Campus Cinema: University Portrayals in Contemporary Films

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Abstract

This research analyses English-speaking films made from 2014 to 2024 that are primarily set in university environments. The main aim is to investigate the role of universities in these films, focusing on how these institutions are depicted and whether they adhere to stereotypical representations. By examining a diverse selection of movies, this research also seeks to answer questions about the consistency of these portrayals and whether they contribute to or challenge prevailing stereotypes such as elite status of academia, party life of academia, overachieving nerds in the academia, professors in the academia, etc. The findings will provide insights into the cultural impact of university depictions in contemporary cinema.

Keywords: Film, Professor, Stereotypes, Student, University

Introduction

Various settings in film can have a significant role in shaping characters, themes, plots, etc. For example, museums and galleries spaces can provide great scenic setting but also add to the symbolism. They are associated with culture and education, often depicted as places celebrating identities and collective memories. They serve as sanctuaries for various characters: artists and connoisseurs, tourists seeking exotic experiences, snobs and dandies navigating between high and mass culture, , thieves and spies breaking laws, haunted individuals confronted by mummies, etc. (Jacobs, 2016). Education settings such as school and universities are another very good example of such settings. Universities are represented in research mainly troughs analysis of stereothipical representation of American sororities and fraternities, party life at campus and student characterization like nerds, jocks, etc. For example, Fedorov (2019) in one study confirmed trends in university portrayal in cinema. Internet is the most significant platform to reflect the topic of school and university environment almost twice ahead of its closest rivals – cinema and television. The representation of schools and universities, schoolchildren, students and teachers in such media texts can only be considered as partial, mainly due to excessive stereotyping and simplification of their images.

When it comes to representation of education settings one of the well know examples is Dead Poets Society. It is set in the late 1950s in an East Coast boys' prep school, Welton Academy. Robin Williams plays the school's new English teacher and Welton alumnus, John Keating, who inspired his students in their life. Mr. Keating as the main character is described as unusual English teacher who gives a big influence toward his students' life. This unusual teaching style opposites with academic policy. English teachers have roles as facilitator, personal models or demonstrator, and as delegator. As facilitator, teacher controls the class and creates good environments and activities, stimulates new information, provides opportunities for collaborative work, to be problem solving and offers students a multiplicity of authentic learning tasks (Afifulloh, 2017). Another example is Dangerous Minds. Cristensen (1995) in reviewing the film, illustrated a critical social class analysis. She pointed out how the white, middle class protagonist teacher in a largely Latino and African American context sends the message that students have a choice and can make their lives different. She states that this message ignores the context and material conditions of these students' lives by not acknowledging the role of poverty, bias, and oppression. She also critiqued the teacher's pedagogy, which focused on teaching "the canon," for example her focus on two white male poets, rather than a broader range of authors more relevant to her students' lives. Such well know films can have an impact on viewers in shaping their perception on education.

Theoretical Background

Representation theory is a good base for understanding stereotypical portrays in films as it critically examines how films and other media portray people, groups, and social issues. The theory also explores how cultural meanings are constructed, circulated, and internalized by audiences, influencing public perception and identity formation. In films, the portrayal of race, gender, class, and other social categories often reinforces or challenges existing stereotypes. Encoding and decoding model is particularly relevant to the study of films (Dyer, 2022; O'Shaughnessy et al., 2008). Stuart Hall argued that media texts, including films, are encoded with meanings by their creators and decoded by audiences in different ways depending on their social and cultural contexts. For instance, a film might represent a racial or gender stereotype, but how the audience interprets and responds to that stereotype depends

on their own experiences and background. According to Hall, representations in media do not merely reflect reality but actively shape it. Movies, by repeating certain images or ideas, can normalize these representations and make them appear as natural (Hall, 1997; Hall, 2014).

Academia in Film

Academia life is researched in many different ways, and the focus is usually made on characters like professors, and students. For example on one study using content researchers examined popular films released between 1985 and 2005 that contain professors in either primary or secondary roles. Their findings showed stereotypical depictions beyond glasses, bow ties, and tweed jackets. Specifically, they found stereotypical images of race and gender as well as an emphasis on the importance of research, sometimes at the expense of teaching or ethical behaviour (Dagaz & Harger, 2011). Therefore, contemporary media images of university professors do not show only idealised version of learning and heroes or victims, but also as lazy, incompetent, deceitful, and burned out professors. In modern media, teachers and university professors are increasingly under pressure from politicians, parents, cultural, religious and racial differences, funding cuts and other social problems. Similarly, the image of students has been transformed to ones of laziness, ineptitude, cruelty, violence, careless entertainment, compulsive, out-of-control drug use or alcohol consumption, and other (Bauer, 1998; Beyerbach, 2005). Using data gathered by analyzing films released between 2000 and 2012 Yakaboski, and Donahoo (2015) found that Hollywood's films showed university students trough nudity, sex, or victimized horror scenes. In more recent decades, college women are seen in faux-feminist roles, prioritizing romance and heterosexual relationships over academics. Films have contributed to society's perceptions of what it means to be a university student. Contrary to the images promoted by higher education marketing, Hollywood's portrayals overdramatize negative elements by placing narrow social norms onto characters (Yakaboski & Donahoo, 2015). Fedorov (2019) in one study showed that negative stereotypes of university students' media images include: party animal; student involved with a lot of sexual partners; social butterfly, nerd with no social skills; thin and beautiful student who succeeds, an inexperienced person without strong work ethics. Positive media stereotypes of university students include: happy ticket holder who seeks to get an exemplary education and make a successful career; university student who is career-oriented, servant to new digital technologies and social media, nerd who becomes cool or attractive, and a serious, head-down studious type. Teachers' negative media stereotypes are: victims of professional burnout; representatives of 'the old school', clowns and lazy people; evil, aggressive and authoritarian. Positive stereotypes of teachers include: honest, smart professionals; modern, open-minded teacher. In his critical analysis Papke (2003) in Hollywood films derives portrayal of university professors as crusading hero professors, devoted teachers, and sympathetic failures. On that note, the research that focuses on one specific film or characters also makes a connection with a hero type professor. Yogerst (2014) states that Indiana Jones has two sides. One is a heroic, and another is his ordinary world, that of an archaeology professor. Indy, or Dr. Jones is shy and reserved in his ordinary world. In a more recent study DeSantis (2020) states that fraternity films show recurring and repeated generic tropes. They construct a social reality for viewers that sells Greek life as an important and needed augmentation to the otherwise harsh, friendless, and bland college experience that awaits them. Even if the commitment of joining a fraternity comes at the price of some short-lived, humorous hazing, the ultimate payoff of friendship and never-ending parties is shown to be well worth it. Finally, Wasylkiw and Currie (2012) explored how university-themed comedy films influence students' attitudes towards academics and substance use. In first study the content analysis of 34 university-themed comedies revealed a

focus on risk-taking behaviours, like alcohol consumption, and a minimal emphasis on academics. The majority of characters were white, with male characters more often depicted engaging in risky behaviours. The second study assessed the effects of such films on students' attitudes. Results showed that they led to more favourable views of substance use and more negative views on academics, regardless of students' previous movie-watching habits or substance use.

Methodology

By applying a thematic content analysis, we aimed investigate how universities are depicted in films. This approach allows for a better understanding of the recurring themes and stereotypes associated with university settings in films. Similarly, Dagaz, and Harger (2011) having assembled a list of films, constructed a pilot coding sheet focusing on variables such as type of college or university, department, demographic characteristics, clothing, student interaction, and items stereotypically associated with professors such as glasses, briefcases, pocket protectors, and bow ties. The matrix for our content analysis was designed to evaluate various aspects of the films and includes the following categories: 1. Basic information (title of the film, release year, genre); 2. Type and location of the university (real or fictional university); 3. Description of main characters (students, professors), 4. Stereotypes related to university (student party life, frightened freshman experience, etc.). The procedure included a few steps; watching films, creating excel matrix, inserting data to the excel matrix, and calculating the total number for each category/theme in the matrix. We presented the data in number and percentages.

Sample

A sample of films was collected using an internet search engine. The search focused on films that were released within the last ten years, specifically from 2014 to 2024. The criteria for the selection were as follows. Firstly, the films had to be set in a university or campus environment, real or fictional. Secondly, the films had to be in the English language. The first list of films provided by an internet search engine included films set in high schools, boarding schools, and films that had students as main character but did not include any mention or depiction of the university. These films were excluded. The final list included a total of 49 films. These criteria ensured that the selected films were relevant to the study of universities in films, and that they were accessible to an English-speaking audience. The majority of films were released in 2014 as seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample of Films

Year	N	Title
2023	5	The Other Zoey, Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny, Saltburn, Oppenheimer, Scream VI
2022	3	Master, Emergency
2021	1	College Professor Obsession
2020	3	S#!%house, I Still Believe, Tazmanian Devil
2019	3	After, The Perfect Cheerleader, A Rainy Day in New York
2018	8	The Professor, American Animals, Life of the Party, Step Sisters, Haunting on Fraternity Row, The New Romantic, Spinning Man, Swiped
2017	8	Professor Marston and the Wonder Women, The Man from Earth: Holocene, Deadly Sorority, M.F.A., Burning Sands, Rings, Frat Star, Submission
2016	7	Neighbors 2: Sorority Rising, Everybody Wants Some!!, The Goat, Barry, Friend Request, Mother, May I Sleep with Danger?, Total Frat Movie
2015	3	Mistress America, Irrational Man, The Stanford Prison Experiment
2014	9	Dear White People, Still Alice, Girl House, The Dorm, It Follows, College Musical, 22 Jump Street, Neighbors, Whiplash

Results and Discussion

In this part of the paper we present the results and discussion related to genres of the films in the sample, type of university depicted in the sample, professor and student main characters stereotype, and overall university stereotypes depicted.

Table 2: Genre Distribution

Genre	No	%
Comedy	12	40,83
Thriller	7	14,28
Horror	6	12,24
Drama	6	12,24
Comedy Drama	4	8,16
Romantic Comedy	2	4,08
Romantic Drama	2	4,08
Docudrama	2	4,08
Action Adventure	1	2,04
Comedy Thriller	1	2,04
Biographical Thriller	1	2,04
Slasher	1	2,04
Thriller Comedy	1	2,04
Biographical Drama	1	2,04
Science Fiction Drama	1	2,04
Psychological Drama	1	2,04
Total	49	100

Analysing the genres of university-themed movies provided us with insights into how different aspects of university life are portrayed in film. Comedy is the most common genre

for university-themed films, making up a significant portion of the total (40,83%). Comedy university-themed films reflect the humorous and often chaotic experiences associated with college life. These films focus on the lighter, more entertaining aspects of university, emphasizing friendships, romantic relationships, and the pursuit of fun and parties (Wasylkiw & Currie, 2012). One example from the sample is a film tiled Neighbors 2: Sorority Rising (2016). This films builds a comedy plot around female freshman starting a new sorority in a house near one family.

Thriller is the second most common genre (14,28%). The prominence of thrillers show a darker or more suspenseful aspects of university life. These films explore themes such as academic pressure, secrets, crimes on campus, or psychological tensions. The university setting in thrillers often becomes a setting for intense and suspenseful plots. Horror is also a common genre, tied with drama. The horror genre's presence indicates that the university setting is used as a location for fear and suspense. These films revolve around haunted dorms and sinister professors. The isolation and stress of college life can amplify horror elements, making the setting ideal for such stories. Good example is film titled Master (2022). This film has a more prominent message related to racial issues. The theme of oppression of black people in the film is depicted through the horrifying psychological experiences that terrify the main characters, female student, and female professor. Despite not being clearly depicted as slavery, the characters in the film demonstrate how discrimination and racism still exist (Renata & Mustofa, 2023). Drama is equally common as horror. They seem to focus on serious, emotional narratives involving the personal growth, struggles, and challenges faced by students and professors. These films deal with themes such as identity, social expectations, and the pressures of academia. One example is a film Still Alice (2014). This film is praised for its depiction of Alzheimer's from the perspective of the sufferer, a female professor (Falcus, 2014).

Romantic comedies and romantic drama focus on relationships in the university context, highlighting the romantic experiences, like in the film The Other Zoey (2023). Docudramas explore real events or true stories set within a university environment. They focus on significant, often dramatic, events in academic or student life, providing a blend of documentary-style storytelling with dramatic re-enactments like in a film American Animals (2018) that tells a story of four college students in Kentucky who plot to steal rare books.

Table 3: Real and Fictional Universities Depicted

University depicted	No	%
Real university	18	35,29
Fictional not named university	17	33,33
Fictional named university	16	31,37
Total	51	100

In a sample of 49 films there are 17 real universities depicted in total. USA Ivy League universities showed in films are: Harvard University, Columbia University, and Princeton University. Some other well know are: Oxford (UK), Barkley (USA), and Stanford (USA). Fictional universities are in total 29. Ones with no known name are 14, and also 15 fictional with made up names such as; Braxton University, Adison University, etc. One of the most recent films depicting many of the well-known world universities is Oppenheimer (2023). This film, cantered around Robert Oppenheimer, the American physicist who led the Manhattan Project to develop the first atomic bomb (Stevenson, 2023). In one study Abbas

(2023) employed Marxian literary theory to analyse the film, uncovering power dynamics, class conflicts, and moral dilemmas stemming from destructive technological progress. Oppenheimer is portrayed as both a heroic figure of the atomic age and a tragic victim of political, economic, and military forces. Some universities shown in this film are Barkley (USA) and Princeton University (USA). Another film set at a real university is The Stanford Prison Experiment (2015) centred on controversial experiments of professor Philip Zimbardo at the Stanford University. Harvard University is depicted in film Professor Marston and the Wonder Women (2017) which shows life of psychologist William Moulton Marston.

Table 4: Professor Main Character Portrayal

Demographic	Professor portrayal	No	%
Black female	Mentor professor	1	10
White female	Professor in crisis	1	10
White male	Hero professor	2	20
	Professor in crisis	2	20
	Aggressive and/or unethical professor	4	40
Total		10	100

In our sample of films there are in total 10 professors who are main characters. White female and black female professors are minimally represented in the data. In films, they are depicted as caring mentors, and intellectuals. One black female professor main character is from the film Master (2022), and one white female professor main character is from the film Still Alice (2014). More prominently represented are white male professors. They are often shown as authoritative figures, either inspiring or challenging the main student characters. Professors with heroic attributes are shown in films Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny (2023), and The Man from Earth: Holocene (2017). Heroic type of professor was found in previous research (Yogerst, 2014). White male professors in existential crisis are shown in films The Professor (2018), and Irrational Man (2015). However, male white characters mostly fall in the category of aggressive and/or unethical attributes and behaviour. A good example is The Stanford Prison Experiment (2015). This is in accordance to previous research (Dagaz & Harger, 2011). The data shows a significant underrepresentation of black male professors. It is important to state that this analysis only included main characters. However, the data from the table reflects broader trends in media representation, with white professors being more prominently featured, while minority groups are underrepresented. Therefore, such films do not seem to fully explore the diversity of experiences within the academic setting.

Table 5: Student Main Character Portrayal

Demographic	Student portrayal	No	%
Black female	Nerd or gifted student	1	2,56
	Fighter and hero student	2	5,13
Black male	Nerd or gifted student	1	2,56
	Socially struggling student	2	5,13
White female	Nerd or gifted student	1	2,56
	Fighter and hero student	6	15,39
	Socially struggling student	7	17,94
	Party and troublemaker student	3	7,69
White male	Nerd or gifted student	7	17,94
	Socially struggling student	2	5,13
	Party and troublemaker student	6	15,39
Total		39	100

In our sample of films the majority of main characters are students, a total of 39. White female students are the most represented group. Common stereotypes include the nerd or gifted student, socially struggling student, fighter and hero student, or a party and troublemaker student. Similar results were found in previous research (Fedorov, 2019). White male students are also frequently featured as main characters. They are often depicted in a wide range of roles, from jocks and fraternity members to intellectuals and rebels. Both black female and male students are less represented in the data. In films, this underrepresentation is often mirrored, with these groups being shown in secondary roles or as part of a diverse group of friends rather than as the main character. When present, they are portrayed as overcoming challenges, dealing with issues of race.

Table 6: University Stereotype Depicted

Stereotype depicted	N	%
University is a place of student party life	39	79,59
University is a place of fraternities and sororities life	25	51,02
University is a place of frightened freshman experience	29	59,18
University is a place of nerds, jocks, etc.	42	85,71
University is a place of picturesque scenery	44	89,79

Finally, our last analysis provided us with reoccurring themes in general serotype of universities in film. In total 39 film represent universities as a place of student party life. The high number of films featuring student parties indicates that partying is a significant and popular theme in university movies. Parties are often used to depict the social life and culture associated with college, serving as a backdrop for character development, plot progression, or simply as a source of humour or drama. These scenes likely highlight aspects such as freedom, experimentation, social dynamics, and the contrast between academic responsibilities and social life. Similarly to this theme 25 films represent universities as a place of fraternities and sororities life. The depiction of freshmen experience is represented in 29 films which suggests that a substantial number of university-themed movies focus on the experiences of first-year students. Freshman year is often portrayed as a critical period of transition, adaptation, and self-discovery, making it a relatable and engaging subject for audiences. Common themes include the challenges of leaving home, making new friends, facing academic pressures, and the excitement and anxiety of starting college life. Given that comedy is the most prevalent genre in university films (as noted earlier), it's likely that many of the films featuring student parties and freshmen are comedies. The themes of partying and navigating freshman year lend themselves well to humorous interpretations. Films focusing on freshmen may also fall into the drama or coming-of-age categories, exploring the deeper emotional and psychological aspects of this transition period. The data suggests that social life is crucial to during the early years of college. Another common stereotype is a presence of palate of student characters such as jocks, and nerds. Also, a picturesque visuals of campuses with parks, and embellished architecture is very common. These stereotypes are well documented in previous research (DeSantis, 2020).

The main of this paper was to investigate the role of universities in contemporary films, focusing on how these institutions are depicted and whether they adhere to stereotypical representations. The analysis has provided us with data that shows common stereotypical representations of universities such us stereotypical characters (nerds, party students, etc.), and stereotypical themes explored in films like frightened freshman experience, and fraternities and sororities life. These findings are in accordance with previous research dealing with academia in film (Dagaz & Harger, 2011; Wasylkiw & Currie, 2012). The paper

has examined a diverse selection of films, this to answer questions about the consistency of these portrayals and whether they contribute to or challenge prevailing stereotypes such as elite status of academia, party life of academia, overachieving nerds in the academia, professors in the academia, etc. The data has showed a consistency in stereotypes witch also is in the accordance with the theoretical background of representation theory which states that repeating certain images or ideas, can normalize these representations and make them appear as natural (Hall, 1997; Hall, 2014).

Limitations and Future Research

This research is subject to several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the analysis was based solely on films in English, which naturally skews the focus toward films produced in the USA and UK. As a result, American films dominate the sample, potentially limiting the diversity of cinematic styles, cultural contexts, and thematic elements that could have been captured if non-English films were also included. This focus on English-language films may lead to over-representation of certain cultural norms, values, and stereotypes that are prevalent in American cinema. Also, the study is limited to films released in the last ten years. While this provides a contemporary view of the subject matter, it excludes older films that may have influenced current trends and themes. Furthermore, the analysis was conducted by a single researcher. While efforts were made to ensure objectivity and accuracy, the involvement of just one person introduces bias in the overall analytical approach. A larger team of researchers could have provided a more balanced perspective. Future research should aim to address some of the limitations highlighted in this study. One important area of improvement would be to conduct a more in-depth analysis of both main and supporting characters, as they often serve as key carriers of stereotypes. By examining the portrayal of characters more closely, future studies could provide a more nuanced understanding of how these stereotypes are reinforced. Additionally, future research should broaden the scope of the films being analysed to include a more diverse selection of languages and cultural contexts. This would also help avoid over-reliance on American films, which may overemphasize certain stereotypes or norms specific to that region.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of university-themed films reveals distinct patterns in genre, character stereotypes, and overall depiction of university life. Comedy emerges as the most prominent genre, emphasizing the humorous and chaotic aspects of college, while thriller and horror genres highlight darker, more suspenseful dimensions of university life. The portrayal of universities is often fictional, with both real and fictional institutions serving as backdrops for a wide range of narratives. The representation of professors and students shows clear disparities, with white male professors often depicted as aggressive or unethical, while minority professors, are underrepresented. Similarly, white students dominate the main roles, with stereotypical portrayals as overachievers, partiers, or socially struggling individuals. Stereotypes about university life focus heavily on student parties, fraternity and sorority culture, freshmen experiences, and picturesque campuses. These elements, along with depictions of nerds, jocks, and social conflicts, reinforce familiar tropes that reflect a narrow, view of university life. Ultimately, the data suggests that university-themed films tend to prioritize entertainment, emphasizing social and comedic aspects, while often underrepresenting the diversity and complexity of real academic environments.

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