

ANALYSING CLASS IN THE MEDIA

Sociologists have long been interested in how the media portrays social class. Since the 2000s, several studies have found that working-class and underclass people are often shown in narrow, negative, and stereotypical ways, especially in reality TV, tabloid news, and online spaces. These portrayals can shape how audiences understand class, poverty, and inequality in the UK today.

By the end of this activity, you will be able to:

- Identify how the working class and underclass are represented in different forms of media.
- Analyse these portrayals using sociological language and theory.
- Evaluate the social impact of these representations.

Part 1: Class Discussion (5–10 mins)

Discuss as a group:

- What does representation mean in the context of media?

- What stereotypes might exist about working-class or underclass people?

- Why might these stereotypes be repeated in popular culture?

Part 2: Group Task – Media Representation Analysis (30–40 mins)

Instructions

1. Work in groups of 3–4.
2. Choose three media examples that portray the working class or underclass. Try to include different types of media:
 - Television / streaming: Shameless (UK), Benefits Street, EastEnders, The Jeremy Kyle Show
 - News articles / headlines: The Sun or Daily Mail stories about “benefit scroungers” or “sink estates”
 - Films: I, Daniel Blake (Ken Loach), Made in Dagenham, Billy Elliot
 - Social media / online: TikTok videos, memes, or influencers who discuss “chav culture” or class identity
3. Complete the table on next page for each example:



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Media Example	Example 1	Example 2	Example 3
Media Type			
Description of Portrayal			
Positive or Negative Portrayal			
Stereotypes Present?			
Whose Perspective in Media Representing?			
Who are Intended Audience?			



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Part 3: Follow-Up Questions (10–15 mins)

What common stereotypes appear across your media examples?

Are working-class people ever shown positively or sympathetically?

How do representations differ between news, entertainment, and social media?

Which sociological theories best explain these portrayals?

- Marxism (hegemony and ideology – Gramsci)
- Cultural effects theory (repetition and influence on audience)
- Moral panic theory (Cohen, Hall et al.)
- Postmodernism (audience resistance and self-representation online)

What might be the real-world consequences of these portrayals for class inequality and public attitudes toward poverty?

Extension / Homework Task

Write a short (300-word) analysis of one of your examples:

“How does this media text construct an image of the working class or underclass, and what might be the social consequences of this portrayal?”

Use key terms such as stereotype, ideology, hegemony, moral panic, representation, class inequality, and refer to at least one sociological study from your knowledge.

