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Young Female University Students and the Dark Economy of Higher Education in British Television Dramas *Clique* (2017) and *Cheat* (2019)

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This article explores the conceptualisation of young female university students and the university as an institution in two British television dramas: *Clique* (BBC 2017) and *Cheat* (ITV 2019). In recent years, higher education has been cast in news media and documentary as a 'dark economy' with questionable recruitment practices, high-stakes assessment, and a profit-driven agenda. Students have been problematically positioned both as 'victims' of a corrupt and profiteering system and as 'snowflakes' incapable of rising to the challenges of higher education. Both *Clique* and *Cheat* engage explicitly with these discourses, and in this article, we analyse how these series serve both to reinforce and undermine a range of social and cultural anxieties about young female students in the cultural space of the university. We argue that the genre positioning, aesthetic, and themes of the two series function to reflect a broader shift toward 'darker' representations of the university in popular culture that reveal widespread anxieties about shifts in the meaning and experience of a university education. We also argue that the positioning of the young women at the centre of these series as 'troubled' and 'traumatised' prior to their entry into the university functions to externalise the challenges currently facing British higher education, representing the student as 'the problem' rather than the university system itself.

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Introduction

Scully and Harmes (2023: 2) have argued that popular cultural representations function as key mediators of how the broader public understands universities and university life, carrying 'more weight in public and policy discourse than experience or knowledge of reality'. Television can both convey and inform cultural assumptions (Fisher and Cottingham 2016; Calver and Michael-Fox 2021a) and so examining what ideas about university students are being constructed, conveyed, reinforced or challenged in televisual texts can lead to a greater understanding of broader public perceptions both of university students, and academic institutions themselves.

This article focuses on the construction of young female university students and higher education institutions in two televisual texts from the UK (United Kingdom), *Clique* (BBC 2017) and *Cheat* (ITV 2019). We draw upon these series to explore the depiction of university education in the UK as a 'dark economy' and how the series can be seen to reflect societal anxieties about the state of higher education and the experience of young female students.

In terms of the context of women in higher education in the UK, they are more likely to attend university, complete their studies and gain a first or upper second-class degree in comparison to men (Bolton and Lewis 2023). This, in many contexts, has been celebrated as a clear demonstration of the advancement of women's rights (for example, Harris 2004). Yet, amongst these educational successes, women are more likely to experience mental health difficulties whilst at university (Sanders 2023), are more likely to experience sexual harassment and violence (Jones *et al.* 2024) and are less likely to gain highly skilled work after graduation (Bolton and Lewis 2023) in comparison to men. As Puwar (2004) has argued in her groundbreaking work on bodies and space, when women enter fields where the power of white men has been entrenched, they are not entering neutral or empty spaces but ones where a long history is already at play. This article, therefore, considers how female students are positioned and constructed within the highly gendered spaces of higher education.

First, a note on language use. In this article, we use 'female' and 'women' interchangeably and inclusively to refer to those who identify as women, rather than those assigned female at birth (AFAB). Little data is currently available on students in academia who identify as non-binary or any other minority gender identification. We also emphasise here the term 'young' in relation to the students represented, because this is a key feature of the representation of female students in the two series examined. In the 2019/20 academic year, 37% of all UK undergraduate (male and female) entrants were mature students, typically defined as 21 years or older (Hubble and Bolton 2021).

However, there is no representation of mature students in the two series examined here. Whilst there are some high-profile representations of mature students in higher education within popular culture, for example, the US television series *Community* (2009–2015) or, as analysed elsewhere in this issue, *Educating Rita* (1983), mature students are, overall, underrepresented in popular cultural representations (Calver and Michael-Fox 2021b). Later in this article, there is an analysis of the context-dependent use of 'girls' and 'women' in *Clique* that reflects some of the gender politics at play in language use in this series.

Both series examined in this article contribute to constructions and reflect assumptions about young female students, and they also contribute to popular understandings of the university itself. As we have argued elsewhere, screen representations of universities are engaging with the detrimental effects of neoliberalism upon higher education (Michael-Fox and Calver 2023). This is also explored in academic and popular texts including Peter Fleming's *Dark Academia: How Universities Die (2021)*, Benjamin Ginsberg's *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters* (2011), Richard Hil's *Whackademia: An Insider's Account of the Troubled University* (2012), John Smyth's *The Toxic University: Zombie Leadership, Academic Rock Stars and Neoliberal Ideology* (2017) and Richard Hall's *The Hopeless University: Intellectual Work at the End of History* (2021). Scully and Harmes (2023: 7) have suggested that the popularity of such texts has meant that they now represent a 'new sub-genre that delights in exposing the worst elements of contemporary academia (arguably to little effect).' The two series we examine in this article can be understood to be engaged in a similar cultural project. Both series reflect and negotiate many of the real challenges that female students navigate within academia. As fictional drama series that are positioned in terms of genre as thrillers, they also paint an especially 'dark' image of academia and university life. These series can be seen to feed into the potential for 'moral panic' (Cohen 2011) about universities, their safety and suitability as environments for young women. These representations of students and universities matter as Scully and Harmes (2023: 2) have argued that popular cultural representations function as key mediators of how the broader public understand universities and university life, carrying 'more weight in public and policy discourse than experience or knowledge of reality'.

The Series

This article examines season one of the television drama series *Clique* (2017 BBC) and the sole season of television drama *Cheat* (2019 ITV). Both series emerged within the space of two years. Below is a brief outline of each series and an explanation of why they were selected for analysis.

Clique (2017 BBC)

Clique has two seasons, the first of which aired in 2017 on BBC Three's online-only schedule before being broadcast on BBC One (the British Broadcasting Corporation, which is a British public service broadcaster).[1] Both seasons have found new audiences on Netflix, where the series began streaming in September 2021. *Clique* was created by Jess Brittain and has been described as a 'madly seductive student thriller' (Raeside 2017). Season one begins with the depiction of lavish parties and high consumerism, reflecting the common construction of university students 'as socialites, ''party animals'' or even hedonists' (Brooks et al. 2022: 6). The season focuses on the allure of the high profile Solasta internship scheme, reflecting and contributing to constructions of university students as 'future workers' (Brooks et al. 2022).

The title *Clique* signals the season's focus on an elite group of young women associated with the internship scheme. The title also produces connotations of prestige and merit associated with the UK's most competitive higher education institutions. Georgia, a new student at the university, is recruited to the scheme. However, her childhood best friend Holly (the series' central protagonist), who is attending the same university, becomes increasingly concerned about her safety and infiltrates the clique to investigate it. The trailer (YouTube 2018) for the drama features conventionally attractive young women in revealing clothing attending glamorous parties, engaging in sexual activity, and drinking alcohol, but shifts as it progresses to showing the young women crying, being threatened physically, as well as footage of police crime scenes. The on-screen text describes a 'thrilling drama' and a review describing the series as 'a modern noir', which emphasises the conceptualisation of the university as 'dark' and 'risky' in the series. An intertitle states 'dying to get in, dying to get out', illustrating the high stakes associated with the internship scheme and, arguably, university more broadly.

Cheat (2019 ITV)

Cheat aired in 2019 on ITV (a British free-to-air public broadcast television network)[2] and is centred around a dangerous relationship between university lecturer Leah and her student Rose. The four episodes that form the series are set at the fictional St

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[1] BBC Three is an online-only platform which specifically targets a younger demographic, particularly those aged 16-34, with more contemporary and youth-oriented content. In comparison, BBC One is the main public service channel, aiming for a broader audience. The move from BBC Three to BBC One is important to note as it demonstrates the success of the series and broader societal interest in themes explored in Clique.

[2] ITV is the UK's largest commercial public service broadcaster and the primary competitor to the BBC, the UK's main publicly-owned public service broadcaster. BBC One generally offers a broader range of content, including more factual and specialist programming, while ITV is known for its popular dramas, entertainment shows, and news coverage.

Helen's College, implied to be a part of the prestigious Cambridge University, where the series was filmed. Produced by Two Brothers Pictures, *Cheat* has been described as a 'chilling drama' (Mangan 2019). The series depicts the role of the university student as 'consumer not learner' (Brooks et al. 2022) and has already been examined in relation to its representation of higher education in the UK (Silverio, Wilkinson and Wilkinson 2021). Its focus is on a case of academic misconduct in which a student is accused by her lecturer of having purchased an assignment. This series was selected as it shares several striking similarities in terms of genre positioning (thriller, drama) and its representations of a young female student in the setting of a highly prestigious UK university. In addition, both series construct the university as a 'dark' and 'risky' space for young women.

As *Cheat* unfolds, it becomes clear that student Rose has a complex ulterior motive for being in lecturer Leah's classes that has little to do with higher education. This element of the plot plays into popular debates about what students are at university for and the risk of students going to university for 'the wrong reasons' (Gill 2023). Rose's academic misconduct is revealed as an attempt to capture her lecturer's attention, as audiences come to discover that Leah is actually Rose's half-sister. The series opens with a scene in a prison, with the student and lecturer facing each other across a glass divide, signalling the dark themes to come and the mystery element of the drama, in which audiences wait to discover which of the two women is to be imprisoned at the culmination of the series. The genre positioning of the series is also made clear in the trailer (YouTube 2019) which features an array of fast paced visual images of the police, blood, and psychological conflict between the two women, emphasised in the dialogue including: 'do you know how easy it was to get inside your head?' (Rose, student) and 'she scares me' (Leah, lecturer). As the series progresses, the title *Cheat* takes on several different meanings aside from that of academic misconduct. A theme of cheating within monogamous relationships emerges, as well as a more implicit set of questions about how students might cheat the system of entry into higher education through nepotism and failing to declare key aspects about themselves.

Research Approach

We approached the research with a belief that television forms a space in which people engage with complex social understandings (Livingstone 1998). Williams (2010: 170) has emphasised that:

> media representations of students are worthy of analysis as they reflect back to society some of the dominant ways in which what it means to be a student is understood.

Williams (2010: 170) also suggests that representations of students in the media might play a part in constructing 'ways of being' for new generations of students, making their analysis important in the context of a shifting higher education climate. As part of our analysis of *Clique* and *Cheat,* we were therefore interested in exploring the ways in which young female university students were positioned within the series and what this might suggest about the opportunities and challenges young women experience in higher education environments.

Drawing on the analytical framework of Creeber (2006), we engaged in textual analysis to provide a critical interpretation of the television dramas *Clique* and *Cheat*. We engaged in detailed close readings of the dramas through repeated watching of the episodes and reading the narrative transcripts. We completed this first step separately and made notes relating to developments in the story, key scenes and emerging themes. During the analysis, our guiding questions were:

1. What do the dramas suggest about the experiences of female university students?
2. Are universities positioned as safe and supportive environments for female university students?
3. What wider societal concerns are reflected in the dramas about the experience of female students and university education more broadly?

These guiding questions were identified as Creeber (2006: 35) argues 'television is not made or watched in a vacuum; the institutional, technological, social and political conditions in which a programme is produced, broadcast and consumed are inevitably an important area for discussion'. Situating the television dramas within the broader cultural context was therefore an important dimension of our textual analysis.

Three central themes were identified across both series that reflect the gendered tensions in the representations of university students and the construction of the university as a 'dark economy'. The first theme is *cutthroat competition and 'snowflake' students*, in which we examine the conceptualisation of the young female students in these series as in competition with each other and with men, but also as unable to handle such competitive environments. The ways in which the university and its staff are embroiled in cultivating such competitiveness and producing the construction of the student as a 'snowflake' are examined. Second, *sex, rape,* and *exploitation*, exploring the series' representations of consent, women's sexuality, and the role of the university in protecting, or failing to protect, young women from sexual exploitation. Third, *troubled and traumatised students*, wherein we examine the ways in which both series take a strikingly similar approach to positioning their central female student

characters as having been 'troubled' since childhood and having experienced significant trauma before commencing their studies. We argue that this representational choice is tied to broad cultural debates and anxieties about the potential *loco parentis* role of universities and student mental health. These representations function to mitigate the accountability of higher education institutions, which the two series imply cannot be held responsible for the care of students who arrive at university with significant pre-existing mental health concerns.

Discussion

Cutthroat Competition and 'Snowflake' Students

Both *Clique* and *Cheat* are set in highly elite institutions, signalling at the outset the notion that the students featured must have been academically talented to enter such environments. The elite status of the institutions is made evident through images of grand old buildings and expansive university grounds. In Harris's (2004: 1) conceptualisation of the 'future girl', the female subject is shown to have been celebrated 'for her desire, determination and confidence to take charge of her life, seize chances and achieve her goals'. Central to this construction of 'can-do' girls is their engagement and success in education, the achievement of an exceptional career and their display of a luxurious consumer lifestyle (Harris 2004). Such a conceptualisation of 'can-do' girls is apparent in both *Clique* and *Cheat*. Both series explore and challenge the idea of young women 'having it all'. They participate in this highly neoliberal construction through its reiteration of images of excess, glamour, and competitiveness. At the same time, they undermine and challenge prevailing ideas about young women and success by revealing its pitfalls, the power struggles at play, and the unfairness, exploitation and deceit built into the system. Both series contribute to a media landscape in which there is an appetite for examining and troubling dominant ideas about feminism and neoliberalism in accessible ways.

In *Clique,* whilst students drink, party and enjoy themselves from the outset, series creator Brittain (2017) has made clear their intention for the series to explore the high stakes and competitive environment of university. Brittain (2017) points out that *Clique*'s central characters:

> are dealing with the time-old tropes of that liminal time of life: uncertainty, low self-esteem, loneliness, friendship problems, class.... There is a reason you are supposed to spend your uni years puking in a bush and missing lectures, rather than drinking champagne with a high-net-worth client, or competing with a friend when a lucrative, dangerous opportunity presents itself.

This highlights some of the tensions evident in Brooks et al.'s (2022) analysis of the construction of students in Europe across media, policy, and broader discourses, where they can be understood as people 'in transition', as 'enthusiastic learners and hard workers', and also as 'stressed'. The students in *Clique* seem to represent all these categories in a series that can be seen as a critique of high-pressure competitive academic environments. For example, when character Holly asks for advice on how to succeed from another student intern, she is told to 'work your tits off, all the time', emphasising relentlessly high-pressure milieu they inhabit.

In *Cheat,* the representation is somewhat more complex. In the first episode, student Rose is seen casually strolling into a lecture late with a disposable coffee, signalling, along with her expensive trainers, the luxury consumer lifestyle Harris (2004) associates with the 'future girl'. The lecture is delivered by Leah and is symbolic of key themes in the series, being about Bertrand Russell's theories of power, authority, and coercion. However, the scene suggests that whilst Rose is a competitive student in terms of being at a prestigious university, unlike her more hard-working peers, Rose is turning up late and is not committed. Audiences are soon informed that her father 'built half the bloody library', suggesting that her access to higher education was not a case of meritocratic competition but of nepotism. Leah states 'it's not fair that she can just get away with it and everyone else has to work their bollocks off'. Here a comparative analysis of language choice is telling, as the aforementioned young student in *Clique* articulated the need to 'work your tits off' whilst the older female academic here in *Cheat* offers the same sentiment with the metaphor of male genitalia. This implies that whilst younger students might have shifted their use of language and metaphor to be more inclusive, the actual need to work excessively hard in order to compete has not itself shifted. This signals the argument that whilst feminism has been empowering for many women, it has not had the enduring influence on structural inequalities that many hoped it would (David 2016).

The attitude of female academics toward their students is portrayed as exacerbating the challenges experienced by young female students in both series, where the academic staff are seen to either have a negative view of students or to facilitate dangerous environments for them. In *Cheat*, lecturer Leah chastises her young student by stating 'You know, you could've just paid for a lower mark and I wouldn't have blinked an eye. Had to have the best though, didn't you?' Silverio, Wilkinson and Wilkinson (2021: 155) have suggested this reflects how it is 'no longer good enough in UK HE to attend a good university' but that students are 'demanding that their degree classifications are also the best.' Such an attitude amongst students is arguably an inevitable by-product of a high-cost, high-stakes university education within a system that is often publicly

understood solely as a mechanism for producing 'future workers' (Brooks et al. 2022) rather than providing a broad spectrum of cultural and social functions. A concern with 'being the best', or what Harris (2004: 4) calls the 'competitive individualism' that accompanies 'economic rationalism', is also evident in *Clique* by a female economics professor, who states 'here's your first life lesson, if you're not the best, then don't waste my time. I don't like you.' Professor McDermid is a single, dynamic woman who has achieved the highest academic status at university. She highlights to her students the lack of female representation in positions of power, but rather than drawing on a feminist critique of the gendered inequalities in society, she states:

> The problem here ladies, is you. You are the ones moaning on Tumblr. You are the ones who made yourselves a victim in every office. You are the ones banging on about the pay gap, when you should be getting on with your career. You are the problem. Feminism in this country has been infected with misinformation and an obsession with being offended. I am here to help you reclaim it. I am not here to help you joyride because you happen to possess a vagina. And I'm not going to sit and cry with you when you graduate and realise that the system isn't fair. Of course it's not, get over it, take action.

Thorley (2017: 6) has argued that in recent years a 'problematic construction of young people as being "snowflakes" unable to cope with ordinary life events' has emerged, and here Professor McDermid, like Leah in *Cheat*, is seen to perpetuate an idea of students as entitled 'snowflakes' who are unwilling to work hard and cannot handle the cutthroat competitiveness required for success.

Talbot, O'Reilly and Dogra (2023) state that the rhetoric of the snowflake is frequently invoked in lay discourse to characterise a generation of young people as overly sensitive, a misleading conceptualisation that is potentially stigmatising. This aligns with the work of Finn, Ingram and Allen (2021: 196), who explain that students are often seen as 'overly-sensitive and too easily "triggered"', lacking in grit and resilience. Such a construction resonates too with other articles in this collection, for example, Readman's examination of students and protest in *The Chair* (2021). In *Clique*, Professor McDermid is positioned at first as an inspiring and refreshing female academic, but as the series progresses it becomes clear her controversial attitude is a central factor in her unwittingly enabling the sexual exploitation of the young students at the centre of the series by enrolling them as interns at her brother's firm, Solasta Finance (this feature of the plot is discussed further in the next section). So, rather than fuelling the view that young female students are 'snowflakes' unable to handle

the ruthless competition of academic meritocracy, *Clique* in some ways subverts this notion, suggesting that such views perpetuate and enable the exploitation of young women.

Cheat is also engaged with ideas about student power, competition between women, and the student as a consumer, with Rose's complaint about her lecturer posing a risk to academic Leah achieving a permanent contract. As Silverio, Wilkinson and Wilkinson (2021) have astutely noted in their analysis of the series, *Cheat* is a pertinent example of how within the context of a financially focused institution where student satisfaction is high on the agenda, 'a complaint *against* a student [...] can very quickly be turned to be viewed as a complaint *by* the student, with the university rushing in an attempt to limit reputational damage among the student body.' Leah and Rose are pitted against each other – the success of one will mean the failure of the other. Similarly, in *Clique*, the young women are in competition with each other and if one succeeds, the others will fail, as there are limited spaces on the internship they are competing for. When Georgia is successful and Holly is not, Georgia accuses her friend of 'being a jealous bitch'. However, in both *Cheat* and *Clique*, when taken in context of the whole narrative, the series makes it clear that the women's bitter competitions with each other are a distraction from something more complex and hidden – a sexual exploitation ring at the internship in *Clique* and a secret affair that means Rose and Leah are sisters in *Cheat*. As the series progress, the dynamics of competition between these women are portrayed as having their terms dictated by patriarchal power structures that serve to protect men and victimise women, as we discuss in the next section.

Sex, Rape and Exploitation

The cutthroat competition the young students are engaged in initially seems to be meritocratic but as the two series progress, the success of characters is increasingly linked to their capacity as highly gendered actors, bound up with their physical appearance and sexual appeal. As Buckingham (2021: 94) has argued in his analysis of representations of youth on screen:

> the risk for girls focuses very much on their emergent sexuality. Representations of adolescent girlhood typically emphasize their fragility and vulnerability to sexual exploitation or, alternatively, the risks of an assertive, independent sexuality. These are girls 'at risk', but also girls who represent a risk to others.

This representation of adolescent girlhood can be observed in *Clique* and *Cheat*. In *Clique*, young female students are portrayed as vulnerable to sexual exploitation. In

Cheat, Rose utilises her sexuality to manipulate and harm others, being presented as a young female student who poses a risk to those around her through her weaponised sexuality.

Vulnerability and sexual exploitation appear strongly in *Clique* as the Solasta internship is revealed to include not only several legitimate internship roles, but also a role that involves the rape and sexual exploitation of the young woman selected for it. First this is the character of Fay, who before attempting to take her own life[3] creates a video explaining what has happened to her. In the video she reveals that her role in client relations was to act as an attractive young woman for high profile clients to have sex with. She hides a camera and films herself being raped by a Solasta Finance client and the CEO. After her death, Fay is replaced by Georgia, who is subject to the same exploitation. At a press conference the CEO states 'these girls are given real work to do in the real world', and this takes on a disturbing meaning when the abuse taking place becomes apparent – and common criticisms of students not understanding 'the real world' come to the fore, as the series implies that 'real work' in the 'real world' for young women will mean accepting exploitation. The CEO, referring to the young women as girls, emphasises both their youth and a patronising and paternalistic attitude on behalf of the man exploiting the young women. The young women themselves, Fay and Georgia, have been told they are the internship's 'top girls', the most talented and sought after in professional terms. To admit that their role is enforced sex work and not connected to their knowledge or skills in their chosen professional fields leads them to hide what is constructed as a shameful secret to maintain the idea that they have been 'successful'. Georgia positions her abuse as central to her success, almost as a necessary phase to secure future opportunities and a high-powered career. For example, this is illustrated in a conversation between Georgia and her lecturer, Professor McDermid:

> Georgia: It's like you said, once you get over yourself it doesn't need to be a huge deal.
>
> Professor McDermid: What I said?
>
> Georgia: What you taught me. Use what you've got, like the men do. I get it now. Steiner was... [one of the men who raped her] it messed with my head for a bit, but I'm good now. Holly will never get that, she's not ambitious.

Later in the series, when Professor McDermid is fired from the university, she states she did not know about the abuse and that she was trying to teach the girls to be

[3] Fay survives the attempted suicide, but is then later murdered.

'pragmatic'. This acts to position these abusive experiences as the price of success. Research illustrates students are more likely than others to be subject to sexual assault (OfS 2022). Universities in the UK are under increasing pressure to address abuse on campus, with accusations of sexual assault cases not being taken seriously rife (Tidman 2022). In researching for the series, creator Brittain (2017) found that young female students talked about applying for competitive internships, 'wondering if they could trust the strange-sounding bloke offering one'. They talked about 'their debt worries and the things they were considering doing to make ends meet' (Brittain 2017). This suggests that the system of higher education, its cost, and the competitiveness of opportunities all contribute to students' potential vulnerabilities. As such, within *Clique*, the university and in particular Professor McDermid are positioned as enabling abuse, albeit without knowing what they are doing. The university legitimises the internship, and Professor McDermid tells the young women they must tolerate misogyny in order to be in the room and 'part of the conversation' (she is not yet aware of the sexual exploitation taking place). When the other students involved discover the truth, they show the video of Fay's rape at an open evening showcasing the internship that parents and prospective students are attending, producing a public uproar as the scandal is revealed. The decision to reveal the exploitation in this way emphasises universities' concern with recruitment, the role of parents in selecting institutions, and broad cultural anxieties about universities' capacity to protect students (discussed in the third and final theme in this article).

In their own analysis of *Clique*, Lainio (2023: 13) argues that:

> the available positionings for the students within the risk narrative does not offer them with empowerment and agency [...] Instead, they are positioned as vulnerable and potential victims, and object of others (mainly men). In this way, their agency is limited, and their bodies are prioritised for gazing, pleasure, and even violence.

Yet we argue that it is through filming and revealing her own abuse that Fay can have some agency after her death. However, the need to provide explicit video footage of her own rape signals the challenges faced by many who seek justice for sexual assault only to find the 'process more traumatic than the actual rape' (Victims Commissioner 2021). Yet even when the explicit video is released, the men accused deny any wrongdoing. The themes of rape and consent are further explored when two of the central characters discuss the video:

> Holly: they are raping her
>
> Rory: she doesn't say that

Holly: she doesn't have to

Rory: I'm not saying it's not horrific, but she doesn't resist

Two years after *Clique* first aired on the BBC, the BBC also broadcast a documentary entitled *The Warwick Uni Rape Chat Scandal* (2019), detailing a case that highlighted university failings in relation to sexual misconduct in the UK (Westmarland 2019). The role of students in taking action against sexual assault in the fictional world of *Clique* and in real UK universities in recent years demonstrates how young female students can and do engage in political and civic action. However, whilst Brooks et al. (2022) have shown that newsmedia portrayals in Europe have favourably reported on student protests about sexual assaults on campus, university staff and policy actors are more likely to reject any positioning of students as politically engaged citizens. *Clique* effectively portrays some of the tensions and challenges that emerge for universities when it comes to addressing sexual assault and misconduct, whilst also seeking to attract new students. The role of Professor McDermid in unwittingly sending students to an internship where they will be sexually exploited serves as a critical commentary on the trustworthiness of universities as institutions able to protect their students.

As stated earlier, Buckingham (2021) argues that young women's sexuality can be constructed as posing a risk to others. Whilst in *Clique* young female students are portrayed as vulnerable to sexual exploitation, in *Cheat*, Rose's sexuality is threatening and dangerous as she uses it to coerce others. Rose encourages the attentions of a male porter who works at the university and manipulates him into helping her cover up a murder she commits. Rose seduces and has sex with Leah's husband, Adam, whom she later kills. She is presented as dangerous, manipulative, and as weaponising her sexuality. However, this construction is more complex if the context of the whole series is taken into consideration. Whilst Rose does engage in sexual activity with Adam, he is an academic working at the university who has chosen to engage in sexual activity with a young student whom he knows has been accused by his wife of academic misconduct. The university porter engages in unprofessional behaviour with a young woman he has a duty of care toward. We also discover that Rose's father (also Leah's father) was an academic at the same institution, who had an affair with Rose's mother when she was his research assistant. In each instance, the university is a key feature in complex plays of power, privilege, and sex. What this suggests is that whilst Rose is enacting agency through using her sexuality to help her navigate the space of the university by flirting with the porter and having sex with Adam, she is doing so in a space in which men seem to be able to do the same historically with impunity.

As Puwar (2014) has argued, there is a significant amount of entitlement granted to certain bodies in certain spaces. Whilst Rose's actions are positioned as manipulative and

even psychotic, the power dynamics that form the backdrop of her actions are complex and deeply ingrained. The # MeToo movement and its aftermath have highlighted the sheer volume of sexual harassment and violence in further and higher education (Lewis 2022), and whilst there is growing pressure to address staff-to-student sexual misconduct (Universities UK 2023), guidance emphasises that significant cultural change is required. This cultural shift requires an examination of the power and privilege at play in institutions and how these enable and protect certain bodies whilst failing to protect others, as well as a thorough consideration of accountability. In *Cheat*, Rose's actions are in some ways positioned as punishing Leah to gain revenge toward her father. In the final episode, their father tells Rose: 'Leah does not deserve to be punished for my mistakes', whilst Rose responds, 'neither do I'. All in the context of the same university, Rose, Leah, and Rose's mother are positioned as victims of a system where women never seem to win. However, it is also suggested that Rose's decision to kill Adam was less about revenge and more about protecting her sister from a partner and husband who did not support her career. Though macabre, premised as it is on murder, this element of the plot hints at an alternative to the cutthroat competitiveness that forms the first theme examined in this paper, suggesting the possibility of women protecting each other to shift the culture of a space laden with historical male privilege by any means necessary. What is certainly evident in the depictions of sex, rape, and exploitation in these two series is that young female students must contend with complex power dynamics and questions about consent, blame and accountability as they navigate their university experience.

Troubled and Traumatised Students

According to Brooks et al. (2022: 133), one of the ways in which students are constructed across media, policy and broader discourses in Europe is as a threat or object of criticism – 'with respect to the quality of education, and to society more broadly'. Brooks et al. (2022: 133) argue that 'behind these constructions are assumptions about an "ideal" or "implied" student, to which those who are criticised are seen as not conforming'. What is interesting about both *Clique* and *Cheat* is that on the surface, the young female students portrayed appear to adhere to many assumptions made about the 'ideal' student. In their article on *Cheat*, Silverio, Wilkinson and Wilkinson (2021) outline the many privileges that Rose embodies as she navigates university – from her whiteness to her heterosexuality, her social class and age, as well as her lack of responsibilities. Many of these privileges are also true of the central protagonist in *Clique*. Both students have entered a highly prestigious institution that audiences would associate with academic success and merit. Yet, both series can be understood to engage in positioning students

as a threat to the higher education system. In both series, the central protagonist whose actions threaten the university is revealed to have a deeply 'troubled' and traumatic past.

In *Clique*, Holly 'takes down' the Solasta internship and brings the university into disrepute. In *Cheat*, Rose kills a member of academic staff and is imprisoned for murder as a student, bringing negative media attention to the university. Both young female students challenge the patriarchal systems that have led to the sexual assault and misconduct experienced by the women around them. In *Clique*, the rape of Holly's friends Georgia and Fay; in *Cheat*, Rose's mother's experience as a research assistant who had an affair and child with her boss before being abandoned by him and dying by suicide. Notably, neither Rose nor Holly are themselves direct victims, but instead are constructed as young women taking action to seek to mitigate injustice. This implies both the potential for women to support each other, and at the same time, potentially both acknowledging and exacerbating the stigma associated with being a victim by shifting this experience away from the central protagonist of the series onto more minor characters. In *Clique*, the injustice is clear-cut with powerful men raping young female students. In *Cheat*, it is murkier, with the complicated layers of power and privilege at play, with the university positioned as a key contributing factor in Rose's mother's death.

Whilst both series position young female students in terms of 'energy, idealism and physical beauty', they also represent them as 'both troubled and troubling' – a duality that Buckingham (2021: 3) identifies in many representations of youth. The 'troubled' and 'troubling' facets of the two young female student protagonists represented here, we argue, function to reduce and mitigate the accountability and responsibility of the university in a climate of cultural anxiety and concern about the role of universities in protecting young students. Both series represent the university as a 'dark economy' full of risk, highly concerned with success, money, and recruitment. However, they also imply that the students navigating those risks are inherently flawed – 'troubled' and traumatised on entry to higher education, and therefore central to the problems universities are facing. In *Clique*, Holly is revealed to have been involved in the death of a young girl. In *Cheat*, Rose's reason for being at university and in Leah's classes is to redress the trauma of her childhood and her mother's death by suicide after her father's abandonment.

This strikingly similar narrative strategy can be related to debates about universities and whether they should act *in loco parentis.* In a speech on universities' accountability, former UK minister Sam Gyimah (2018) stated:

> the 'uni experience' can be disorienting and demanding, as it should be. But, in this the universities need to act *in loco parentis*, that is to be there for students offering all the support they need to get the most from their time on campus.

The debate about universities' responsibilities and duty of care toward students is highly sensitive and has been high on the agenda of UK higher education in recent years. This is related in part to numerous student suicides and the campaigning work of bereaved families who have sought a statutory duty of care for students in higher education (Abrahart 2022). Certainly, *Clique*'s promotional trailer, which states 'dying to get in; dying to get out', has taken on a more haunting dimension in the wake of widely reported student and staff suicides in the years since the series was released. However, concerns about universities and their duty of care to students are also related to several other factors considered here, including reports of sexual assault and violence in universities. As Blake (2023) argues, there is growing consensus that 'students should not have to be "officially disabled" or "vulnerable" in order to protect their wellbeing'.

In both *Clique* and *Cheat,* young female students have not been protected but, in fact, explicitly harmed by the universities they attend. Universities are framed as 'dark economies' full of risk, wherein universities as institutions not only fail to protect but actively harm young female students. However, at the same time, the women at the centre of both narratives are positioned as having entered the UK higher education system 'troubled' and 'traumatised' by their past childhood experiences, and under false pretences connected to their 'troubled' pasts. At an ideological and symbolic level, these remarkably similar narrative choices suggest a cultural desire to shift blame from the complex, power-laden dynamics of the university as an institution and onto young female students themselves. Thus fuelling problematic constructions of the student, both, on the one hand, as vulnerable 'snowflakes' that universities have no capacity to contend with, and on the other hand, as threats to established structures of power. Anxieties about 'the student mental health crisis' can be seen both in the UK and elsewhere. Shackle (2019), reporting in *The Guardian,* asks 'what is troubling students, and is it the universities' job to fix it'?. McMurtrie (2022) reports in the US publication *The Chronicle of Higher Education* record numbers of students feeling 'checked out, stressed out, and unsure of their future'. Both articles, and many others like them, draw on the testimony of academics who report a shift in the students they have had in their classes over time. In particular, there is a focus on the increase of mental health diagnoses amongst students, and staff concerns about whether it is their role to support students' emotionally. What both television series examined here seem to

imply is a deep-seated concern with the limits of responsibility, the protection, safety and exploitation of young female students, and shifts in the student population.

Conclusion

This article has examined how televisual representations of young female university students in the UK reflect and negotiate a range of prominent socio-cultural concerns, especially those regarding gender, risk, and power in a university setting. In analysing two television dramas that focus on the lives of young female students at elite academic institutions, we have identified three themes prominent in the narrative. First, a context of cutthroat competitiveness in tension with representations of students as 'snowflakes'. Young female students are pitted against each other in an environment where they are under pressure to succeed but are also constructed as entitled and unable to cope with the challenges of the 'real world'. Second, sex, rape and exploitation, wherein young female students' university experiences are highly gendered, with the young women themselves positioned either as victims, potential or actual, or as threatening actors who weaponise their sexuality. Third, the representation of young female students in both series as initially appearing to adhere to constructions of the 'ideal' student before it is revealed that both have secret 'troubled' pasts that lead to them being a threat to the university, its power structures, and its potential to recruit more students. Both central protagonists are young female students who navigate risk, sexual exploitation, violence, and death in the context of higher education. We have argued that this creates a construction of the university as a 'dark economy' that reflects concerns about and the potential for 'moral panic' (Cohen 2011) over universities and their suitability as environments for young women. However, in both series, the central protagonists are portrayed as 'troubled' and traumatised prior to their entry to higher education, reflecting broader social anxieties about the responsibility and accountability of universities toward the students who attend them.

We have offered a critical analysis of how British television dramas, specifically *Clique* and *Cheat*, reflect societal anxieties about higher education and young female students. We have engaged with contemporary concerns about the commodification of higher education and argued that this has led to the construction of higher education as a 'dark economy' in the UK. This suggests that popular culture is engaging more critically with the changing nature of higher education, revealing public unease with the current system.

Disclaimer

This article contains references to sexual violence, rape, suicide and death.

Competing interests.

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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