

Important Information regarding the Popular Culture Depth Study: Choosing a Popular Culture Focus Study

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Popular Culture remains by far the most popular depth study in the HSC course, with over half of all students choosing a Pop Culture option for the exam. However, the selection of an in-depth focus study is often fraught with difficulty, with little meaningful guidance from the syllabus. New teachers are often in the position of feeling that they must either choose 'what's in the text book' for safety, or taking the risk of devising resources for their own study that they feel will more effectively engage their students. Some teachers, in an effort to give students ownership over their content, allow students to 'choose their own adventure', where each student in the class selects their own focus study of personal interest. All of this adds up to an incredibly diverse range of different topics that are written about in the HSC exams, with varying degrees of success.

It is undeniable that some Pop Culture focus studies lend themselves more effectively to presentation in the exam, and some focus studies really can deny students access to the full range of marks on the paper through their breadth, or lack thereof, or one-dimensionality. The dynamic and flexible nature of the Pop Culture depth study is one of its strengths - the ability to tailor the course to the needs and interests of our students is what makes Society and Culture, and Pop in particular, such an exciting course to teach. But it is frustrating to see students that are clearly socially and culturally literate, and who have a high level of understanding of the conceptual nature of the course, being denied full access to the question because they, or their teacher, has inadvertently chosen a focus study which does not 'work' for the question at hand.

Most teachers will choose to study one focus study in depth with their class - some teachers will study one in detail and one as a minor focus study and then draw from a range of others (an ambitious but often very successful model). Some teachers also choose to study one focus study with the class and have the students then supplement this understanding with an in-depth study of their own choice, which, provided it is completed with teacher guidance, is also a successful approach. It is generally the case that students who only complete a focus study of their own choice, either through an assessment task or as a class activity, are less able to succeed in the HSC examination as they are unable to fit the four distinguishing characteristics. Often these students will select focus studies that do not fit the criteria outlined in the syllabus and they are therefore unable to address questions dealing with some aspects of the syllabus. These students tend to choose things like particular brands, films, websites or musical acts, which do not meet the criteria for a popular culture. I would strongly advise against allowing students to study their own focus study unless it is coupled with a major focus study undertaken as a class, and those students are counseled to predominately write about that primary focus study, using their own to provide a broader range of evidence in their response.

So what are the key features that a popular culture focus study must incorporate, and which focus studies are generally more or less successful? Naturally, any focus study must first of all fit the four distinguishing characteristics:

1. Being associated with commercial products

Note the use of the word 'associated' - this implies that the popular culture is more than just a commercial product, or products, itself. Some commercial products have managed to move beyond their origins of being simply a brand or product to becoming a popular culture through their complexity, longevity and global impact, but this is the exception rather than the rule. Barbie is a good example of a commercial product that has transcended these limited origins: Barbie is now associated with a range of commercial products aside from the dolls themselves, including magazines, makeup,

and clothing, and Barbie has her own online world. Barbie has also an easily traceable history of over 50 years, and has had impacts around the world - the creation of the Muslim antidote to Barbie, Fulla, is a wonderful example of rejection of a popular culture. However, Barbie is exceptional: most commercial products or brands will not be complex and multi-faceted enough to develop into a fully fledged focus study, unless they are viewed under the umbrella of a genre of, for example, toys or fashion. Bratz, for example, does not have the longevity and complexity to develop into a focus study, and nor do other products like Care Bears or My Little Pony. Similarly, Coca Cola has moved beyond its origins as a commercial product to be genuinely considered to be a popular culture and can demonstrate most of the syllabus criteria, yet this is very unusual for a food or beverage. Attempts to create focus studies out of such products or brands that have had limited real impact on wider society will limit students ability to address questions on such dot-points as the contribution of the popular culture to social change, or issues of power and authority, or the positive or negative aspects of the popular culture that have become part of society.

2. Developing from a local to a national to a global level

Local to national to global is often one of the biggest sticking points with new focus studies that teachers or students try to develop. While it is usually possible to trace most products, brands or fads along part of this journey, only genuine 'popular cultures' can be traced along the full trajectory. A popular culture will have an organic development from its origins as a trend or movement among a group within a local area, to, through the growing interest of the media and development of paraphernalia, a national level of acceptance and popularity, to eventual global levels of recognition. If a focus study can't be traced through these three levels then it is not a wise choice - many internet-based focus studies, like social networking sites, exemplify the problems with this. While this can seem frustratingly limiting, as there are a range of truly global 'popular cultures' in contemporary society that appeared to bypass the 'national' or 'local' level, we have to ensure that we work within the constraints of the syllabus in order to give our students the absolute best chance at accessing the full range of marks in the exam. Social networking sites, to follow this example, could be traced back to the local level (Facebook's origins at Harvard, as dramatized in the recent film, *The Social Network*, are a good example of this), however the national level is problematic - most web-based trends have the ability to 'go global' almost immediately, and there is no 'national' level for students to consider in a meaningful way. Even though social networking sites do appear to be a fascinating area for students to study, their incompatibility with this aspect of the syllabus means that students will be disadvantaged if they are asked a question in the HSC about tracing the focus study along this path, so it is best avoided as an exclusive focus study. This sort of study would certainly be an appropriate and dynamic adjunct to another, more traditional, focus study.

3. Allowing consumers to have widespread access to it

Students need to have a genuine understanding of what 'widespread' means - when the syllabus is referring to a popular culture that gone 'global', widespread access needs to entail access beyond only western countries. Bollywood, for example, has developed (via the local to national process of moving from Mumbai to being distributed throughout India in the post-Partition era) into a truly global popular culture, with particular appeal in non-western countries that resist 'Americanisation', such as Russia, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

4. Constantly changing and evolving

The idea that a popular culture will constantly change and evolve in order to meet the changing demands of consumers and maintain profit for transnational corporations is also an area which is misinterpreted by some students who choose less than ideal focus studies. In order for students to make meaningful judgments about the constantly changing nature of a popular culture focus study, they should be able to trace the evolution of their focus study over a considerable period of time. Focus studies like rock and roll, grunge, surfing, teen movies and Bollywood allow students to make complex and meaningful judgments about the role of a variety of stakeholders in this process, the interactive nature of popular culture and the impact of changing technology. A focus study which can only be traced to within a decade or so, like 'Twilight' (which can be reasonably successful only when

seen within the genre of 'vampire fiction', not as a 'brand' on its own) does not allow students to engage fully with questions dealing with this area.

A Note on Television

There has been a marked increase in recent years of students and teachers selecting 'television' as a focus study. The syllabus does state that a popular culture "may be drawn from" television, and, strictly speaking, it does fit the four distinguishing characteristics, as outlined above. However, the sheer breadth of studying 'television' as a focus study gravely limits the ability of students to fully engage with all aspects of the syllabus. Television is, in essence, a medium for the transmission of popular culture, but is too broad and diffuse to be considered a popular culture itself.

The huge diversity of offerings on television means that students struggle to identify trends in change and continuity - being unable to identify trends over time that apply across all of the different types of television programs, for example, students often find themselves making judgments on the changes in the technology of television sets - plasma, flat-screen, 3D etc, which is not an appropriate focus for a popular culture study. These responses also generally become very descriptive and superficial. Further, if students are asked to analyse or evaluate the role of stakeholders like the media, for example, they may find themselves tied up in conceptual knots as they try to reconcile the fact that their popular culture focus study is, in fact, media, and making judgments on the impact of the media on the media is exhausting

A better solution is to select a genre of television and develop a focus study around that. Reality television or animation, for example, can be developed into workable focus studies that generally allow students to make meaningful judgments about all areas of the syllabus. Television as a general focus study is too diffuse and broad - while students will be able to discuss a variety of different aspects of television in class, and they may enjoy the diversity, their HSC exam will be made more difficult than it needs to be. It is also a reminder of the importance of constantly referring back to the syllabus document and using a range of resources to supplement information found in textbooks. There are a range of valuable textbooks and resources available, but none should be used in isolation. Popular culture, in particular, is a depth study that is most effectively taught with continual reference to contemporary resources, articles, documentaries and academic journals - textbooks are a useful foundation but in order for meaningful connections between the syllabus document and the 'real world' to be made we must go further.

The real issue with the choice of focus study arises when students are simply unable to produce an exam response that is truly reflective of their ability because their focus study of Justin Timberlake has made few discernible contributions to social change (whereas if they had studied Rock they would have a wealth of material); or because there are no apparent implications of globalization for Tupac (as opposed to the rich potential of the genre focus study of Hip Hop).

While it is important for teachers to select focus studies that will allow their particular cohorts of students to actively engage with the syllabus in a meaningful way, it is crucial that this desire to keep students interested does not lead to the choice of a focus study which may disadvantage them in the exam.

Some Pop Culture focus studies that have been used in the past that tend to work well include:

- * Genres of music, eg: rock and roll, hip hop, punk, grunge
- * Genres of film, eg: teen film, Bollywood, horror
- * Animation, eg: Japanese anime, cartoons (often with a particular focus on The Simpsons)
- * Comics, eg: superheroes
- * Sport, eg: surfing, soccer
- * Toys, eg: Barbie

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