# MENTAL HEALTH EQUITY, MEDIA, & NARRATIVE POWER:


Mental health does not begin in a therapist's office, nor does it exist only inside individual minds. Mental health is shaped long before a crisis appears—by the conditions in which people live, learn, connect, and see themselves reflected in the world.

These experiences shape confidence, stress, belonging, and opportunity long before anyone labels them as "mental health issues."

Mental health equity means that everyone has a fair and just opportunity to achieve optimal mental well-being.

Achieving that goal requires addressing the structural conditions that influence exposure to stress, belonging, safety, and opportunity.

Public health researchers often describe these conditions as upstream determinants of well-being.

If life were a river, upstream is where the water begins to flow. What happens upstream shapes everything that occurs downstream.

These upstream forces include factors such as education, housing, economic stability, community safety, racism, and increasingly, the media environments people are exposed to every day.

Mental health is shaped by the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and learn.

Today, many of those conditions are mediated through images and stories circulating across film, television, news, advertising, and social media.

# THE MOVIE: THE HATE YOU GIVE

To advance mental health equity, we must therefore examine media not only as culture, but as an upstream determinant of health.

**Narrative Power and Structural Racism**

Structural racism operates not only through institutions and policies, but through stories.

Media narratives have historically framed social inequities as individual failures rather than the result of systemic conditions.

When barriers are portrayed as personal shortcomings instead of outcomes of historical and institutional forces, inequity becomes normalized.

Narratives that pathologize communities while ignoring root causes–such as under-resourced schools, environmental stressors, or economic exclusion–shift responsibility away from systems and onto individuals.

Over time, this narrative environment contributes to psychological harm. It narrows the range of stories considered valid or valuable, reinforces stigma, and limits how society understands the origins of inequality.

At the community level, these narratives shape public attitudes and institutional responses, influencing which communities receive empathy, support, and resources.

In this way, media narratives function as upstream drivers of mental health outcomes.

**The Psychology of Narrative: Deficit Stories and Learned Associations**

One of the most powerful mechanisms through which media shapes perception is the repeated use of deficit-based narratives.

Deficit narratives frame communities–particularly African Americans and other marginalized groups–primarily through images of crime, poverty, disorder, or failure while excluding stories of innovation, leadership, creativity, and resilience.

When audiences encounter these narrow portrayals repeatedly, the images begin to form powerful mental associations..

Psychologists describe a related mechanism as paired-associate learning–the process by which the human brain learns to connect two ideas through repetition.

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When certain visual cues are consistently paired together in media, those pairings become automatic in the mind.

For decades, film and television have often paired images of African American communities with themes of danger, criminality, or dysfunction.

Through repetition, these associations become embedded in public perception.

Media storytelling frequently reinforces these pairings through juxtaposition techniques–placing contrasting images side by side in ways that imply meaning without explicitly stating it.

For example:

- Scenes of crime intercut with images of Black neighborhoods
- News montages that repeatedly associate Black faces with violence.
- Narrative structures that contrast ”order“ with ”urban disorder“

Even when unintentional, these storytelling conventions create structural narrative racism, shaping how audiences interpret identity, community, and belonging.

The result is not simply cultural misunderstanding.

These narrative environments contribute to chronic psychological stress, reduced sense of belonging, and lower expectations of opportunity for those who are repeatedly misrepresented or erased.

## Why Media Matters Upstream

Research shows that persistent misrepresentation and invisibility are associated with lower self-esteem, heightened anxiety, and diminished belonging.

When people rarely see themselves reflected with dignity, complexity, and agency, it affects how they understand their own possibilities.

At the community level, harmful narratives influence public attitudes and policy decisions.

They shape which groups receive empathy, protection, and investment.

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In this way, media narratives operate as upstream forces that shape downstream mental health outcomes.

## Reclaiming Stories as an Upstream Intervention

Mental health equity is not achieved solely through treatment.

It is built through conditions that support well-being.

One of those conditions is **narrative power**—who tells stories, whose experiences are visible, and how communities are represented.

Film Media Literacy Education provides a research-to-action strategy for addressing this upstream determinant.

By teaching people—especially young people—how images shape perception and emotion, film media literacy helps individuals recognize narrative manipulation, challenge harmful stereotypes, and understand how stories influence belief systems.

This shift moves young people from passive media consumption to active story creation.

It strengthens agency, critical consciousness, and self-efficacy—protective factors that support mental health and community resilience.

When young people learn how stories work, they reclaim narrative power.

And when communities reclaim narrative power, they create the conditions necessary for collective well-being and mental health equity.

Repeated deficit-based narratives and negative imagery in American media have long shaped how the African American story is perceived—both within the United States and around the world.

When film, television, news, and social media repeatedly frame African American communities through narrow portrayals of crime, dysfunction, or struggle, these images become powerful psychological cues.

Over time, the human brain learns these associations through repetition.

Neuroscience helps explain why this matters.


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The brain's pre-frontal cortex—the center responsible for reasoning, empathy, insight, and complex problem-solving—functions best when individuals feel psychologically safe.

But when people are repeatedly exposed to imagery that signals threat, exclusion, or dehumanization, the brain's threat-response systems activate.

As illustrated in the neuroscience framework, when the brain perceives a threat—whether physical or psychological—energy is redirected toward defensive responses such as fight, flight, denial, anger, or repression, while higher reasoning and abstract thinking are suppressed.

For African American youth who grow up surrounded by media environments that frequently depict people who look like them in deficit terms, these repeated cues can create chronic psychological stress.

Instead of activating the brain's highest capacities for creativity, learning, and civic engagement, the narrative environment can trigger persistent vigilance and self-protection.

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This affects not only individual well-being but also collective community health.

Persistent misrepresentation can undermine self-esteem, distort social expectations, and weaken a young person's sense of belonging in society.

At the same time, these narratives shape how others perceive African Americans—reinforcing bias in institutions, policy decisions, and everyday social interactions.

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The consequences extend far beyond one community. Media images circulate globally, meaning the stories told about African Americans influence how people across the world interpret race, democracy, justice, and opportunity in the United States.

When a nation's dominant narratives repeatedly frame one group as dangerous, deficient, or disposable, those stories weaken the moral credibility of democratic ideals such as equality and shared humanity.

In a digital age where social media platforms amplify imagery instantly across borders, the psychological and cultural effects multiply.

Current events—from viral videos of racial violence to polarized political messaging online—demonstrate how quickly images can shape public perception, deepen division, and fuel misinformation.

For youth everywhere, these narrative environments matter.

Young people increasingly learn about society not through textbooks but through the visual language of film, television, and algorithm-driven media feeds.

When the stories circulating in these spaces are dominated by deficit portrayals, they can distort how young people understand themselves and others.

This is why film media literacy education is not simply a cultural skill—it is a public health and democracy-building strategy.

By helping young people understand how media narratives are constructed, how images trigger emotional responses in the brain, and how storytelling can either reinforce or challenge structural inequality, communities can reclaim narrative power.

In doing so, they create healthier narrative environments—ones that support mental health, strengthen empathy, and help build the democratic culture necessary for societies to thrive.


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It is not African American culture that harms young white people or white families—it is **distorted media portrayals of that culture** that can cause damage to everyone.

When film, television, news, and social media repeatedly introduce African American life primarily through narrow images of crime, conflict, or dysfunction, young viewers of all backgrounds—including white youth—learn a deeply incomplete and misleading story.

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Through repetition, these portrayals shape mental associations and social expectations before young people have real-world experiences that could correct them. For white boys and girls growing up in these media environments, this can quietly reinforce fear, bias, and misunderstanding, making it harder to develop empathy, cross-cultural relationships, and an accurate understanding of American history and society.

Families can inherit these distortions as well, shaping how communities perceive one another and in from school dynamics to civic participation

Distorted media narratives that repeatedly frame African Americans and other communities through deficit-based imagery do not only harm individuals–they carry measurable consequences for the nation's economic and civic health. influencing everything.

When entire groups are introduced to one another through narrow or stigmatizing portrayals, it shapes expectations in schools, workplaces, and hiring environments long before real talent is encountered.

Bias–often unconscious–can limit access to education, leadership pipelines, and high-growth industries, leaving large pools of human potential underdeveloped or underutilized.

The result is a labor force that operates below its full capacity.

Innovation slows when diverse perspectives are excluded, productivity declines when mistrust weakens collaboration, and the economy loses billions in unrealized talent and entrepreneurship.

These hidden costs ripple outward into GDP, workforce participation, and national competitiveness.


These hidden costs ripple outward into GDP, workforce participation, and national competitiveness. At a time when the global economy depends increasingly on creativity, cooperation, and advanced problem-solving, narrative environments that reinforce division rather than mutual understanding quietly erode the very conditions that allow a modern economy—and a democracy—to thrive.

Closing the skills gap requires more than new technnology - it requires young people who understand how the modern information economy works and who can think critically, collaborate across cultures, and communicate though the the powerful language of media.

Film media literacy education equips youth with exactly these abilities. By teaching students how stories are constructed, how images influence perception, and how media technologies can be used to create meaningful narratives, young people develop the creative, analytical, and communication skills that today's workforce demands.