



A-Level Media Studies

7572/2

Report on the examination

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Overview

There continues to be a positive response to the demands of the Media 2 paper with students bringing a critical approach to the questions and using the longer format responses to explore contemporary media debates with insight and nuance. As noted in last year's report, there is evidence of a productive balance between the focus on the primary content of the specification – the four media frameworks – and the close study products which are used to explore these. This is clearly the result of centres feeling confident to use the frameworks to explore key debates in media studies rather than feeling limited by the set products. The aim of media studies as a subject is to examine the relationship between the media and the society which produces it and there was plenty of evidence of this in student responses. As is highlighted below, the focus of differentiation in the questions is the ability to evaluate and to make judgments and draw conclusions about debates, theories and approaches, rather than to simply describe features of the media products. The emphasis on this also means that there was little opportunity for rote answers – although of course there are common 'facts' about the close study products.

It should be noted that the structure of the paper has – like any A level exam – features of the predictable and unpredictable. There is more detail below in considering the requirements of each question, but it is the case that the exam will cover all the theoretical frameworks. Q1 will always be an unseen text (presented as print) and will always assess the Media Language framework. Question 4 will always be the synoptic question where students are expected to draw on their knowledge across all the theoretical frameworks. Question 2 and 3 will each focus on one media framework with Q3 also drawing on contexts. The close study products will be assessed across Questions 2, 3 and 4. There are four forms studied for the component – Television, Video Games, Magazines, Online, social and participatory media – three of the four will be assessed on each paper.

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

Figure 1 is a poster for the Netflix drama series *High Seas* (2020).

Analyse **Figure 1** using the following ideas from narratology:

- narrative codes
- 'character types'.

This question assessed AO2 1, which meant students had to:

Apply knowledge and understanding of the theoretical framework of media studies to analyse media products through the use of academic theories

(9 marks).

Question 1 is the only short answer on the paper and will always test knowledge and understanding of the framework of media language. Students should recognise the relatively small number of marks attached to this question when planning how much time to give to it and how much to write. The contextual information is deliberately kept to a minimum and no prior knowledge of the product – in this case a Netflix advert for the series *The High Seas* – is required (though it will always relate to one of the forms assessed on this paper).

Students were being assessed on aspects of narratology (character types and narrative codes) which is part of the Media Language framework. Answers did need to refer to both aspects, but this didn't need to be equal and clearly there are areas of overlap across the two. There was lots of evidence of knowledge and understanding, with students using the specialist terminology of narrative approaches to identify enigmas, conflict, equilibrium and the disruption of the looming dark clouds (literal and metaphorical). Character types were identified in the roles of the protagonist and antagonist and theories of binary opposition were used to explore the groupings by gender. Students often applied Propp's narrative theory to the characters, which was relevant but did become problematic where students felt they had to define *all* of Propp's character types. Highest level responses were able to analyse the narrative codes through precise reference to aspects of media language such as the framing and positioning of characters, costume signifiers and the setting, which all contributed to the understanding of narrative and character.

Less successful responses tended to be descriptive or speculative, imagining what might happen to the characters rather than focusing on the evidence. It is also important to keep question focused – sometimes students were tempted to move into areas of representation which weren't relevant, particularly given the limitations of time.

Question 2

Post-feminist theory argues that the key aims of feminism have been achieved and therefore there is no need to continue or to expand the feminist movement.

How valid are these claims in explaining the representations in video games?

Refer to your video game Close Study Products *Horizon Forbidden West* and *The Sims FreePlay* in your answer.

This question assessed AO1 1b, AO2 2 and AO2 3 which meant students had to:

Demonstrate understanding of the theoretical framework of media (**10 marks**).

Apply knowledge and understanding of the theoretical framework of media to:

- evaluate academic theories (**10 marks**)
- make judgements and draw conclusions (**5 marks**).

Over half of the marks for this question are attached to assessing the ability to take up a critical position on theoretical approaches; to show the ability to evaluate and to make judgements and draw conclusions. There was a great deal of evidence that students were well prepared to do that, tackling the question from different angles. The debate for evaluation was drawn from the framework of Representation, focusing on feminist theoretical approaches, and students overwhelmingly showed their understanding of this area of the specification.

There were two main ways in which students approached the question, some interpreted the statement to mean that the set products could be viewed as evidence of the achievement of feminism while others considered the ongoing debates around representation in video games to be part of a dynamic response to a society which is still not fully equal – both these approaches were valid and thoughtful. Less successful approaches focused on outlining the types of representation present and, while these answers could still be rewarded, they weren't able to address the focus on evaluation.

Many students used their knowledge of theorists such as Lisbet Van Zoonen, bell hooks and

Laura Mulvey to debate the extent to which feminism had achieved its aims supported by reference to the two games. This led to some nuanced arguments – and an encouraging lack of consensus – about the extent to which for example, Van Zoonen's and Mulvey's analysis of the representation of women as reinforcing patriarchal values could be applied to the games under discussion. In evaluating these theories, students found it productive to consider the role of the game player as well as the institutional context. While there was a lot of argument that *Horizon Forbidden West* was evidence of a greater equality in the context of feminism, there were also questions about the wider audience response to the character of Ahoy which revealed elements of sexism and misogyny. Some higher-level responses questioned the limitations of feminism itself as a movement and theoretical position, using an intersectional approach – often citing bell hooks – to argue that feminist theory had a very narrow view of equality. Both of the games in question provided a range of examples in terms of diversity in gender, race, sexuality etc. to evaluate this position.

The great majority of students were very familiar with *Horizon Forbidden West* and *The Sims Freeplay*, the most successful responses used them to explore the debate while less successful answers tended to identify the areas of representation which often led to a more implicit – rather than explicit – question focus. There was clearly a lot of relevant material to draw on from the set products with students confidently analysing the representations in both with the best answers placing them in the wider media landscape– many answers referred to 'gamergate' as evidence that the aims of feminism hadn't been achieved. There was also useful consideration of how games were played, describing the power relationship between game designer and gamer which were linked to the debate. This was particularly fruitful in considering the ability of the player to select the character's journey in *The Sims Freeplay* which, some students argued, could lead to a more or less progressive representation in terms of genre. Students struck a good balance on the whole between reference to the games, relevant aspects of the frameworks and the wider media landscape. For example, some responses usefully complicated the debate by arguing that as global products, the games would be received in different ways in different countries and cultures – *The Sims*, in particular, was used to show how feminism might not be interpreted in the same way globally. While there was a lack of agreement as to the extent to which the games could be considered feminist, there was a healthy skepticism about the motivations of the games industry, with some responses arguing

that the seemingly progressive representation was driven by the needs of a capitalist ideology rather than a feminist one.

Question 3

Audience responses to media products are shaped by social and cultural contexts

To what extent does an analysis of your magazine Close Study Products GQ and The Gentlewoman support this view?

This question assessed AO2 1 and AO2 3 which meant students had to:

Apply knowledge and understanding of the theoretical framework of media to analyse media products, including in relation to their contexts and through the use of academic theories (**15 marks**).

Apply knowledge and understanding of the theoretical framework of media to make judgements and draw conclusions (**10 marks**).

This question will always ask students to use the theoretical frameworks to analyse the media products in relation to contexts and theories. In this instance the framework was Audience, and the contexts were social and cultural (the relevant contexts for each Close Study Product is in the CSP booklet on the AQA exam board website). All the essay questions on this paper also assess the skill of evaluation, here in the form of the command phrase 'To what extent'.

As ever with media studies, a question about audience response is likely to overlap with some aspects of representation in considering how audiences are targeted through the content, but it is important for students to keep question focused. Definitions of social and cultural contexts can also be quite porous, and the great majority of students used this to their advantage, defining how they were going to explore the contexts. Dominant approaches were related to changing social and cultural norms around gender and sexuality, as well as increased concern about the environment and lifestyle changes. Some students looked at the changing media landscape of magazine publishing as a context, defining the shift in consumption as part of cultural context, which was a valid approach.

The most successful approaches to the question recognised the importance of identifying how they were defining 'response', which then enabled them to debate the 'To what extent' aspect more logically. There were a variety of ways in which students could explore the nature of the

response, drawing on the media framework. This included reference to the possibility of different interpretations, uses and gratifications and socialisation, all of which provided logical ways to link the response to the contexts (or argue against the link). A particularly productive approach was to define response through the application of Stuart Hall's reception theory. Here, the central premise of the theory – that audiences are shaped by a variety of influences and will respond in unpredictable ways – provided an excellent foundation to explore the debate. In evaluating the relationship between the magazines, the audience response and contexts, students raised relevant questions around oppositional readings and to what extent these were possible (citing the effects theory). They also argued that response would depend on the reason for buying the magazine and that audiences would have different experiences of contexts and questioned whether there might be individual values which endured beyond specific context. All of these approaches demonstrated critical, often sophisticated responses to the topic area.

Students were very familiar with the close study magazines and were able to analyse them in detail to demonstrate how responses were shaped. This analysis often referred to the way in which audiences were addressed by particular representations which were in turn linked to social and cultural context. *GQ* magazine's focus on a more fluid approach to masculinity and sexuality was often interpreted as aligning with the audience's values in the context of a more progressive society and thus leading to a positive response (including the purchase of the magazine). The focus in this argument was the front cover (it's clear that for many students the pinnacle of Robert Pattinson's career was his supporting role in the *Harry Potter* franchise) and the interview with Jonathan Bailey. While the focus here was understandably the reference to his sexuality, some responses used the very high-cost fashion items as an example of how audiences may respond in unintended ways (disapproval of such extreme materialism) due to their contexts. Many students were also able to argue more generally that not all audiences would respond as positively as the magazine intended, providing evidence that audience response wasn't merely shaped by context – or a uniform response to that context. Similar, valid approaches to analysis were taken in discussing *The Gentlewoman's* take on environmental issues with more complicated responses explored in the representation of the boxer Ramala Ali where many students argued that there would likely be a negotiated or oppositional response to the feminist representation of boxing.

There was evidence of a widespread view that social and cultural contexts are characterised by increasingly progressive values in issues of equality and diversity which probably needs some examination. Some students did question this position, referring to recent international developments around women's rights to bodily autonomy as well as debates around nationality which challenged that view. Again, this was useful in considering how contexts are not experienced in the same way by everyone – a valid evaluation of the question.

Question 4

'To be successful, media products must offer opportunities for audience interactivity'

To what extent do you agree with this statement?

Refer to your online social media products *The Voice and Social Media Presence for Taylor Swift* in your answer.

This question assessed AO1 1a, AO1 1b and AO2 3, students needed to:

- Demonstrate knowledge of the theoretical framework of media (**5 marks**).
- Demonstrate understanding of the theoretical framework of media (**10 marks**).
- Apply knowledge and understanding of the theoretical framework of media to make judgements and draw conclusions (**10 marks**).

Question 4 is the synoptic question where students are expected to draw on their knowledge across the media frameworks. They aren't expected to address these equally, but it is a chance to explore the CSPs across a range of concepts and issues, selecting the aspects which are of most relevance and/or interest to the student.

This was the first assessment of the new CSP examining the online presence of Taylor Swift and this clearly provided a wealth of examples which students used very well to explore their ideas. The extent to which *The Voice* offered opportunities for audience interactivity was well debated and many students questioned whether it could be defined as successful – clearly a valid argument. As with questions 2 and 3, the best responses were critical and evaluative. They

avoided simply describing the examples of interactivity and instead used them to explore this aspect of audience behaviour in the wider media landscape.

Productive responses to the statement were clear about how the terms ‘success’ and ‘interactivity’ were to be characterised. Success could be defined in relatively straightforward commercial terms – tickets sold, music streamed, merchandise bought for Taylor Swift and website traffic, comments for *The Voice*. Success was also considered in terms of creating a connection with the audience, a form of community which would make the audience feel ‘seen’, which applied to the experience of black audiences for *The Voice* and a young female audience for Taylor Swift. Interactivity ranged from relatively limited audience behaviour such as replying to activity by the singer or website to – in the case of Taylor Swift’s fans – creating memes, social media posts and fiction. The extent to which buying tickets or merchandise could be seen as interactive was debated, with some responses making the thoughtful argument that conglomerates attempted to make being a consumer feel like an active audience response. This was a productive approach, arguing that major industries were transforming something authentic into something false. In exploring the question of audience interactivity many students demonstrated their good level of knowledge and understanding of end of audience theories, with a focus on Shirky and Jenkins. They were also able to debate the effects model in questioning the extent to which audiences could be seen as interactive.

It was important that students engaged with the ‘To what extent’ aspect of the question. Some students approached this very thoughtfully by considering different types of success. This was particularly the case with *The Voice* where students argued that representing a marginalised group often ignored by other media was a more important measure of success and this was part of the newspaper’s history. The focus on news and an older audience, it was argued, meant that a focus on audience interactivity wasn’t appropriate. In considering Taylor Swift’s success a variety of alternative factors were suggested such as talent and commercial appeal as well as the backing of a global conglomerate within a capitalist system (‘it’s not the interactivity it’s the market’ as one response put it). In this context of evaluation several responses also noted that Swifties were making their own responses rather than being given opportunities by the artist, as Swift has reduced the number of interactive options – a result it was argued of negative audience responses.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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