

Straight Outta Compton

(2015)



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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oyoew4T74_w

**AS Component 1:
Investigating the Media**
**A level Component 1: Media Products,
Industries and Audiences**

Subject Content: Media Industries
Focus Area: Media contexts

PRODUCT CONTEXT

- *Straight Outta Compton* is a biopic, produced by Legendary Pictures, distributed by Universal Pictures and directed by F. Gary Gray.
- The film follows the story of hip hop band N.W.A. in 1980s America. Members of the band (Ice Cube and Dr. Dre) were co-producers.
- The film was a huge commercial and critical success, became the highest grossing music biopic of all time, and was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay.

PART 1: STARTING POINTS – Media Industries

Historical Context:

The film portrays events set predominantly in mid-1980's California, USA. The depiction of this period in a contemporary film may have been impacted by the social upheaval caused by the racial tension and the LA Riots in 1992 (the portrayal of 1980's California, and the possible glorification of N.W.A. as agents of social change, may have been revised or influenced by subsequent events).

Cultural context:

N.W.A. were significant in terms of social change as advocates for free speech, producers of protest songs and as highly successful black men from disenfranchised American urban communities.

N.W.A. were also heavily criticised for their misogynistic lyrics and their promotion of a lifestyle that objectified and marginalised women.

Economic and Political Contexts:

Two members of the original band N.W.A. co-produced the film, so consider the possible significance of this in relation to funding and to the portrayal of historical events (could this be considered a sanitised attempt to “cash in” by band members?).

Consider the significance of patterns of ownership and control, including conglomerate ownership, vertical integration and diversification:

- *Straight Outta Compton* was **produced** by Legendary Pictures who entered into partnership with Universal Pictures (the film's **distributor**) in 2014. Universal is owned by NBC Universal, a Comcast company. The fact that the film was produced and distributed by a **major, vertically integrated film studio** that is part of a **media conglomerate** is significant in terms of funding, possibilities for cross-promotion and reaching a global audience.
- Consider other releases from **Universal/Legendary**? What are they famous for? Might audiences have a perceived sense of quality/expectation?
- The film was produced by a **major studio** and co-produced by two members of the band – this is significant in terms of the film and its marketing:
 - » Consider the **politics** of the band and the possible perceived glorification of the band as catalyst for social change. It is significant that band members from N.W.A. were co-producers of the film and might be accused of downplaying or sanitising the more problematic aspects of their work

(consider the “N” in the band name and some of their most famous tracks including “F*** tha Police” which are not referenced explicitly in the film’s marketing).

Consider how media organisations maintain, including through marketing, varieties of audiences nationally and globally:

- There are a number of specific and distinct **potential audiences** that the film is attempting to **target**, including:
 - » **Fans of N.W.A** (older fans who lived through the period, younger fans attracted to the band for their cultural significance etc.)
 - » **Fans of rap/gangster rap** (predominantly American audience or world-wide appeal? Urban dwellers who share experiences with the artists? Middle class youths whose lives are vastly different to the perceived struggles of the artists?)
 - » **Fans of biopic films** (open minded, educated, older, global audience without a specific interest in N.W.A.?)
 - » **Fans of the film studios/producers** (consider previous releases of Legendary/Universal)
- Rap and the sub-genre of gangster rap have specific and well identified **fan bases**. Consider the ways in which the **marketing** attempts to both **appeal** to these existing (and possibly pre-sold) audiences and also transcend the music genre to appeal to a wider film audience. Fans of the genre/N.W.A. for instance may be **attracted** to trailer scenes of the band being formed or the music being discussed and recorded but wider audiences may be more interested in scenes of social tension, cultural change or personal drama.
- **Specific examples of the marketing:**
 - » **The trailer**
 - * Familiar conventions used including duration, green band disclaimer/rating card, use of production logos/idents (possibly establishing status/reputation of film), use of intertitles, use of music, condensing the film to showcase dramatic scenes and establish narrative expectation including a three-act structure, links to social media/website. Also absence of conventions (no traditional trailer voice over, no specific release date).
 - * Identification with protagonists in the trailer - audiences encouraged to align with hip hop artists as

underdogs/disenfranchised minority, for example, the two specific instances where members of the gang are forcefully restrained by police.

- » **Star appeal** (including in this case the appeal of the “real life” characters portrayed on screen and identified using intertitles). The **names** of actors or directors are absent from the trailer and instead replaced with the real names of some of the members of N.W.A.
- » **Film logo** – explicit design reference to music parental advisory notice (social conventions of rebellion, challenge to authority etc.).

Consider the regulatory framework of contemporary media in the UK and the role of regulation in global production, distribution and circulation:

- The **BBFC** (an independent, non-governmental body) age rates film and video releases in the UK. However, local councils have the power to overrule BBFC decisions and rate films differently (e.g. *This is England* was rated 18 by the BBFC but several councils rated it 15). The theatrical release of *Straight Outta Compton* gained a 15 certificate, although the *Director’s Cut* DVD was an 18. More information can be found at <http://www.bbfc.co.uk/>.
- The **MPAA** rates films in America where *Straight Outta Compton* gained an ‘R’ rating (‘restricted’ - under 17s cannot attend without a parent). Consider **global distribution** - the film was rated differently in different countries (it was banned in Malaysia for example but gained an 11 rating in Sweden).
- Age ratings are important to **producers and distributors** in guaranteeing an **audience** – for example, a 15 rating in the UK opens the film to a much wider audience than an 18 certificate.

Consider processes of production, distribution and circulation and the impact of digitally convergent platforms:

- Consider how film/film marketing is **circulated and distributed**:
 - » Where and how is film/film marketing most likely to be **consumed** by audiences?
 - » How has this consumption changed/been impacted by the ubiquity of the **internet**, including YouTube and smartphones?
 - » Are **audiences** now more likely to seek out, for example, new trailers online as **active consumers**?

» How does this impact the **relationship** between **audience and product**?

- The film was **scheduled for release** in August 2015. The first **trailer** was released by Universal on 8 February 2015, with a 'red band' card to reflect the 'restricted' nature of the content (see regulation section above); the trailer included an introduction by Ice Cube and Dr. Dre.
- A second, **global trailer** was released on 1 April 2015, before the screening of Universal's *Furious 7*. Consider the significance of **ownership (vertical integration)** here and how *Straight Outta Compton* might have benefited from being trailed before an arguably more mainstream film with wider audience appeal. Further reading: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/scottmendelson/2015/04/07/why-universal-teased-straight-outta-compton-with-furious-7-instead-of-jurassic-world/#54f76a1c2a52>
- **Viral marketing** – On 7 August 2015 Beats by Dre launched an **app** that allowed users to upload their own photograph to the *StraightOuttaSomewhere.com* website, completing the 'Straight Outta' logo with a location of their choice. Over 6 million downloads of 'Straight Outta' images were generated on social media before the film's opening day. Find out more below: <http://uk.businessinsider.com/straight-outta-comptons-successful-viral-marketing-2015-8?r=US&IR=T>
- *Straight Outta Compton* was **released** in Britain on 28 August 2015 and released in the USA on 11 August 2015 (premiere in Los Angeles); see other global release dates: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1398426/releaseinfo>
- The film was a **major commercial success**, making over \$200 million – it had a \$50 million total budget (\$28 million production budget). Awards nominations (including for the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay) also contributed to its success.

Consider the significance of economic factors:

- The **pre-sold Hip Hop fan base** of the band N.W.A. (the appeal of 'real-life' story and the music itself) might serve to **offset the economic risk** of the film production. Similarly, the success of other **hip hop biopics/music drama films** *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* (2005), *Notorious* (2009), *8 Mile* (2002), might help to guarantee an audience for the film.
- Discuss the extent to which the film marketing,

such as the trailer, has been constructed to make a **profit** for the producers. It may be interesting to consider the ways in which elements such as swearing and violence have been either omitted or toned down to offer a broad appeal and ensure the trailer will reach audiences.

- Economic factors might also consider **synergy** - both the **soundtrack** for the film, featuring music by N.W.A. and a Dr Dre album inspired by the film, *Compton*, were released in conjunction with the film. The commercial success of these albums (e.g. the soundtrack entered the US Billboard 200 album chart at number 2 a week prior to the film's release) arguably contributed to the film's success.

Consider theoretical perspectives:

A level only:

Cultural industries – David Hesmondhalgh

- Further explore the concept of **profit** in relation to the film industry and in this case specifically to the genre of biopic. N.W.A. offer considerable cultural significance but their story might arguably have been reduced to a profit making exercise by industries.
- Explore Hesmondhalgh's idea that **media conglomerates** operate across a range of cultural industries by considering the way the film was released in conjunction with very successful (at least in the USA) music albums.
- You might also usefully introduce the idea that this film has a very low risk for the producers. The musicians from N.W.A. are successful in their own right and offer a pre-sold audience for the product and the genre of musical biopic is familiar to audiences.