

# A-LEVEL MEDIA STUDIES

MEST3 Critical Perspectives  
Report on the Examination

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## **SECTION A**

Section A of this year's exam was the magazine front cover and website home page of Kerrang! The questions encouraged students to critically analyse the products and in Question 2 and 3 to address the more complex ideas of media, issues, debates, theories and wider contexts.

The focus of the three questions is:

### **Question 1 Media concepts**

Use the unseen products to answer a question on concepts – forms (including media language, genre and narrative), representations, institutions, audiences or values. This year's question was on media language and institution, in particular branding.

Students are rewarded for:

- analysis of both media products, preferably detailed analysis with detailed reference to the products
- understanding of concepts, in particular in this question media language and institution – brand image.

### **Question 2 Media issues and debates**

Use the unseen products to answer a question on media issues and debates. Students may refer to other media products to support their answer. The 'may' is intended to encourage students to move beyond the two unseen exam products and include examples of and from media products other than the two exam products.

Students are rewarded for:

- evaluation using media issues/debates/theories
- supporting their answers with a range of examples.

### **Question 3 Wider contexts**

Use the unseen products to answer a question on wider contexts. Students should refer to other media products to support their answer. The 'should' is intended to tell students they will be expected to move beyond the two unseen products and include other examples.

Students are rewarded for:

- evaluation using wider contexts
- supporting their answers using a range of examples from other relevant media products.

For Question 2 and 3 students can include examples from a wide range of sources, for example their individual case studies, their MEST4 coursework, AS work, other AS and A-Level class work and from their own media use. There were lots of really up to date and topical examples that students used to show their interest in the media.

Students should read the introductions to the two media products carefully to provide useful background that can help answer the questions. For example the range of platforms used by Kerrang! would be useful for Question 3, the target audience information would be useful for Question 1 and 3. However students must use the information to answer the question, not just repeat the information in their answer. Students who did this wasted valuable time.

Students should also be reminded to take time and care to read the Section A questions before they look at the products, and again before they answer the questions. They should underline the key words and make notes using these key words as they read the two products. For example in Question 2 students needed to answer both parts of the question on representation and audience.

Students are rewarded if they make a number of different points. For the higher levels a range of different points is required in each question. They cannot achieve a high a level if they only include one point in an answer, even if that one point is made well. This was a weakness in some answers to Question 3, with only a general focus on reaching a larger audience.

There were lots of good answers in Section A.

### **1. How does Kerrang! create a strong brand identity in these print and online products?**

Answers to Question 1 were rewarded for explaining what the brand image is and then analysing how it was created in detail in the two products.

Good answers included reference to some of the following points:

- explanations of the brand image. Good responses explored a range of ideas linked to words such as individual, rebellious, alternative, against social norms, self-expression, stand out from the crowd, outsiders, loud, confident. Sophisticated answers discussed how it created a community of people invited to buy in to the brand and share the brand values
- media language that communicated the genre, for example the photos, names and coverlines of rock bands, the advertising, eg The Darkness game, the use of dark colours to reflect the rock genre, the name Kerrang!
- the repetition of the distinctive Kerrang! logo. Stronger answers analysed it in detail, commenting on the distressed, grunge style font, the exclamation mark and name that communicated the loud, anarchic and rebellious brand image
- the use of direct address to encourage an intimate relationship between the brand and their audience
- the names and photos of famous bands from the rock genre were used. Some students needed to develop this valid but very straightforward point. For example the use of well known more mainstream bands and smaller up and coming ones to promise the audience Kerrang! are 'in the know'. This was reinforced with words such as, 'special issue'. The word 'new' was repeated on the website home page promising the audience Kerrang! is an up-to-date brand
- the tattoos that communicated the brand image of rebellion against the norms of society and of individual self expression. Higher level answers didn't lose sight of the humour used on the front cover

- the consistent house style across platforms, including the use of language, the logo and brand colours to create and reinforce a strong multi-platform brand image
- the use of social media logos to promise a community of like-minded people
- sophisticated answers also discussed the more gossipy side of the magazine. Kerrang! showed a brand image of being a serious music magazine but still promised the celebrity and gossip side of the music industry with, for example 'Rockstar confessions' and 'the stars come clean on love, life and regret!'.

**2. How is the representation of masculinity constructed to appeal to the audience?  
You may also refer to other media products to support your answer.**

This question was answered well by almost all students. The best answers addressed all parts of the question, the representation of masculinity and the appeal to the audience. Weaker answers just focused on one part.

Good answers focused sharply on a range of media debates, issues and theories, with lots of examples to support their points. Weaker answers did solid analysis on the representation and audience appeal of the two exam products, but didn't develop these in to wider media issues or debate points, about for example, masculinity in the media in general. Question 2 is assessing media issues, debates and theories so this is what really separates the lower and higher level answers.

Good answers included reference to some of the following points:

- how the representation of masculinity supported dominant representations and values. For example the advert for a violent game and the dominance of men on the cover and in the rock genre. Also the values of rebellion in the images and coverlines, stronger answers linked this to the appeal of the rock genre
- how the representation challenged dominant representations and values about masculinity. For example the sexualisation of men as objects for women to look at, although this was undercut by the humour. Sophisticated answers developed this in to a discussion about the use of sex to sell and debates about increasing sexualisation. Dominant representations were also challenged by the focus on emotions, 'confessions' and the vulnerability in the key image
- higher level answers argued that Kerrang! did both and their answer was complex
- sophisticated answers discussed how the rock genre's ideal of masculinity sometimes challenged mainstream dominant values, for example with the long hair and skinny body
- sophisticated answers discussed how masculinity has changed and is changing, including a range of often contradictory values and ideologies
- higher level answers discussed how representations of masculinity were constructed to appeal to different audiences. For example the sexualisation of the male cover star to appeal to women as an object or the appeal to a male audience as an aspirational or escapist figure.

Good answers also linked this to other products that used a similar or different representation to appeal to their particular audience

- sophisticated answers evaluated how the alternative representations of masculinity were constructed to appeal to an audience that saw themselves as individual, different, outsiders and against the norms of society. This also fitted in to Kerrang!'s brand image
- there was a wide range of examples used to support points made. Good answers used their examples to explain and support points, weaker answers just described the example

Examples included, other men's magazines such as Attitude, Men's Health, Zoo and Nuts. Women's magazines such as Grazia, Comsmopolitan, Vogue and Heat and the website heatworld. David Beckham was used as an example including his appearance on magazine front pages and advertising campaigns. Action films such as Skyfall and the James Bond franchise, The Expendables and comic book/superhero films such as The Avengers, the reboot of the Spiderman franchise and the new Superman. Reality TV programmes such as TOWIE were explored. Plus a wide range of music artists and bands and their videos from a range of different genres, the most popular of which was Rihanna.

Theories that were successfully used to support points included Mulvey Male Gaze, Butler Gender Trouble was used especially well, Uses and Gratifications, Hall Encoding Decoding, Dyer Star theory, Perkins Stereotypes, Gammon and Marshment Female Gaze, Medhurst Stereotypes.

### **3. How important is it for producers of print products to have a multi-platform presence? You should refer to other media products to support your answer.**

This question was answered well. Good answers focused sharply on a range of wider contexts, with lots of examples from other media products to support their points.

Again what really separated the lower level answers from the mid and higher level ones was the ability not to just describe what a multi-platform presence was, but to develop this into wider contexts points, in particular here social and economic ones.

Good answers included reference to some of the following points:

- the decline of print media and a fall in profits. Sophisticated answers explored the idea that we are in a transitional phase where print and online both exist
- a multi-platform presence media could add value to an already established brand
- online in particular could add more content, be more up to date and easy to access, allow audience interaction and allow commercial opportunities such as merchandise
- there could be cross promotion between platforms, with concepts such as synergy and convergence explored. A consistent house style and branding helped this
- expansion in to online media could meet the needs of an increasingly active audience who expect audience interaction. Higher level answers explored the changes in media consumption. Sophisticated audiences developed this into the idea of creating or building an imagined community, offering a sense of community that is used to market the brand

- new platforms can be used to reach out to new audiences and to further engage and make profit from existing audiences. Social media can offer a good value way of doing this with peer to peer marketing and social media chat
- the rise of tablets and smart phones could signal the return of or help the survival of existing magazine brands with online versions
- multi-platform can allow for global reach and extend the brand to other countries. Sophisticated answers explored the debates about globalisation including cultural imperialism or global village
- the music industry has moved online so it is important for music magazines especially to do this

Higher level answers also explored the downsides of having a multi-platform presence. For example how it could damage profits and lead to the disappearance of the print version and whether print products have yet developed a way to make their online versions profitable. The ability to have this type of complex answer should be encouraged and is a good way of students accessing the higher levels.

There were lots of good up to date and topical examples to support points. The Guardian and the Daily Mail were the most popular examples, plus other newspapers such as The Telegraph, The New York Times, The Independent, The Times. There were also lots of magazine examples, including Heat and Heatworld, Vogue, Cosmopolitan and NME. Examples of companies that had gone out of business because of online competition were included, such as HMV, Game and Blockbuster.

Theories that were successfully used included Gauntlett Web 2.0, Gillmor We Media, Anderson New Media and Audiences, Dyer's Utopian Pleasures of Community, McLuhan Global Village, Robertson Globalisation, liberal pluralism/Marxism debates, post modernism.

## **SECTION B**

Students were asked to choose one out of four possible questions, two from each of the two pre-set topics, Representation and the Impact of New and Digital media.

Students are reminded on the exam paper that they would be rewarded for showing evidence of independent study by using their:

- own individual case study topic
  - own individual media products
- to answer the question.

Students were rewarded for:

- an individual case study with a range of examples
- understanding of representation or the impact of new and digital media
- application of relevant media issues/debates/theories/wider contexts
- focus on the question

For Representation, the most popular group was still young people/teenagers. Other popular social groups were women, people with disabilities, the working class and gay men. Places were often

the place a student was from and in the best answers students included issues such as representation of class, ethnicity, etc. There were many good essays this year on the representation of New York with complex answers and relevant wider contexts. Good representation case studies often had a sharp and original focus, rather than a very general case study. For example rather than the representation of men, a sharper focus on the representation of men in comedy films. Other examples of this included women in games, African Americans in the music industry and men in the horror genre in television and film.

Some weaker case studies, often on footballers, lost their media focus and drifted into discussions about football without clearly applying wider issues to media representations and products. Case studies can also choose a group that includes the study of a number of social groups or places. For example a case study on pirates included exploration of the representation of gender, class and nationality and contrasted factual and fictional representations. Also a case study on the representation of the police included exploration of the representation of gender and nationality. There were also good case studies on the representation of the British Armed Forces, people with a mental illness and travellers, again with lots of interesting issues, debates and wider contexts.

For the Impact of New/Digital Media case studies the most popular was Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. However this sometimes led to very general case studies with a lack of detailed examples or detailed analysis. A sharper focus and a selection of a number of actual media products with detailed analysis would help. For example, the impact of social media on the music industry with a focus on a particular artist or record label with examples of a video from YouTube, a social media page, the official website and an online magazine feature. Or the impact of new and digital media on the television industry with a focus on a particular institution or channel, with examples from a range of TV programmes, their websites and social media. There were many good case studies on the impact of new and digital media on news media. However students do need actual detailed examples and analysis, rather than just a reference to the Arab Spring on YouTube or the attack on Lee Rigby on Twitter.

Some students had very wide ranging case studies and although they were still rewarded for the wide range of examples they used, this made it difficult for some students to write a focused or coherent answer, with the weakest ones ending up as lists of examples with limited evaluation. Schools/colleges should also tell their students not to choose case studies based on a technological development, such as the iPhone, Kindle, or digital photography. There were also a few very weak case studies on companies such as ASOS or Amazon. These case studies did not lead to detailed examples of actual media products/texts and often lacked a media focus. A few schools/colleges are still doing these case studies and seriously disadvantaging their students who often struggled to get out of the lower levels. A few students also had very specific case studies, for example privacy and social media. Such a narrow case study that only focuses on one particular issue makes it very difficult for a student to answer the range of possible questions they might get.

The best case studies were produced by students that had worked hard throughout their course and thought for themselves.

The best case studies included:

- a range of different media products from the three platforms, with different representation/values/genres/producers, etc.
- detailed examples from particular media products with detailed analysis of particular media products
- evidence of research into media debates and issues and relevant wider contexts

- theory applied to media products used to explain and support
- a genuine interest in the case study they had chosen to do, seen by engagement with the issues and their own opinions.

The main ways students achieved higher level marks was by having their own individual case study to answer the question. There is still a minority of schools/colleges doing centre led case studies with only centre led examples. Students from one centre shouldn't all have the same case study. This doesn't allow students to show evidence of independent study, which excludes them from the higher levels. For example a centre all writing answers on the representation of youth, with the same or very similar media products is disadvantaging their students. In addition students who had their own case study were more engaged and more willing to focus on the question, rather than repeat a pre learned answer of descriptive points. All or at least the vast majority of the media products students use to support their answer should also be individual.

Schools/colleges can start the pre-set topics with a class overview on Representation and The impact of New/Digital Media to introduce the topic and may want to do a mini class case study as an example, but then students should do their own individual case study, with their own choice of media products.

Good Section B answers:

- answered the particular question, not writing 'everything I know about my case study'. Stronger answers identified and addressed the key words from the question in their answer and answered the question directly in their conclusion. Students should also answer all parts of the question, not just latch on to a few words. If a student hasn't studied a particular topic, for example representation and globalisation, they should be advised not to answer that question. There is a list of possible question topics in the specification and a checklist grid on the AQA website under Key Materials. Good answers always included a conclusion that answered the question directly, often summarising different arguments and coming to their own conclusion
- included detailed analysis of and references to particular media products, rather than just general examples. For example not just YouTube videos about the Arab Spring, but an example of a particular video with detailed references to a particular scene, shot, mise en scene, etc or not just Sherlock, but a particular scene, shot, mise en scene, etc from a particular episode
- showed a range in their answers. For example referring to a wide range of platforms, preferably all three and/or using products from different genres/institutions/representations/values. Students were also rewarded for referring to a range of media products to support their answers. Answers couldn't achieve the higher levels if they only used one or two
- applied media issues and debates, what does their case study suggest are the current issues in the media? Applied relevant media theories to their case study and media products throughout their answers, using the theory to answer the question and support the point they are making, not just describing a theory. Weaker answers tended to list pre learned centre led theories, that although relevant were not clearly applied to media products or used to answer the question
- included relevant wider contexts and again applying them to their own case study. Weaker answers tended to include lists of facts and statistics or the history of a particular topic with no evaluation or link to the question.

## REPRESENTATION

Good answers didn't lose sight of explaining how their group or place was actually represented in individual products. There is a lot for students to do in MEST3, but they should not forget to analyse and evaluate how their group or place is actually represented. This shouldn't just be one or two points, for example that women are represented as sexual objects and victims, but should aim to include a range of ways that group or place are represented. Higher level answers also included complex and contradictory representations. Higher level answers did this in detail, with in depth examples from media products.

A few weaker answers wrote a very general essay about the representation of their group or place or re wrote a past question they had obviously done in class, rather than focusing on the question form the exam paper.

**4. Does globalisation mean that audiences have a wider range of representations to choose from or does it result in a particular representation being dominant? Use your own case study to evaluate the impact of globalisation on media representations.**

This question was answered with mixed success. Some students had obviously not studied globalisation and their answers showed little understanding of the concept or the issues. They would have been better choosing Question 5.

- Stronger answers analysed and evaluated a range of different representations of their group or place to evaluate the 'wider range of representations' of the question. They could then come to a conclusion on wider range or one dominant. Choosing a variety of media products carefully when planning their case study would help this.
- Good answers came to a complex conclusion, arguing to varying degrees depending on their group or place that there was a dominant representation but also other challenging representations.
- A reasonable case study and satisfactory understanding of representation usually got students in to Level 2. It was the 'why' that really allowed students to achieve the higher level answers. Good answers discussed the reasons why a particular representation dominated or why there was a wider range. They used media issues, debates and wider social, political and economic contexts, to explore this, for example values, ideologies and hegemony, the role and motivations of media producers, the role of audiences, globalisation and cultural imperialism.
- Sophisticated answers discussed the role of audiences and used active audience theories to discuss the different possible readings different audiences could get, but also the power of preferred readings.

**5. How and why does the representation of the group or place you have studied reflect and reinforce dominant values and ideologies.**

This question was more popular than Question 4 and was answered well.

- Most students addressed the values and ideologies of the question. Weaker answers only focused on dominant representations. Students should make sure they develop their research and analysis of the representation of their group or place to values and ideologies.
- Higher level answers discussed the range of representations of their group or place. Higher level answers included some examples that didn't reflect or reinforce. When students are planning their case study they should choose a wide range of examples that represent their group or place in different ways and communicate different values and ideologies.
- Good answers discussed the reasons why representations reflected and reinforced or challenged dominant ideologies. They used media issues, debates and wider contexts, to explore this. Answers really benefited from economic and social wider context reason for the representations.
- Sophisticated answers discussed the role of audiences and used active audience theories to discuss the different possible readings different audiences could get, but also the power of preferred readings.

## THE IMPACT OF NEW/DIGITAL MEDIA

Almost all students showed good understanding of the impact of new/digital media. A minority of weaker students got bogged down in only knowledge of new and digital media and their answers tended to be descriptive lists of products or technological innovations. For example a case study using Twitter doesn't need a detailed description of the history and functions of Twitter, but does need detailed examples of particular Twitter accounts.

### 6. Does your case study suggest that new and digital media have had a positive impact by offering audiences a more diverse range of values and ideologies?

This question was answered well.

- Having a wide range of examples or having a variety of examples of media products obviously allowed students to address the 'diverse' of the question. Choosing a variety of media products carefully when planning their case study would help this.
- Mid-level answers got stuck at the level of 'more diverse' and 'positive impact' of the question. Good answers also addressed the harder concept of values and ideologies not just having a wider range. Carefully reading the question and including detailed analysis and evaluation of their case study products would help them to do this.
- Good answers used this to discuss the changing role of audiences. However some weaker answers repeated an audience question they had obviously practised and didn't answer this question.
- Higher level answers included debate and complexity, including arguments and examples that showed both sides of the argument.
- Stronger answers always included a conclusion that answered the question directly, often again summarising different arguments and coming to their own conclusion.
- Good answers discussed the reasons why there was or there wasn't more diversity using media issues, debates and wider contexts. Economic, political and social wider contexts were particularly useful for this question. For example Marxist/pluralist debates and active/passive audience debates.

**7. New and digital media have led many media producers to involve their audiences more. However audience involvement is only superficial and media producers have ensured they maintain control? Use your case study to evaluate whether new and digital media have changed the role of producers.**

- Almost all answers were able to explore how producers had involved audiences more. Many answers used the example of social media and stronger answers had detailed examples of this rather than just general discussion about YouTube or Twitter. However some weaker answers struggled to move on from this and some just repeated an audience essay they had previously practised.
- Stronger answers addressed audience involvement but kept their focus on the changing role of producers. Higher level answers also addressed the word 'control' and/or superficial or explored the word 'involved', exploring what it meant for audiences from the question. Students should take time and care to read the question, underline the key words and plan their answer.
- Higher level answers included debate and complexity, including arguments and examples that showed both sides of the argument. Sophisticated answers discussed the differences between media producers, with debates about status, credibility, aims, etc.
- Good answers discussed the reasons why the producers' role had changed, using media issues, debates and wider contexts. Economic, political and social wider contexts were particularly useful for this question. Many answers included quite complex debates about pluralism and Marxism and sophisticated answers debated the strengths and weaknesses of both arguments. Issues of globalisation, cultural imperialism and competition, profit motives were also used in sophisticated answers.

## **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

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

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