

# Teaching guide: representation

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## An introduction to representation

The aims of this document are to:

- introduce representation and show how it can be used to analyse media texts
- define key theories and terminology to be studied and used when analysing representation
- identify where representation can help with the analysis of the close study products (CSPs).

This guidance and activities are meant to act as a starting point for teaching representation and you are encouraged to explore this topic further in relation to the CSPs and different media forms.

Representation is the way in which aspects of society and social identity, gender, age and ethnicity are presented to an audience through specific media products using specific media language. How issues and events are represented in the media is also a key issue to consider as is the audience response to those representations. Context should also be considered. It is important to consider the following when addressing the concept of representation across the CSPs.

- What sort of world is represented by the product?
- Do the media construct versions of 'reality' through representation?
- How and why particular social groups are under-represented or even mis-represented?
- How and why are stereotypes used in media products?
- Who creates the representation contained within the product? Are their ideas and values apparent in the product?
- How representations are encoded through media language and contain attitudes, beliefs and values that may be reinforced across a range of products.
- How representations may position audiences and how do those audiences respond?

## Encoding and decoding

The media can be seen to be very powerful and the way in which it represents issues within society links directly to the way audiences interpret them. Repetition of representations over a period of time has the effect of making those representations become 'normalised'. For example, it is often said that the women presented on the front cover of women's magazines and online magazines are unrealistic representations of the 'perfect' woman. Producers of media products use media language to **encode** their ideas and messages through the construction of the representations used in that product and audiences will **decode** those messages accordingly.

Hall's Reception Theory outlines how audiences may interpret the same product in different ways. Some audiences will take a preferred reading, encoding it exactly as the producer intended, others may take a negotiated reading, where they mostly agree with the message but there may be elements of the message they reject. The third reading that Hall identified is that some audiences may disagree with the message of the product and therefore take an oppositional reading of that product. When analysing the CSPs you need to consider potential audience readings of them.

Stereotyping is a process of categorisation, which is needed to make sense of the world, and the amount of information we receive. Everyone will have their own 'prejudiced' ways of seeing and making sense of the world around them in order to navigate their way, hence we all use typifications and belong to groups which can be typified. We make sense of people and make judgements according to gestures, dress, voice etc. Stereotypes work by taking some easily identifiable features of a group and using those features to describe everyone in that group.

Perkins conducted research into stereotypes and concluded that a stereotype:

- is a concept that reflects a group not an individual
- exaggerates shared features of a group
- has features that are understood and recognised as they tend to be repeated across different products and forms
- when negative, tends to prevent the audience from being objective and analytical
- is not always negative, some can be positive
- can convey messages quickly
- can communicate dominant ideas and beliefs held within a society.

## Mediation

Before a product reaches and is consumed by its audience it will have gone through a process of selection and construction, therefore it will have gone through the process of mediation.

This image would be selected by a producer to evoke sympathy from the audience for David Cameron. Samantha and her concerned expression would encourage audiences to empathise with her.



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## Context and purpose

Students need to have an understanding of representation in a product in terms of the context and purpose. The representation in any media product, according to the type of text it is (the context) will have a different purpose. For example, the representation of sports stars on *Match of the Day* will be very different from that of *A League of Their Own*. One is a serious football match report programme and the other is a comedy game show.

## Self-representation

The increase of new digital media platforms offers a variety of opportunities for self-representation. Websites, blogs, vlogs and social media sites such as Instagram and Facebook allow users to represent themselves and update this representation on a regular basis. Users make choices about which images to upload according to how they want others to see them, they can control this version of themselves that they present to others.

David Gauntlett's theoretical perspective focuses on the autonomy of the audience; how they use and respond to different media products. He claims that:

- The media provide users and audiences with the tools to allow them to control the construction of their own identities.
- Previously media products conveyed unambiguous messages about ideal types of identities, nowadays media products offer audiences a much wider range of icons and characters allowing them to choose different ideas.

## Representation of gender

The representation of women in the media changes according to cultural and sociological shifts over time. There are, however, still some stereotypical representations of women where they are defined through the way they are perceived by men and expectations of society. Primarily women are judged by their looks and appearance and media products will offer aspirational images of women. These representations of women will often focus on their sexuality and emotions, many narratives will be based around relationships with husbands and children.



Men are stereotypically represented differently from women in media products, their representation has changed over time and more recent discourse suggest that masculinity is in crisis as men no longer have such clear traditional roles in society. The advent of the 'new man' has meant that different representations of men have emerged. Nonetheless, images of men in the media still predominately focus on body image and physique, physical strength, sexual attractiveness and relations with women as well as power and independence.

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## Representation of ethnicity

Ethnicity is an area where representations have changed dramatically over the years. However, people from other cultures still tend to be defined by their 'otherness', which can be used both positively and negatively. As with other groups, ethnic groups are often stereotyped and defined by their racial characteristics. Often ethnic groups are mis-represented or under-represented, Black and Asian people are often represented as being exotic in some media products. Young black people have often been demonised by some areas of the media through linking them to violence and gang culture. Tokenism may occur when ethnic minorities are represented, for example, the introduction of a black or Asian family in a soap opera storyline may focus on particular aspects of their culture such as arranged marriages.

## Representation of issues and events

The representation of issues and events is important to consider in relation to the values and attitudes of the product in which they feature. If the product's producers think in a particular way then the product may be seen to be biased. The construction of the representation needs to be analysed in terms of the use of media language within the product such as: mode of address, anchorage, visual, technical and audio codes etc. Issues of mediation will need to be taken into account. Opportunities for the producers to encode messages and whether these messages reflect the dominant ideology of that media producer must always be considered. The product can be seen as an opinion leader in that it offers a particular, constructed view of an issue or event.



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### Activity one

Representations in print advertising.

Choose a print advert and analyse the representation that has been constructed. Consider and analyse the following:

- who is being represented, in what way and for what purpose?
- what messages is this advert conveying to the audience?
- are there any stereotypes being perpetuated in this advert? Are there different ways of interpreting the representation in this advert, if so what are they and why?

### Activity two

Choose a news story about an event and look at the portrayal of this story in two different newspapers. Consider and analyse the following:

- what decisions have the editorial team made about how to represent this event?
- how has the main image been used to communicate messages to the audience?
- what does the representation of the event tell you about the attitudes, beliefs and values of the newspaper?
- how is language used to construct the representation of the events shown (anchorage)?
- how may audiences interpret and understand the representations in these newspapers?
- do the two representations differ from each other?

More theoretical perspectives and enabling ideas that can be used to further develop an understanding of representation at A-level include:

- the male gaze and female gaze
- post-feminism
- sexualisation and raunch culture
- feminism: gender and power, gender as discourse (Van Zoonen), intersectionality (hooks)

- gender performativity (Butler)
- cultural Imperialism
- orientalism
- ethnicity and postcolonial theory (Gilroy).

### Key terminology

Construction	How a product is created – what aspects of media language are used.
Context	The aspects that surround a product at the time of its construction.
Decoding	When audiences interpret a text.
Encoding	What message is communicated by a product's producers.
Mediation	The decision process behind the construction of a media product.
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.
Stereotyping	The construction of traits associated with groups of people, can be positive and negative.
Tokenism	A superficial representation of groups who are often underrepresented in society.