International GCSE

Media Studies

Steff Hutchinson

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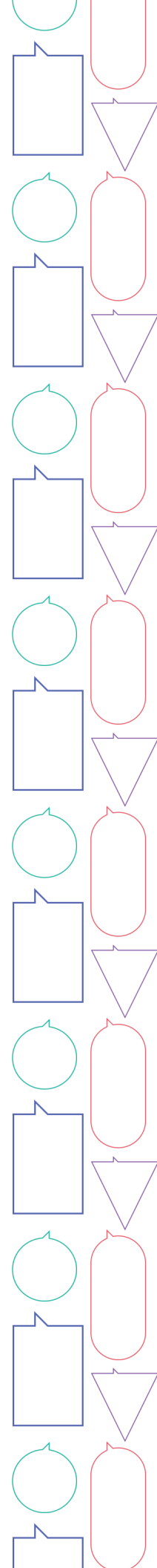
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Contents

2.1 What is genre?

Genre

A **genre** in media studies is a category of media product. All products in the category share similar characteristics, such as the characteristics of a sci-fi film that you considered in the Getting started activity above.

Often, a genre is broken down further into smaller categories, called **subgenres**. For example, the overall genre of television drama can be subdivided into a range of subgenres, including period dramas, soap operas, crime dramas, medical dramas, and so on.

If you start watching in the middle of a television programme, you are able to recognise its genre or subgenre by what you see and hear.

For example, if you start watching in the middle of a medical drama, you are likely to see doctors, nurses, and patients in a hospital setting. There will be conflict or romance between some of the medical personnel while they try to save the life of a patient. Most medical dramas are set in the present day, filmed using high-key lighting, and the technology in the operating theatres or the emergency rooms appears very convincing. In contrast with a medical documentary, you will probably hear background music, the voices in a conversation will all be recorded clearly, and there will be multiple camera angles within a single scene.

▶ **Figure 2.1: A scene from Indian medical drama *Dhadkan Zindaggi Kii*.**

Recognising genres

The different media forms categorise their products in different ways. You need to be able to recognise genres and some subgenres in each of the media forms you are studying. Here are some examples.

Media form	Example genres	Example products
Audio: radio	Music radio	AIR FM Rainbow
		Naija Hits FM
	Sport radio	Beijing Sports Radio
		talkSPORT
Audio: podcast	Pop culture	WAW! What A Week with DJ Fresh
		Sentimental Garbage
	Music	DJ Ricks Kenya
		Lost Notes
E-media: video game	Puzzle game	*Royal Match*
		Candy Crush
	Role-playing game	*Baldur's Gate III*
		Final Fantasy VII
E-media: website	Social media	Instagram
		Facebook
	Portfolio	Emergeast
		Tokyo Photography
Print: magazine	Arts and culture	*Artomity*
		Canvas
	Lifestyle/leisure	*Glamour South Africa*
		Aspire Lifestyle
Video: television	Science fiction	*Doctor Who*
		Stranger Things
	Crime drama	*Money Heist*
		The Stranger
Video: film	Action/adventure	*Casino Royale* (2006)
		Ram Setu (2022)
	Romantic comedy	*The Mermaid* (2016)
		The Princess Bride (1987)
News: newspaper	National quality	*The National*
		USA Today
	Local	*Mumbai Mirror*
		The Sindh Times

▲ **Figure 2.2: Alpha Blondy FM is a talk radio station based in Abidjan in Côte d'Ivoire. Talk radio is another example of a genre of the radio media form.**

Key terms

Trope: a character or scenario in a story that is used so often across different products that it is easily recognisable by the audience

Jeopardy: danger or risk of failure, building tension for the audience

Protagonist: the main character in a story, whose actions are most closely followed by the audience

Jump scare: a sudden scaring moment in a moving image product, designed to startle audience members

For radio, podcasts, and magazines, the genres are based on the content of the production. For television and film, the genres are based partly on content and partly on our emotional reaction: for example, horror films scare us, while comedy films make us laugh. For video games, the genres are based on the nature of the gameplay. Newspapers are categorised by the target audience, and the seriousness of the news being covered. Websites are allocated to genres according to the functions of the website.

Building skills 1

Table 2.1 contains two genres for each media form. Think about the media form of video games. How many other genres can you think of? Compare your list with other members of your class. Do you all agree on the same categories?

We expect to see similar codes and conventions across all products within a given genre. These are what help us to define the genre and differentiate it from other genres. They are also what attracts a specific audience. If you have enjoyed one product within a specific genre, you might seek out other products in the same genre by looking for similar characteristics. If you enjoyed being scared by a horror film, for example, you might seek out other films with low-key lighting, intense soundtracks, and settings in old isolated buildings.

Similar characters and scenarios that are repeated across different products within the same genre are referred to as **tropes**. Isolated buildings with scary characters are a trope of horror films.

Building skills 2

What codes and conventions would you expect to see and hear in a role-playing video game?

Compare your ideas with others in your class. Do those who enjoy such games include different characteristics from those who don't enjoy them?

One of the ways that different genres can be recognised, especially in films, television dramas, and video games, is in their handling of **jeopardy**. The audience expects different types of danger and risk depending on the genre. In mystery and crime narratives, tropes include the **protagonist** being wrongly accused of murder while the real killer is on the loose. Thrillers often show the hero racing against time to prevent a catastrophic event. As well as isolated buildings and creepy characters, the horror genre uses seemingly unstoppable killers and constant **jump scares**. By finding new ways to present and handle the expected jeopardy, producers keep audiences engaged and invested in the narrative.

The principles of repetition and variation

There are media theorists who study media products to understand how audiences, producers, and products interact, and the effects they have on each other. One of these theorists, Steve Neale, studied genres in film and devised the genre theory of **repetition and difference**.

To be recognised by audiences, genre products need to repeat the conventions and ideas of previous products in the same genre. For example, an adventure film must be set in visually exciting locations, with a hero in a race against time to achieve something specific. On the way, the hero must be challenged by a villain and overcome physical danger, which will probably get more and more challenging as the film goes on.

However, each genre product must also have its own unique content, making it different from other products in the same genre; otherwise, the audience would experience nothing new and be bored. Each product needs to **subvert** the existing conventions in some way. Makers of adventure films need to find new locations, new goals, new characters, and new dangers for their heroes to overcome.

As an audience, we want enough *repetition* to make the product feel familiar, so that we know how it works. But we want enough *difference* for the product to feel fresh and deliver some interesting surprises. If everything remains the same, there is no sense of jeopardy.

▲ **Figure 2.3: We don't want every adventure film to include the hero rushing to get across a rope bridge as the villain cuts through the rope.**

Exam tip

An exam question could ask you to define a term like 'genre conventions', or to provide examples from one of the media products you have studied of a concept like genre repetition and variation.

The use of repetition provides a predictable pattern that the audience can understand. The codes and conventions of a specific genre create that pattern.

For example, the reader of a lifestyle magazine expects:

- an image of a person on the front cover, looking at the camera using the direct mode of address, inviting the reader to enjoy the lifestyle promised by the magazine
- the coverlines to be directly related to some of the content in the magazine, and the magazine to include other articles that are not mentioned on the cover
- whole-page adverts at the start of the magazine
- a contents page on an early right-hand page, showing what's in the magazine
- the contents page to show that the magazine is divided into sections based on the type of content, such as fashion, lifestyle, celebrity news, beauty, food, and travel
- pages to be numbered on an outside corner of each page, to help the reader find the article they are looking for.

▲ **Figure 2.4: If a lifestyle magazine varies too much from the codes and conventions listed, the reader may become frustrated because the magazine doesn't satisfy their expectations. The reader may give up, thinking the magazine is not for them.**

Building skills 3

Think of a media form and genre that you know well. Perhaps it is a genre of video game or a film genre. Note down the expectations of the audience when they encounter a new product in that genre, similar to lifestyle magazines above.

If you were creating a new product, knowing this expected pattern of conventions would help you to shape the product. How could you subvert one or more of these conventions to provide a new experience for your audience?

Why are there genres?

Genres help audiences:

- know what to expect, and take pleasure in the familiar
- recognise and select products they will enjoy
- understand how codes and conventions within the genre work, so they can easily understand the meanings in a new product.

For media producers, the **generic conventions** of a genre become a template to follow, allowing them to create a product they know an audience will engage with. This in turn means there is:

- less financial risk, as a potential audience already exists for a product before it is made
- an existing target audience for marketing, with the distributors knowing who to target and what has worked before
- economy in production, as a company can reuse ideas and possibly resources, and can employ the same specialist team across a number of products.

Economic factors like these enable a company to make a profit. Sometimes, one or two innovative media products become very successful, making a large profit for their creators, and other companies quickly make similar products to grab a share of the same market.

> ### Key term
>
> **Generic conventions:** the expected conventions that help to define a genre and separate it from other types of media product

> ### Synoptic link
>
> Genre products and their marketing can easily be targeted towards relevant audiences (see page 123).

> ### Did you know?
>
> The phrase 'reality TV' wasn't used until the 1990s, and it only really took off as a genre around 2000, with the success of global franchises like *Big Brother* and *Survivor*. When singing competition franchises like *Idols* were added from 2001, this relatively new genre became very attractive to producers. It attracted large audiences but was relatively cheap to make. The same set or location and the same crew were used throughout the series, and episodes featured members of the public rather than expensive actors.

▲ **Figure 2.5:** Outside the Australian *Big Brother* house in 2020

Other genres may become popular because they fit well within the audience's cultural context. An obvious example of the impact of cultural context is the rise in smart phone use, which in turn led to a huge rise in the genre of mobile gaming. When much of the world was locked down during the Covid-19 pandemic, social media videos created by combining clips of different contributors in different locations became very popular. At the same time, massive multiplayer online role-playing games increased in popularity because they enabled people to socialise without breaking local lockdown rules.

However, the culture in different countries or regions can influence the codes and conventions used within a specific genre.

▲ **Figure 2.6: A musician collaborating with others online to create a video.**

The actions of the audience can have an impact on a genre. Media producers need to attract an audience, so they will create products that the audience appears to want, and change aspects that audiences heavily criticise. Video game developers, in particular, spend significant time and money working out who their audience is and what they would like to engage with. This research informs gameplay, style, narrative, and difficulty. An obvious impact is the increase in the diversity of characters, especially in action/adventure games, and new genres of games that appeal to a more diverse audience.

▶ **Figure 2.7: The increasing number of female gamers has led to more games featuring strong female protagonists, and more complex storylines that appeal to women.**

Intertextuality

Sometimes, media creators will deliberately reference another (usually well-known) media product within their new product. This is called **intertextuality**, a word that literally means 'between texts', because media products are also referred to as 'texts'. This can be done as a mark of respect for something the creators have themselves enjoyed, and it can add to the meanings in the new product. Very often, intertextuality refers to something the producers think the anticipated audience will enjoy.

For example, Bollywood films often draw on ideas from previous films, such as songs, characters, and even iconic scenes. This is done to pay tribute to the earlier films and give the audience a sense of **nostalgia**, or it is done as a comment on changing times.

▲ **Figure 2.8: The 2023 film *Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahaani* uses intertextuality by referencing iconic Bollywood song sequences from earlier times.**

Problems with genre

There are a number of problems with genres. They need to use both repetition and variation to ensure audiences remain interested. Otherwise, they become stale and the audience gradually drifts away.

Another issue with genre products is that some sectors of the potential audience are put off before they even engage with the product. If you were bored or frustrated by one lifestyle magazine, you will probably avoid picking up any others.

The benefits of working within a known genre generally outweigh these issues, but media producers strive to attract and maintain audiences by mixing ideas from different genres and by making changes to the genre itself.

Key terms

**Intertextuality:** when one media product quotes or borrows features from another

Nostalgia: a mix of happiness, sadness, and longing when thinking about the past

Practice exam questions

1. Define the term 'genre'. *(2 marks)*

2. Give two examples of genre conventions used in lifestyle magazines. *(2 marks)*

3. Analyse how one of your selected media products combines conventions from different genres. In your answer, refer to at least two different genres. *(8 marks)*

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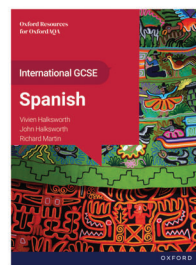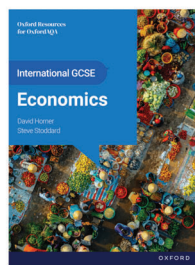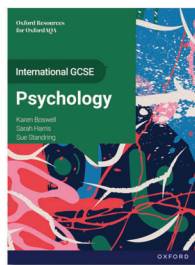
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