



Superheroes

Stormzy

GCSE Component 2: Understanding media forms and products

Focus areas:

- ♦ Media language
- ♦ Representation
- ♦ Audiences
- ♦ Media industries
- ♦ Media contexts



[Stormzy – Superheroes
\(Official Video\) – YouTube](#)

Product context

- *Superheroes* was released on 13 December 2019 as part of Stormzy's second album, *Heavy is the Head*. The video for *Superheroes* premiered on 9 September 2020 when it was shown in school classrooms in London, Glasgow, Dublin and Manchester at the start of the term when schools re-opened after having been closed since March due to the Covid-19 pandemic.
- The video was directed by British filmmaker Taz Tron Delix and produced by Argentinian animation studio 2veinte. Stormzy dedicated the video to Chadwick Boseman following the actor's death in August 2020. The video ends with the text: 'RIP Chadwick Boseman 1976–2020, Forever a Superhero in our hearts'.

- In 2020, Stormzy donated £500,000 to the Black Heart Foundation to provide educational scholarships for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and pledged to donate £10m over the next decade to help combat racial inequality in the UK.



Image by Raph_PH / Flickr.com / CC BY 2.0

Starting points – Media language

- The **opening shot** of the video establishes the urban **setting** with a wide shot of a UK cityscape. The accompanying **audio code** of birdsong connotes hope and optimism.



- The **colour palette** creates meaning, with the soft shades throughout the video signifying a positive mood. For example, the pink sky connotes hope and optimism, and the gold used to highlight the bones of Stormzy and the boy when they appear translucent reflects the lyrics about courage and inner strength.
- The **iconography** used in the video is associated with Black empowerment. The placards and raised fists in the protest scene send a message of Black power. Then, the symbolism at the end of the video when Stormzy places the world in the boy's hands before leaving him sends a clear message of optimism for the 'young Black kings' and 'young Black queens' who have the power to change the world.
- The **costumes** in the video create meaning for the audience, with Stormzy's black outfit symbolising Black empowerment. The boy's Adidas tracksuit was selected by the director to reflect a style similar to the dress code in Stormzy's *Sounds of the Skeng* video, adding authenticity and relatability for the young audience.
- Subverting music video **conventions**, *Superheroes* does not include the artist performing the song. It is entirely **narrative** based, with Stormzy featuring as a character leading the young boy on a typical **hero's journey**, showing him other characters who have found their gifts or superpowers. The **lyrics** narrate the story throughout, and the visuals contain many cultural references to real people and events from 2020.
- Stormzy is shown in the role of the hero, who rescues the young boy when he falls when flying by himself. The 'young Black kings' and 'young Black queens' could be seen as **Proppian heroes**, who receive help from Stormzy and other inspirational figures on their journey towards empowerment.
- **Intertextuality** creates layers of meaning in the video. For example, the scene where Stormzy is flying with the boy could be interpreted as a reference to Buzz Lightyear and Woody in Pixar's *Toy Story*. Later, the character in the classroom who works out the maths problems and appears to have telekinetic powers over the pens may remind audiences of the character of Neo in *The Matrix*.
- **Technical codes** also create meaning in the video. For example, a low angle shot establishes Stormzy as the hero the first time he meets the boy. The boy is looking up at him from the corner of the frame, positioning the audience to view Stormzy as an inspirational role model.
- The **animated** nature of the video enables the characters' superpowers to be constructed imaginatively, such as the scene where the musician is shown with six arms to represent his many talents.
- **Lighting** is used throughout the video to connote power and energy. Lightning flashes, sunlight and stars are used to connote positivity and to reflect superpowers, such as the lighting effects chosen to show Stormzy teleporting to different locations.

Starting points – Representation

- Stormzy is represented positively as a Black role model with the power to inspire the younger generation. From the start he is shown to be caring, taking time to support and inspire the central male character. He is also reading *Noughts and Crosses*, which he presents to the police. This highlights the issue of racial profiling and represents education as the route to empowerment and equality.



- The 'young Black queen' chopping vegetables and washing dishes reinforces a stereotype of females being more powerful in domestic settings but also suggests that the young Black female is a superhero because she is caring for her grandmother.
- The scene where a young female character is shown anxiously looking at herself in the mirror represents the issue of body confidence. It is transformed into a moment of empowerment when she is inspired to embrace her natural beauty by looking at a picture of the music artist Little Sims. Her gesture codes show this transformation, and the picture highlights the importance of positive role models for young Black females.
- The female character who is wearing a football shirt with the name Rashford on the back challenges stereotypes as she is shown to be a talented footballer.
- The 'young Black kings' are represented as empowered by education in the classroom scene and as talented and creative in the scene in the music studio. The central character is represented as vulnerable and lacking in confidence at the start before he is guided by Stormzy on his hero's journey where he is inspired and empowered by the positive role models he is presented with.
- The video depicts different kinds of families, sending a message to the audience that not everyone lives in a typical family. For example, one girl is shown living with and caring for her grandmother. In another scene, Black fathers are presented as good role models. The father with two children is doing his daughter's hair, challenging negative stereotypes about gender roles.
- The events of the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement are depicted in the graffiti shot and in the scene where the protestors are holding placards and wearing face masks due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

These scenes represent issues of Black empowerment, police prejudice and racial profiling (particularly with regard to stop and search).

Starting points – Audiences

- The primary audience for the video was school pupils in the UK, with the video being streamed to classrooms on 9 September 2020.
- Before the video was aired, Stormzy sent a video message to schools welcoming pupils across the UK back to school and telling them they would be the first people anywhere to see the video. He told them: *"I think it's important that you guys understand how powerful you are. Despite the colour of your skin, despite where you come from, despite your religion, despite whatever it is that you feel may be holding you back; you are a superhero. I wanted to make this video to inspire you guys, to let you know that the sky is the limit. To let you know that all those things inside of you, make you incredible."*
- The **target audience for *Superheroes***, Black British males and females from Generation Alpha, is younger than Stormzy's typical target demographic (male and female millennials/fans of the grime genre) due to the focus on younger characters and the animated nature of the video.
- Older, Gen Z audiences reacted on social media to Stormzy's use of lyrics from Keisha White's *Someday*, which feature at the end of the *Superheroes* track. This is better known as the Tracy Beaker (CBBC, 2002–2005) theme tune and sparked comments such as 'Man is singing Tracy Beaker riddims on his album?? Give that man a grammy' (-joezay(@pxpajoe, December 13th, Twitter, 2019).



- Stormzy is the 5th most popular rap/hip-hop artist in the UK (YouGov poll, 2023). On Instagram, 48% of Stormzy's followers are female and 52% are male.
- Stormzy's music is promoted to audiences through his website and its convergence with his social media accounts. In 2023, his third album, *This Is What I Mean*, was featured on his website, YouTube channel and Twitter account. The *Superheroes* video is also featured on the videos page of his website.
- Stormzy's social media accounts take a more personal approach to connect with his fans. Stormzy has expressed his views through social media on issues such as the Black Lives Matter movement and the 2019 UK general election.
- According to the **Uses and Gratifications Theory**, the *Superheroes* video could offer education, entertainment and personal identification with the characters in the narrative.
- **Audience responses:** According to the **Reception Theory** (Stuart Hall), the preferred reading of the video would be for the young Black audience to embrace the positive message of strength and hope in the song and feel empowered and inspired by Stormzy and the other role models featured.
- In 2020, Stormzy signed to 0207 Def Jam (part of Universal Music Group), a newly formed sub-division of Def Jam Records based in London which focuses on UK rap and grime artists.
- The official website promotes tours, album releases and associated merchandise and is currently (as of 2023) promoting Stormzy's third album, *This Is What I Mean*.
- Stormzy's brand, #Merky, has pledged to donate £10M over 10 years to Black organisations in the UK to fight racial inequality.
- Stormzy is known for bringing the grime music genre into the mainstream. Grime is a sub-genre of hip-hop.
- Stormzy was the first unsigned artist and the first grime artist to appear on *Later with Jools Holland* on BBC2. In 2014, he was the first ever artist to win Best Grime Act award at the MOBOs (Music of Black Origin Awards). He was also the first Black British solo performer to headline Glastonbury in 2019. Stormzy has won the Brit Award for Best Male Solo Artist twice.
- The production company responsible for producing the *Superheroes* video was 2veinte, a well-known boutique design and animation **studio** established in Buenos Aires that works with traditional frame-by-frame 2D animation. The director, Taz Tron Delix, and 2veinte managed to produce the video in just eight weeks. To achieve this, they had to use simple backgrounds after the establishing shots in order to focus on the characters and minimise scenic details.

Starting points – Media industries

- Stormzy's first album, *Gang, Signs and Prayer*, was released independently. It was the first rap album to win the BRIT Award for British Album of the Year.
- He was then signed to Atlantic Records in 2018, under which his second album, *Heavy is the Head*, was released. This album, which features the track *Superheroes*, was the 5th best-selling album in 2020.



Starting points – Media contexts

- The video contains many references to popular culture chosen to represent Black culture in an empowering way. These include rappers Dave and Little Simz, and footballer Marcus Rashford.
- Malorie Blackman's *Noughts and Crosses* novel is also referenced in the video. Stormzy appeared in the BBC adaptation of Blackman's novel which explores racism in an alternative version of society where Black people hold more power.
- The scene that depicts the Black Lives Matter protests reflects the social and political climate of the summer of 2020, shortly after the death of George Floyd in the US. Stormzy took part in the London protests, and the scene with the placards also reflects the social context of the Covid-19 pandemic, as the protesters are shown wearing face masks.
- The use of the Marcus Rashford shirt reflects social and political contexts as, at the time, Rashford had made a stand against the UK government on their decision to end the free school meals provided during the pandemic. Rashford successfully pressured the government into reversing their decision, so Stormzy wanted to represent him in the video as a hero and role model to young people.
- Stormzy is well-known for his political activism, using social media and high-profile performances, such as his headline slot at Glastonbury in 2019, to both support and criticise British politicians and encourage young people to vote.



Suggested reading

[Stormzy dedicates video for song Superheroes to Chadwick Boseman | Stormzy | The Guardian](#)

[Get to Know the Black British Superheroes in Stormzy's Stunning Animated Video | LBBOnline](#)