"Hipster Freshman": Popular Culture's Portrayal of Community College Students

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Due to its seemingly unclear and ambiguous mission, the community college has somewhat of a stigma attached to it, as the four-year institution defines the American college experience (LaPaglia, 1994). Although only a few studies concerning media portrayals of community college students have been published within the last 20 years, the existing studies (Bourke, Major, & Harris, 2009; LaPaglia, 1994; Tucciarone, 2007) have failed to address whether the media's portrayal of community colleges influences students' decisions or actions with regard to enrolling in a two-year institution. Using the theoretical framework of critical media literacy, the researchers will examine whether media portrayals determine if there is a message that creators and producers of media are attempting to convey with regard to community colleges and their students. In addition, this study will examine if media portrayals influence students' intent to enroll in a community college.

Due to its seemingly unclear and ambiguous mission, the community college has sometimes been stigmatized as providing an inferior education compared with four-year institutions, which are thought to define the higher education experience (LaPaglia, 1994). Although only a few studies concerning media portrayals of community college students have been published within the last 20 years (Bourke, Major, & Harris, 2009; LaPaglia, 1994; Tucciarone, 2007), the existing studies have failed to address whether the media's portrayal of community colleges influences students' decisions or actions with regard to enrolling in a two-year

institution. Using the theoretical framework of critical media literacy, this study examined whether media portrayals contain a message that creators and producers of media are attempting to convey with regard to community colleges and their students. In addition, this study examined if media portrayals influenced students' intentions to enroll in a community college.

Literature Review

Although researchers have examined the portrayals of higher education in fiction, there is a need to focus on the works that portray community colleges. In fact, Bourke et al. (2009) asserted that although the community college has been the subject of many works of fiction, scholarship analyzing these portrayals is limited. Hinton (1994), in his analysis of movies that focus on colleges and universities, indicated that not one movie produced during the 30-year period between 1960 and 1990 presents nontraditional students at a community college, which is where a large percentage of nontraditional students choose to begin their collegiate studies. The failure of the media to accurately portray community colleges and their nontraditional population results in skewed depictions of community colleges for the American public. Hinton (1994) avowed that these individuals obtain their information about colleges from watching the media; therefore, these portrayals can have a negative influence.

Only a few studies (Bourke et al., 2009; LaPaglia, 1994; Tucciarone, 2007) have focused specifically on the media's influence on community colleges. LaPaglia (1994) indicated that American fiction, including print as well as television and film, does not contain many references to or plots about community colleges and/or their students, which she finds disturbing when she considers that half of all postsecondary students are enrolled in two-year institutions. She observed that when community college students appear in American fiction, they are portrayed as "mediocre, probably losers, and usually unsympathetic" (p. 6). LaPaglia (1994) and Tucciarone (2007) concluded that American fiction reflects the inferior status of community colleges and their students and does not reflect the actuality of two-year institutions. Although LaPaglia (1994) and Tucciarone (2007) noted the inferior status of the community college, Bourke et al. (2009) maintained that community college students, as portrayed in movies and novels, are depicted positively, satisfied with their decision to attend community college. The researchers indicated that the negative portrayals were reflective of a

student's lack of motivation and not the characteristics of the institution itself (Bourke et al., 2009).

The few published studies (Bourke et al., 2009; LaPaglia, 1994; Tucciarone, 2007) that focus on the community college's portrayal in television and film primarily used a content analysis methodology. Considering the research published to date has failed to examine critical media literacy in regard to higher education, this study sought to establish a link between higher education, particularly focusing on community colleges, and critical media literacy, thus laying a foundation for future studies. The lack of research necessitated an examination of the representation of community colleges in the media to examine if these portrayals contributed to an individual's image of these institutions. In addition, this study examined if these media portrayals influence students' decisions concerning community college.

Conceptual Framework

Critical media literacy was used as the theoretical framework for this study as it addresses how students make meaning of media messages. The National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) (2014) stated that media literacy is the ability to analyze symbols and messages conveyed via the media, which refers to all print and electronic forms. The Center for Media Literacy (CML) (2003) maintained that the importance of teaching media literacy is that it can empower individuals to think critically about the messages the media convey. Critical media literacy involves examining the conditions that perpetuate social injustice in an attempt to extinguish such injustices or to create alternate media that do not oppress or marginalize others (Semali, 2000). As critical media literacy has emerged as a field of study, it is clear that the media have a strong influence on its viewing public; therefore, media literacy serves as pedagogy as it has the power to teach, shape, and influence one's opinion, self-image, and perspective (Kellner & Share, 2005).

Methodology

The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews in early 2014 at two Mississippi community colleges and employed media clips that portrayed community colleges and their students. Technology now allows qualitative researchers to use videos and electronic images as data for a study as well as to incorporate these components in the data collec-

tion process (Gibbs, Friese, & Magabeira, 2002). As part of the study, research participants were asked to listen to and view four short media clips. After doing so, the participants were asked to respond to questions about their attitudes toward the content concerning community college students. The participants were asked if they believed these media clips were reflective of community colleges and their students and if these media portrayals influenced their decision to enroll in a two-year institution.

Media Clips

The first clip that research participants were asked to listen to was from Rodney Atkins' (2006) song "These Are My People." The lyrics to this song stated, "We got some discount knowledge at the junior college where we majored in beer and girls" (Atkins, 2006). The lyrics imply that the two-year institution is a place where students receive "discount" or inferior knowledge (Atkins, 2006). The second clip research participants were asked to watch was a media clip from *Tosh.0* (Zabielski, McAdams, & Judge, 2012). In the selected clip from *Tosh.0* (Zabielski et al., 2012), a community college student who is skateboarding collides with an older woman, a nontraditional student who is on her way to class. Narrating the collision as it occurs, Tosh exclaimed:

> Just another day at community college where kids who can't get into a state school share a campus with old people who want to learn computers. . . . Maybe this would not have happened, if you were not 45 years late to class. (Zabielski et al., 2012)

This clip captures the social injustice that is present with regard to the media's portrayal of nontraditional students. Even if research participants are not familiar with the show, they are likely to be familiar with having classes with a nontraditional student who has decided to attend the local community college.

After listening to Atkins' (2006) song and watching the clip from *Tosh.0* (Zabielski et al., 2012) that presented community colleges negatively, research participants were asked to watch two video clips that portrayed the community college in a positive manner from the pilot episode of *Community* (Harmon, Russo, & Russo, 2009). This television series chronicles the daily lives of its characters, who are members of the same study group but possess diverse backgrounds with regard to race and age. As diversity is currently increasing at community colleges, Fain (2012) believed that the creators of the show effectively portray

community college life and issues common to these institutions. For example, he wrote that *Community* pokes fun at real-life issues, such as "turf battles between departments, overly ambitious administrators, underprepared students and relentless budget cutting" (Fain, 2012, para. 5).

Community emphasizes the daily lives of college students as they form relationships with each other. In trying to unite the study group, one student points out to the other members of the group that people can find the good in anything but often fail to see the good in themselves. Jeff Winger reminds the group that each member is better than he or she thinks he or she is. As the members start to see the good in themselves, Winger states that because the individuals have stopped being a study group and are becoming a community, they are unstoppable (Harmon et al., 2009). This scene illustrates the social development of community college students who form relationships with each other.

After each participant viewed the third media clip, the researchers advanced the pilot episode of *Community* (Harmon et al., 2009) to the fourth video clip. In this scene, psychology professor Ian Duncan learns that Winger has been disbarred as a lawyer because he possessed false credentials. The professor encourages him to make something positive of his newfound opportunity at Greendale Community College. Professor Duncan says, "What you have, my friend, is a second chance at an honest life" (Harmon et al., 2009). While the community college provides younger students with an opportunity to earn a college education, the community college serves a variety of individuals, including nontraditional students. For many, the community college is their second attempt to achieve success in life.

Participants

The research participants were currently enrolled in community colleges and had been enrolled for at least one semester prior to the interview to ensure that students had been exposed to the community college atmosphere for at least one semester. Six interviews took place at one community college, while the other six took place at another. All participants were full-time students and expressed an interest in popular culture. The researchers selected both traditional students as well as nontraditional students so that the sample would be representative of the enrollment typical of community colleges.

Interview Process

Research participants were recruited for personal interviews which explored undergraduate students' attitudes concerning whether media portrayals influenced them as they made the decision to attend a two-year college. Purposeful sampling or criterion-based sampling, specifically snowball sampling, was used to recruit research participants who were over the age of 18 and had attended a community college for at least one semester. As snowball sampling was used to identify participants; the first participant was asked to name another community college student who possessed similar interests in media portrayals. Participants also provided contact information, either email addresses or telephones numbers, for those students that they recommended. The researchers then contacted these students via email or telephone to arrange a time when they could meet. Participant selection continued in this manner throughout the interview process. In two cases, the participants who completed the interview located the person he or she recommended and brought that individual to the researchers. Then, the researchers made arrangements with that individual to complete the interview at his or her convenience. The process of recruiting participants via snowball sampling occurred much more quickly than the researchers initially anticipated. Once participants found out they had been referred to participate, they were very eager to assist the researchers with the data collection process. The researchers conducted the first six interviews at one Mississippi community college, and after doing so, they conducted the remaining six interviews at a second community college in Mississippi. At the second community college, they used criterion-based sampling again to identify a student who was knowledgeable about popular culture. After conducting this interview, they once again asked the participant to recommend a student who possessed similar knowledge and would be interested in participating in the interview.

The shortest interview lasted approximately 40 minutes while the longest one lasted about 70 minutes. The majority of the interviews lasted between 50 and 60 minutes. Creswell (2013) wrote that a sample may consist of as few as one research participant, or a sample may contain more individuals if they are needed "to develop a collective story" (p. 157). The exact number of research participants, 12 for this study, was dependent on the researchers achieving data saturation, which in this case occurred after the 12th participant was interviewed when no new information or themes emerged (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As data saturation was achieved and considering that new information was not

emanating from the interviews, the research would reflect the common themes that emerged from the 12 interviews.

Data Analysis

We employed a constant comparative method to generate common themes, patterns, or codes present in the data. This inductive data analysis allowed us to characterize participants' experiences as students at the community college explored their intentions when they enrolled in community college, and determine if their decisions were influenced by media messages.

Findings

The findings indicated that community colleges offer opportunities to both traditional and nontraditional students. Many students attend two-year institutions because they are affordable, especially when compared with the tuition of four-year institutions. Linda, a single parent and an employee who works two jobs, said that the community college "was cheaper, closer to home. I could afford it." Participants also noted that they had the opportunity to live at home, to save money on housing, and to gain experience in the workforce. As a number of research participants in the study were employed, they praised the flexibly scheduled course offerings because they were able to complete courses during the day, afternoon, or evening, and students also had the option to attend classes online. Tamara, a mother of three, noted that she was able to get two of her children ready for school and drop them off before driving to the community college to take classes. Explicating how the community college fits her schedule, she said:

> I have a daughter that is at the university. And I needed something that fit the schedule between carpooling my children to school and handling business that I needed to do. It fit into my schedule. I originally started here, so I wanted to finish the degree here.

The flexibility in scheduling classes allowed community college students to spend late afternoons and evenings at home with their families and complete classes during the day when their children were attending school. Michael, a traditional student and part-time employee, noted that he had received athletic scholarships to play football for a number of colleges and universities, but he did not qualify academically to play at these institutions. The community college became his only opportu-

nity to continue playing, and in the end, he realized that the decision to enroll was somewhat advantageous to him:

> I am able to focus on the material in class because classes are small. There are less distractions and [I] ask questions when I don't understand. Instructors know me; they are nice—helpful and tell me to see them for help sometimes. It is easier to get help when I need it.

He went on to detail that in addition to having a second chance to play sports at a four-year university, this is also his second chance to become a better student. Michael realized that this is his opportunity

> "…to learn how to study. When I transfer to a big school, my teachers don't care. From what my friends told me at other places [colleges], they [professors] don't care if you go to class. It's not like here; you gotta go to class."

Not only do students have the opportunity to become better students, but participants also indicated that the community college offers a quality education that prepares them for the workforce. The findings illustrated that many of the students felt as if they were succeeding academically at the community college. Many of the students in this study attributed their academic success to the faculty that provides a high level of service and accessibility to students. Linda stated that her instructors stay after class to answer questions and are accessible during office hours and via email to answer questions or reteach concepts. "I know a lot of my teachers, all of my teachers have been—I could not ask for anything more. They give us all of their time." Jamal, a husband who also is employed part-time and a father of two children, said, "As long as you keep 'em [instructors] aware, they will help you out. After all, they understand that we have lives, families, kids, jobs, or maybe because I'm older."

Even though community colleges enroll students from different backgrounds, research participants suggested that there is a sense of unity present on campus. They expressed that it is not uncommon to have the same students in their classes during one semester or to have classes with students who were in their classes during previous semesters. Likewise, students indicated that they also develop relationships with their classmates when they form study groups to help each other understand the class information. The study's participants noted that in the study groups, students work together and engage in teamwork to prepare each other for an upcoming test or assignment. Frank, who was

retired from the military, remarked that he knew very few people on campus when he enrolled, but he has met new friends since that time:

I have met some good people who help me in my classes and just friends who hang and grab lunch together. If I happen to miss class, I can ask any of my classmates what I missed. Everyone is friendly.

Despite being somewhat anxious about returning to the classroom after spending 20 years in the Army, he learned that he could rely on his classmates for help and friendship. "The sense of community is accurate [in the third media clip] because in my experience at the community college, there seems to be a sense of community in the campus, staff, faculty, administration. It is encouraging, and they are very involved in the community."

Traditional students were unable to relate to negative media portrayals, but nontraditional students were able to relate to the older students portrayed in the clips. These students related to the age or situation of some of the characters portrayed, but a number of them remarked that it was hard for them to relate to the clips that portrayed community college students as ignorant or unintelligent. Research participants in this study believed that the media made fun of community college students because they are "an easy target." Michael commented, "There is a mix at the community college: young students, older students, retirees, single parents, working adults, and married students." He also remarked that these obvious differences among community college students provide content for comedians "because it is easy to make fun of age, especially when there are both young and old—like the old lady who is called a 'hipster freshman' in the show."

Even though there are a large number of nontraditional students at the community college, "it [the number of nontraditional or older students] is a stereotype," according to Joseph. He remarked:

It is strictly broken down by the community colleges because they are allowing people to have second chances and are willing to take them [the students] and anything that is willing to walk in the door. They don't understand that but are willing to go back to school and to put in the work to get there.

The findings of the study reflected that much of the information pertaining to community colleges that appears in the media is a result of the way community colleges are perceived by those who are unfamiliar with and do not understand two-year institutions. The research

participants thought much of this treatment was due to obvious differences, namely differences in age, life experiences, socioeconomic levels, and developmental education. Participants in this study noted that these obvious differences provide comedians and script writers with content to mock community colleges and their students.

Conclusions

The findings of this study supported Tucciarone's (2007) claim that the media teach individuals about unfamiliar institutions and experiences. All of the research participants in this study were familiar with the institution as they were currently enrolled community college students, and they employed critical thinking skills that allowed them to question and evaluate the accuracy of the media's content. As research participants were familiar with the community college, their real-life experiences as community college students served as a comparative basis for the attitudes and beliefs that the media conveyed.

The problem arises with the public that is not familiar with community colleges, apart from those they see in fictional portrayals. Silverblatt (1995) affirmed that programs that were not intended to have pedagogic purposes now offer insights about behaviors and attitudes as television attempts to appeal to the largest number of viewers possible. Those students who have attended community college can distinguish accurate portrayals from those that are skewed and/or exaggerated. The media have stereotyped certain individuals, such as the nontraditional student enrolling to learn computers and the ditzy blonde-haired traditional student. The media perpetuate these stereotypes, and as they have been reinforced repeatedly, media creators do not have to invest money and effort to re-introduce new characters or develop their personalities (Silverblatt, 1995). Viewers recognize the type of student that is often portrayed with community colleges, and as a result, they may associate these students with the institution in real life.

For many viewers, these stereotypes represent actual community college students, especially when they possess no knowledge of or experience with community colleges. Kellner and Share (2005) maintained that the media shape attitudes and beliefs in society, especially as individuals lack critical media skills that allow them to question these portrayals. Television becomes a means by which individuals are assessed (Brown, 1991; Silverblatt, 1995). Instead of questioning these portrayals, individuals often adopt beliefs based on media portrayals, especially as television maximizes viewership by incorporating the dom-

inant and popular attitudes of the day (Brown, 1991; Kellner & Share, 2005; Silverblatt, 1995). This study indicates that students who attend community colleges knew that the stereotypes of community college students are inaccurate, but recognized that people with little knowledge of the community college setting may believe them. Unfortunately, some students may choose not to attend a two-year institution when they might have benefited had they enrolled, particularly given that community colleges provide good opportunities for students.

As these two-year institutions differ from the norm of a four-year college (LaPaglia, 1994), the research participants who viewed the media clips believed the media attached a stigma to these institutions and their students. The media may label community college students as old, incompetent, and unsuccessful. The research participants indicated that they understand that the media's job is to entertain individuals, and they also believed that individuals in society who are unfamiliar with community colleges accept the information they see on television as accurate. A few research participants expressed that the older woman, who is portrayed as a nontraditional student attending the community college, is clearly victimized by the skateboarder who nearly ran her over (Zabielski et al., 2012). Many of the study's participants explained that the elderly woman should not be criticized for enrolling in college 45 years later but instead should be rewarded for wanting to learn new technology (Zabielski et al., 2012).

Many of the research participants disagreed with the two media clips that presented community colleges and their students negatively (Atkins, 2006; Zabielski et al., 2012) and stated that these portrayals were not accurate representations of community college students. Participants explained that media portrayals in which community colleges and their students were portrayed negatively are quite different from their own experiences. In fact, they interpreted the negative media portrayals as somewhat positive, as participants noted that a sense of unity exists between traditional and nontraditional students. Along with this idea of unity among nontraditional and traditional students comes diversity, especially when one considers the age of both nontraditional and traditional students.

In addition to positively reflecting the diversity of the student body, the findings indicated that community colleges are institutions that offer second chances to students who were not successful in high school and to older students who are returning to college. This concept of open access is integral to the community college's mission, as the com-

munity college accepts students who are underprepared and otherwise may not have the opportunity to enroll in a four-year college or university. This gives these students the opportunity to earn a college education and/or workforce training so they will have the chance to prepare for future employment or additional studies, thereby improving and enriching their own lives.

Although the media portray community colleges both negatively and positively, the findings of this study suggested that media portrayals of community college and their students do not influence potential students to attend a specific type of institution. Even though the media were not influential with regard to a student's college-going decisions, the findings suggested that students were surprised at the negative content that was present in the media clips. This negativity reaffirmed their decision to attend a community college, as they saw their attendance at a community college as an opportunity to achieve academic success, to earn a quality education, and to disprove the media's negative stereotypes. Students expressed a sense of satisfaction with their decision to attend community college, and this finding was very similar to those of Bourke et al. (2009). These researchers concluded that community college students in media portrayals are presented positively as they are happy with their decision to enroll in a community college. When the portrayals were negative, Bourke et al. (2009) indicated that his participants felt that these stemmed from students' lack of motivation and were not reflective of the community college.

Implications for Practice

Community colleges must be aware of stereotypes that exist in the media and understand the degree to which these stereotypes influence the actions and decisions of potential students. With this awareness, they can work to counter the content of these portrayals in their recruitment efforts. Community college professionals can focus on the positive aspects of their institutions, including one-on-one instruction, flexible-scheduled classes, teacher-to-student ratio, tutoring centers, and convenient locations. Employees of these institutions should reinforce these positive aspects in their recruitment materials, so individuals who are not familiar with the community college will not believe media portrayals to be accurate about community colleges (Bourke et al., 2009).

Reinforcing positive aspects of community colleges will allow these institutions to counter negative media portrayals by embracing a culture that emphasizes the community college's mission and promotes

student success. Hlinka (2013) explained, "The culture of an organization operates at a profound level and exerts powerful influences over the way members perceive, feel, and think" (p. 541). This illustrates the importance of establishing a culture that is student-centered and embraces the idea that students and the college can achieve success. This helps to gain the confidence of its employees as well as the confidence of the local community in which the community college is located. Then, local residents will realize the accomplishments of the institution and its students, and as a result, they will be more likely to hold a favorable opinion of the local institution.

Another way that community colleges can inform local residents and potential students of their accomplishments is to reach out to alumni. Ashford (2011) suggested that community colleges can benefit from and build relationships with alumni by asking business owners to serve on campus groups and/or sponsor programs that will assist students. In addition, Ashford (2011) explained that alumni can even serve as mentors to college students. Community colleges should invite their alumni to speak with current students as well as potential students. Nodland (as cited in Ashford, 2011) noted that allowing students to establish a relationship with an institution's alumni exposes current students to alumni's successes and accomplishments, which demonstrates the strength of the institution.

Implications for Research

An expanded study that includes a larger, more representative sample would enrich the existent literature. The sample could also be expanded to include prospective high school students who are interested in enrolling in college as well as currently enrolled four-year college or university students. If students were influenced to attend a four-year institution over a two-year institution based upon media portrayals of two-year institutions, such attitudes and beliefs may be revealed in a sample that consists of students who began their higher education at four-year colleges and universities. Similarly, prospective college students may be more influenced by the media because they are curious about college life, and they may think these portrayals give them a sneak peek into a world with which they are not familiar.

Also, a study that examines where students acquire their information about college and how this relates to students' socioeconomics and demographics would enhance researchers' knowledge of factors that influence college choice. A study such as this may determine if there is

a link between lower-class students, high school students, and/or first-generation college students to media content. Likewise, it may establish a link between lower-class or middle-class students and if they get their information regarding college from the media or from another source of information. In addition, it would inform researchers' understanding of first-generation college students and student demographics as well as how the media influences prospective college students' choice of attending a two- or four-year institution.

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