Representations

Representation is the term used to describe how people, places, ideas or events are represented in media products. What we see on screen isn't real – it is a version of reality that has been carefully created using different types of media language.

How audiences understand these representations depends on how the producer **encodes** the meaning, and the **cultural knowledge** of the audience.

Stereotypes

A stereotype is defined as a 'widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing.' Media theorist **Stuart Hall** explained that stereotypes reduce people to just a few basic traits, ignoring their full complexity.

In sitcoms, producers often use stereotypes because audiences already recognise them. This helps the story move quickly, as characters don't need a lot of introduction. Stereotypes also work well in comedy because they often involve exaggeration, which is a common technique used to make things funny.

The process of representation

Representation in media goes through three key stages:

Selection: The producer decides what aspects of the subject to represent. For example, they decide what characters say (dialogue) and where they fit in the storyline.

Construction: This is how representation is realised via technical and creative choices. For example, characters who are less important might not be shown in close-up.

Mediation: This is how representation is presented to audiences and how they understand it. In sitcoms, viewers usually already know what to expect from the genre, so their past experiences shape how they interpret the characters and situations.

Why representations are important

Representations are important to audiences because they offer ways to identify with or aspire to certain ideas or lifestyles. Viewers like seeing themselves reflected in the media, but they also enjoy seeing their ambitions represented.

This is a positive way of looking at representations. However, they can also be received negatively. Sometimes, representations can reinforce harmful stereotypes or spread negative ideas.

This is especially true in sitcoms, where we often laugh at certain representations. We must consider how the representation is used to create humour.

Gender representations

Gender representations are an important part of sitcoms. Many sitcoms are built around family units, and in the early days of the genre, these families were usually nuclear (a mother, father and children) and followed traditional, heterosexual roles. As sitcoms have evolved, these representations have become more diverse.

In sitcoms, gender roles are often shown as clear-cut, with characters playing typical roles like mother/father or husband/wife. Media theorists like Liesbet van Zoonen argue that men and women are often portrayed in different ways in the media. It is important to think critically about how these gender roles are created and represented.