedocratic". Hartley states that the (popular) TV industry aims to address an audience which it feels is "governed by childlike qualities."⁵⁷ Bubblegum music approaches teens in a paedocratic manner, as if being wild and irresponsible goes hand in hand with being young, innocent and vulnerable, and adult responsibilities are not in order. This 'infantilization', as Adorno would call it, provides a comforting break in the difficult way towards becoming a responsible, dutiful adult.

While other genres are valued more for their musical classification, bubblegum is judged mostly for its imagined audience of female adolescents.⁵⁸ But judgement aside, pop-music genres like bubblegum remain very helpful in conveying ideological ideas, and creating and supporting an

⁵³ Greene seems very unnuanced in describing McCurdy's mirror audience, he calls them "white trash" and "hicks". In his endnotes on page 196 he addresses this issue, by explaining that assumed audiences of a subgenre are often reduced to respective stereotypes.

⁵⁴ Greene, *Teens, TV and Tunes*, 10, 104.

⁵⁵ These are Greene's words in Greene, *Teens, TV and Tunes*, 102.

⁵⁶ Adorno as quoted in Greene, *Teens, TV and Tunes*, 102.

⁵⁷ John Hartley, *Tele-ology: Studies in Television* (London: Routledge, 1992), 17.

⁵⁸ Greene takes the dismissing of bubblegum by rock fans as example in Greene, *Teens, TV and Tunes*, 104.

imagined America on screen.

2.2. Format

Similar to bubblegum music, the format of the shows also illustrates and underlines the socially harmonious imagined America communicated in the teen pop music sit-coms. Both *iCarly* and *Victorious* follow a similar, conventional sit-com format as *The Partridge Family* and *The Archie Show* before them, which goes well with this sweet, harmonious bubblegum music. This means that the performance of a song was written into the narrative as a real musical performance, for example in a karaoke bar or at a wedding.⁵⁹ The performed songs, as in this case, are usually also released as single with an accompanying music video, making good use of the cross-market opportunity the pop-music sitcom provides.

Big Time Rush doesn't fit in the quiet, socially harmonious picture as well as the other series, or at least format-wise. It has the allure of rebelliousness, due to its unconventional format, while still in the confinements of the conservative bubblegum branding that Nickelodeon employs. *BTR* has a cartoonlike style, in which the actors make cartoonesk gestures tied to cartoonesk sounds (Mickey Mousing). The throwing in the air of anything that was held in hand when being startled or when panicking or hurrying is a good example, this happens many times during each episode. The narrative often borders on the absurd or cartoonesk, and all regular adult characters behave like kids. The slapstick humor and exaggerated acting, combined with film techniques like fast-motion and jump-cuts, mimic the style of *The Monkees*, says Greene.⁶⁰

2.3. Chapter conclusion

Cross-marketing allows the increase of influence of the TV-shows and their projected values on teens, by approaching them via several congruent routes at the same time, all controlled by the same creator. Music is one of these routes, and a very important one in teen pop-music sitcoms, which revolve around teens making music. The bubblegum music genre plays a big part in the narrative, and also has a hand in conveying ideological meaning. The harmonious music underlines the creation of socially peaceful and isolated places and narratives. Pop-music plays a supporting role in the creation of an imagined, but nevertheless influential, socially harmonious America.

The use of conventional and unconventional sitcom formats, along with matching film

⁵⁹ Carly performs the song "Shakespeare" at a wedding in the 5th episode of the fourth season of *iCarly*, "iDo". Tori performs the song "Freak the Freak Out" in a karaoke bar in the 13th episode of the first season of *Victorious*, which bears the same title.

⁶⁰ Greene, *Teens, TV and Tunes*, 106-107.

techniques, serves as another tool to underline this harmonious imagined America. Overall, the teen pop-music sitcom is perhaps one of the best tools of the TV industry to put the United in the imagined States of America.

Chapter 3: Americanness in teen pop-music sitcoms

It is clear that certain ideals about American Identity are dominant, and that ideas and values can be conveyed to a young audience in teen TV-shows. This information is used to analyze three case studies. This chapter will revolve around cultural close-reading analyses of 'Americanness' in the Nickelodeon TV-series *iCarly*, *Big Time Rush* and *Victorious*. At the center of this is the question how ideals about "American Identity" are conveyed to its young American audience in these three teen pop-music sitcoms. In order to help answer this question, the researches of Kooijman, Greene and Hendershot have served as guidelines in this process.

To unfold this hyperreal American Identity in the teen sitcoms, this research is built around a couple of researchable elements and terms extracted from the dominant ideas about this identity. In relation to America's supposed exceptionalism, some basic elements that set the scene are regarded, followed by the exceptionality of the main characters. Then, in terms of isolationism, locations and settings, as well as the clash between adult control and (supposed) teen autonomy are treated.

The discussion of the translation of the body of myths in the sitcoms follows, which provides a lot of insight. In the reading of the American Dream, the optimistic prospect of success and fame and the availability of happiness and opportunities, as given form in the TV-series, are examined. Then, Hollywood is viewed as the promised land, and the place where one finds prosperity and money. Here, an unexpected divergence occurs regarding the downplay of disorientation and shock that is ignored in the myth, but present in the TV-series. Lastly, ambition, the encountering of an 'other', and the DIY mentality are examined in the discussion of Turner's Frontier thesis.

3.1. Exceptionalism

Many American Studies scholars view the concept exceptionalism as being a typically American trait. Besides the obvious traits that set the (American) scene, like language and fictional setting, the concept exceptionality can be found in the narrative of the TV-series as well. For example, the students at the Hollywood Arts School in *Victorious* can be viewed as exceptionally talented and extraordinary. And the boys from *BTR* are very lucky to experience the exceptional opportunities that present themselves to them. Here especially, it seems as though these kinds of opportunities are a result of the greatness, freedom and prosperity that America brings. They are realistic opportunities, and they can present themselves in real life as well, but in reality the road to fame is rarely as easy as it seems in the TV-series. This discrepancy between the imagined America and the reality is elaborated on further in this chapter, when discussing the American Dream myth.

So, the use of language, fictional setting and contrast with other cultures places the three series firmly within American culture on first sight. Together with elements of the narrative, it makes them exceptionally American.

3.2. Isolationism

The incongruity of an imagined America with the reality also becomes visible in Nickelodeons use of isolationism. The peaceful teen America that Nickelodeon projects in its TV-series displays isolated locations in which the narrative of TV-series take place. In other words, the settings of the sitcoms are isolated “worlds”. Both the high school world that *iCarly* is set in, and the starting young actor- and musician hotel bubble that *Big Time Rush* is situated in are subcultures, which are isolated to some extent from the dominant American culture. *Victorious* displays an even more isolated subculture, being a combination of both subcultures mentioned above, set in a high school especially for talented art students (like actors and musicians).

For high school is a different world from “real life”, with an isolated culture contained in one building. It can be viewed as a subculture of the dominant one, where different rules and social standards apply. For example, in high school it can be “not done” to wear a certain brand of sneakers, while this would be perfectly acceptable in other environments. Kids can be cruel. Then the hotel where the Big Time Rush boys live and get schooled is merely for actors and musicians. This creates an atmosphere that is also isolated from the rest of the world and other people that are not in that business. So, the high school, hotel for wannabe-stars, and school for talented teens are all locations isolated in multiple ways from American society.

Isolationism is not only a theme location wise. Besides the sitcom settings, Nickelodeon also employs different narrative and formal ways that resound isolation. The clash between teen autonomy and adult authority, which traditionally isolates teen culture from the dominant adult culture, is addressed in each sitcom, as will become apparent in the following paragraphs.

The popularity of Nickelodeon shows with kids is not just due to the goofiness and jokes about bodily functions, but also because of the idolization of the differences between ‘square’ adults and fun kids. This difference is made so explicit, that almost a separate, adult-free world is created for the teens in the series to live in. This can be viewed as an “imagined America”, to speak in Kooijman’s terms, that revolves around teen culture. This imagined America comes with its own norms, values and ideals, of course, which all influence the watching teens in real life.

At the base of the isolated teenage world lies the eternal conflict between teen autonomy and (square) adult supervision. The idea of adult males as eternal teenagers is a theme that often reoccurs in Nickelodeon TV-series, as in the three case studies of this thesis as well. In *iCarly*, the

only adult that is a primary character is Carly's older brother and guardian Spencer, who in many ways is a bigger child than she is. In the following analysis, we will first see not only the protection of the boundaries surrounding the created isolated teen world in *iCarly*, but also how the present adults in the series are either presented as an (adult) outside threat or are eliminated as an threat by presenting them as resembling teenagers. After that, however, the illusion of teen sovereignty of the teen world is snuffed out, as becomes apparent that, despite all, the adults remain in control.

In the *iCarly* episode "iWanna Stay With Spencer", Carly's brother Spencer (her legal guardian) accidentally puts Carly in a slightly dangerous situation, that luckily ends well.⁶¹ But subsequently their grandfather wants Carly to come and live with him, in a small and boring town, because he is convinced that Spencer is not responsible, authoritative or mature enough to raise a teenager. Spencer argues at first, but after another incident sadly agrees that he is indeed too irresponsible and it is decided that Carly is going to live with her grandfather. Right before Carly is set to leave, Spencer hands their grandfather a 'take-care-of-Carly list', which includes, for example, her allergies and her favorite kinds of food. At the last moment, Spencer shows that, although sometimes childish and immature, he is in fact a responsible adult when need be, so Carly can stay with him.

Besides rebelling a little by suddenly wearing emo/gothic clothing, colored hair extensions and (fake) piercings, Carly doesn't have a say in her living arrangements, because she is 'just' a child. To being called a child Carly aptly responds: "I am not a child, just young and short," which might as well be the brand motto of Nickelodeon. As part of its brand identity the network created the image that it portrays and treats children as intellectual human beings with opinions of their own, thus fortifying the isolating borders of the teen world. This episode, however, clearly demarcates the adult restrictions within which (Carly's) teen autonomy can exist. It exemplifies Hendershot's explanation of the appeal of Nickelodeon: the created teen world of Nickelodeon, although seemingly governed by fictional teen characters and therefore appealing to its teen audience, is both created and approved as a hyperreal, isolated surrogate-world by adults.

The message that is conveyed to the teen audience in this episode is that no matter how immature adults sometimes act, they are still adults and therefore responsible for and authoritative over teens. But to take the bitter taste of false freedom out of the mouth of the teen audience, after having watched the bubble of supposed teen autonomy that they turned to Nickelodeon for burst, both Spencer and Grandpa engage in a childish belly rub dance-of at the

⁶¹ This is the 5th episode of the first season of *iCarly*. The only thing we learn regarding the absence of actual parents is that Carly and Spencer's father is in the army stationed in a submarine somewhere far away and remote.

end of the episode. Here, Nickelodeon itself reminds us that the supposed isolation of teenage culture, like the isolation of America, is a hoax.

In *Victorious*, however, the borders of a supposedly isolated teenage world remain stronger than those of *iCarly*, due to the absence of authoritarian adults. Tori and her sister Trina live with both their parents, whom we see every now and then, although they seem very unconcerned with their children's adventures and whereabouts. On one occasion, Tori's parents even planned a weekend trip in order to avoid having to take care of Trina, who has to have her wisdom teeth removed. Because Trina is very needy (read annoying) even when not sick, they leave Tori to take care of her.⁶² Besides apparently not feeling incredibly responsible for their daughters, they are not authoritative, and are ordered about on several occasions. When celebrating their anniversary by watching a movie together at home, they are not even dominant or strict enough as adults to tell their daughter's teenage friends, who barged into their home, to leave.⁶³ Parental authority is absent in the narrative of the TV-series.

Two other adult characters in traditionally authoritative positions are teacher Erwin Sikowitz and guidance counselor Lane Alexander. While Sikowitz comes up with strange, but useful ways to teach acting to the kids at Hollywood Arts, he is depicted as a weird, flamboyant, bohemian man who is not always capable of accepting his responsibilities as an adult, or behaving like one. Like Spencer in *iCarly*, he behaves most often more like one of the kids than like a responsible adult. Lane, as the kids call him, offers advice and guidance when needed, but doesn't have an authoritative role in school, or in conversations with the kids. This goes for the majority of the conversations between adults and teens on *Victorious*, as both are usually equal in intelligence and input. There is no value or judgment implied in these observations, but noticeable is that in *Victorious*, the supposed isolation (from parental interference and authority) in which the teenage world functions is left more intact than in *iCarly*. Perhaps this is partly because the characters of *iCarly* are younger (when the show started) than the characters of *Victorious*. These kids are 16 years and older, and therefore less likely to have strict adult control than the *iCarly* kids, which are still in their early teens.

Big Time Rush follows a more unorthodox format, which reverberates the less traditional and clear distinction between the adult and teenage behavior and life in the pop-music sitcom, compared to the other two.

Thus, the isolation of teen culture in the sitcoms occurs in the choice of location and

⁶² Tori states that is why their parents left town, in the 13th episode of the first season of *Victorious*, titled "Freak the Freak Out".

⁶³ This occurs when their daughters are not even home, in the 19th episode of the first season of *Victorious*, titled "Sleepover at Sikowitzs".

scenery, in the narrative and in the format. Comparing these observations with Campbell and Kean's discussion of the term isolationism, similarities between them become apparent. The adult-created, imagined teen world in the sitcoms does not only lack cross-(sub)cultural comparison, traditionally clashing with the dominant adult culture, but is also conveyed as separate from foreign (read adult) influence.

3.3. American myths

Many American virtues can be found in the body of myths that is discussed in Chapter 1. The myth of the American Dream, for example, entails the moral that the possibility of achieving success and fame lies in America, and that the pursuit of happiness and opportunities is available for everyone here. The myth of the 'promised land' contains similar promises as the myth of the American Dream, but in a more concrete manner; freedom of religion, prosperity, and money are all waiting for those who take the leap of faith and become Americans. Turner's Frontier thesis teaches us that ambition is a necessary attribute as an American, as is a Do-It-Yourself (DIY) mentality. Both were important and necessary traits for those who ventured the frontiers. They were also vital in the quest to stabilize and maintain the new, uniform national identity, which was 'found' at the frontiers when faced with 'savages'. This manifested itself in the need to actively destroy or civilize those (native) Americans that did not fit within this identity (yet).

The next paragraphs will support the argument that the morals in these myths, that are part of the imagined American Identity, are still integrated in modern teen pop-music sitcoms. Subsequently, this 'ancient' mythology, that for many citizens conveys the meaning of being American, but problematically ignores the diversity and opinions of many more, is still stealthily taught as truth to teenagers through the teen pop-music sitcoms.

3.3.1 The American Dream

The most evident myth in the teen TV-series is that of the American Dream. It is already noticeable in the lyrics of the theme songs at the beginning of all three series. As discussed in chapter, the bubblegum music in the series is a useful tool to support the formation of a harmonious, imagined America. Here, we see that the lyrics accompanying the music are equally powerful in conveying a message, in this case about the American Dream, and in doing so aiding this formation. In *iCarly*, for example, the reference to America and its possibilities is unmissable:

“So wake up the members of my nation
It’s your time to be
There’s no chance unless you take one”⁶⁴

And in the *Victorious* theme song a similar message is sung:

“You don't have to be afraid to put your dreams in action
You're never gonna fade you'll be the main attraction
(...)
Cuz' you know that if you live in your imagination
Tomorrow you'll be everybody's fascination”⁶⁵

Both main characters Carly and Tori sing the songs ‘live’ in at least one of the episodes of their TV-series as well. The lyrics to the songs describe how the main characters both have a chance at their American Dreams -respectively becoming an internet sensation and a music artist- and how they seized (or are seizing) that moment. The lyrics imply that these opportunities can present themselves to anybody. In the *Big Time Rush* theme song, there is even more focus on the DIY part of making one’s American Dream reality (hard work). Ironically, the narrative of how the boys of *BTR* are discovered and become famous is more unlikely to happen in real life than the narratives of *iCarly* and *Victorious*.

Other songs that are connected to and promoted in the *BTR* episodes are often about the most well-known version of the American Dream: becoming famous. For example, a song in the episode “Big Time Fever”⁶⁶ is fittingly called “Famous”, and the lyrics are a text-book description of the average American Dream of becoming famous, which is the center of all three TV-series.

“If you wanna be discovered,
and end up on the cover
of every star-studded supermarket magazine.
You can do it,
stick right to it.
It could happen tonight.
(...)”

⁶⁴ This is an excerpt from the theme song as shown in each episode of *iCarly*: Michael Corcoran and Dan Schneider, “Leave It All To Me (*iCarly* Theme Song)”, perf. Miranda Cosgrove & Drake Bell, Nickelodeon Records, 2007.

⁶⁵ This is an excerpt from the theme song as shown in each episode of *Victorious*: Michael Corcoran, Lukasz Gottwald and Dan Schneider, “Make It Shine (*Victorious* Theme Song)”, perf. Victoria Justice, Nickelodeon Records, 2011.

⁶⁶ This is the 18th episode of the first season of *Big Time Rush*.

It's your moment,
You can own it.
It's the American Dream."⁶⁷

Fame seems to be synonymous with living your dream in all three TV-series. Because, in the words of Big Time Rush, "famous means that you're the best."⁶⁸ Thus, the most commonly regarded (but not the only) modern version of living the American Dream, becoming famous doing something you love, is the basis of the three shows. This suggests to the audience that being famous is synonymous with the American Dream, and that it therefore is something clearly definable. This clearly definable American Dream revolving around one issue (becoming famous) is part of the imagined America that is projected in the teen sitcoms, rather than reality. For many Americans, becoming famous is neither their goal nor their interpretation of the American dream.

Moreover, in the sitcoms it is implied and even stated that becoming famous can, and will happen to anyone who wants it enough and works for it. In real life, however, it is still merely part of their imagination than of their reality for many people that do want it and work hard. The teens that do become famous doing something they love are more of an exception than a rule.

Another way in which the American Dream is projected in the sitcoms is through the location of the narrative, and what it represents. For both Big Time Rush (the band) and Tori Vega (from *Victorious*), the possibility of achieving success and fame is inextricably linked to the United States of America. Specifically, to the birthplace of the rich and famous, and home to many myths, legends and hopes: Hollywood. The boys from BTR are discovered and brought to Hollywood, which is seen by them and by all the (record)business people around them as the place to be in order to get famous. It is, in many ways, the "promised land", as will be elaborated on later. Tori Vega already lived in Hollywood, which was how she was able to be 'discovered' and asked to attend Hollywood Arts High School, the school for talented young teens. This discovery could have happened in other parts of America or even in other countries, but the opportunities that Tori and her friends get in different episodes are undoubtedly harder to come across in areas that are not Hollywood. Her living in Hollywood is convenient to say the least, and a story situated in this mythical and iconic location full of promises makes the show more appealing to watch.

With *iCarly* as exception in this example, the use of Hollywood as the main narrative location in *BTR* and *Victorious* is almost metaphorical. In *BTR* it is maybe even more another character with a personality and grills of its own, than merely a location. Hollywood, in this case,

⁶⁷ The lyrics are derived from listening and "Big Time Rush - Famous Lyrics," *LyricsMode.com*, Lyrics Mode, Web, Accessed on 9 Oct. 2015.

⁶⁸ Ibidem.

is the America in the American Dream myth. Where better to situate stories of American Dreams about being famous, and opportunities to get there, than in the most famous celebrity hotspot and breeding ground in the world. Here lie the possibility of achieving fame, and the happiness that, supposedly, comes with it. The American teen audience sees that, even though they might not experience it, the American Dream is not a myth; it is merely situated in another part of the States than where they live. By placing the myth close to home, in an existing area that everybody knows, the possibility of living the American Dream is made almost tangible. It is a, perhaps unintentional, attempt to draw the myth from the imagined world more towards the reality.

So, fame is seen as the same thing as success, and as the ultimate American Dream in the three TV-shows. Although it is a common dream that many Americans indeed might have, it is not the only interpretation of the myth, despite what the TV-shows might suggest. In the sitcoms, an important tool to gain fame is either a global carrier (the internet in *iCarly*) or the location in a very specific American area (Hollywood). Via the use of song texts, and Hollywood as location, the message is conveyed to the audience that this fame is possible and within reach for anyone. This may be the case in the imagined America that the TV-series play in, but whether this is also true for people in the real world is up for discussion. After all, the amount of luck that is (also) involved in BTR's road to fame is rarely seen in real life. But, perhaps improbable situations make the best narratives for TV-series like these.

3.3.2. Turner's Frontier Thesis

The second American myth that resonates in the teen sitcoms is Turner's Frontier thesis. The two important values in Turner's Frontier thesis are ambition, and a Do It Yourself (DIY) mentality. The presence of these values in the sitcoms will be illustrated in the following examples.

All three case studies convey that the right amount of ambition will grant a person success. In an episode of *iCarly*, for example, the three teens who created the web show want to gain viewers. They achieve to do this in an amusing, creative and harmless way, by means of a competition of who can conjure up the best idea to gain votes.⁶⁹ In their ambition to make their show successful, however, they refuse to sell out by becoming too commercial. When offered a sponsor deal by a shoe company for a large sum of money in another episode, they initially accept. But when the shoes that they are supposed to talk up in their show turn out to be of bad quality, the teens do not want to continue promoting them because they do not want their viewers to buy bad products because of them.⁷⁰ They have enough ambition to want to profit from their show, but not at the expense of others. Because of this healthy balance, success for the

⁶⁹ This is the narrative of the 2nd episode of the first season of *iCarly*, named "iWant More Viewers".

⁷⁰ This happens in the 18th episode of the first season of *iCarly*, named "iSponsor Techfoot".

kids and their web show is guaranteed, seems to be the message.

In *Big Time Rush* and *Victorious*, this message is even clearer. Here, a recurring contrast between those that are overly ambitious and those that are precisely ambitious enough has been written into the narrative. Before the formation of BTR (in the TV-show) only James has the dream to become a famous pop singer and teen idol. His three friends only come to the auditions for producer Gustavo to support James, but initially not with the intention to participate themselves.⁷¹ In the waiting room, however, they are convinced to audition as well, because Gustavo is getting desperate. Gustavo rejects James but wants to sign the reluctant Kendall, who did not even audition properly but mockingly sang and danced to make fun of him. Nonetheless James does not give up, and tries to convince Gustavo to pick him instead by singing to him whenever he has the chance. He is quickly silenced, again, by Gustavo's "Stop it. Don't ever do that again." Desperately ambitious James, however, still gets his shot at becoming famous, when Kendall agrees to come to Hollywood on the condition that his three friends can join him in a boyband. Even though Gustavo does not find the other three good enough to become popstars, he is willing to take this risk because Kendall, who never had any desire to go into the music business, is "the whole package" that Gustavo has been looking for. This contrast between James, who is too ambitious, and Kendall, who is just ambitious enough for the right reasons (making a career out of spending time with his friends), remains a recurring theme throughout the series. At one point, when BTR threatens to be discontinued by the record company, James quickly signs a solo contract with Gustavo's biggest competitor. Granted, he does come to his senses eventually, but the contrast is clear.

Thus, James is too desperately trying to become famous and is therefore not successful. Kendall, however, is casually talented with the right amount of ambition and rebellious authenticity, which is the formula for success. He is willing to work to become famous, but only on his terms. While two snob wannabe actresses tell Carlos that "the only people who make it in this town are the ones who are mean, selfish and in it to win it", the narrative sends out a different message. Like the kids from *iCarly*, Kendall refuses to 'sell out' and lose touch with his roots, and he keeps the other boys from getting (different variations of) 'Hollywood fever' as well. Only when the boys stop conforming to Hollywood stereotypes, they are on the right track to achieving their goal again. Next to ambition, authenticity is clearly an important part of the success-formula.

In *Victorious*, the actions of the desperately ambitious character become even more frantic. Tori's less talented but oblivious sister Trina goes to great lengths when even the slightest

⁷¹ This is the narrative of the 1st and 2nd episodes, combined they made a TV movie, of the first season of *Big Time Rush*, "Big Time Audition".

possibility of fame is presented. In the episode “The Diddly-Bops” she first chases a record producer’s car for seven blocks, while singing a song (off pitch) in the hope of being discovered. Then, she agrees to perform for little children wearing a hamburger costume “cause I’ll be on stage, performing and getting paid to sing in front of people who adore me,” to which Tori and her friends, who find the act embarrassing, respond “don’t you have any respect for yourself?”⁷² For Tori’s and her friends, being taken seriously as artists is more important, while Trina settles for anything that will make her famous. Here and in other episodes, Trina seemingly has no boundaries, principles or morals in her quest to fulfill her dream of becoming famous. Her crazy ambition is often referred to as negative, and it serves as a reminder to other characters (and viewers) of how not to become.

So, in Turner’s Frontier thesis the settlers only fully realized their identity as Americans when faced with ‘savages’ with different morals. Similarly, the morally exemplifying characters of the shows find the limits of how ambitious they can be, while still doing the right thing, in the face of the discussed characters that are overly ambitious and willing to go ‘too far’ to get what they want. The message is that the exact amount of ambition will make ones (American) dreams come true, while any person diverging from the norm is “different” and needs to be corrected (read civilized).

However, it needs to be kept in mind that the set amount of ambition that is portrayed as exactly right, thereby also determining what is too little or too much, is defined by the makers of the series. It is a part of the values and morals connected to the imagined America that is created in the TV-series. These values and morals in some ways resemble those in the frontier time. Anyone without the exact right amount of ambition is considered both different and crazy (read savage). Similar to how the American Identity is “found” by the frontier men and women when faced with natives in Turner’s Frontier thesis, part of the approved form of (imagined) teen identity is found by the ‘good’ main characters when faced with people with different morals in the sitcoms.

The second value that can be derived from Turner’s Frontier thesis is the Do It Yourself (DIY) mentality, which also has its equivalent in the three teen sitcoms. In *BTR* the DIY mentality, although present, has not resulted in outcomes that are completely teen made. The boys from *BTR* do have reluctantly accepted input in their band, but it is always a collaboration between them and the adults (Gustavo and Kelly) that leads to the best results. In *Victorious*, the focus is, like in *iCarly*, on teen empowerment through the creation of their own material, like theater shows and songs, from beginning to end. The narrative of *iCarly* shows a textbook example of the

⁷² This conversation takes place in episode 15 of the first season of *Victorious*, titled “The Diddly-Bops”.

new form of DIY youth culture: three young kids that write, produce and star in their own funny web show, filmed in Carly's home. The internet provides more possibilities to present home-made material to a big audience than ever before. This fairly recent trend provides the main storyline of the *iCarly* narrative. The internet also has an important role as the main tool for cross-marketing and staying connected to the viewers, which is also the case in *Victorious*.

Like in the punk era, the modern DIY culture, as written in the narrative, is against becoming part of mass culture. It rebels against corporate capitalism and commercial, relentless record and media industries. Greene discusses the previously mentioned episode, where *iCarly* gets a lucrative sponsor deal with a shoe company but refuses to 'sell out', as an example of the kids standing up to powerful companies. This is a recurrent theme in several other episodes of *iCarly* and in the other series as well.⁷³ In *Victorious*, for example, the element of authenticity, which is said by critics to be lost in mass culture, is valued highly.

In *BTR*, this rebellion is manifested in the parodying of the teen mass culture as a second humorous layer in the show. Hendershot stated that this kind of second layer makes the series more appealing to an older audience as well.⁷⁴ As Greene states: "underneath it all, BTR ridicules feminine mass culture while simultaneously pandering to the 'teenyboppers' in the hopes that they buy a product that holds them in contempt."⁷⁵ Flocks of screaming tween and teen girls are seriously looked down upon and mocked in the series, but simultaneously wanted as a symbol of a successful boyband.

The rebellion against the boyband standards and the control of the corporate record industry is a returning main theme. This amounts to "unintentional self-parody", feels Greene, another form of parody besides that of female teen culture.⁷⁶ In the series, BTR is supposedly authentic and legitimate because of its male teenage rebellious attitude towards their capitalist record company. But in reality, BTR is of course created by and under strict control of a capitalist creator of mass culture (Nickelodeon). Although it may appear that *BTR* is mocking the record industry and the glamorous Hollywood scene, this rebellious attitude and the "unintentional self-parody", along with the parody of female teen culture, was most likely consciously created by Nickelodeon to appeal to an older audience.

The DIY movement in *iCarly* does not just send a message of rebelling against corporate capitalism, it also stands for rebelling against adult control. The *iCarly* web show proves better when it is not under adult executive control on multiple occasions in the narrative. The supposed

⁷³ Greene, *Teens, TV and Tunes*, 82.

⁷⁴ Hendershot, *Nickelodeon Nation*, 3.

⁷⁵ Greene, *Teens, TV and Tunes*, 170.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, 171.

teen autonomy and the rebellion against the big commercial media industries and mass culture in the narratives, are of course in stark contrast with the reality. Both *iCarly* and *BTR* and everything connected to them (the *iCarly* web show, the *BTR* band) are in fact under the control of adults at a big commercial corporation that produces mass culture. The authenticity that especially *iCarly* evokes in the narrative, of being a DIY teen product that is very critical of mass culture, is cleverly developed to fit that very same mass culture in reality.⁷⁷

Noteworthy is that the conflict of teen autonomy versus adult control conflict, that is very prominent in *iCarly* as well as in *BTR*, is not as important in *Victorious*. There is the least adult authority in *Victorious* compared to the other two series, as discussed before, and there is also the least focus on the hip teen against square adults conflict. This may perhaps be because the teens are older than the *iCarly* kids at the beginning of the show, or because they go to a school that encourages the teens to create and do things themselves. Or perhaps it is because there are enough teen primary characters in the series to have no need of adult primary characters, or maybe it just provides a good storyline.

Thus, ambition and the DIY mentality are not only two characteristics that are connected to Turner's Frontier thesis, but also items that still occur in the narratives in the three teen pop-music sitcoms this research revolves around. Although the DIY mentality is present in all three series, however it only results in DIY teen-made results in the narratives of *iCarly* and *Victorious*. In *BTR* there are always adults, childish or not, involved somewhere in the process. Part of the DIY movement is also the stand against corporate capitalism, which manifests itself in each TV-series in a different manner. The teen autonomy versus adult control is the spill of many *BTR* episodes, and occurs on several occasions in *iCarly* as well, but it less prominent or often even absent in *Victorious*.

Characters with the right amount of ambition only realize the borders of acceptable ambition, when confronted with overly ambitious characters that go 'too far' to get what they want. The DIY skills and mentality are the reason for the success of both the settlers at the frontier and the teens in the narrative of the TV-shows. Therefore, this American myth is still notably present, albeit in a different format, in current teen TV.

3.3.3. Promised Land

The last American myth to discuss is the myth of the 'promised land'. This has a large overlap with the American Dream, because, as discussed, in Hollywood the 'universal' American Dream of fame involves prosperity and money for the taking. In both *BTR* and *Victorious*, Hollywood is the promised land, where the 'universal' American Dream of fame comes true and where prosperity

⁷⁷ Greene, *Teens, TV and Tunes*, 83.

and money lie for the taking. This is not to say that the struggles that artists, musicians and actors face in Hollywood are ignored completely in the narratives. Friends of the boys from BTR and of Tori do have trouble gaining recognition and becoming famous for their skills on some occasions, although the way to fame seems to always be a little bit easier for the main characters.

Nickelodeon mostly avoids the issue of (freedom of) religion, an aspect of the promised land idea, likely because its series are designed to appeal to as many people as possible. The delicate matter of religion would perhaps complicate this, and is therefore avoided by not or rarely mentioning it. In the *Victorious* episode “Wok Star” Robbie talks about his Bar Mitzvah money, indicating that he is Jewish, and on *iCarly* Freddie mentions his ‘church pants’.⁷⁸ Other than small mentions like these, religion does not have a part in the narratives of the three series. Because of this, there can neither be spoken of freedom of religion nor of religious oppression. The characteristic of the promised land ‘freedom of religion’ is one that is therefore not represented. Nevertheless, the promise of money and prosperity are covered in the discussion on the American Dream.

Like mentioned in the first chapter, the side effect of people who emigrated to the promised land were often downplayed in the prevailing myth. There had been no, or little, mention of the disorientation, homesickness and shock that many of these new immigrants would feel once arrived in America. Their new lives and the assimilation progress in reality proved much more challenging and depressing than assumed from the heard stories about the promised land.

The theme of assimilation is one that is present in both *Big Time Rush* and *Victorious*, as the series both begin with a relocation of the main character(s) to a new environment. In the BTR episode “Big Time Fever”, Carlos, Logan and James get the previously mentioned ‘Hollywood fever’, which causes them to exaggerate and become extreme versions of stereotype Hollywood people, before being reminded where they came from.⁷⁹ Besides this there is a reference or two to being homesick. So the boys from Big Time Rush do have trouble assimilating, however overall they fit in more smoothly than would be expected from small town boys from Minnesota. For them, the promised land of Hollywood, embodied by their hotel-home the Palmwoods, is almost exactly as they hoped it would be, and they love it here.

Victorious starts with Tori being discovered and asked to enroll at a new school for talented youngsters. Then she discovers that there are several ‘initiation’ rituals at her new school, which she has to go through to fully fit in. First, she learns that everyone at Hollywood Arts has to customize their locker, to show the authentic creativity inside. Then, there is “the

⁷⁸ “Wok Star” is the 16th episode of the first season of *Victorious*. Freddie says this in episode 20, titled “iStakeOut” of the first season of *iCarly*.

⁷⁹ “Big Time Fever” is the 17th episode of the first season of *Big Time Rush*.

Birdscene”, a part of an acting class which every new student has to pass, without help from fellow students, in order to continue their education at Hollywood Arts. Students have to act out a small scene, for which they will constantly receive negative feedback from the teacher, until they learn to stand up for themselves and defend their own choices. The goal of the exercise, which the student doesn’t know until he or she stands up to the teacher, is self-confidence and believing in what you perform. It is not until Tori passes the Birdscene that she is truly accepted by the teacher and other students. Like in *Big Time Rush*, this assimilation takes one episode, which in the narrative covers just a couple of days.⁸⁰

Thus, the theme of assimilation is something that is largely overlooked in the myth of the promised land, but that is present in *BTR* and *Victorious*. Here, the use of old and prevailing American myths in teen sitcoms strays a bit from the previously argued track. While the old myth largely ignored assimilation problems like disorientation and shock, they do occur in the narratives of the series. Still, it seems that the assimilation of the main characters happens more quickly than it would in reality. This might be a personal estimation though, as the process differs for everyone going through it.

Freedom of religion, an important incentive for immigrant who came to the United States, is also unrepresented in the narratives of the series. With the many religions that are present in America, Nickelodeon might have chosen to avoid the (still) touchy subject of religion in order to avoid alienating parts of their audience. Besides these discrepancies, core items of the promised land, that are noticeable in the TV-series, are the promise of money and prosperity that await in this land.

3.4. Chapter Conclusion

Thus, in the portrayal of the traditional American values in Nickelodeon teen pop-music sitcoms, there are some that clearly remain present, and some that are less explicitly present than expected.

The exceptionalism that Americans link their country to is mirrored in the exceptional situation that we see each of the main characters in in the sitcoms. This similarity can be easily spotted at first glance, while the reading of other American values requires having a closer look.

Isolationism, for example, represented here by the isolation of teen culture and the imagined teen America, is present as in several areas of the sitcoms. This imagined America supposedly clashes with the dominant adult culture and is conveyed as indifferent to adult

⁸⁰ Tori’s assimilation process happens during “The Bird Scene”, the 2nd episode of the first season of *Victorious*, which covers her first day at Hollywood Arts.

influence, in order to fortify the (fake) idea of an actual separate teen world.

One of the key criticisms that have been mentioned in the American Studies field on the subject of American Identity, is that the interpretation of it is regulated by the dominant voice in America, which is white, male, middle-class and heterosexual. Other points of view are overshadowed or even ignored in this process. This tunnel vision seems to apply to the interpretation of the American Dream in the sitcoms as well. In the imagined America that is created in these sitcoms, fame is synonymous with the American Dream.

From Turner's frontier thesis, the contrast between good and bad by positioning the self versus an Other is derived. This myth itself stems from a violent historic background, which luckily is foregone in the translation of the myth in the sitcoms. Yet, much of the myth resounds, especially in *iCarly* and *Victorious*. Here, the DIY mentality is an important theme, which results in many narrative situations. Realizing the ambition for one's 'true' American Dream and goals happens via the same model as the frontier men supposedly realized their American Identity. And moreover, ambition was as an important motivator at the frontier as it is in all three the sitcoms.

The interpretation of the promised land myth in the sitcoms, seems to correspond better with the reality than with the dominant version of the myth, as recapitulated by Campbell and Keane. Problematic assimilation, which has been said to be overlooked or ignored in the myth, is a present theme in the narrative in the sitcoms. Freedom of religion, a key pillar of the myth, however, remains largely unmentioned. The interpretation of the myth in *BTR* and *Victorious* seems to be reshaped to zoom in on Hollywood as being the new promised land.

Conclusion

In the discussion in the field of American Studies on traditional ideas about American Identity, as covered in the first chapter of this research, a handful of dominant ideas have been distilled. All these ideas combined suggest the existence of one identifiable American Identity, which is in fact problematic.

The distinction between the reality of a problematic national identity, and an “imagined America,” as constructed in the teen pop music sit-coms, along with a hyperreal American Identity, can be made. The latter can be seen as an improved copy of the reality, is often perceived as more real, but is in fact a form of hyperreality and an absolute fake. The imagined America we see in *iCarly*, *Big Time Rush* and *Victorious*, has the exterior of being created and managed by teens, as befitting the Nickelodeon brand, but is in fact created, approved, and carefully managed by adults.

Making the distinction between America and the imagined America can be difficult for impressionable teen audiences who, by smart use of cross-marketing, are imprinted with alternate realities from many sides. The use of bubblegum music as a tool in this cross-marketing has proven to be very effective. The analyses of the case studies show that the imagined America and its hyperreal American Identity are not only present, but also actively sustained as an alternative reality in the three Nickelodeon teen pop-music sitcoms.

Through the implying of a common American Identity, and a common American Dream, the split between reality and the imagined America is kept intact. Whether this is good or bad for the teenagers watching the TV-series is not relevant in this thesis. There are arguments to be named both in favor of maintaining a softer and improved pretend-world for impressionable teens, and in favor of teaching them the truths of the real world. Judging these arguments, or concluding which side is right is not part of this thesis, but is rather left for others to discuss.

What can be overall concluded from this research, is that the dominant, traditional ideals about the concept “American Identity” are conveyed to a young American audience, in the televised form of an imagined America created in the teen pop-music sitcoms in several ways.

First off, a belief in the exceptionality and uniqueness of the nation America is engraved deeply in the shared consciousness of the citizens. It is regularly named as a characteristic of American Identity, and can also be found in the setting and narrative of the sitcoms.

Connected to this is the idea that the United States is isolated from the rest of the world, which on a cultural level would imply that there is no, or very little, foreign influence on American culture. The teen cultures that are shown in the TV-series are not only exceptionally American, they are also a subculture that is in many ways isolated from the dominant culture. The purposely

created idea of an isolated teen life or subculture, in the imagined America, is left intact in *Victorious*, but is undermined in *iCarly* and *Big Time Rush*. Here, adult authority still has the upper hand and final vote in matters, although sometimes less obvious than others.

Then, there is the body of American national myths, which can be regarded as building blocks in the construction of a national character. Here, the exceptional character of America and its history is found as well. The most prominent of these myths are the American Dream, Turner's Frontier thesis and the promised land. The dream of the characters in all three the sitcoms is becoming famous, which creates the suggestion of the possibility of a common American Dream. Although the details surrounding what to become famous for, and the way to accomplish this, may differ slightly from character to character, the objective is alike. The mindset as narrated in Turner's Frontier Thesis, which is often considered as a contributing factor in the "successes" in American history and nation forming, is present in the narratives and characters of the sitcoms. Only the promised land portrayed in the TV-series seems to have loosened its ties with the original myth a bit, and instead mirrors more of reality. Assimilation and disillusionment are less overlooked than in the myth.

In the imagined America and its imagined identity in the teen pop-music sitcoms, unification and a common American Dream can be achieved. In the real world, one American Identity that embodies all is outside of reach, it remains a fantasy rather than reality.

A next interesting step would be to research how the exported image of American Identity in the discussed TV-series thrives, or not thrives, outside America. This could increase the understanding of the influence of teen culture, and how the transfer of American ideals differs according to audience.

In what ways differ the appropriation of the transferred factors of Americanness, and the representation of American Identity, by Nickelodeon's Dutch teen audience from that by its American audience? Basil G. Englis, Michael R. Solomon and Anna Oloffson already studied the influence of music television and consumption imagery on adolescents, which includes a comparison between the effects of music television in the United States versus those in Sweden. Also, Tasha Oren has compiled several essays of television scholars that address cultural imperialism, media globalization and how programs produced and created in the United States are exported to and received in foreign markets. Inspired by these studies, the Netherlands could serve as a case-study for exploring the reach of American traits in further research.

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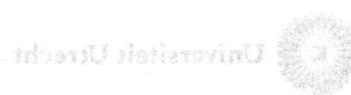
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PLAGIARISM RULES AWARENESS STATEMENT

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- including a translation of one of the sources named above without quotation marks or footnotes;
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I hereby declare that I have read and understood the above.

Name: *Karlijn Tange*

Student number: *3638715*

Date and signature:

03-02-2016

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