Student Perceptions of Academic Librarians

The Influence of Pop Culture and Past Experience

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> A warning: If you rip, tear, shred, bend, fold, deface, disfigure, smear, smudge, throw, drop, or in any other manner damage, mistreat, or show lack of respect towards this book, the consequences will be as awful as it is within my power to make them.
>
> —Madam Irma Pince, Hogwarts Librarian[1]

In "The Perception of Image and Status in the Library Profession," Deirdre Dupré notes, "It's not the stereotype that's the problem, it's the *obsession* with the stereotype."[2] She argues that this obsession with public perception of librarianship actually stems from an overall sense of insecurity and unworthiness within the profession itself. Although librarians may have unintentionally assisted in the creation and preservation of some negative stereotypes, visual mass media—namely film and television—have contributed to the adverse perceptions cultivated by the public in regard to librarians and their role in society.[*]

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[*] While we do see the irony in writing about librarian stereotypes—and that we, by participating in this book, are presumably perpetuating the concept of stereotype-obsessed librarians even further—we conducted this study in order to better understand preconceived ideas of gender roles, ageism, and occupational bias and how to avoid them in library services.

In the article "Librarians, Professionalism and Image," Abigail Luthmann writes a succinct overview of librarian representations in mass media throughout the 20th century. She explains that the "infamous negative stereotypes" of librarians are often quite old. The common media-generated representation of a librarian is an older, single, white woman, generally adorned with one or more of the following: cardigan, pearls, tweed skirt, hair in a bun, and dark-rimmed glasses.[3] These pop culture images found on television, are woven into the fabric of the student subconscious for years prior to entering college.

Niagara University Library was interested in assessing whether or not there is a difference between freshman and senior undergraduate student perceptions of academic librarians and evaluating why this does or does not occur. We sought to discover whether there is a strong connection between childhood television viewing experiences and expectations of librarians. Furthermore, we wanted to know if direct and indirect experiences contribute to the stereotypes created by the mass media in regard to undergraduate students' impressions of perceived librarian usefulness.

Understanding this information will help library staff assess how we can become more approachable and develop various strategies when assisting the 21st-century student population. Quantitative and qualitative methods were employed to assess student perceptions of librarians; these perceptions were sought from of willing undergraduates attending our small, private northeastern university. Students were given a survey to gauge whether or not television played a role in the formation of their perceptions of librarians. If no media influence was found, the authors' secondary assessment factor was perceived service ability based solely on the librarian's outward expression through clothing and related aspects of appearance. Additionally, the authors surveyed a national sample of librarians to compare reports of the clothing they wore versus what students expected them to wear based on portrayals of librarians in media. Responses represent typical daily work attire selected by librarians who were surveyed.

Surveys for both the students and the librarians were developed based on research conducted by Peluchette, Karl, and Rust in 2006.[4] Their

study describes individual differences in the beliefs and attitudes regarding workplace attire among MBA students. Emphasis is placed on the attitudes of the wearer and the extent to which they might use their clothing to influence the perceptions of others or to achieve certain workplace objectives. We based our survey on this approach in an attempt to assess how undergraduate students perceive themselves and if their survey response is a direct reflection of what they expect from others. We hypothesized that academic librarians use clothing to influence others. We looked for evidence of how and why they may do so and of whether their clothing choices perpetuate the media-generated stereotypes.

Perceived Approachability of Librarians Based on Media Influence

Cultivation theory is the idea that "television viewing affects beliefs and influences the judgments of viewers based on frequency."[5] This theory, developed by George Gerbner and Larry Gross in 1976, was derived from several research projects conducted to determine if there was a correlation between the amount of violent television viewed and people's perceptions of violence in the real world.[6] Not only did their article conclude that those who watched more TV perceived the world to be a more violent place, it also led others in the mass communication field to explore the thought processes that led to these cultivated beliefs.

Current research builds on Gerbner and Gross's original theory. According to L. J. Shrum, television viewing affects the construction of real-world judgments through its effect on the accessibility of information from memory.[7] Heavy viewers are able to easily recall these familiar media constructs as a basis for their judgments based on the frequency, recency, and vividness of stereotype.[8] These findings suggest that television viewing supports typical archetypes rather than changing attitudes, which is consistent with Gerbner's view of long-term television effects.[9]

Additionally, media has more of an impact if the content is perceived to be realistic.[10] RoskosEwoldsen, Davis, and RoskosEwoldsen note that Gerbner and his colleagues observed that "men are characters in TV shows at about a 2 to 1 ratio to women, and women's roles are more stereotypi-

cal than men's."[11] As a result, people who are heavy viewers of television, for whom the experience of "reality" is more filtered through impressions from television, tend to have more sexist views of women. Research conducted by Prentice, Gerrig, and Bailis states that information contained in fictional messages can influence beliefs about social groups.[12]

Mainstreaming and resonance are two variables that have been incorporated into general cultivation theory in response to the methodological and theoretical critiques of Gerbner and Gross's original work on the subject and its effects.[13] Building on the social cognitive theory developed by Albert Bandura, mainstreaming suggests that our actions are guided by what we observe in others.[14] This indirect learning, coupled with exposure to media-generated behaviors, allows us to interpret events and model our actions and responses to similar situations by what we have observed. We are influenced by our perceptions to different stimuli, for example attractiveness or functional need.[15] Television portrayals of particular actions, events, or groups tend to be more vivid than real-world experiences. However, if direct exposure to these real-world experiences is not possible, we gain our understanding of these events through media depictions. A "script" or "episode model" can be used in order to interpret the event and discern how to react to it.[16] Essentially, we utilize media depictions to make sense of and react to actions, events, and groups we have not previously encountered.

Resonance proposes that television viewing reaffirms a person's belief that was originally cultivated based on their own life experiences.[17] For example, people who have interactions with crime, violence, and drama tend to acquire long-lasting impressions, and as a result, a larger cultivation effect is created based on those encounters.[18] This begs the question, do daily social interactions contribute to the creation of a cultivated effect in the same way as exposure to a more significant event would? How much do nondescript outings such as going to the dentist, going grocery shopping, or even visiting the local library influence the way we assess information and formulate stereotypical cultivations?

Roskos-Ewoldsen, Davis, and Roskos-Ewoldsen agree that cultural models influence how the media are understood.[19] Although no research has investigated this phenomenon yet, they take the cultivation theory

one step further and suggest that a stronger effect of heavy TV viewing may be found if researchers measure television exposure during childhood and early adolescence. This is a critical period in a child's life. Repeated exposure to a stimulus, such as heavy television viewing, has stronger effects on perceptions of social reality.[20]

Librarian Approachability Based on Wardrobe

Does the repeated image of a mean older lady with a bun and thick-rimmed glasses influence a student's decision to approach or avoid a librarian? Research shows that library users consider two types of information about librarians when they consider initiating a reference encounter. In a 1998 *Library Trends* article, Marie Radford explains, "First, they receive an impression of the librarian attending the reference desk informed by their appearance and nonverbal behavior. Secondly, previous experience with and/or opinions of librarians."[21] Solutions proposed to increase reference interactions often include improving a librarian's interpersonal skills at the desk. However, there is relatively little research on the effect of a librarian's appearance.

Patricia Glass Schuman makes an argument that many librarians, including us, agree with—that image concerns should "not be about physical stereotypes, but about librarians' usefulness and necessity."[22] Patrons need a clear idea of the range of services the library provides. However, the image we convey is more influential than what we say or how we say it.[23] A recent study conducted by Bonnet and McAlexander suggests that librarians can easily increase their approachability by adapting their affect and clothing.[24] By incorporating certain characteristics into their wardrobe and behavior, such as wearing comforting colors or a friendly smile, librarians can help ease students' anxieties and increase patron interactions.

In addition to appearance and behavior, another stereotypical factor that may come into play, whether or not students realize it, is ageism. Usually, age discrimination refers to those in the workforce who are over the age of 50, but Melanie Chu notes, "Young, new librarians face age discrimination, including disrespectful treatment in the workplace and unrealistic expectations of performance."[25] Unfortunately, there has been little research

conducted into student perceptions of young or novice librarians' abilities. Librarianship is one of the professions where the average number of workers aged 45 and older is higher than in the rest of the general workforce.[26]

Crosby, Evans, and Cowles apply the notion of psychological "mirroring" and "matching" in the service context.[27] Their research study found that if a salesperson and customer were similar in appearance, lifestyle, and socioeconomic status, there was a positive effect on trust and satisfaction. Customers also tend to match their expectations of what a person with technical knowledge should look like based on the age or gender of a frontline employee. In many cases, this led to customers approaching staff based on both age- and gender-related stereotypes. Age was associated with experience, while one's sex was related to gender-normative roles and occupations. Furthermore, a study conducted by Johnson-Hillery, Kang, and Tuan found that older consumers prefer to be served by older retail staff because they perceived them to be more helpful than younger employees and more likely to suggest products that related to their personal needs.[28] White-collar professional services that are high in status, such as dentistry, are difficult for customers to evaluate.[29] As with reference librarians, customers must rely solely on the service provider's knowledge in the service encounter. These preferences influence patron interactions and the perceived usefulness of librarians.

Survey Administration

In order to assess student perceptions, we created an online image-rating survey to display visible characteristics of librarians varied by gender, age, ethnicity, and attire (see figure 1). First, we tracked the participants' demographic characteristics to assess for matching or mirroring in terms of librarian approachability. Next, students were asked to evaluate their current use of the library and perceived customer satisfaction with library services. This acted as a baseline assessment to compare actual versus perceived notions of the library and librarian usefulness. Lastly, the students were given hypothetical research scenarios and were prompted to select which librarian would be most useful in assisting them with a specific task and to provide reasoning for their selection.

FIGURE 1

The student survey included their rating of librarian approachability based on images of actual librarians and examples of their wardrobes.*

For the images used, we recruited librarians who fit the demographics associated with a stereotype. In addition, to control for bias, we sought out librarians not associated with our own institution. Their images represent typical daily work attire choices confirmed by the sample of librar-

ians who were surveyed. All librarians were photographed with their gaze directed toward the camera, with a smiling facial expression to seem more approachable and to attempt to control for perceived differences in expression.[30]

Additionally, two librarians were chosen to represent a uniformed look that is a standard in service-oriented businesses. This included blue button-down shirts and a name tag that identified their professional status clearly. We chose the shirt color on the basis of color theory that suggests that blue inspires calm and tranquility. Bonnet and McAlexander's study echoes this theory that blue increases the approachability of the wearer.[31] Because we thought that library anxiety is a major inhibitor to student library use, we opted to have our "librarians-in-uniform" wear the most comforting color to appear more accessible.

Study Variables

Our dependent variable was the perceived usefulness of librarians based on student perceptions. The independent variables noted in our study were the amount of television viewing and time spent at local libraries during childhood, young adulthood, and college years. The amount of television watched was measured through self-reported hours of viewing based on long-term autobiographical memory.[*]

Seven demographic variables were measured to compare television viewing and perceptions of social reality based on past experience: race, education level, gender, GPA, perceived family income level, major, and age.[32] This demographic content accounted for individual differences independent of any media variables. Assessment of these measures was intended to provide understanding of how different conditions influence the judgment-construction process.[33]

Educational television is expected to influence individuals' beliefs and attitudes in distinctive ways.[34] Based on the research conducted by Dahlstrom and Scheufele, we wanted to measure the types of television content

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[*] Cultivation effects are typically observed for judgments of societal norms, but not for personal experiences (L. J. Shrum, "The Implications of Survey Method for Measuring Cultivation Effects," *Human Communication Research* 33, no. 1 (2007): 66.)

students were familiar with.[35] This way, we could pinpoint student content viewing. Fifteen popular cable channels were included as a way to measure the potential interaction between exposure amount and how particular media content influenced their judgments.

Student Results

In September 2013, a 30-question survey was sent to approximately 2,900 undergraduate students via the university-wide e-mail system. In order to increase participation, a nominal monetary incentive was awarded by random lottery to one student who completed the entire survey. Four hundred twenty-six students attempted the 30-question survey. Three hundred sixty students completed the majority of the survey, while only 199 students completed the survey in its entirety. We believe that there was a high attrition rate due to the length of the survey. However, all responses were considered regardless of whether the respondent completed the entire survey. While every academic level was represented, the largest group of respondents were freshmen (34 percent); female (81 percent); from the largest departments on campus, namely business or education (42 percent combined); between the traditional college student ages of 17 and 21 (86 percent); and self-identified as non-Hispanic white or Euro-American (90 percent). This sample is representative of the general undergraduate student population.[†]

Our results indicate that there is not a direct link between exposure amount and particular media content and student judgments of librarian usefulness. It is important to keep in mind that student responses may be skewed based on the accuracy of long-term autobiographical memory. This information was collected as a means to place their prior experiences in perspective.

The cultivation effect may be skewed due to a student's ability (or inability) to process information during survey administration. Shrum

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† Overall, Niagara University last reported to the National Center for Education Statistics that 60 percent females and 40 percent males were enrolled in 2012. The majority of students identify themselves as Caucasian (66 percent). In addition, 5 percent identify themselves as African American, 3 percent as Hispanic, and less than 2 percent as American Indian/Alaskan Native or Asian/Pacific Islander. Twenty-four percent of the students did not identify their ethnicity. ("IPEDS Data Center," National Center for Education Statistics, last modified 2012, http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/SnapshotX.aspx?unitId=acb4aeb4b2ae).

found that a majority of college students given surveys are usually in a hurry to complete them and are therefore more likely to use heuristics, or mental shortcuts. These judgments are able to be recalled due to their vividness, frequency, or recency in the memory and tend to show a larger cultivation effect because they retrieve only a small amount of the cognitive information available. Heuristics are easy to apply and make few demands on cognitive resources, so they are more likely to be used in instances in which either the ability to process information is impaired (e.g., time pressure, distraction) or the motivation to process information is low (e.g., low involvement).[36] This lack of processing may cause source discounting errors because students are either unmotivated or unable to determine the source of the information they retrieve.[37]

The largest groups of our students reported having watched between two and three hours of television a day throughout the years, regardless of their educational status (elementary school, 52 percent; high school, 47 percent; college, 40 percent). A small group (less than 7 percent at each developmental level) reported watching television six hours or more a day. The most popular television channels viewed during their early childhood years were the Disney Channel (66 percent), Nickelodeon (60 percent), and ABC/ABC Family (34 percent). However, the majority of the students surveyed could not name specific examples of librarians in the media. In general, students identified librarian media portrayals to be female and older. Fifty-five percent of students recalled that librarians rarely appeared in media, but mostly remembered it to be negative. Comments provided below this question offered a dichotomy either of an "old," "mean," or "shushing woman," or of a "young, sexy woman." One student stated in her comment that while most examples were of these types, she had "yet to meet [a librarian] that fit these stereotypes."

In an effort to compare social reality based on past experience, we asked students to recall childhood experiences. The majority of students stated that they grew up in the middle-income households (83 percent) and their parents both worked full-time (59 percent). Students estimated that they went to the library weekly during elementary school (64 percent). During that time, they remember asking the librarian for assistance

monthly (43 percent). Library use decreased to monthly as they progressed through high school (35 percent), while their use of the librarian slightly decreased as their age increased (38 percent).

When asked to reflect on their own opinions, the largest group of respondents stated that a librarian's wardrobe has no effect on their approachability (45 percent). However, their responses about their own approachability fared very differently (figure 2). For example, when asked if they felt that their own wardrobe affects their approachability, comments included, "You need to present the way you want people to see you" and "Education is a very professional and personable profession. You have to have an air of respect for yourself, and it's definitely represented through your attire." With this in mind, a professional wardrobe and presentation are imperative for potential interactions with staff and patrons.

Students: Attire, Effort, and Influences					
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
I put a lot of effort into my clothing attire	15.01%	54.42%	27.61%	2.95%	
	56	203	103	11	373
I expect others to put effort into their attire as well.	4.56%	46.11%	43.97%	5.36%	
	17	172	164	20	373
The way I dress affects my personal interactions.	15.05%	54.57%	26.34%	4.03%	
	56	203	98	15	372
Clothing influences a librarians approachability.	5.36%	32.98%	45.58%	16.09%	
	20	123	170	60	373

FIGURE 2

Students' self-perceptions and beliefs were assessed to reflect psychosocial matching and mirroring in librarian approachability.

At the time of survey administration, 45 percent of students reported frequenting the campus library on a weekly basis. Students stated that they

have received assistance from a librarian weekly (4 percent), monthly (6 percent), a couple of times a semester (37 percent), or never (35 percent). Of those asked, 16 percent of students did not respond. These results may be skewed due to the fact that a large number of the student respondents were freshmen and the survey was administered during the first two weeks of their first college semester. A few students (5 percent) mentioned that they could not locate a staff member when they needed help or that they did not know who to approach for assistance.

The results of our survey coincide with Luthmann's contention that the "image" of a profession is created by people's personal experience of it.[38] No matter the academic level, our students have a positive outlook toward librarians in general (figure 3). Overall, students reported being either satisfied or very satisfied with the way they are treated at the campus library (92 percent) and the quality of service they are provided (88 percent), even if they had yet to receive direct service.

Student Perception of Librarian Ability					
	Strongly Agree	**Agree**	**Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**	**Total**
Librarians aid my advancement in my academic discipline.	17.88%	67.58%	13.64%	0.91%	
	59	223	45	3	330
Librarians enable me to be more efficient in my academic pursuits.	19.39%	66.06%	13.64%	0.91%	
	64	218	45	3	330
Librarians help me distinguish between trustworthy and untrustworthy information.	22.05%	66.16%	10.27%	1.51%	
	73	219	34	5	331
Librarians provide me with the information skills I need in my work or study.	18.60%	70.12%	10.06%	1.22%	
	61	230	33	4	328

FIGURE 3

A majority of students surveyed felt that librarians were beneficial to their academic research.

While our results do not contain enough data to prove or disprove our hypothesis that student satisfaction with the library increases throughout one's academic career, students who left comments with this question suggest a confirmation of service quality. A few juniors stated, "I love the librarians," "I got help today :)," and "If I need help the librarians are always nice and help." These comments indicate that older students were more inclined to explicitly endorse librarians based on positive experiences accumulated since freshman year.

When given a choice, more male and female users chose to approach female librarians, supporting Kazlauskas's findings in 1976 that users prefer to approach a female when given a choice.[39] Comments included these:

> When I am seeking reference I put my trust in someone who I feel is intellectual, and I don't know why I pick female, I just feel most librarians are female. That's how I have seen them so that's how they should be.

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

> Because this is what I have grown up with and am used to. I want someone who is like me and knows what she is talking about.

Conversely, it was surprising to find that a few females made comments that suggested that they do not think their gender knows as much as males do in certain areas of academia. One female respondent stated

> I would chose person number seven. He looks very young and fashionable, thus he seems up to date with all sorts of technology. Him being a guy also adds into my decision because I stereotypically think more males know more about technology than females.

Another stated, "Three, men are usually better at/like more statistical data." In fact, one female simply stated her selection was not at all based on the wardrobe so much as "because he is a male."

Mirroring and matching in the service context of an academic library was confirmed in our study. One male student stated he would select librarian "three or seven. Both are closest to my age and male so they'd probably think more like I do, making it easier to communicate." Another male stated

> I would ask number three for statistical help. All my stats professors have been male, so I associate males with understanding math. Again, he is young enough to be approachable and since he is not wearing a tie, I feel that he has time to help, whereas a man with a suit and tie would seem too busy to help.

Many of the responses related their librarian selections solely to past experience, for example, "Three, honestly it's because he looks like my high school physics teacher who spent quite a bit of time helping me analyze data and work with graphs and tables." It is clear that it is not only occupational stereotyping at issue. The results of our student survey show gender biases as well. The issue with statements such as these is a continuing unwillingness of patrons to pose STEM-related questions to female librarians.[*] As this is a female-dominated profession, the resulting risk is that the librarian is underutilized.

Our student sample selected the youngest librarian as the most approachable (34 percent) and the overall best example of an ideal librarian (32 percent). The majority of reasons provided may be summarized in this statement:

> As a female, approaching another female is a lot easier for me. Also approaching someone who is older than a student but not too old where they might struggle with the current trends. She looks like a normal person who is distinguished by her unique top, so I don't have to worry about approaching the wrong person.

Another female stated

> Person number two seems extremely friendly and wanting to help her students. She is also young and pretty. Also, her

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[*] STEM: Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math.

> clothes won't distract anyone because they aren't revealing or
> too showy, but she is very approachable.

The fewest students said that they would approach librarian eight (9 percent) and nine (8 percent). Surprisingly, the main reasons were these librarians' "young" age and outfit worn. Comments were similar to this one:

> They are younger and don't seem to be in the professional setting
> based on their casual apparel. Though dressed acceptably, there's
> really nothing that sets them apart from anybody else who might
> be using the library (images seven, eight and nine). I am more
> likely to approach someone who looks the role of a staff member—semi-formally dressed with a name-tag or "librarian" tag.

Based on these comments, it appears that a professional appearance is more approachable than personal style.

Librarian five was rated as the most professional-looking (84 percent) while appearing to have the most knowledge required to provide quality research assistance (31 percent). In contradiction to these statements, other students determined that librarian five also appears the most business-like or impersonal (45 percent) as well as unapproachable (32 percent). These student responses indicated that it was because he was wearing a tie. While this inhibited his approachability for a large number of students, others claimed that the tie associated him with the ranks of a professor as "most of our male faculty wear ties daily." Second to him in every statement was librarian one. These selections of preferences demonstrate that a professional look is generally preferred among the sample. However, it is worth mentioning that appearing too professional, for example, wearing a tie, is a detriment to increased patron interactions. Therefore, moderately professional dress seems to be functional, in terms of professionalism, and friendlier, in terms of approachability.

When it came to assisting with online technologies, librarian seven was considered the best librarian for the job (36 percent). This seemed to be the only time that ethnicity stood out as an issue. There were numerous student comments similar to the following, "Number seven. He seems the

youngest out of all of them and therefore having the most experience. The fact that he is Asian also influenced my decision." Other reasons seemed to be influenced by his personal style, for example, "I would choose person seven because of his mail carrier bag. It just seems like he has his laptop on him at all times and would be most likely to find and be able to interpret statistical data." Note that this selection was chosen based on a belief that he had some type of statistical as well as technological knowledge. This belief corresponds with the previous comments applied to males and their supposedly greater STEM-related knowledge.
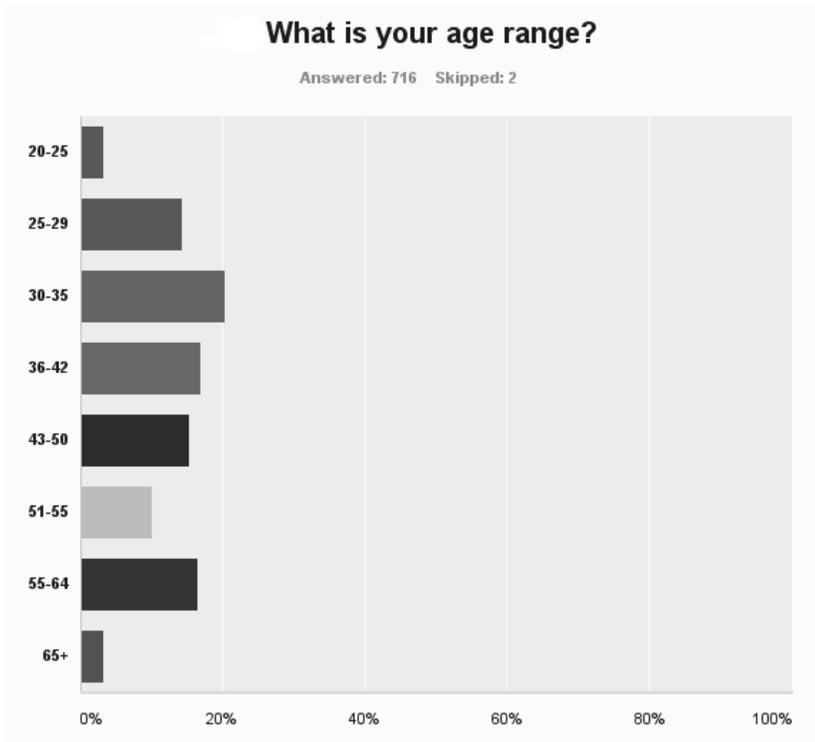
Some students preferred their ideal librarian to be "older" and "wiser," selecting librarians one, five, and six. One student proclaimed, "Six, because she portrays a typical librarian in my mind because she is older and looks like a librarian from the movies." However, there was no connection between those who watched more television as children (i.e., six hours or more a day) and those who preferred the traditional media-generated stereotype of an older woman. In fact, most of our respondents indicated that in their past experience, real-life librarians have been older (51 percent), intellectual (44 percent), and female (81 percent).

Thus, our hypothesis that there is a higher cultivation effect in those who watched more television as children has been deemed null. Students based their judgments on perceived librarian usefulness solely on their prior experiences in a reference encounter. This was noted based on their high frequency rates of attendance in libraries growing up (64 percent attended the library during elementary school once a week) as well as their positive ratings of their current library without necessarily having used it yet.

Academic Librarian Results

It is important to compare media-derived stereotypes and student perceptions with actual characteristics of the professional librarian image. Are we, in fact, caught perpetuating these media stereotypes ourselves? During the summer of 2013, we surveyed a sample of academic librarians (715 respondents) using an online self-assessment that was distributed through various e-mail lists. Librarians replied to 19 questions concerning self-perceptions of their actual work environment and office attire.

The majority of the respondents identified themselves as non-Hispanic white or Euro-American (92 percent) and female (87 percent). There is a range of ages in those who completed the survey. Of the academic librarians surveyed, 17 percent stated that they are in their 20s while the largest group of respondents are in their 30s (38 percent). Members of the second-largest group are at least 50 years of age (29 percent; see figure 4).

What is your age range?

Answered: 716   Skipped: 2

Age Range	
20-25	
25-29	
30-35	
36-42	
43-50	
51-55	
55-64	
65+	

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

FIGURE 4

Librarian demographic survey response—age range

Eighty-one percent agreed that their wardrobe selection is influenced by their job duties. Respondents indicated that their choice of dress might influence colleagues' perception of their professionalism and abilities (80 percent). However, they did not seem to see it influencing promotions or pay raises (41 percent; see figure 5). One librarian asserted, "I feel that

interpersonal politics has more to do with departmental advancement and respect than dress does," though one might argue that dress can certainly influence or at least be part of interpersonal politics.

Librarians: Attire, Effort, and Influences					
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Librarian attire influences impressions.	33.61%	57.98%	7.42%	0.98%	
	240	414	53	7	714
Librarian attire influences promotions or raises.	12.32%	37.68%	40.37%	9.63%	
	87	266	285	68	706
Librarian attire influences colleagues.	22.03%	58.33%	17.23%	2.40%	
	156	413	122	17	708
I spend a lot of time and effort on my workplace attire.	10.13%	41.35%	41.21%	7.31%	
	72	294	293	52	711
The way I feel at work affects positive interactions.	42.42%	53.37%	3.93%	0.28%	
	302	380	28	2	712

FIGURE 5

Librarians were asked whether they felt their workplace attire represented them accurately in regard to numerous variables.

Depending on the workday schedule, 75 percent of respondents stated that they tend to wear business casual outfits to work, mainly because various projects, such as moving boxes or shifting the collection, call for less formal attire. Most librarians claimed their outfits are both professional and modest while not limiting their personal style that adds to one's approachability. Many discuss their attempt to thwart the frumpy librarian stereotype by adding "cool" and "funky" accessories as a way to build rapport with students. In fact, one librarian quipped

> I mostly make an effort as I hate the stereotype of librarians as fussy older women only interested in cardigans and the impor-

tance of complete silence being maintained at all times. Also I work with a lot of students who are around 10 years younger than me—quite a gap to them at 18, but not to me! I'd like to be thought of as approachable and current, not over-the-hill.

The same ideal holds true for more experienced information workers. One librarian reflected

> I think the world has changed and the libraries I worked in 30 years ago are a different environment from those we work in now. The conservative look is not required, and is more for those whose personality it fits, not because you have to wear it. Hair color, tattoos, bigger jewelry, statement colors in clothes, are much more accepted. I think it is great!

Another expressed

> I believe that wearing stylish and appealing clothing has a positive effect on my interactions with students, faculty, staff and the larger community. As I'm an older librarian (over 65), my apparel also helps me to avoid being automatically cast as a senior who's possibly less cool and knowledgeable than some of the younger staff.

The youngest generation of librarians surveyed unanimously admitted to an attempt to stand out from the student population and tend to dress formally (17 percent); simply put, "I try to dress up more so students realize that I am actually a librarian and not a student worker." In another example, one respondent explained

> I work on a college campus and look young for my age, so I do want to distinguish myself from looking like a student. I also want to send the message that I am professional and confident. Further, I think dressing nicely sends a message that you care about being there and helps put you in the "work" mindset.

Another pointed out, "I began wearing a coat and tie to work when I started my first library job because I felt I looked young and wanted to make it obvious to patrons that I was a library employee." Those who identified themselves as library directors reported that they also dress formally as it is considered the norm among other campus directors. One director summed up the situation well:

> It is not the library specifically, but the university enforces a dress code. The university tries to demonstrate professionalism. I want to look like a leader but an approachable person who can be helpful.

Some librarians reported that their ideal work outfit is very different from what they normally wear day to day (24 percent). Most of the responses stated that they wanted to be more relaxed in their attire or that they simply cannot afford the expensive contents of their ideal wardrobes. Twenty-seven percent of academic librarians stated that there is a dress code in effect at their institution; less than one percent of those stated that it included a uniform.

Future Research Opportunities

While the librarian survey offered geographically diverse responses, the nature of the student survey warranted the use of a voluntary sample that was geographically narrow and limited in sample size. Due to the demographics of Niagara University, these results are not generalizable. Replication of the student survey with a larger sample and a more diverse population is warranted.

In regard to the images, it is yet unclear how librarians one and two were interpreted by the student population. The images were intended to represent a uniformed look. However, it is unclear whether or not the images were viewed in that sense or simply as professional-looking. Likewise, expanding the pictured librarians to rotate the clothing styles across more librarians and depicting individuals in multiple styles of dress could allow for more refined observations of how our user population encounters librarians.

Additionally, future studies may include moving beyond a survey to actual application of the hypothetical research scenarios with practicing research librarians and surveys taken after reference interactions. These real-life observations can be used to measure how action reflects self-reporting of students in terms of avoiding and initiating reference interactions. The implementation should be sure to control for gender, age, ethnicity, and attire.

Conclusion

The media presents us with what seems to be a constant stream of images and representations, often stereotyped, of aspects of daily life. Through our formative years, we absorb the images we see on television, in the movies, and in other media. These images help shape the way in which we react to and interpret our world. Ideally, every perception, idea, and interpretation we have would be based on prior experience. As this is not always possible, these images then become the basis for our opinions and perceptions of similar situations, people, professions, and other traits associated with the images. However, past experience cannot be discounted when considering the foundation for a person's perceptions, biases, and opinions concerning a certain topic. If an individual interacts with a person demonstrating stereotypical behavior, including wardrobe and appearance, of their profession, gender, age, or other identifiable characteristics, that stereotype will influence all other interactions that individual has with any other member of that group.

Acknowledging that self-reporting gets at only one aspect of students' encounters with librarians, we can come away from this study with some useful observations. Through the surveys administered, it is clear that a student's past personal experience with a librarian is more powerful than media representations. Based on these results, the authors found that cultivation theory does not necessarily apply to the students surveyed in their decision to approach a reference librarian. It appears that prior experience has a stronger effect than media representation when it comes to student perception of librarian service quality. It is clear that the students surveyed, regardless of academic year, perceive our librarians in a positive manner.

However, stereotypes have not been entirely removed from their perceptions. These views are only somewhat influenced by mass media–derived stereotypes of librarianship. Instead, there is a greater emphasis on gender, age, and ethnicity.

Our study suggests that the majority of the college students surveyed prefer librarians to be similar to, or mirror, themselves.[*] Students feel that these librarians will be able relate to common student issues. This mirroring enables students to feel more comfortable and less anxious when asking questions. However, it is not realistic to have only younger staff on hand. The librarian workforce requires diversification. Recently, there has been a record increase of minority student enrollment.[40] If students want librarians who are reflections of themselves, one logical conclusion is that increased diversity among librarians will improve our service to an increasingly diverse student body.

After numerous attempts made by the ALA, the profession remains largely unchanged in terms of gender, disability, age, and ethnicity, to name a few.[41] Perhaps a reevaluation of MacAdam and Nichols's Peer Information Counseling programs could be instituted.[42] The original program consisted of minority upperclassmen who were hired and trained by a librarian supervisor to act as information specialists for their peers. This program was found to be a successful way to lessen student library anxiety through mirroring in the reference encounter. Reimplementation of this program would provide diversification of the library workforce until the profession begins to look like the rest of US population.[†]

Some librarians may be guilty of a self-obsession with existing stereotypes. Even with an occasional accoutrement, librarians' adoption of the stereotypical signifiers does more to encourage the stereotype than it does to assuage it. As evidenced through our study, a patron's perception of a librarian is fundamentally formed through their direct experience. It stands to reason that, when confronted with the stereotypical librarian im-

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[*] Some students also preferred assistance from mature librarians because those librarians reminded them of former instructors or others they held in high regard. However, this was not the majority.

[†] For more discussion of diversifying the academic library workforce, see chapters 7 and 12 in this volume.

age, a patron's preexisting ideas of the stereotype will be emphasized and become ingrained in their perception of the profession thereafter. In short, through our own reinforcement of these media-generated images, either intentionally or otherwise, we are cultivating these stereotypes ourselves.

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