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TV depictions of student life: A comparative study of the US TV show *GrΣΣk* and the British TV show *Fresh Meat*

Pauline J. Reynolds, Department of Leadership and Higher Education, University of Redlands, pauline_reynolds@redlands.edu

An increasing amount of scholarship explores how higher education (HE) is represented in fictional cultural artifacts like television (TV). This work acknowledges the importance of understanding the socio-cultural messages embedded in these portrayals across different times and countries, especially in a context where HE plays a key role in increasing social mobility. However, little research has compared these representations across nations. Much of the existing work has been conducted by US scholars, focusing primarily on representations of higher education in the United States. This article expands current research through a comparative analysis of US TV show *Greek* and British TV show *Fresh Meat* to understand more about different values, ideas, and beliefs related to student life. This comparison of fictional student life particularly illuminates differences in portrayals regarding the purpose of HE, who it is for, who engages in it, and how they do so, especially through the positioning of academic study and the way that socio-economic class manifests in the narratives.

Introduction

A growing amount of scholarship examines representations of higher education (HE) in cultural artifacts such as movies and television (TV) recognizing the need to learn more about the unexamined socio-cultural messages residing in these portrayals across time and nations. Previous work in this area has been dominated by scholars based in the US focusing mainly on US representations (e.g., Edgerton et al. 2004; Reynolds 2014; Tobolowsky 2001, 2006; Tobolowsky and Reynolds 2017). Rationales for engaging in representational work include a range of conceptual positioning including cultivation theory (Tobolowsky 2017a), the imaginary (Kelly 2017), public pedagogy (Lainio 2023), and ideas of (mis)education (Byers 2005; Reynolds 2014). Ultimately, what is shared across these scholars, is the conviction that representations of HE matter. For the purposes of this study, as access to TV programming expands and is increasingly viewed across national boundaries, its narratives teach people about HE around the world as part of popular culture's "powerful, pedagogical force" (Giroux 2009: 91), particularly teaching viewers about students and their lives in HE, who goes into HE, and how they engage in it, which can influence values, beliefs, expectations, and actions (Kellner 2009; Reynolds 2014).

In both the US and the UK, discourse, practice, and policies position HE as a key part of social mobility – in the UK through government initiated Widening Participation work (Burke 2012) and in the US' decentralized system of HE, through the historical diversification of institutional type (Harris 2013) and a plethora of programs at institution, state, and federal levels that support preparation and access (e.g., St. John and Musoba 2010; Dalton and St. John 2016). Regardless, access and success inequities remain, particularly for underrepresented and BIPOC students (e.g., Kelchen et al 2024; Madriaga 2023). TV narratives are one of the ways that messages about HE are shared and experienced for these groups of potential students, nurturing or challenging hopes of belonging and possibilities for success.

Despite the significant presence of HE in TV portrayals, scholarship examining TV depictions has received less engagement than other forms of cultural portrayals such as movies or novels. Some work concentrates on specific portrayals in one show (e.g., Byers 2005; Reynolds, Mendez, and Clark-Taylor 2018; Esposito 2023) or may be interested in questions more pertinent to other fields than higher education or education studies such as considerations of genre. Tobolowsky's work routinely compares several TV shows to uncover shared ideas about students (2006) or professors (2017b), identifying themes across shows related to these roles. However, none of this work includes consideration of potential national distinctiveness in portrayals as all shows included are US TV shows.

My previous work noted that meanings related to depictions of HE change over time and, as a British woman who works as a faculty member in a US university, suggested that comparing representations from different countries might also reveal different meanings related to higher education representations (see Reynolds 2014). Laino (2023) responded to this call looking at movies and TV shows from four different European countries to learn more about the ideas and values concerning depictions of independent learners within HE narratives and found distinct differences.

This qualitative study responds to my recommendation for comparative research and examines how the first year of student life in higher education is represented in the fictional institutions of British show *Fresh Meat* (seasons 1 and 2) and US TV show *GrΣΣk* (season 1). Through the comparative lens, two areas emerged from analysis with distinct differences in representation – the ways the shows position academic study and social class in their depictions of students' higher education. As TV narratives enact a form of public pedagogy through the ways they explicitly and implicitly inform, produce, and reproduce ideas about HE (Sandlin et al. 2009), these shows provide viewers with visions of who goes to HE, who belongs, and what they do there that can influence decision making processes regarding aspirations for and possibilities of engagement in post-secondary education.

Higher Education on TV

Higher education features prominently in US television playing a key part from the beginning of the medium as part of a US cultural fascination with post-secondary education and its peoples (Reynolds 2014). With institutions of HE historically a privileged space for the few, HE TV shows provides glimpses of spaces and practices not accessible to all, an interest aligned with US TV's ongoing fascination with the wealthy in narratives that avoid systemic critique, as seen in TV programming from the 1980s like *Dallas* and *Dynasty* (Kendall 2011) through to *Succession* in the 2020s. Television programming began with the airing of university sports as early as 1939 before quiz show *College Bow*l and comedy *The Halls of Ivy* moved from radio to television in the 1950s. From these televisual beginnings, TV shows set in and around HE such as *The Ray Milland Show* (1953–1955), *The Paper Chase* (1978–1986), *A Different World* (1987–93), *The Education of Max Bickford* (2001–02), *Felicity* (1998–2002), *GrΣΣk* (2007–11), *Community* (2009–15), and *The Quad* (2017–18) reflect the persistent and continuing fascination for stories about higher education, even setting narratives at different institutional types such as historically Black colleges and universities (*A Different World*; *The Quad*), community college (*Community*), and women's colleges (*The Education of Max Bickford*) (Reynolds 2014). In addition to shows set around colleges and universities, US

TV shows since 1939 depict HE characters in a range of genres. Examples dating from 2000 include fantasy and science fiction (e.g., *Heroes,* 2006–10; *Falling Skies,* 2011–15), reality shows (e.g., *Last Chance U*, 2016–20), adult animation (e.g., *China, IL*, 2011–2015), and crime (e.g., *Law and Order: SVU,* 1999-present). Additionally, US television expands its higher education programming through the repeated studio strategy of following characters from popular TV shows set at high schools on to HE (e.g., *Beverly Hills 90210*, 1990–2000; *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, 1997–2003; *Dawson's Creek*, 1998–2003; *Gilmore Girls*, 2000–07; *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, 1996–2003; *Gossip Girl*, 2007–12; *Veronica Mars*, 2004–07).

In contrast with the US, British television provides fewer focused examples of fictional HE life and does not boast quite the same persistent cultural appetite for these stories, something my previous work dubbed a US cultural phenomenon (Reynolds 2014). Apart from occasional examples, such as *The Young Ones* (1982, 1984) and the long-lived quiz show *University Challenge* (1962–87, 1994–2023), British TV historically minimizes portrayals of HE students while deeply engaging with compulsory school life (e.g., *Grange Hill,* 1978–2008; *Waterloo Road,* 2006–2015, 2023). Unlike US TV, these programs remain focused on the school of their titles and do not follow the student onto post-secondary education after leaving (although *Grange Hill* did spawn a spin off show based on one beloved character). Institutions of HE are also historically privileged spaces in Britain with many class inequalities related to access, and remaining so despite expansions from the 1960s and particularly in the 1990s (Boliver 2011). As British TV has a long tradition exploring class in its programming (Dickason 2016; Morley 2009), the more homogenous exclusivity of HE settings may not have suggested an attractive location to play with class differences. Depictions of higher education in murder mysteries however provide opportunities for HE characters to be engaged in plots that play with class and bring the town to the gown. These manifest through misbehaving academics or students in murder mysteries such as *Morse*, *Lewis* and *Endeavor (*programming set in Oxford from 1987–2023) and through lead roles or appearances in many other crime shows (e.g., *Vera, Wire in the Blood, Sherlock, Eleventh Hour).* Other programming offers adaptations of novels focused on professors (e.g., *Small World,* 1988*),* interacts with HE in various ways in long standing TV shows (e.g., *Dr. Who*), or provides narratives focused on administrators or campus services (e.g., *A Very Peculiar Practice,* 1986–88). However, perhaps due to an increased public awareness and investment in HE due to hikes in tuition fees and resulting protests across the UK, particularly in 2010–2011 (Anderson 2016; Ibrahim 2014), new interest in HE and its characters manifested in British TV programming of the second decade of the twenty-first century with a spate of HE themed shows including *Trinity* (2009), *Off*

the Hook (2009), *Campus* (2009–2011), *Fresh Meat* (2011–2013), *Cheat* (2019), and *Clique* (2017–2018).

Despite the apparent hunger for HE narratives, anti-intellectual portrayals are rife in US pop culture, depicting a respect of learning outside of classes while simultaneously devaluing academic learning (Tobolowsky and Reynolds 2017). Faculty roles in TV shows often serve as the rationale for anti-intellectual messaging so portrayals position professors as distrusted and rarely supportive of students (Tobolosky 2006; 2017b). Tobolowsky (2017b) reveals how representations on US TV embody Rigney's three types of anti-intellectualism – anti-rational ideas that academics are dispassionate and morally suspect due to their propensity to question, anti-elitist portrayals of academics as superior or distanced from non-academics, and unreflective instrumentalism depictions which position faculty work as impractical and not worthwhile. Relatedly, when narratives focus on students, US TV shows tend to portray HE as social rather than academic institutions, academic work is reduced to anxiety over grades or exams and where college or university is positioned as the undisputed next step for high school graduates (Byers 2005; Reynolds 2014; Tobolowsky 2006).

One reoccurring feature of US representations of HE life, and a reason for *GrΣΣk*'s selection for this study, concerns so-called "Greek life". A unique feature of US HE, Greek fraternities and sororities were student organizations developed from eighteenth and nineteenth century student clubs such as literary societies which pushed back on or complemented their formal education (Whipple and Sullivan 1998). Becoming more social in nature in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, these groups, named with letters from the Greek alphabet, use group values, secrecy, selectivity, and often siloed, single-sex, living arrangements, to foster shared identity on campus and beyond. On US TV, portrayals of fraternities and sororities depict Greek organizations as fostering a sense of belonging juxtaposed with diminishing attention to academic study (Herrera, Walters, and Williams 2022). Additionally, portrayals of Greek life represent gendered depictions of students with hypermasculinized depictions of university men who engage in risky behaviors, and university women who are rendered as "intellectual-lite" (Hadjigeorgiou 2022; Reynolds 2014; Reynolds, Mendez and Clark-Taylor 2018).

For British TV shows, scholarship particularly highlights manifestations of the neoliberal university in narratives perhaps as research in this area is more recent (Hadjigeorgiou 2022; Lainio 2023; Michael-Fox and Calver, 2023; Silverio, Wilkinson, and Wilkinson 2021). Neoliberalism dominates analyses across TV shows, whether that concerns 'the marketisation of university sexuality' (Hadjigeorgiou 2022: 155), the exercise and subsequent limitations of students' consumer power (Silverio, Wilkinson, and Wilkinson 2021), or the narrative positioning of students

as a commodity to be exploited (Michael-Fox and Calver 2023). In the analysis of British TV shows, the focus on anti-intellectualism observed by some US scholars gives way to an embedded critique of HE which focuses less on the anti-intellectual discourse about the purpose and value of academia and more on the state of HE policy particularly related to financial struggles (Olive 2022). Different shows from different periods portray and critique the development of a marketized higher education with fluctuating notions of commodification where students shift from being commodities in portrayals from the 1980s (Michael-Fox and Calver 2023) to operating over 30 years later as "powerful consumers" where academics are commodified (Silverio, Wilkinson and Wilkinson 2021).

The Study

Focusing on the first season of *GrΣΣk* and the first two series of *Fresh Meat*, I approach these TV shows as cultural texts that provide access to explicit and implicit ideas about higher education through the qualitative analysis of fictional data (Watson 2011). Both shows cover about the same fictional period of time for the protagonists, their first year in HE, with ensemble casts, who all live together, albeit that *GrΣΣk*'s characters live in sex separated houses rather than all together. Both shows were written for a specific national TV audiences and exhibit narratives that explore British and US higher education respectively but are available to view in other markets.

For data, I used transcripts of both the shows (some of which were generated as part of a previous study and others as part of this study or found on the internet). I watched the shows with the transcripts to make sure they accurately represented the show, editing as necessary if there were discrepancies. These transcripts were then coded using emergent coding to reveal implicit and explicit meanings concerning the representation of student lives (Carspecken 1996). As part of the analysis process, I also used memoing to discursively 'make sense of the parts in relation to the whole' of my analysis (Mihas 2021: 243), comparing codes with other codes and big and small ideas within and across the shows. Through memoing about the codes and comparing the coding of the shows to one another, I identified areas or themes where I had observed similarities and differences between the shows' portrayal of student life.

The TV Shows

The first season of *GrΣΣk* aired in 2007 with 22 episodes focusing on most of the first year in HE for several of the main protagonists. The show focuses on Rusty Cartwright, a new first year student at a fictional public US institution, Cyprus-Rhodes University,

who has been admitted to the honors engineering program. The show depicts his adjustment to life at university during his first year through to Spring Break as he juggles his academic responsibilities, his first girlfriend, a roommate, and building a relationship with his older sister, with pledging a fraternity, the party-loving Kappa Tau Gamma (the KT's). Being a pledge and pledging is essentially a transitional status where students have been accepted from many applicants as a possible member for the fraternity or sorority, but have a trial period where they have to prove their fit for the organization. His older sister, Casey, is a junior (third year) active in the Greek system and a Presidential-hopeful for her prestigious sorority, the Zeta Beta Zeta's, or ZBZ's. Throughout the season Casey faces challenges with boyfriends and the women in her sorority and starts to question her path after graduation while developing a relationship with her younger brother and, if reluctantly, helping him adjust. Previous research about the show focuses on how different identities are portrayed. For example, Reynolds, Mendez, and Clark-Taylor (2018) reveal the ways the narrative limits university women's intellect in stark comparison with the male students, while Martin (2011) focuses the intersections of race and sexuality through a study of Calvin Owens, a Black gay character on the show who is good friends with Rusty and also pledging a fraternity. Martin (2011) traces the fluctuations in the portrayal of Calvin's Blackness noting how his race is neutralized in the show except when stereotypes of Black masculinity are operationalized in his romantic relationships.

The first two seasons of *Fresh Meat* consist of a total 16 episodes depicting the first year in HE at fictional Manchester Medlock University, UK, for a group of 6 students who have been placed together in a university house off campus rather than the halls of residence. The students all come from different backgrounds although some of them share majors in Geology and English while one student is in Dentistry. The housemates and fellow students juggle getting to know one another with going out, working through their differences as they balance academic work with their social lives. Lainio (2023) discusses how the portrayal of Vod, one of the characters in *Fresh Meat,* who is a BIPOC student and initially on a scholarship, particularly counters normative notions of independent learners embodied by white, male, middle class students by narratively fulfilling, resisting, and disabusing stereotypes of non-traditional students and their investment as learners with her eventual success. Previous scholarship including both *Fresh Meat* and *GrΣΣk* have also examined how their portrayals present HE as a "sexual market" where students gain capital or social position from sexual encounters, and depictions affirm problematic discourse and behaviors as legitimate and desirable (Hadjigeorgiou 2019).

Findings

GrΣΣk and *Fresh Meat* both portray similar elements of university life but have different representations of the academic world, potentially reflecting cultural differences in HE portrayal. The context of higher education in the shows provides an important foundation for the themes emerging in this study where *GrΣΣk* provides a vision of university life as a sheltered fantasy, contrasted with *Fresh Meat's* exaggerated realism. As a sheltered fantasy, students in *GrΣΣk* participate in an insular, self-contained world focusing only on one population of students, those engaged in Greek life. Students appear to be individuals without ties or associations beyond their Greek-affiliated lives on campus, where engagement with places and others is localized and proximal. Alternatively, *Fresh Meat's* exaggerated realism depicts students engaged with and referring to networks of connections both in and out of the university community, across generations and roles. They are young people who refer to their families, who are represented as having multiple identities, not just that of HE student or Greek-life student, who get involved in clubs and activities at their own initiative (e.g., student newspaper, protests, charity work), who clearly all came from somewhere else, and for whom campus space is more extensive than *GrΣΣk's* localized sex-separated spaces.

This article discusses two areas highlighted through the analysis. The first examines the role of academic study in the shows and distinguishes the different ways that students' engagement in academic work are positioned in relation to their social lives in the TV shows. The second theme examines the ways that socio-economic class manifests in the TV shows related to students lives.

Comparative negotiations of academic study and social life for TV students

In the pilot episode of *GrΣΣk*, an enthusiastic first-year, Rusty, who is an honors engineering student, claims he wants 'a real college experience'. Apparently, this is not one he can get from the company of his fellow new engineering students based on his experience at an orientation party featuring 'Bot Wars' and Red Bull instead of the expected beer and frivolity. As he tells his sister,

> Rusty: Look, I went to an engineering party last night with my roommate, who I suspect is kind of racist, and we stood around a multi-purpose room talking about the theoretical and scientific inconsistencies of *The Matrix*...There were robots. Robots! (Exclaimed in exasperated disbelief). I want a real college experience. I want to have fun.
> Casey: You don't know how to have fun.
> Rusty: Well, I can learn. Isn't that what college is for?
> Casey: Hell no... (Season 1, Episode 1).

Rusty gives perhaps contradictory explanations of what HE is all about, or as he says, what a "college" experience is all about as US vernacular often uses college and university interchangeably. Rusty, like other students in *GrΣΣk,* is referring to his large research university and HE in general when he references 'college' and any references to college in the discussion of *GrΣΣk* does likewise. His understanding of a 'college experience' differs greatly from the discourse about 'student experience' which focuses on institutional and instructional quality and value for money without regard for how student identities constrain or facilitate success (Sabri 2011). Rusty's desired experience focuses on parties and fun as well as college being a place of learning, but the learning he refers to is not that allied to a major or course of study, but social and emotional, the type of learning which provides lessons about life. His sister very clearly defines her life in HE, and life in general, as one that revolves around her social life. In *GrΣΣk* Rusty is the main character invested in academic study and allied with a major yet still viewers observe him making choices that prioritize his social life in his drive to realize his vision of a so-called perfect college experience. As he says when defending those involved in Greek life to his roommate, 'at least they're enjoying college. Every week a different party, meeting new people all the time. It sounds more like what college should be' (Season 1, Episode 1).

With the emphasis on the social life of students, *GrΣΣk*'s narrative subsequently reduces academic study to moments of competition and stress such as first encounter posturing between Rusty and his fellow engineering roommate over who has the most impressive SAT score or highlighting midterms and finals rather than demonstrating sustained engagement, like previous observations of the ways academic study manifests in US TV (Byers 2005; Tobolowsky 2006). Time depicted in class or engaged in class work is rare and *GrΣΣk* minimizes contact with academics, often casting any interaction as adversarial, aligning with anti-elitist portrayals of professors (Tobolowsky 2017b). One such instance concerns a situation in which the fraternity helps Rusty to circumvent his professor and slip a late paper into his grading pile, one which was late due to his fraternity pledging activities. This event becomes an opportunity to display extraordinary and hugely entertaining teamwork from the fraternity brothers as they work together to outmaneuver his instructor in a skewed example of how ostensibly academic work comes first but is really about beating the system (Season 1, Episode 2).

Other occurrences celebrate characters' academic abilities but only when they are exercised for social aims. The best example of this is Rusty's fraternity's, the Kappa Tau's (KT's), legendary annual 'Vesuvius' party (Season 1, Episode 5). Part of the party's notoriety involves a large model volcano. When the fraternity brothers discover that the volcano is not working, thereby threatening their party's success, Rusty, eager to fit in and show the fraternity brothers he belongs, declares, 'I'm science-y.

Give me the manual. I'll fix the volcano'. And fix it he does – by stealing a scientific prototype on campus. After hooking the machine up to the volcano, all the beer at the party evaporates and then condenses when the volcano erupts as beer-rain and beer-lava, saving the party, and elevating Rusty to 'legend' status. The time and hard work necessary to be able to apply such learning is not something recognized or authentically supported across the show, but contradictorily applying learning and engaging in criminal behavior on behalf of the fraternity for social entertainment and group prestige is valued. If belonging in HE is particularly important for first-year students (e.g., Hausmann et al. 2007), *GrΣΣk* constructs meaningful, overt academic study as a barrier to inclusion and belonging, like the historical ostracism of hard-working students as 'grinders' and outsiders in US college life (Horowitz 1987).

The identification of characters with their majors also seldom occurs in *GrΣΣk* erasing possible academic identifiers, but one scene linking a woman character to a major appears when viewers discover that Frannie, a senior and the Zeta Beta Zeta (ZBZ) sorority president, is pre-med. Unable to fulfill the requirements of this track, she demonstrates her unrealistic aspirations and negligible academic engagement in a meeting with her academic advisor where they point out she had not taken any science courses. Frannie counters, 'but, what about my dream of becoming a gorgeous intern in a hospital full of gorgeous interns, discussing my love life while performing complex surgeries and hating my mother? [reference to TV show Grey's Anatomy]' to which the advisor replies, 'Try the drama department' (Season 1, Episode 9).

This scene displays a moment where ill-planning, poor choices, and unrealistic aspirations mean this student faces another year at the university to be able to graduate. Interestingly, Frannie handles the news with the realization about all the social things she can now continue to do at university for another year in her sorority. Although this student has not engaged sufficiently in her academic work, students are demonstrated as learning constantly, but the learning that occurs predominantly relates to life lessons and situations where they learn from others about how to treat people, how to prioritize competing interests, and experience new things, including sexual relationships. Many of the ways academic study is minimized in *GrΣΣk* reflects anti-intellectual positioning regarding the utility of academics' work as irrelevant and impractical (Reynolds 2017). *GrΣΣk* minimizes academic engagement in its portrayal of students' university life, where learning is synonymous with the useful acquisition of practical life lessons.

In *Fresh Meat* the narrative also represents students engaging in their social life, and in some ways this social life is even more vigorous than that of the students in the family show *GrΣΣk*. Students routinely drink and take recreational drugs in the show so much so that the one character, Vod, overdoses and is admitted to hospital attended

by the housemates, one of whom brings his beer with him in her honor as she 'partied her way into hospital, the ultimate party destination, I mean, she is gonna be a legend on campus' (Season 1, Episode 6). Note that actions related to alcohol in both shows bolster students' chances of achieving legend status with their peers.

Despite the partying in *Fresh Meat*, academic work is present to a much greater extent than *GrΣΣk*. The housemates read in their bedrooms, living room, and kitchen, work on papers, and are often surrounded by books and notes. Indeed, one character, Josie, experiences anti-intellectual conflict as part of the narrative when she gets annoyed with her non-collegiate boyfriend over her need for time and space to work and faces derogatory queries about the nature of academic study (Season 1, Episode 7). Another character, Vod, finds herself swept away in admiration and awe when she actually reads a required book for her English course rather than watching a TV adaptation or cheating (Season 1, Episode 4). This personal engagement marks a moment of belonging in HE for Vod, where she gets personal and academic benefit from doing the work.

Students' academic work is a constant meaningful presence in *Fresh Meat* and its importance as part of student life is suggested in a variety of ways in addition to the referential presence of academic objects. One of these relates to degree programs. Students are continually identified by their degree program choice, in fact the viewers know the program of all characters in *Fresh Meat*, unlike *GrΣΣk,* as all the characters talk about their various programs and engage in classes and activities pertinent to them such as switching programs in season 1, dentistry practicums (season 2), an internship fair (Season 2, Episode 3), a geology fieldtrip (Season 2, Episode 6), and a reception for a visiting scholar (Season 2, Episode 7). Character identity is intimately wrapped up in that of the academic program; academic identity is not obscured or invisible but vital and necessary in the plot for all students, contributing to depictions of belonging as first year students.

An example of the more problematic relationships between academic work and the social involves Josie's dentistry degree program. She goes to a dentistry class completely drunk and ends up drilling through her first live patient's cheek (Season 2, Episode 5), resulting in getting kicked off her course despite an appeal to the professor when she keeps showing up for classes (Season 2, Episode 6). No longer an enrolled student, Josie's admittance to various social events is barred as she needs a valid student card to access university spaces (Season 2, Episode 7). The narrative depicts how unrestrained engagement in the social has consequences for Josie's academic options that in turn influences where she can be social and potentially who she can be social with.

The identification and involvement of students' characters with their programs leads to the greater presence of professors in *Fresh Meat.* Indeed, two male academics in the show try to develop relationships with the housemates in ways

that portray male professors as needy, desperate, and as seeking validation from their much younger students. Although research shows that engagement between academics and students contributes to student success (e.g., Wolf-Wendel et al. 2009), the interactions between academics and students in *Fresh Meat* are not those supportive of success and seem more akin to anti-elitist depictions (Tobolowsky 2017). For example, Dan, a Geology professor, attends a party at the housemates' residence where he gets completely drunk and reacts to his students as if he was having a romantic relationship with them, as demonstrated in the scene where one of the housemates, Kingsley, decides to switch his degree program. In response to the professor's upset questions about him leaving the program Kingsley says 'It's not you, it's me! You're great, it's just something that I have to do for me. It's ...I mean, even without the geology, can't we still be friends?' (Season 1, Episode 3). In an even more egregious relationship with students, one of the professors has a consensual sexual relationship with Oregon, one of the female housemates, a situation that temporarily advantages Vod when Oregon persuades him to change Vod's failing grade to a 'cheeky little B' (Season 1, Episode 7). Although relationships between academics and students are problematic, *Fresh Meat* normalizes instead of problematizes Oregon's relationship with the professor, and the narrative even positions Oregon's relationship as aspirational as she is the one deriving power from the relationship and being in control (Hadjigeorgiou 2019).

In the representations of the first year in these shows, anti-intellectual portrayals in *GrΣΣk* represent institutions of higher education as 'the' place young people go to socialize, through which they gain a sense of belonging. But a shift in meaning occurs in *Fresh Meat* where portrayals firmly position students as engaged in their university programs with students' social life at university contingent on their academic work, not the other way around. For students in *Fresh Meat*, belonging is a consequence of the various markers of their academic engagement represented in the show.

Comparative negotiation of socio-economic class in student life

In comparison with *Fresh Meat*, the first season of *GrΣΣk* completely omits any explicit notion or awareness of differing socio-economic status beyond a privileged class. In fraternity or sorority houses on campus, the students live in an idyllic world where food appears, rooms are cleaned for them, and most are perfectly attired and coiffed, often in designer clothing. In fact, the very first introduction to the women of *GrΣΣk* consists of an exercise where the sorority sisters of ZBZ infer the suitability of a prospective pledge solely from their appearance. This exercise helps the women to determine fit for perspective pledges. Their claim that ZBZ admit 'only the best' to their sorority infers

that the value of admitted members lies in their financial resources and subsequent ability to buy designer clothes in season, among other things (Season 1, Episode 1).

In this sheltered fantasy, perceptions of socio-economic difference are ignored, associations with the most privileged are desired, and your individual worth is determined by how you look, what you are wearing, and who you know – or, specifically for the women, who they are dating. Some of the ways these students use money include: a payment to stop others from dating an ex-girlfriend (Season 1, Episode 18), buying a designer ball gown for a formal event (Season 1, Episode 17), and renting a hotel suite and travelling on a private jet for Spring Break vacation (Season 1, Episode 22).

None of the students work during the first season of *GrΣΣk,* no one expresses concerns about money, and even the disreputable and comparatively messy KT fraternity house manages to host huge parties and go on a house Spring Break trip, even if it is not as fancy as other Greek houses, something that is presented as a cultural source of pride and a choice – they are putting their money where it matters by buying beer instead. The rare times when potential issues with money occur are when one character gets a credit card to help fund unnecessary extras for her Spring Break trip such as designer swimwear and beach cover-ups (Season 1, Episode 21) and another time when a heartbroken character racks up a huge bill at a strip joint with his friends that they cannot pay at that moment (Season 1, Episode 8). In both instances, the issue is easily sorted. The credit card charges are resolved temporarily through an unrequested extension of the credit limit, and at the strip club, the love interest swoops in to save the day. The characters are not at all concerned about not being able to pay or in accruing debt – someone else will always be able to cover it. Implicit in the narratives is the idea that financial means is necessary to navigate HE life. In *GrΣΣk,* higher education is a place no one financially struggled to come to or financially struggles to stay in while living privileged lives as non-working students.

In *Fresh Meat* however viewers are treated to a less perfect world where rooms are filthy and snail infested with two even connected by a 'glory hole' stuffed with tissues; everyone cooks for themselves, students are adorned in casual, normal clothes, and going to the pub is not always an event that must involve a wardrobe change, and certainly not into designer wear – a baggy jumper/sweater suffices. Class differences are present and obvious in *Fresh Meat*, if more veiled at times for an international audience, with narratives showing typical examples of the ways class manifests in British shows such as cross-class misunderstandings and ridiculing the classes of different characters (Medhurst 2007). For example, references to gap years involve Vod's time at the fish factory earning money for university, in contrast to JP's multiple houses and Oregon's material advantages (e.g., mansion, horse, and car), Kingsley

lived in a council flat acting as a carer to his sick mother, and Vod used the coach service National Express to get to university with a couple of bags rather than being taken by family members with a carload of belongings.

Students struggle with money in this show, which necessitates one student getting a cleaning job (Season 2, Episode 2) and another working in an abattoir (Season 2, Episode 1). Instead of the swanky restaurant visited by students in *GrΣΣk*, dates for the students of *Fresh Meat* occur in the local pub, the student union bar, or at a cheap all-you-can-eat Chinese buffet to which one student takes a bag to load up for later (Season 1, Episode 3). This contrasts with Oregon who does not understand that 'insufficient funds' at the ATM means that *her* account has run out of money, not *the bank* (Season 2, Episode 2).

While *Fresh Meat* predominantly portrays HE as a place for academically prepared people from all backgrounds, some students with money demonstrate an entitled attitude towards higher education and resentment towards less privileged others for their presence. For example, an old school acquaintance of JP's who attended the same posh boarding school prior to university describes the reason he didn't get into 'Cambridge' as that he 'probably lost out to a fucking muggle on a scholarship' (Season 1, Episode 2).

Continuing the fantasy inspired class-based name-calling, JP describes Howard and Kingsley as 'orcs' because they do not know 'how much nice shit costs' (Season 1, Episode 8). A group of former boarding school students also treat students from families with lower means as their helpers or servants, indeed the character's reference to such students as muggles (non-magical beings in JK Rowling's *Harry Potter* world) suggest that the posh lads from the boys boarding school are the opposite – the chosen ones with magical powers. When wealthy JP is ill with mumps, Vod, who has a cleaning job to help her get by, kindly looks after him. But when his boarding school friends visit, he starts ordering her around, as if she works for him, telling her to get them tea and cakes. She declines and when he offers to pay her, she points out, 'I thought I was doing a mate a favor' but that if he is going to pay, she will make sure to 'do the full works' and promptly vacuums up the drugs his visitors have placed on the table, causing an uproar, to which she responds, 'What? Naughty servant? Bad servant? Go on, fuck off' before sweeping out of the room (Season 2, Episode 2).

The posh boys display class-based exclusionary attitudes about who belongs in higher education. Despite these occurrences, the narrative uses class-based writing conventions such as cross-class competition or ridicule (Medhurst 2007) to challenge the alignment of higher socio-economic status with university belonging. Their interactions suggest that widening participation in HE is at their expense, the group that benefits from existing and persisting inequalities in HE (Leathwood 2004),

a position ridiculed in the show. These moments include when the less privileged outshine the more privileged by destroying that which the privileged students value, as in the example above with the vacuumed drugs, by demonstrating more intelligence or knowledge, or just by being better human beings.

Separated from the rest of his boarding school friends, JP is supported by the housemates when needed, despite his entitled attitudes. When his father dies, JP's boarding school friends are meant to be taking him to the funeral so he can get back in time for an event he is funding for them and meant to be DJing at. At the last minute the friends rescind their offer to take JP to the funeral, after getting some more money out of him for the event, which means he might not get to the funeral in time or be back for the gig he has financed (Season 1, Episode 8). The housemates surprise JP by taking him to the funeral and back again in time for him to DJ at the event. He arrives at the event only to discover that his old friends have replaced him with a woman they fancy, and they are also not giving credit to JP for bankrolling the event – they have clearly been using him. After the housemates hear one of those friends leveraging JP's generosity as their own by claiming, 'Yeah, Ralph paid for everything. He's a dude. Yeah, cost about 10K. All Ralph's own money. He's like Bono, if Bono was cool', Vod stands up for JP by announcing, 'I just wanna say, big up, JP! Yeah, a lot of people think he's a posh lob-on, and fair dues. But truth is, he shelled out for all this, so kudos' (Season 1, Episode 8). The housemates navigate their own class differences to support one another even when they do not always understand each other and their choices.

In their depictions of the first-year of student life, *Fresh Meat* challenges the notion that institutions of higher education are only for the financially privileged, while *GrΣΣk* embraces it and glamorizes college going with not even token engagement in storylines that would counter the privileged perspective of HE. In *GrΣΣk* privileged students' involvement in higher education are depicted as 'the' performance of college-going while *Fresh Meat* exaggerates conflict, tensions and situations where students need to negotiate socio-economic status as part of their relationships and choices.

Conclusion

This study provides a glimpse into the comparative lives of HE students in *GrΣΣk* and *Fresh Meat.* Both are fascinating shows that reveal interesting shared and conflicting understandings about higher education. The comparative lens particularly highlights differences between the shows regarding portrayals of the purpose of HE, who it is for, who engages in it, and how they do so, particularly through the positioning of academic study and the way class manifests in the narratives.

GrΣΣk's sheltered fantasy presents a social student life of few consequences, none of which bear lasting significance. HE is for the elite, a privileged playground, where class has already ensured success. Looking at *GrΣΣk* through a comparative lens, the minimization of academic work observed in prior studies about US TV portrayals (Byers 2005; Tobolowsky 2006) appears in this show to result from anti-intellectual ideas (Tobolowksy 2017b) that decry its relevancy for a more nuanced understanding of the social over the academic, questioning the saliency of formal education. Comparatively, the academic learning in *GrΣΣk* has little bearing on future comfort or success – the characters' privilege has already ensured it.

With a more diverse socio-economic cast of characters, *Fresh Meat*'s academic learning is more important for several of the students, providing additional visions of the future beyond Vod's fish factory or Kingsley's council estate. Class differences in approach to HE are apparent within the show, as well as in contrast to *GrΣΣk,* as for several of the characters academic success matters, for their present and future, and is shown to have intrinsic and extrinsic value. While portraying HE as important for certain students, the show also critiques the system of HE. If professors are symbols of academia, as suggested in previous research (e.g., Reynolds 2014; Tobolowsky and Reynolds 2017), then the unprofessional relationships between male professors and their students in this show weaken the significance of the system more broadly.

Together, the findings of the comparative analysis suggest the shows manifest a tension between aspirational and exclusionary depictions of HE as they negotiate the role of academic study and class in their narratives in the struggle to belong as first year students. Analyzing the shared and alternative meanings in these shows and in popular culture texts more generally is an increasingly important undertaking as higher education diversifies, massifies, and negotiates perceptions of its contemporary value in the twenty-first century. For many potential students artifacts of popular culture give a glimpse into collegiate life where shows such as *GrΣΣk* and *Fresh Meat* provide templates of engagement and possibility, and portrayals bear the potential to influence access, college choice, and engagement decisions of students by projecting limited versions of who belongs, where they belong, and how students demonstrate belonging.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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