

LESSON PLAN

Screen Stigma: Looking at Mental Illness in Popular Media

This lesson is part of *USE, UNDERSTAND & ENGAGE: A Digital Literacy Framework for Canadian Schools*: <http://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/digital-literacy-framework>.



LEVEL: Grade 9 to 10

DURATION: 1 ½ to 2 hours, plus time for the assessment/evaluation

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Matthew Johnson, Director of Education, MediaSmarts

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Overview

Students begin by viewing a slideshow that explores common stereotypes of mental illness and mental illness treatment in media. They read a prepared analysis of the portrayal of mental illness in a TV show popular with teens, then in a small group analyze another text of their choice. Finally, students create an annotated version of a scene or excerpt from a text in which they analyze and evaluate its portrayal of mental illness.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- Learn about common media stereotypes of mental illness and mental illness treatment
- Consider the impacts of media stereotypes
- Conduct a critical analysis of a media text
- Create a critical media work

Preparation and Materials

Prepare to project the slideshow [Media Myths and Mental Illness](#)

Photocopy the following handouts:

- *Media audit: "Riverdale"*
- *Media audit worksheet*

Photocopy the assignment sheet *Media and Mental Illness Analysis*

Consult the teacher backgrounder *Media and Mental Illness: Selected Texts*

Procedure

MEDIA MYTHS

Start by asking students to think about characters in TV shows, movies, et cetera, who are either identified as being mentally ill or are shown having symptoms of mental illness. Ask how realistic they think those portrayals are; let students discuss the question for a few minutes but don't give a definitive answer.

Now show the slideshow *Media Myths and Mental Illness* and go through it with the class. Can they think of any other examples of each of the myths discussed in the slideshow?

IMPACT OF MEDIA MYTHS

Ask students what impact these myths and stereotypes might have on how we think about mental illness. (If you feel your students need an introduction to the idea that media affect how we see the world, you can show them the Media Literacy 101 video *Media Have Social and Political Implications*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?list=UU_jQ4vYf-WPf4_5eSdGABWQ&v=YZi6s22yktw)

Make sure the following points come up:

- Seeing people with mental illness as violent can make people afraid of them, which contributes to *stigma* by making people unwilling to talk about mental illness
- Thinking that people with mental illness *look different* can lead to stigma because it makes us “other” them (see them as fundamentally different from us) and also makes us underestimate how many people have mental illnesses
- Seeing people with mental illness as *childlike* can make us think that they can't participate fully in society or make decisions about their own lives and treatment
- Thinking that mental illnesses can't be treated, that their treatment is brutal or dehumanizing, or that they can be treated by being loved or by just “accepting yourself” can make people with mental illness not seek treatment and lead others to blame them for their own illness.

MEDIA AUDIT

Distribute the handouts *Media Audit Worksheet* and *Media Audit: "Riverdale"*. Go through the worksheet to explore the questions that we can ask to critically analyze a depiction of mental illness, then go through the audit of "Riverdale" to show them an example.

Now organize students in groups of 3-4. Have each group select a media text that portrays one or more characters with a mental illness (you may suggest examples from the backgrounder *Media and Mental Illness: Selected Texts*) and analyze it using the *Media Audit Worksheet*. Each group will then present their findings to the class, using samples from the text (clips from TV shows or movies, photocopies or overheads of comics) to illustrate their points.

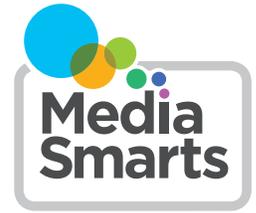
ASSESSMENT/EVALUATION TASK:

Distribute the assignment sheet *Media and Mental Illness Analysis* and have students select an existing scene from a movie or TV show and then provide annotations in the form of an added audio track, text on screen or live narration that points out where the text is accurate or misleading, then ends with suggestions for how the portrayal could have been improved (or, if the portrayal was accurate and responsible, how other media creators could learn from its example).

If you would like to make this an extended multimedia project, you can require students to create a fully annotated video of their text. If you choose this option, it is recommended that you choose a tool for them to use and spend at least a half hour showing them how to use it.

Below are some examples of free multimedia annotation tools developed by universities or not-for-profit organizations:

- Scalar (<https://scalar.me/anvc/scalar/>)
- Mediathread (<http://getmediathread.com/>)
- Vialogues (<https://vialogues.com/about>)
- VideoAnt (<https://ant.umn.edu/>)



SCREEN STIGMA: LOOKING AT MENTAL ILLNESS IN POPULAR MEDIA

Media Audit Worksheet

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Title:

Do the portrayal(s) fall into any of the stereotypes we've discussed in class? If so, describe how they do so.

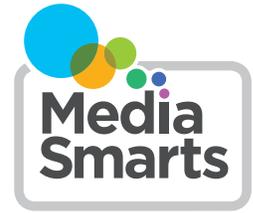
Character(s) portrayed as having mental illness(es):

What role(s) do they play in the text?

Describe the portrayal(s) in terms of the mental illness(es) shown:

If a diagnosis of a specific mental illness is given in the text, list it here. If not, list the symptoms associated with mental illness that the character(s) are shown as having.

What positive and/or negative impact do you think the portrayal(s) might have on the audience's views of mental illness? Explain why you think so.



SCREEN STIGMA: LOOKING AT MENTAL ILLNESS IN POPULAR MEDIA

Media Audit: “Riverdale”

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Title: Riverdale (TV show)

Character(s) portrayed as having mental illness(es):

Betty Cooper, Polly Cooper

What role(s) do they play in the text?

Betty is one of the main characters. Polly is her sister; Betty’s investigation about what happened to her is a big part of the first season of the show.

Describe the portrayal(s) in terms of the mental illness(es) shown:

Betty is identified as having Attention Deficit Disorder. She has two other symptoms shown. She hurts herself several times, squeezing her fists so hard her nails cut into her hand. Betty also sometimes takes on something like a different personality, dressing and acting very differently when she wants to do something that doesn’t fit with the way other people see her.

Betty also finds out that her sister Polly was sent to an institution by her parents to recover from mental health issues, though it’s implied they also wanted to keep people from knowing she was pregnant.

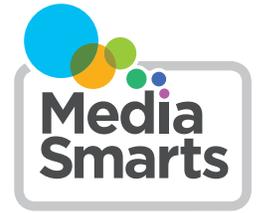
Do the portrayal(s) fall into any of the stereotypes we’ve discussed in class? If so, describe how they do so.

When Betty takes on her different personality she becomes violent, once almost killing someone. (Myth #1)

Betty is given medicine to treat her ADD. It doesn’t seem to help her and she becomes addicted to it. (Myth #4) There’s no suggestion at any time that Betty should or could be treated for her other symptoms (Myth #4) but her relationship with Jughead is shown as making her more stable (Myth #6). Both Polly and Betty are at different times put in a mental institution which is shown as being very unpleasant and whose staff does not make any effort to treat its patients. (Myth #5).

What positive and/or negative impact do you think the portrayal(s) might have on the audience’s views of mental illness? Explain why you think so.

Showing a positive character like Betty having mental health issues could help take the stigma away from mental illness, but the show has such a negative portrayal of mental health treatment that it might make people with mental illness less likely to get help. It also reinforces some negative stereotypes about people with mental illness, particularly the idea that they’re violent.



SCREEN STIGMA: LOOKING AT MENTAL ILLNESS IN POPULAR MEDIA

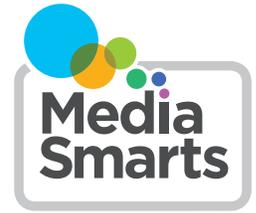
Media and Mental Illness Analysis

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Start by selecting a media text (movie, TV show, video game, comic, etc.) that portrays one or more characters with a mental illness. If you have trouble thinking of a text, I can suggest some possibilities.

Now *audit* the text using the Media Audit Worksheet to identify how it portrays mental illness and the possible impacts of that portrayal.

Use samples from the text (clips from TV shows or movies, photocopies or scans of comics, etc.) to illustrate your findings to the class.



SCREEN STIGMA: LOOKING AT MENTAL ILLNESS IN POPULAR MEDIA

Assignment Sheet: Media and Mental Illness Analysis

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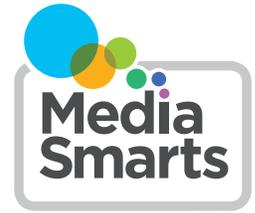
Choose a scene from a media text that portrays mental illness. (This can be from the text you analyzed in your group, but does not have to be.)

Now add *annotations* to the text pointing out where it is misleading or accurate in its portrayal of mental illness.

Here are some possible options for creating an annotated text:

- Create a video where annotations appear as captions or onscreen text
- Create a video in which the original scene is intercut with you discussing it
- Show the text and pause to do live annotations
- Add written annotations to a print text
- Create a slideshow of selected images from the text, with annotations onscreen

End your annotation with suggestions for how the portrayal of mental illness in the scene could have been improved (or, if the portrayal was accurate and responsible, how other media creators could learn from its example).



SCREEN STIGMA: LOOKING AT MENTAL ILLNESS IN POPULAR MEDIA

Teacher backgrounder: Media and Mental Illness Selected Texts

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Note: Not all of these texts are appropriate for young people. In some cases you may wish to ask parents to approve students' choices or to provide students with selections from the text.

TV SHOWS

- *13 Reasons Why*
- *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*
- *Degrassi*
- *Hoarders*
- *Homeland*
- *Lady Dynamite*
- *Legion*
- *Orange is the New Black*
- *Sherlock*
- *This is Us*
- *You're the Worst*

MOVIES

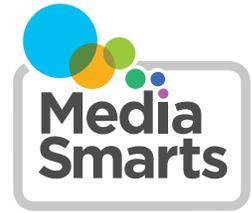
- *A Beautiful Mind*
- *As Good as It Gets*
- *Black Swan*
- *Garden State*
- *Girl, Interrupted*
- *Mom's Night Out*
- *Rain Man*
- *Silver Linings Playbook*

VIDEO GAMES

- *Batman: Arkham Asylum*
- *Depression Quest*
- *Far Cry 3*
- *Persona*
- *Silent Hill*

COMICS

- *Batman*
- *Deadpool*
- *Guts*
- *Harley Quinn*
- *Marbles*
- *Unstoppable Wasp*



SCREEN STIGMA: LOOKING AT MENTAL ILLNESS IN THE NEWS

Evaluation Rubric

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<p>Access</p>	<p><i>Making and Remixing:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use medium and genre elements to direct attention, communicate meaning and provoke inference <p><i>Finding and Verifying:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify relevant and irrelevant and more or less valuable information <p><i>Community Engagement:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actively seek out information that provides new perspectives and viewpoints • Find information that supports or challenges a position or point of view 	<p>Insufficient (R)</p> <p>Beginning (1)</p> <p>Developing (2)</p> <p>Competent (3)</p> <p>Confident (4)</p>
<p>Understand</p>	<p><i>Reading Media:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyze how medium and genre elements direct attention, communicate meaning and provoke inference • Identify the choices made by media makers and analyze the implications of those choices <p><i>Media Representation:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand how media, including those produced by one's peers and oneself, influence our views of reality and our identity • Identify frequent gender, racial and other stereotypes in media and analyze their origins and impact • Understand how media representations can influence self-perception and identity, including relating to gender, race and ability <p><i>Community Engagement</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluate the social and political implications of a media work • Finding and Verifying • Verify the reality and accuracy of media content 	<p>Insufficient (R)</p> <p>Beginning (1)</p> <p>Developing (2)</p> <p>Competent (3)</p> <p>Confident (4)</p>

EVALUATION RUBRIC

Engage	<p><i>Community Engagement:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Respond to the social and political implications of a media work• Use digital and other media tools for civic engagement purposes <p><i>Media Representation</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Compare media representations to one's own identity and experience• Ask critical questions about what is and is not included in a media work, whose voices are and are not included or given priority, and the implications of those choices	Insufficient (R) Beginning (1) Developing (2) Competent (3) Confident (4)
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