

TV depictions of university life: A comparative study of the US TV show *Greek* and the British TV show *Fresh Meat*.

Introduction

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Higher education inspires narratives for an immense amount of popular culture texts across genre, media, and national boundaries. These texts, whether they be films, tv shows, books, music, cartoons or other artifacts, influence the values, beliefs, ideas, behaviors, and choices of viewers and consumers (e.g. Dagaz & Harger, 2011; Signorelli, 2005; Taylor, 2005; Tobolowsky, 2001; Tuccarione, 2007; Villani, 2001; Wasylkiw & Currie, 2012), serving as pedagogic texts that (mis)educate (Byers, 2005; Giroux, 2009; Kellner, 2009).

Growing numbers of first generation students apply for and attend universities in Britain and the US and for many of them the only knowledge or understanding they have about post-secondary institutions comes from their TV screens and other media (Tobolowsky, 2001). Although to my knowledge no research as yet examines the depiction of higher education in twentieth first century British TV shows, US TV shows portray higher education as social rather than academic institutions where academics is associated with intermittent stress instead of excitement and college is the undisputed next step for high school graduates (Mackay, 2003; Tobolowsky, 2006).

Within a British and US context of expanding access to higher education, particularly for first generation and/or low-income students, identifying, analyzing, and using the representations of higher education becomes a vital strategy to prepare for, anticipate, and redirect students' expectations and subsequent role performance informed by misunderstandings perpetuated through media representations. This study examines the US TV show *Greek* (2007-2011) and the British show *Fresh Meat* (2011-2013) to reconstruct the values and ideas about higher education represented in these shows.

Three exploratory research questions guide this study:

1. How is higher education portrayed in representative US and British TV shows?
2. What distinguishes portrayals of British higher education from US portrayals?
3. What do the similarities and differences tell us about shared or alternative ideas about higher education as represented in these TV shows?

Higher Education on TV in Britain and the US

From Amis' *Lucky Jim* to Byatt's *Possession*, Britain boasts rich and deep literary offerings depicting higher education and its people, but television provides far fewer focused examples of fictional collegiate life. Misbehaving academics or students persist in murder mysteries such as *Morse* and *Lewis* set in Oxford but with the exception of *The Young Ones* British TV very much ignored college student life until a more recent spate of college themed shows including *Trinity* (2009), *Off the Hook* (2009), *Campus*

(2009-2011), and *Fresh Meat* (2011-2013). Across the Atlantic, higher education features much more predominantly in US television where it played a key part from the beginning of the medium in shows such as *College Bowl* and *Halls of Ivy*, which moved from radio to television in the 1950s. Dalton and Linder (2008) identify numerous US shows set in universities or using academics, administrators, or students as main characters. Unlike British shows such as *Grange Hill*, US television expanded its higher education offerings by following high school students on to college (e.g. *Beverly Hills 90210*, 1990-2000; *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, 1997-2003; *Dawson's Creek*, 1998-2003; *Gilmore Girls*, 2000-2007; *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, 1996-2003) with university portrayed as the next step for students (Tobolowsky, 2006).

The purpose of this study is to examine one US and one British show focused on college life to identify, analyze and discuss the unique and shared representations of higher education on TV from a comparative perspective.

Methods

This qualitative study conceptualizes *Greek* and *Fresh Meat* as cultural texts that reveal dominant and alternative ideas about higher education. The focus of the study will be on the first season of *Greek* and the first three series of *Fresh Meat*. The first season of *Greek* aired in 2007 with 22 episodes focusing on most of the first year at college for several of the main protagonists while each series for *Fresh Meat* in 2011, 2012, and 2013 had 8 episodes each. Therefore, I have a similar amount of data from both shows for analysis covering about the same period for the protagonists. Both shows are comedy dramas, focusing on the first year of college with ensemble casts. Naturally, both shows were written for a specific national audience and exhibit narratives that explore British and US higher education respectively.

Data for this study consists of transcriptions of the shows detailing dialogue and visual descriptions of scene, settings and characters. Analysis involved an emergent coding process to reveal the implicit and explicit discourse related to my research questions (Carspecken, 1996). Themes developed by discerning patterns within and between the codes.

Findings

Greek and *Fresh Meat* both portray similar elements of university life, especially related to the over representation of the social in popular higher education, but have very different representations on the academic world that reflect cultural differences in college portrayal. For example, one major difference between the shows concerns class. *Greek* completely omits any notion or awareness of class. The students live in an idyllic world where food appears and rooms are cleaned for them and everyone is perfectly attired and coiffed. No one works during the first season of *Greek* and no one expresses concerns about money. In fact the only time anyone talks about money is when one character gets a credit card to help fund unnecessary extras for her Spring Break trip such as designer swimwear and coverups. In *Fresh Meat* however viewers are treated to a less perfect world where rooms are filthy, everyone cooks for themselves, and students

are adorned in casual, normal clothes. Class is obvious in *Fresh Meat*, it is explicit and implicit with references to gap years to earn money for college or to travel, or references to living in council flats and using the coach service National Express to get to college rather than being taken by family members. Class provides humor and tension in the narratives with one student using his money to get a better room by paying the student in that room to swap with him and another student describing the reason he didn't get into Oxford as that he "Probably lost out to a f*cking muggle on a scholarship."

Admittedly, this paper provides a mere glimpse into the comparative worlds of higher education in *Greek* and *Fresh Meat*. Both are fascinating shows that reveal interesting and useful shared and conflicting understandings about higher education, both within show and comparatively.

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