Media Studies

Representations of Teenagers in Television Teen Dramas

The aims of this Factsheet are to:
* identify the common stereotypes of teenagers
* identify where these stereotypes are evident in contemporary media texts
* discuss what affects these representations

AQA / OCR / WJEC?

Representation is a Key Concept in the AQA specification and is studied in more detail in the A2 unit Representation in the Media. OCR covers issues of representation in the AS Key Media Concepts unit which focuses upon TV Drama and the A2 unit Media and Collective Identity. Representation is a key issue in the WJEC specification as part of the AS Media Representation and Responses unit and the A2 unit Text, Industry and Audience.

Stereotypes of Teenagers

Since the very early depictions of teenagers in the films of the 1950s, young people have suffered from largely negative or one-dimensional representations in the media. These representations have been repeated so often in a variety of texts that they have become stereotypes. There are four main stereotypes of teenagers:

Stereotype	Example
Juvenile delinquents are running out of control on a self-destructive path. Though often from an affluent background, these teenagers become involved in crime and drugs and indulge in promiscuous sex. They are usually brooding, selfish and self-confident, though they often become alienated from their parents and peers as a result of their behaviour. The extreme of this stereotype are the 'teen apocalypse' characters, portrayed as bored, angst-ridden individuals who often act out violently as a result of their circumstances.	**Becky in *Kidulthood* (Dir. Huda 2006)** *(http://uk.movies.yahoo.com/k/Kidulthoood/photos-1848660-1771631.html)*
The **superficial teen** stereotype depicts teenagers as consumed by unimportant school-related problems, such as playing truant, avoiding detentions and attending the prom with a dream date. Rather than being alienated from adults, these teenagers are able to effectively manipulate their clueless parents and dumb teachers. Though the characters are often academic underachievers, they are still smart enough to get their own way eventually. Such characters often learn valuable life lessons, usually helped by a sympathetic and understanding parent, such as being true to themselves and respecting others	**Cher in *Clueless* (Dir. Heckerling 1995)** *(http://www.screenrush.co.uk/film/galerievignette_gen_cfilm=14471&cmediafichier=18608809.html)*
The **dumb teen** is portrayed as drug-addled or socially inept but always idiotic. These characters do not fit in with their peers and choose to live their lives according to their own beliefs, no matter how often they are ridiculed by others.	**Napoleon in *Napoleon Dynamite* (Dir. Hess 2004)** *(http://thecia.com.au/reviews/n/napoleon-dynamite.shtml)*
The **sarcastic, self-aware but bitter** teenager is a more subtly sarcastic character. They are often used in texts to comment upon the inadequacy of the teenage stereotypes and to undermine them. These characters are resentful of the treatment they receive as a result of being young.	**Roland in *Saved!* (Dir. Dannelly 2004)** *(http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/5078337/)*

Activity			
Think of other examples of characters which fit the stereotypes of teenagers from three different types of media text.			
Stereotype of teenagers	*Soap Opera*	*Teen Film*	*Sitcom*
Juvenile delinquent			
Smart but superficial			
Dumb teen			
Sarcastic, self-aware but bitter			

Teenagers on Television

The **genre** of any text will affect how certain groups are represented in the narrative. For example, the generic convention of a horror film means it is necessary for the female characters to behave in certain ways but these representations will be very different to how women are portrayed in romantic comedies. Television genres are no different.

Dawson's Creek (1998 – 2003) can be considered a teen drama series and the nature of the genre necessitates certain representations in the text. Similar to other American teen dramas like *The O.C* (2003 – 2007) and *One Tree Hill* (2003 – present), the characters in *Dawson's Creek* needed to have worries, hopes and aspirations to create the 'drama'. It is clear to see that such television programmes have used many of the stereotypical representations of teenagers outlined earlier. For example, Jen in *Dawson's Creek* (1998 – 2003) is the typical juvenile delinquent, sent to the safety of her grandmother's home to mend her ways.

However, it is possible to see many teenage television characters as more complex individuals than those stereotypes seen in films as a result of television programmes having more time to develop characters. Though the audience spends only around two hours with a film character, a television character can be shown for many hours over the course of a series. So, whilst Jen never managed to totally escape her stereotype, she was allowed to develop other aspects of her personality, such as regret about her past behaviour and her aspirations for the future.

Other characters in *Dawson's Creek* combined elements of the different stereotypes to create more rounded, and possibly more realistic, representations of teenagers. Pacey appeared to be the dumb teen. He was the class clown, always acting out and failing academically.

However, as the series of *Dawson's Creek* progressed, Pacey was also portrayed as the smart teenager, the sarcastic, self-aware teenager and sometimes the juvenile delinquent. He effectively embodied all four stereotypes at different points in the programmes' six series.

Unusually for stereotypical teenage characters, the teenage characters in *Dawson's Creek* were old before their time; they held deeply philosophical conversations which seemed unrealistic and yet the issues the programme discussed would be problems encountered by many real teenagers. The serious approach to issues such as the divorce of parents, relationships and homosexuality meant the teenagers seemed like mini-adults rather than realistic representations of teenagers.

American teen drams are extremely popular with British teen audiences and are a large part of Channel 4's scheduling. It would be unwise for British production companies to compete directly with these successful programmes by creating their own, especially when the budgets for American shows would be so much higher, so programmes created for teenage audiences in the UK have tended to combine the typical conventions of the American teen drama genre with comedy elements.

Sugar Rush (Channel 4 2005 – 2006), *Drop Dead Gorgeous* (BBC3 2006 – 2007) and *Skins* (E4 2007 – present) have used exaggerated stereotypes to add humour to otherwise dramatic narratives so they offer something different to the teen audience. However, these programmes have tended to rely upon the same basic stereotypes as their American counterparts.

Exam Hint:- When you are writing about representations of teenagers in your exam, remember to refer to the stereotypes and give specific examples which support your point. Refer to characters in named texts and give examples of their behaviour from specific episodes.

Skins Case Study

Skins and Channel 4

The **ideology** of the **institution** which produces or finances a text will influence the representations within the text. *Skins* is made by Company Pictures for Channel 4. Channel 4 is a publisher-broadcaster which means it commissions production companies to make programmes specifically for its channels or it buys ready-made programmes in from other companies. Programming is funded by on-air advertising, programme sponsorship and the sale of programme content either to other broadcasters or to the public on DVD. *Skins* was the first programme commissioned for E4, Channel 4's digital entertainment channel which targets the 16 – 35 age range.

Much of programming on the various Channel 4 outlets is for a youth audience which means that the representations will be created to appeal to that group. In addition, Channel 4 must follow its public service remit to produce programmes which demonstrate innovation, creativity and which will appeal to a culturally diverse society. As a result, representations of all social groups should be evident across the range of texts commissioned. Channel 4 are also committed to commissioning programmes produced outside Greater London in an attempt to balance the 'London-centric' representations often portrayed in the media. This is one of the reasons *Skins* is set in the South West city of Bristol and *Hollyoaks* is set in Chester.

Skins and its Audience

Skins is primarily targeted at an **audience** of 16 – 24 year olds, although the first series' DVD release was classified 18 and the official website features a warning that the content is unsuitable for under 18s. To fully exploit the interests of the target age group, Channel 4 publicised both series of *Skins* extensively on the Internet. Each character has their own fictitious *MySpace* page and the programme is heavily promoted via trailers on the *MySpace* homepage. The first episode of series two was aired simultaneously on E4 and on *MySpace*. Each episode of series one of *Skins* focused upon a **narrative** concerned with one character, with ongoing storylines and character developments arcing over the whole series.

The official Channel 4 *Skins* website featured unseen mini-episodes to fill in narrative gaps created in the series one episodes as well as competitions and a viewers' forum. Whilst the audience did not need to see these to understand the broadcast episodes, they added character and narrative depth for those viewers who did watch them.

Stereotypes of Teenagers in *Skins*

Auburn and **Grady** (2000) claim that television can contribute to people's misunderstanding of young people and reduces teenagers to a set of fixed types. The limited representations seen to exist in many media texts are also evident in *Skins*. Tony, the protagonist of the first episode of series one is the **smart, superficial teen**.

(http://www.radiotimes.com/ shows/skins/series-one/)

He is popular and good looking and is always determined to get his way, regardless of which of his friends he may hurt along the way (usually his girlfriend, Michelle, and his best friend, Sid). He belittles his father and friends but, by the end of the first series, has effectively alienated himself from them all as a result of his callous disregard for their feelings, showing a development of the stereotype.

In this image, Tony is shown to be unconcerned by his father's presence. The high angle camera shot, rather than suggesting Tony's father is in a position of power, implies just the opposite as Tony's insolent pout shows he is in control in their relationship.
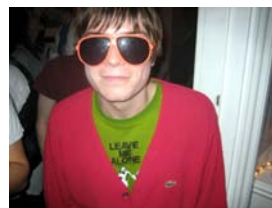
Chris, the protagonist of series one episode four, is the teenage **delinquent**. His criminal behaviour is focused around his excessive drug use but he is also involved in an inappropriate sexual relationship with his Psychology teacher.

(http:/viewmorepics.myspace.com/

Similar to other media representations of the juvenile delinquent, Chris' dysfunctional home life is used to explain his self-destructive and self-harming behaviour. His father is absent and uninterested and, in his dedicated episode, his mother disappears leaving him £1000 in cash in the kitchen, which Chris promptly spends on drugs, alcohol and pizza. Despite such a problematic home life, Chris is still used by the writers of *Skins* to create comedy. The audience is encouraged to laugh at Chris' wide-eyed enthusiasm, his relentless pursuit of his teacher's affections and his poor personal hygiene habits.

The character of Jal, protagonist of episode three, embodies the **sarcastic, self-aware and bitter** stereotype. She can see through Tony's manipulative ways and always tell him so but she is resentful of her family's lack of interest in her achievements as a talented musician.

(http://profile.myspace.com/ index.cfm?fuseaction =user.viewprofile&friendid =140518345)

Finally, Sid is represented as the **dumb teen**. He is ridiculed by Tony, unable to get a girlfriend and always behind with his school work. However, Sid refuses to conform to the norm or become more like Tony, as shown in the talking Mega-dog t-shirt he repeatedly wears in series one. It is Sid who provides most of the comedy in *Skins*, albeit unintentionally.

Rather than laughing at Sid, the audience is positioned to feel for him and laugh at how ridiculous, yet recognisable, the situations he finds himself in are. For example, when Sid is trying to sneak out of his house behind his parents' backs he accidentally sets off his talking t-shirt, making it obvious what he is trying to do. Sid's resignation to the trouble he will face is humorous as most people can relate to the situation.

> **Exam Hint:-** *When you are writing about stereotypes be careful that you do not make over-simplistic generalisations. Remember that stereotypes group people according to supposed characteristics and, whilst they may be based upon some truth, are not necessarily true of all people in that group.*

Despite *Skins* reducing some of its teenage characters to stereotypes, there are other characters who demonstrate other aspects of teenage life. Often the types of representations evident in media texts can be related to the social concern of the time they were produced. In *Skins* several contemporary issues are raised through the characters. Aside from the usual worries of teenagers being out of control which have been evident in the media since the 1950s, *Skins* discusses problems particular to teenagers nowadays.

For example, Cassie is struggling with anorexia nervosa, bulimia and self-harming behaviours. Maxxie is openly homosexual but faces prejudice when his best friend, Anwar, feels that his Muslim faith will not allow him to remain friends with Maxxi. Disordered eating, homosexuality and issues of faith, especially Islam, are all contemporary issues which would not necessarily have been evident in media texts of the past. Despite dealing with potentially controversial issues, *Skins* is not judgemental of the characters' choices. Cassie, Maxxi and Anwar are accepted by their friends and the narratives about these particular characters tend to show the characters themselves questioning their choices and behaviours rather than allowing other to do it for them. For example, in episode two of series one, Cassie falsely believes that other people are telling her to eat when, in reality, she is imagining this.

If S*kins* deals with real issues, evident in the real world, then the question of realism has to be considered. Unusually for media depictions of fictitious teenagers, the actors playing the young people in *Skins* are teenagers themselves. The writing team had an average age of twenty two and there were teenage advisors on hand to offer advice on the scripts. Whether this makes the representations realistic though is questionable. Many reviewers commented upon the realism of the series.

Kathryn Flett in *The Observer* called the dialogue in the first episode "convincingly authentic" and Patricia Wynn Davies in *The Daily Telegraph* said the characters "seem like real Noughties teenagers". However, these reviewers were not the target audience of *Skins* and it is arguable that they would not know if the representations of teenagers were realistic as they are not teenagers themselves. The *Skins* forum on the Channel 4 website indicated that many members of the target audience thought that aspects of the characters' personalities were realistic but that they had been exaggerated for the purpose of entertainment and comedy. It is important to remember that the producers of *Skins* had never claimed they were trying to make a realistic teen drama and the vast majority of media texts rely upon stereotypes to act as a narrative shortcut.

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ Cassie_(Skins_character))

The fact that *Skins* is a comedy series necessitates that representations be based upon reality so that the audience can relate to the characters' situations and laugh along with them. However, realistic representations would not provide the amount of comedic situations necessary to fill a series so the representations must be exaggerated to combat this.

For example, whilst it is possible that there are teenagers who share one or two of Cassie's personality traits, it is less likely that there would be a real person who embodies them all. For the purposes of comedy, Cassie is incredibly idiosyncratic, suffering from disordered eating, enduring unrequited love and coping up with her parents' unrelenting and noisy sex life.

Auburn and **Grady** (2000) believe that representations of teenagers on television, whether they are realistic or not, can reinforce young people's isolation from the rest of society. This is evident in some reviewers' comments on the first episode. Lucy Mangan writing for *The Guardian* said of the characters: "they're as irritating as real teenagers, I'll give them that." This suggests that teenagers are seen as somehow different to adults and behave in ways which are alien to them. Representations that rely upon the usual stereotypes of teenagers can reinforce how other social groups view young people and, according to Auburn and Grady, that could be potentially damaging.

Skins and Ideology

Despite some development of typical teenage representations in *Skins*, the portrayals are mainly conventional. A wide range of social groups are depicted in *Skins* but the **dominant ideology** is still upheld in the characterisation and narratives. In British society, the people with the most power, either material power in the form of money or symbolic power in the form of respect, are white, middle-class, heterosexual, Christian, able-bodied men. This ideology is supported in *Skins* as Tony is the most powerful member of the group; he is the most popular and the most successful character, both academically and sexually. Tony's middle-class values are emphasised through his nuclear family, received pronunciation and his involvement with the choir at the local private school. Conversely, Jal, the black, female character, is from a dysfunctional family. Even though she is also a gifted student like Tony, her talents are not openly acknowledged or appreciated, especially by her father who seems more interested in his latest young, white girlfriend.

Activity

Choose a media text which is targeted at teenagers, such as a website or music magazine.

1. Are the usual stereotypes of teenagers evident in your text?

2. From your personal perspective, do you think the representation is realistic?

3. Are the teenagers made to appear 'different' to the adults?

4. Does the target audience alter how teenagers are represented?