



A-LEVEL MEDIA STUDIES

7572/2 Paper 2
Report on the Examination

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Overview

There was clear evidence across the paper that, despite the difficult situation facing teachers and students over the last two years, students were very well prepared for the paper, engaging with the subject through thoughtful and relevant responses. This is obviously the result of a great deal of hard work by centres.

Across the questions, students demonstrated an appropriate balance of knowledge and understanding of the theoretical frameworks, specific theorists and ideas, and were able to use the Close Study Products (CSPs) to demonstrate this understanding. It was very positive to see that, on the whole, students avoided rehearsing ‘facts’ about the CSPs, using them instead to provide evaluations and arguments about the frameworks, which are the focus of the assessment.

It is important that students are able to develop arguments, evaluate and make judgements about theoretical approaches and concepts, something that is required in achieving the higher levels. In their studies and in preparing for the exam, students should note that Question 4 is a synoptic assessment where they should draw on their knowledge from across the theoretical frameworks. Media Studies is, by its nature, a synoptic subject so lends itself to this approach.

Students should be reassured that the space provided in the answer booklet should be sufficient to produce a very successful response. Students should make sure their work is focused on the question and that it is analytical rather than descriptive.

The following provides information on the responses to each question. Please note that there is also detailed indicative content for each question included in the mark scheme available on the secure area of the AQA website.

Question 1

In this question, students were tested on their knowledge and understanding of the framework of Media Language through their ability to analyse an unseen media product, using postmodern ideas and approaches. The contextual information is deliberately kept to a minimum and no prior knowledge of the product is required (though it will always relate to one of the forms assessed on this paper)

Students did seem to enjoy analysing this image and clearly had a good understanding of the ideas specified, with many of them confidently attributing them to Baudrillard (although there was no requirement to do so). It was important to link the discussion back to the image each time and to resist the temptation to discuss the concept of postmodernism more generally.

Many answers focused on the way in which simulation and hyperreality created an exaggerated and ‘fake’ world of warfare by taking recognisable elements – the soldier, armour, fire etc – and blurring the line between fantasy and reality. Many students discussed the effect of this on the audience, arguing that this type of image begins to replace the reality of war with – some argued – a more glamorised version. An effective approach was to discuss how simulation is central to the design and experience of video games, the repeated, generic nature of these images an important part of the construction of hyperreality.

It's important for students to remember the relatively low tariff for this question and to make sure they remain question focused and concise.

Question 2

The focus of the question was to assess students' knowledge and understanding of postcolonial theory and, though reference to their CSPs, draw judgements and conclusions as to how valid the claims made by the theory are. This meant that students needed to refer to postcolonial theory (identified with prompt in the question) and evaluate its validity within the wider theoretical framework of representation. No specific theorist was referred to in the question (and it was possible for students to demonstrate understanding without referencing any particular theorist) but students tended to focus on the ideas and theories of Paul Gilroy such as double consciousness. Students could also draw on the other areas covered under the term postcolonial theory in the specification, such as cultural imperialism, multiculturalism, marginalisation and otherness (alterity).

Students tended to follow the instruction to 'refer' to (rather than to analyse) the CSPs and used them to give evidence for their arguments around the validity – or otherwise – of postcolonial theory.

Successful responses demonstrated knowledge and understanding of the theory which was often set up with a brief overview in the introduction, referencing how postcolonial theory illuminated the way in which media – and the wider culture – is still shaped by the history of slavery and empire and, some students argued, an unwillingness to move out of that past. This then provided a firm foundation for the evaluation of the theory through reference to the magazines so that the two were integrated. It was important for students to address the question of the validity of the theory. There was no 'right' answer and students were not expected to argue either way in terms of validity, but to make a convincing case for whichever argument they chose.

Students were able to draw judgements and conclusions by considering the 'Speaking Out' articles in *Oh Comely* which featured a diverse range of representation in terms of race and ethnicity, which were predominantly considered to be evidence that postcolonial theory was outdated – that the media is much more progressive and equal in its representation. There were also some perceptive evaluations of this position, with responses arguing that some of the magazine's coverage of race and ethnicity still reinforced stereotypes of the 'other', particularly evident in the article on female genital mutilation. Many responses also put forward the argument that the front cover – the selling point of the magazine – still featured an idealised white woman (in quasi military clothes).

In testing the validity of the theory in *Men's Health* magazine, many students argued that the dominance of the representation of white males (in this case a specific type of hypermasculine ideal) was a form of othering, that the lack of representation of different races and ethnicities was evident that postcolonial theory was still valid. The discussion of absence was a very productive approach with students drawing on concepts such as binary oppositions to further the argument. Responses referred to the way the magazines characterised the men as heroes and that where there was diversity – such as in age – this was still in the context of whiteness as the dominant race. There were some interesting counter arguments with reference to the use of non-white cover stars across recent editions and the nature of Hearst as a global industry meaning that it has to address diverse audiences.

The cover star – Vin Diesel – proved a source of debate and contention. The ambiguity of the star's racial and ethnic heritage meant that a range of arguments and interpretations were valid (including that he is a white man who carries the connotations of his race on the front cover). There did seem to be a majority opinion that Vin Diesel is mixed race and therefore his representation on the cover as an idealised male was a subversion of postcolonial representation. However, this

argument was also often complicated with students arguing that he was represented as a movie star which transcended his race which was being all but airbrushed from the image. An interesting analysis was made that Vin Diesel's mixed race was important but that it was being used as spectacle in a way reminiscent of racist tropes found in minstrelsy.

Weaker responses tended to display confusion about the theory as well as the wider issues of representation and therefore weren't able to evaluate the position proposed in the question. It was possible to construct a basic to satisfactory response through focusing on what the representations were, but higher bands needed to have reference to evaluation. Some responses did move more into the area of the representation of gender which meant that they lost question focus. However, there were certainly areas of overlap in discussing the meaning of white males and females in the context of race and ethnicity. Quite a number of responses drew on bell hooks's idea of intersectionality and, while this isn't specifically within the area of postcolonial theory, it is part of the representation framework and was considered a valid approach to use.

An effective aspect of evaluation was to consider the way that industry contexts shaped representations, with some astute points about the demands of global multimedia companies versus the aims of an independent institution such as Iceberg Press. It was also noted that the more diverse representations appeared in a magazine with a niche audience which has now ceased publication.

Question 3

Students needed to draw on their knowledge of the relationship between media products and the social and cultural contexts which produced them and to evaluate the extent to which they agreed with the statement. This was an analysis question and students did need to make some detailed reference to the medial language aspects of the websites to support their points. This can be targeted rather than extensive and some effective examples included a story from *The Voice* website which featured an image of Boris Johnson in front of the union flag/jack and the vintage aesthetic featured on the *Teen Vogue* website. Reference could also be made to the design layout of the websites including featured images and key navigation features.

The question required a focus on the theoretical framework of audience within contexts in order to consider to what extent the ability to maintain an audience entailed responding to social and cultural contexts. In responding to the 'to what extent' direction, students needed to make judgements and draw conclusions as to the nature of the relationship and whether other factors contributed to targeting and maintaining audiences. Students were clearly able to engage with the question and the CSPs, providing many examples of how the online media could be linked to wider issues – but this didn't always translate into the necessary evaluation of the statement. There was lots of evidence that students were comfortable with the definitions of contexts and were able to draw on relevant examples. Most answers referred to changes in technology which led to a move online for both CSPs and this was fine – particularly when linked to changes in audience behaviour and consumption ('end of audience' theories proved particularly helpful here). Where there was confusion it tended to be that students understood responding to social and cultural contexts as being about the frequency of updates on the websites.

Many answers referred to *The Voice* as an example of a media product whose existence was provoked by a response to social and cultural contexts, with thoughtful reference to relevant events such as the Brixton riots and 'sus' laws as a catalyst for the founding of the newspaper and then website. This argument was continued with evidence of the way in which *The Voice* fulfils a unique role in contemporary UK media through its address to a Black British audience, focusing on social and contexts which are relevant to them. This included reference to cultural phenomena such as

black sports and music stars as well as changes in society which had (arguably) led to greater racial equality. Clearly there are overlaps in the definitions of social and cultural contexts and students weren't expected to categorise their examples. *The Voice's* coverage of developments which could also be characterised as political – such as the Black Lives Matter movement and the Windrush immigration scandal – were also effectively used as evidence of the way the website responded to changes in the society and culture. In drawing judgments and conclusion there was a view that *The Voice* didn't have to do very much to maintain its audience given the lack of competition for the audience. While this was a valid argument, there were also more sophisticated approaches which argued that *The Voice* had a difficult job to address its traditional, older audience (the Religion section was pointed to as relevant to this group) while attracting a younger audience more interested in a changing society. There were also useful points about the ownership of the website showing how despite being a small, independent organisation they had been able to use the move to digital to attract an international audience.

While there were a variety of views about *The Voice's* relationship to its audience, the great majority of students were clear that *Teen Vogue's* success relied on it reflecting the changing contexts – specifically as it affected its youth audience. Examples of this included the shift from focusing on fashion and celebrity to covering issues such as #metoo and the environment. It was noted that *Teen Vogue* addressed their audience as activists as well as consumers and there were some thoughtful points about the overlap between the two. Effective responses linked their points to the industry context, arguing that global corporations need to address the largest audience they can in order to make profits – at times questioning how much the content of *Teen Vogue* had really changed. There were also high-level approaches to considering the relationship between industry and audience for both CSPs, debating the extent to which producers are leading or following wider contexts.

The term 'woke' was often used to define the audiences for both websites and, given the contested nature of the term, it would be good if students were encouraged to unpack its meaning and connotations.

Question 4

This question is always the synoptic question (and is identified as such on the cover of the exam) where students are expected to draw on their knowledge across the media frameworks. They aren't expected to address these equally (or even all four!) but it is a chance to explore the CSPs across a range of concepts and issues – hopefully allowing the student to select their own relevant approach to the question. It was notable that students did tend to focus on describing aspects of representation – which of course was a clear focus of the question – whereas a more synoptic approach would have helped to develop an exploration of why the representations were selected. Thinking about how representations are shaped by media language (narrative and genre etc.), the nature of the industry and the target audience led to more successful answers.

It was clear that all the CSPs allowed students to access many examples – particularly about the way women were represented, but male characters were also used as points of comparison. Weaker responses took a fairly literal approach to the question, describing the examples of gender representation in the chosen programmes and arguing whether they suggested equality or not. A development of this approach did allow students to make judgment and draw conclusions about the extent to which the media did suggest that society had gender equality or not. Weaker responses did seem to struggle to discuss whether a programme might be reinforcing inequalities or commenting on them and this would have been helpful in addressing the question beyond the descriptive.

Higher level responses were able to take the proposition in the question and consider it from a variety of approaches. Effective arguments considered the relationship between representation and reality asking whether it is possible for the media to reflect reality, considering whether the media leads or follows changes in society. Discussion also included the way other aspects might shape the type of representations used, considering the nature of the industry, audience and genre in constructing representations. Examples included the subversion of the dominant male detective character in *No Offence*, *The Killing* and *Witnesses* (though several students argued that the female detective has now become an equally familiar representation in the crime thriller), with some perceptive arguments about the way in which *No Offence* actually misrepresents ideas of equality in society through its female dominant police force.

Referencing genre conventions was a productive way to consider the issue with reference to the female victim as part of the conventions of the genre. There was some very thoughtful analysis of the way that *No Offence*'s use of comedy might be seen to undercut the representation of equality, but also how the central character's use of feminine props (stilettos, lipstick) drew attention to the idea of gender as performance. *Deutschland 83* was used to refer to the way that representations of gender subverted expectations about East and West Germany – the historical and political nature of the subject encouraged students to demonstrate how representations are used ideologically, which would be a productive approach across all CSPs. The focus on industry as part of a synoptic response meant that students noted that the BBC production (and 'state of the nation' drama), *Capital* had to provide a range of representations which included gender, age and ethnicity, further complicating the relationship between representation and reality.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.