

Seventeen Going Under, by Sam Fender



Images from Seventeen Going Under / Sam Fender / youtube.com

AS Component 1: Investigating the media A Level component 1: media products, industries and audiences

Subject content: media language representation media contexts

PRODUCT CONTEXT

- Sam Fender is a 27-year-old indie/alternative rock artist from North Shields in the North-East of England, an area of social deprivation, where more than 30% of children live in poverty (<https://www.nechildpoverty.org.uk/facts/>). His music is both personal and political in content and is inspired by his own experiences growing up in his hometown. It has been referred to as ‘music that punches the air and the gut’ (*The Guardian*, October 7, 2021).
- The track *Seventeen Going Under* was taken from Fender’s second studio album of the same name, released by Polydor records. It was written when he was shielding during the COVID-19 pandemic. The song is introspective in its focus, looking back at his 17-year-old self and trying to make sense of the chaos of that time. Fender said of the album and the title track; ‘17 is when all the challenges begin: you’re not a baby, but you’re definitely not an adult (turns out that bit takes a bit longer than you think)’ (*Rolling Stone*).
- Fender won a Brit Award in 2022 for ‘Best Alternative/Rock Act’, voted by fans, where he also performed *Seventeen Going Under* at the awards ceremony. He dedicated the award to the North East Homeless centre.
- The video for *Seventeen Going Under* was directed by Brock Neal Roberts, with cinematography by Benjamin Wearing. By January 2022, it had received 5.6 million views. The music video also went viral on TikTok after its release. TikTok videos with the hashtag #samfender received more than 258 million views at the time.

PART 1: STARTING POINTS – Media language

Consider the codes and conventions of media forms and products

Consider how *Seventeen Going Under* conforms to the codes and conventions of the **narrative/performance video**. The performer plays an integral part by interpreting the lyrics through a narrative. In this video Sam Fender sings directly to the camera, involving the audience in the story and creating scenarios that attempt to relate to the experiences of youth, particularly those living in areas of social deprivation. The involvement of the artist in this style of music video allows them to establish their star persona and, in the case of Sam Fender, to use the music video form to raise awareness of societal inequalities and issues that are of concern to him.

Consider how the combination of elements of media language influence meaning:

Consider how elements of media language, including technical and visual codes, work together to create meaning in the music video:

Visual codes:

- **Clothing:** the clothing of the young people in the music video is relatable to the young audience and carries **cultural connotations** in relation to the dual time frame and the music genre. Fender himself wears understated clothing, which signifies the music genre but does not draw attention to him as the artist. He establishes himself as part of the group of young people and yet distanced from it: this is displayed in the shot on the cliff top where he is surrounded by a group of young people yet seems isolated and alone.
- **Settings and iconography:** the music video is filmed in real locations in order to create realism, for example urban street scenes, in the car, domestic situations and on the coast. The desaturated, earthy, colour palette reinforces the sense of real life happening. This is juxtaposed with the sunny beach scenes signifying more carefree times and the use of darkness when focusing on the shots of his mother and driving in the car at night echoing the bleaker lyrics.

- **Expressions and gestures:** the focus of the track is introspective, this is signified through the code of expression of Fender as the artist. His expression throughout is serious with a direct mode of address, involving the audience in his thoughts and the narrative, challenging them to listen. ‘Oh God, the kid’s a dab hand Canny chanter, but he looks sad’.
- **Audio codes:** although the only audio codes are the narrative, Fender’s Geordie accent is clear through his singing. His incorporation of North-Eastern dialect words into his song lyrics, for example ‘bizzies’, ‘nowt’ and ‘chanter’, reinforces how the themes of his songs are defined by his local community and his experiences of living in the North-East of England.

Technical codes:

Consider how the technical codes, including camera shots, movement and editing, work together to create meaning:

- Consider how **close-up shots** are used frequently in the music video to enable Fender and the characters to engage with the audience and to convey the raw emotion of the narrative, for example the bloodied knuckles, the confrontational expressions of the fighting girls and Fender’s own solemn expression.
- The **establishing shots** of the urban, working-class milieu anchor the narrative in a realistic setting, suggesting the representation of real life and depict scenarios from his 17-year-old experiences. They place Fender at the centre of his community. An example of this would be the iconic social housing block in the background of one of the shots.
- The opening of the music video is a **slow zoom** down a long street lined with terraced houses, typical of a North-East mining town, drawing the audience towards the artist in the middle of the street, clearly placed as part of the environment.
- The **editing** cuts between the performance of the artist and naturalistic vignettes which convey the disparate narrative of Fender’s youth, romance, friends, conflict, all conveyed through the lyrics

‘fist fights on the beach’ and through the **visual signifiers**.

- **Montage editing** sequences then convey the chaos of being 17: dancing at a club, walking in the dark, hands clasped in friendship, girls fighting. The cuts become quicker and more frantic, matching the increased pace of the music this all signifying desperation.

Narrative:

- The **narrative** is **non-linear**, moving between the past and the present, featuring disruptions and a sort of resolution that reflects Fender’s dominant message of learning from the mistakes of the past and understanding the angst of his 17-year-old self. The performance and narrative scenes re-constructing situations from his youth are universal and relatable to his target audience, regardless of where they live or their situations. The narrative shows Fender’s viewpoint that you are a product of where you live and what happens to you in your formative years. As the video progresses, the artist literally grows larger than his environment and moves above the streets of his youth, transcending the past and ending with a sense of hope.
- The different **narrative strands** are dominated by the performance of the artist who acts as the storyteller, a typical convention of this style of music videos. The repetitive lyrics of the chorus reinforce the narrative of his youth, ‘I’m seventeen going under’.
- The images are highly **illustrative**, often featuring a literal interpretation of the lyrics, this adds to the sense that a vivid story is being told with a clear message.

Consider how media language conveys viewpoints and ideologies

Consider how the elements of media language mentioned above communicate the artist’s political and personal viewpoint, reinforcing the ideology gained from his own experience and his viewpoint that there are groups in society that are forgotten. The inclusion of his mother’s situation in the narrative with the shot of her with the crumpled letters and the bottle of gin is a direct criticism of the social systems that let her down when she was ill and could not work to support them:

‘Luck came and died ‘round here
I see my mother
The DWP see a number
She cries on the floor encumbered’ (*Seventeen Going Under*)

Consider theoretical approaches:

Semiotics: Barthes

- Many of the images illustrate the lyrics but also connote deeper meanings in relation to notions of inequality and as signifiers of place and class, for example the terraced street and the social housing blocks. The audience will attach meanings to these signifiers and to their association with working class youth.
- The idea of ‘myth’ relates to the use of iconography and conventions which, over time, have become recognisable as a symbol of social status, contributing to stereotypical assumptions about places and people.
- Consider the signification of iconography as a visual signifier in the music video *Seventeen Going Under*.

Structuralism: Levi-Strauss

- Music videos create meanings through a structure that is recognisable to audiences. The form has a repertoire of familiar elements regardless of the music genre. This music video employs the codes and conventions of the narrative/performance form, cutting between the constructed narrative and the performance of the artist. Music videos have a set time, the length of the song, to construct meaning and therefore use recognisable conventions including clothing, iconography and setting to convey messages rapidly.
- Consider how the meaning behind the music video *Seventeen Going Under* is constructed through binary oppositions, for example the personal, introspective, older Fender in comparison to the angry, confused 17-year-old. The binary opposites in this music video are also stylistic, they convey meaning in cutting between the artist in the street, becoming increasingly distanced from his environment and the narrative scenarios depicting his troubled youth.

- The resolution of opposites can have ideological significance, particularly in music videos that encode social messages. Consider how this music video suggests that past experiences need not define what happens in the future and how this media form can be used to raise awareness of social issues.

PART 2: STARTING POINTS – Representation

PRODUCT CONTEXT

Sam Fender was born in North Shields in the North-East of England. His music is influenced by his experiences of social inequality and growing up in a dysfunctional family. His second album, *Seventeen Going Under*, and the title track are autobiographical and introspective:

‘...a lot of things you pass off as insignificant moments in your life...they turn out to be quite poignant...how it affects and shapes your character as you get older’ (Talking with John Kennedy on www.radiox.co.uk).

Sam Fender is an indie/alternative rock artist, his music incorporates self-representation within his experiences growing up and focuses on his identity as part of a North-East working-class community. Reviewers have suggested that he is very different from other artists in the genre as his lyrics and music are at times bleak and highlight social issues prevalent in certain **under-represented communities**. He has been called ‘The North Shields Springsteen’, comparing him to American artist Bruce Springsteen, who used his upbringing in New Jersey as inspiration for his rock ballads.

Consider the way social groups are represented through processes of selection and combination:

Representations of gender, age, and ethnicity.

- *Seventeen Going Under* constructs a **version of reality** using real locations and believable, relatable characters. The **paradigmatic choices** of visual and technical codes work together to convey a point of view about social issues, including inequality.

- *Seventeen Going Under* features representations of youth, place, class, gender, and social issues, including mental health, in a way that is relatable to the target audience.
- Sam Fender refuses to accept that certain areas of society, including gender and social class, frequently **misrepresented and under-represented**, should be forgotten. As a result, the representations are challenging, raising awareness of struggling areas of society in need of support and recognition.
- Fender's music is very anchored in his sense of belonging to a particular **place and community**. His representation of North Shields conveys messages about the people who live there, including a stereotypical working-class street and a social housing block juxtaposed with evocative shots of the coast.
- His observations of working-class life are a significant element of his music. The destructive effects of poverty are illustrated here with references to his mother, her struggles with debt and his own younger feelings of responsibility and powerlessness.
- **Representations of masculinity** feature prominently throughout the music video. The **toxic masculinity** of Sam Fender's 17-year-old past is the subject of his recent introspection. This is manifested in the bullying and violence of his youth and the idea that boys must be tough, leading to suppressing their emotions. He uses this song and the construction of representations of gender in the music video to confront his emotions and as an outlet of expression. The narrative of the music video demonstrates how representations are affected by social and cultural contexts.
- **Representations of youth** also dominate the music video, illustrating issues relating to young people, particularly in underprivileged areas, including poverty, violence, and drugs. Through these representations, constructed from his own experiences and the song lyrics, he effectively articulates the emotions of young working-class men and women who may feel trapped by their lives and environment.

- Consider how representations in this music video are constructed through the processes of **selection and combination**.

How representations invoke discourses and ideologies and position audiences (A level only)

- Different music videos will construct representations of, for example, gender, social groups, and class in different ways, according to the conventions of the music genre. Consider how the representations in this indie/rock music video are constructed by the artist in order to convey a viewpoint and instigate discourse around a social issue. Sam Fender is politically outspoken, understanding how dominant groups in society control what is produced, how representations are constructed and the harmful effects of reinforcing regional and gender stereotypes.
- Consider how the music video form here is used to invoke discussion around social inequality and identity. The music video serves both to amplify the lyrics and to position the audience to engage with the issues, for example mental health problems, and empathise with the characters and their situations:

'See I spent my teens enraged
Spiralling in silence' (*Seventeen Going Under*)

Consider theoretical approaches:

Theories of representation: Hall

The video deliberately constructs characters and place as stereotypes to exemplify the way in which these social groups and areas of the country are often represented. This demonstrates that these stereotypes can misrepresent individuals from these groups and reinforce audience perceptions and assumptions.

Consider how the representations in *Seventeen Going Under* are constructed through recognisable signs and codes that are decoded by audiences and interpreted to produce meanings in the music video.

Theories of identity: David Gauntlett

In this music video, Sam Fender re-defines masculinity and challenges the notions of toxic masculinity and its effects. In doing so he offers a more complex representation of what it means

to be male in a modern society and offers a more diverse representation from which identities can be constructed.

CONTEXTS

Social and Cultural

Consider how *Seventeen Going Under* reflects the time in which it was made:

- Sam Fender's song writing is defined by his local community. The representations in this music video have been affected by **social and cultural contexts**, for example the changes to the benefit system which left many families in poverty, the rise in homelessness and the growing awareness of social inequality.
- The narrative constructed by the music video offers social commentary and challenges audience perceptions of particular social groups, positioning them to view them differently.
- Consider how the responses of different audiences may reflect social and cultural circumstances; audiences who may feel under-represented may be empowered by the messages encoded in this music video. The music video explores issues related to Sam Fender's very personal experience of living as a member of an under-represented social group:

'that's the one thing that always going to be my main gripe on this planet, the sheer disparity between the 1% and the rest of the world. These culture wars are valid wars that need to be fought – there's a lot of bigotry, a lot of racism and homophobia. But in order to get the Tories out, you've got to start representing the working-class people of this country.'

(<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2021/aug/25/sam-fender-interview-leftie-slur-working-class-towns>)

- On the release of the track and music video, a TikTok trend was sparked by the lyrics '*I was too scared to hit him, but I would hit him in a heartbeat now*', demonstrating that the themes of the video resonated with those who had experienced bullying and other forms of violence.