Teaching guide: audience

An introduction to audience theory

The aims of this document are to:

- introduce media audiences and the key points to consider for analysis

- define key theories for study and terminology to be studied and used when analysing audiences

- identify where the audience theory can help with the analysis of close study products (CSPs).

Media audiences can range from one person checking their social media feed to billions watching an event such as a royal wedding unfold on television. The key points to consider include:

- the relationship between the media product and the audience is dynamic and constantly changes

- it is no longer assumed that there is only one way of interpreting a product by the audience

- audiences are no longer seen as mass, they respond in complex and sophisticated ways and are influenced by a range of factors

- audiences are made up of individuals with different social and cultural experiences and backgrounds which will affect the way they perceive and respond to a product

- media industries products are highly aware of their audience and how to attract them

- there are many theories which attempt to explain audience responses to media products.

When studying audiences in relation to the CSPs the following should be considered:

- how audiences are categorised by media industries, by factors such as age, gender, social class and lifestyle

- how media industries and producers target, attract, reach, address and construct audiences

- how media industries target audiences using the content and appeal of the product via marketing, distribution and circulation.

Audience categories

Media industries categorise audiences so they are easily targeted. These categories include age, gender and class. Generally audiences are defined through their demographic profile or their psychographic profile.

Demographic audience profile

An audience is categorised A-E according to their class, income, occupation; categories A–B are the wealthiest and potentially have the highest disposable income.

The socio-economic grade is a classification based on the occupation of the head of the household, this indicates the spending power as shown below:

Social grade	Description	% of the UK
A	High managerial, administrative or professional	4
B	Intermediate managerial, administrative or professional	23
C1	Supervisory, clerical and junior managerial, administrative or professional	29
C2	Skilled manual workers	21
D	Semi and unskilled manual worker	15
E	State pensioners, casual or lowest grade workers, unemployed with state benefits only	8

Psychographic audience profile

This is an audience defined by their values, attitudes and lifestyles (VALs). Young and Rubicam's Four Consumers (four C's) categorises audiences according to their cross cultural characteristics, using their motivational needs and VALs, including security, control, status, individuality, freedom, survival and escape.
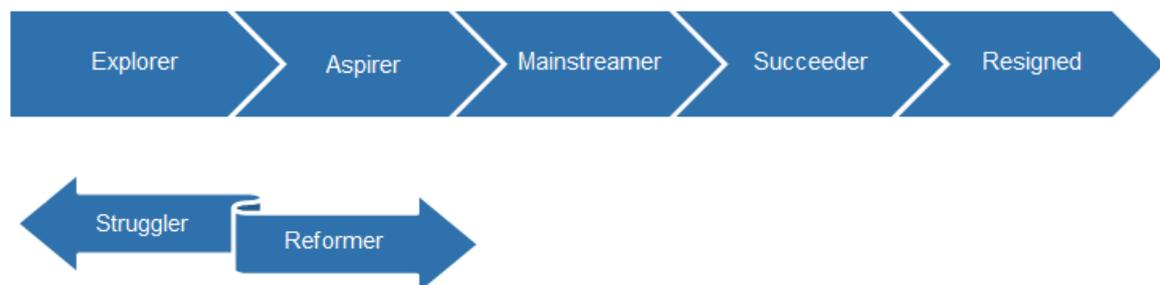
Audience segmentation – lifestyle

Marketers refer to these as AIO's (Activities, Interests and Opinions). Our AIOs dictate our everyday behaviour from where we shop to what we buy.

Media producers will aim products at particular lifestyle groups and develop lifestyle profiles on their target market. Some examples are below:

Third agers

People their 50's plus, retired from a profession, and have a high disposable income with time on their hands. They are often adventurous and like to experiment and seek enjoyment from their remaining years. They are the fastest growing users of the internet.

Tweenagers

A fashionable marketing term for pre-teens, girls in particular aged between seven and 11, a group having substantial purchasing power. They are more worldly wise, fashion conscious and more media-aware than children of this age used to be.

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Generation Y

This is a term used to describe social groups born from 1983 -2007. The main concept behind this group is based around some of the key issues which have occurred within this timeframe such as development of the internet and September 11th. These issues are seen as affecting the values, attitudes and lifestyles of members of that group. Generation Y's key characteristics are a quest for physical security and safety, patriotism, heightened fears, acceptance of change and being technically savvy.

How media products target audiences

When considering how products attract and reach their target audience methods may include:

Technical and audio codes

Editing, music, headlines etc.

The language and mode of address

This might target a specific audience whilst alienating another, for example, Grand Theft Auto's game cover might use lexis and tone specific to an audience of primarily young males who will understand the references and language as they are the intended audience.

The construction

The way in which a text is constructed, such as the opening sequence to a TV drama might use enigmas, multi-stranded narratives and stars associated with that genre.

Platform

An audience can also be targeted through the ways in which a product is marketed and distributed. For example, viral, online and social media campaigns for TV dramas are used to target a younger audience.

The positioning of the audience - this may be through the camera shots and angles, the use of music and other audio codes, the language and mode of address.

How are audiences constructed by media products?

Audience positioning

Media products are constructed to place audiences in a particular position in relation to the product, the product is encoded with meanings and messages through its use of media language, the audience then decode these messages. Different audiences will decode the same products in a different way.

Media products position audiences using technical codes such as cinematography, mode of address and the construction of the product.

Audience response

Producers hope that audiences will all decode media products in the way the producers intended, however, this is not always the case. Audiences may accept or challenge the messages encoded within the product.

Stuart Hall's Encoding/decoding model

Stuart Hall recognised that audiences were active not passive and that it would be a mistake to assume that audiences for media products are passive consumers of what they see, hear or read. He contended that a product might be consumed in a preferred, oppositional or negotiated reading – or a combination of all three.

Jeremy Tunstall – Ways we consume media texts

Primary

Where we pay close attention to the media text, close reading of a magazine/newspaper, or in the cinema watching a film.

Secondary

Where the product is there in the background, we are aware of it but not concentrating on it. This most often applies to radio but also when the TV is on but we are also doing something else such as talking, on mobile phone etc.

Tertiary

Where the product is present but we are not aware of it such as walking past advertising hoardings.

Discussion

Tunstall's ideas are based on traditional media such as film, TV, radio and print. In what ways do you think they can be applied to more recent digital technologies such as internet, mobile phones and blogging/vlogging etc?

Audience theories

Many theories have been devised relating to audience, initially it was thought that audiences were passive and therefore it was assumed that the media had direct impact upon them. In more recent years it has been conceded that audiences are actually active consumers of the media, therefore we can divide audience theories into active vs passive.

Passive theories

- Bandura's – Social Learning Theory (Bobo doll experiment)
- Hypodermic Needle Theory (Magic Bullet)
- Cultivation Theory – (Desensitisation Theory)

Active Theories

- Two Step Flow
- Uses and gratifications
- Reception analysis

Activity one

Who would be the target audience for these texts and why? Discuss with your partner and try to define the profile audience, giving reasons for your decisions.

- Question Time – 10.45pm, Thursdays, BBC1
- I'm a Celebrity…Get Me Out of Here! – ITV
- The Simpsons – 7pm, Monday–Friday, Sky One

Activity two

The uses and gratifications theory as devised by Blumler and Katz states that audiences have four main needs that are gratified by the media; the need for information (surveillance), the need for diversion (escapism or entertainment), the need for personal identity and the need for social interaction.

- Can you identify what media products you consume that gratify these four different needs?
- What different gratifications would a documentary offer its audience?
- Do you think different audiences have different needs to be gratified by media products? Suggest some examples of niche and mainstream audiences and the products they consume.

Key Terminology

Demographic	Audiences are categorised according to income, social class.
Decoding	When audiences interpret a text.
Encoding	What message is communicated by a product's producer.
Negotiated position	The position an audience takes if they predominantly accept some elements of the dominant meaning of a product but not all.
Oppositional position	The position an audience takes if they disagree with the dominant meaning of a product.

Preferred position	The position an audience takes if they accept the dominant meaning of a product.
Psychographic	Audiences are categorised according to their values, attitudes and lifestyle (VALs).
Primary/secondary/tertiary	The attention given to a media product by its consumer.