

UNDERSTANDING LOVE AND IDENTITY THROUGH MEDIA

**HBO's Euphoria: How Do You Understand Love and Identity Through Media ?**

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**Abstract**

Adolescents and emerging adults are constantly bombarded with media which ultimately shapes the individuals they end up being, how they see themselves and how they see others. The purpose of the current qualitative study is to see how media, and HBO's Euphoria specifically has affected people's self-identity and narrative development as well as their love life narratives. Participants were interviewed and asked open ended questions related to the research questions to answer. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using inductive qualitative analysis. Through the research, five themes emerged which were relating to and seeing themselves in characters, increased open mindedness, relationship lessons, wants in relationships and increased closeness in relationships. The research supported the idea that Euphoria and fandom involvement has influenced fans' real life. And that in a broader sense, media has the power to affect people's identity and their relationships.

*Keywords:* Psychology, Euphoria, Narrative Identity, Identity Formation, Fan Studies, Media

## **Identity**

### **Identity Formation**

Identity formation is a long and enduring process. It begins in early childhood and continues well into adulthood. According to McAdams (2013), the psychological self has three facets which are the self as actor, agent and author. The self as a social actor begins to develop in early childhood around the ages of two and three. The social actor encompasses individuals understanding traits and social roles that they fulfill. The self is aware of social roles through repeatedly performing in those roles (McAdams, 2013). Humans are social animals, so they are aware of their social behaviors and the behaviors of others even from a young age which contributes to the sense of self and how they define the “I”.

As children get older and head into adolescence there comes to be more of an emphasis on the traits that individuals tend to observe about themselves and how that compares to other people. Through this method, social actors then categorize themselves based on their own observations and the observations of others (McAdams, 2013). The beginning of adolescence is also when personality begins to stabilize which tells us that around this age is when teenagers begin to settle into a way of “acting” for others. Social roles provide scripts for social behavior and set expectations that people regulate well into adulthood. The actor, in this case, is who thinks about social reputation and is concerned with the perceptions of others. Secondly, there is the motivated agent who emerges in middle-childhood and is concerned with the choices that one makes in accordance to goals, values and plans for the future (McAdams, 2013). The agent begins to develop once people have more control over their daily lives and behaviors. Understanding one's goals and values and wants for the future contributes to identity because it

establishes the personal, social and cultural ideals that one holds close and cherishes. Goals also speak to the hopes and aspirations one has for the future (McAdams, 2013).

Lastly, there is the autobiographical author which seeks to tell a coherent story about the self and put together a narrative about life experiences; it integrates the past, present and future. The author first begins deep formation in adolescence and continues into emerging adulthood and late adulthood (McAdams, 2013). While creating their life narrative people begin using autobiographical reasoning. This refers to the way that people use their autobiographical memories to make inferences about what the meaning of their life is and who they are (McAdams, 2013). Autobiographical reasoning begins in late childhood with children understanding things they did recently and what their participation in it was. Autobiographical reasoning grows in adolescence and becomes a psychosocial challenge in emerging adulthood. Autobiographical reasoning also covers the way authors put together memories in a linear fashion to make a point or draw conclusions about themselves. All in all, the author is what takes memories and turns them into a life story which explains how the person came to be and where they seem to be going in life. Ultimately, the self as actor, agent and author emerge at different points during the lifetime, exist concurrently and all inform each other.

### **Emerging Adulthood**

Building an autobiography is especially important during emerging adulthood. Emerging adulthood is a distinct time period between the ages of 18 - 25 (Arnett, 2000) . Emerging adulthood as a milestone is just beginning to be acknowledged as part of development in industrialized countries. It's important to acknowledge that this definitional time period is culturally constructed and not universal therefore it cannot be applied to every society (Arnett, 2000). The concept of emerging adulthood is seen as a bridge between adolescence and full

adulthood. This time period is prominent demographically and subjectively but most relevant in identity exploration. Emerging adulthood allows for the most opportunities for exploration in many life domains such as love, work and worldviews (Arnett, 2000). In emerging adulthood love explorations become more serious and intimate compared to teenage dating habits which may be more casual and short-lived. Deeper, more serious intimate relationships can lead individuals to (re)consider who they are, who they are in relation to their partner and who they want to be in the future, which are all questions of identity.

Similar to the romantic lives of emerging adults, work life becomes more serious as individuals move through college and/or going from part-time work to full time employment (Arnett, 2000). As emerging adults begin to consider more serious employment it can also bring into question other facets of their identity such as what kind of work are they good at ? What work is satisfying? And what work do they want to do long term ?

Lastly, there is exploration into different worldviews. Learning more about the world is seen as an essential part of growing up but seems to be especially salient between the ages of 18 to25.

During this time in industrialized countries many individuals are starting to pursue higher education which can expose students to many different schools of thought which can enforce their beliefs or cause them to reconsider their previous world views (Arnett, 2000). **Romantic**

### **Relationships and Identity**

Understanding the role of romantic relationships in identity formation through adolescence and emerging adulthood is especially relevant to this paper. As mentioned earlier, during adolescence is when teenagers first begin to consider romance and dating as part of their lives and is when they first start engaging in such behaviors. There are two main romantic experiences that teenagers experience. Adolescents can move through serious romance with one

steady partner or casual dating in short term relationships (Kindelberger, Mallet, & Galharret, 2020). There is also “pending romance” which encompasses indirect experiences with romance through fantasies and attempts at relationships (Kindelberger, Mallet, & Galharret, 2020).

Serious relationships can be defined as “committed relationships in which adolescents plan to engage for a while” (Kindelberger, Mallet, & Galharret, 2020). Serious romantic relationships have the potential to aid identity development because they allow adolescents to be engaged in both negative and positive emotional involvement and commitment as well as thinking about one’s values and wants for the future (Kindelberger, Mallet, & Galharret, 2020).

Casual dating would be considered moving through different romantic partners quickly or even having multiple and concurrent relationships (Kindelberger, Mallet, & Galharret, 2020).

Casual relationships, which seem to be the most common type of teenage relationship, can lead to individuals being involved with many other types of people which can help them understand what type of people you like to be around and what a future could look like with or without a partner (Kindelberger, Mallet, & Galharret, 2020).

And lastly, there is pending romance which is a completely different concept. It is neither an experience of a serious relationship or casual dating. Not all adolescents have the ability to be involved in romantic relationships or want to be. Some prefer to experience romance through conversations about sex and relationships with others or through experiencing fantasies about a friend or celebrity (Kindelberger, Mallet, & Galharret, 2020). Pending romance is a way of experimenting with romantic and sexual feelings and understanding what they feel like without the possibility of romantic rejection (Kindelberger, Mallet, & Galharret, 2020) which can lead to further exploration (Kindelberger, Mallet, & Galharret, 2020). Romantic relationships in the

following years of emerging adulthood play a similar role in the lives of young people helping with exploration of the self (Reifman as cited in Fincham & Cui, 2011).

### **Importance of Identity Formation through Romantic Relationships**

As it has been established that diverse romantic experiences and relationships help with identity formation, how does an individual then incorporate those experiences into their life narrative and what is its significance?

One's narrative identity "represents the internal and evolving understanding of an individual's personal past, present and presumed future (McAdams, 1995, 2013; Singer, 2004 as cited in Dunlop, Hanley & McCoy, 2019). It involves the autobiographical reasoning mentioned before and uses information from the actor, agent and author. Understanding narrative identity is important because it leads to a more introspective look at one's personality as well as personal and social functioning (Dunlop, Hanley & McCoy, 2019). Looking more closely at the romantic lives of people can help understand how individuals discern which experiences are most relevant to their narrative as well as understanding what parts of people's romantic lives help them understand how they function. Nice connections

### **Fandoms and Identity**

One's narrative identity and story encompass many factors, as everyone's life is extremely complex, faceted and impacted by both internal psychological and external social processes (Lee Harrington & Bielby, 2010). However, especially in modern life media plays an important role in people's understanding of themselves and functioning. The field of media psychology looks broadly at the impact that different forms of media such as television and video games have had on society. Specific to media studies and psychology is fan studies. Fan studies

look at fan culture and fandoms and how they relate to media consumption and impact actual fans which includes fan identity.

Fandoms have been central to explorations of identity for many years as they have grown. Fan identity informs different parts of one's narrative identity such as reaching certain milestones and understanding changes of the self (Lee Harrington & Bielby, 2010). The self transforms over the life course and fan identity can help an individual make meaning of those changes. It is noted that adolescent participation in fandoms can allow them to understand the physiological changes their body is going through (Lee Harrington & Bielby, 2010) as well as can be a turning point in their lives. Being a part of a fandom can deeply shape someone's identity, daily activities and even life trajectory. Also, as the media that the fan engages with changes so does the fan identity. It can also be that while as the fan changes the influence, impact or meaning of the media can change (Lee Harrington & Bielby, 2010). The fan object overtime becomes a part of the self as individuals project parts of themselves, their beliefs and values onto it. Therefore, over time the fan object can become a narrative focal point around which fans understand their life.

### **Parasocial Relationships in Fandoms**

Fans also build parasocial relationships with the media that they interact with which can impact their socialization, identity formation and more specifically their romantic relationships and experiences. As mentioned earlier, most people start experiencing some form of romance during their adolescence and it can take shape through serious relationships or more causal interactions as well as through pending romance. Parasocial relationships can be included in experiences of pending romance as they are "relationships with media figures which involve users' cognitive, affective and behavioral responses to a persona as if [they] were a personal

acquaintance” (Erickson & Dal, 2018, p. 112). These relationships with media in fandoms impact what relationship scripts adolescents endorse, their experiences of love and their evaluations of sexual experiences (Erickson & Dal, 2018).

Constructing one’s life narrative by understanding the self as actor, agent and author is a way to make meaning and reason out of our experiences and memories. Adolescence and emerging adulthood are the beginning stages of this process and individuals are exposed to so much which contributes to their identity formation. During this period of life individuals start experiencing feelings of romance and become more familiar with the concept. These experiences of romance can take shape through many different avenues from committed relationships to just fantasies which inform their narrative identity surrounding their love lives. In the modern times, part of growing up for many teenagers is becoming a fan or part of a fandom which can be a way to experience love and romance which inform their own perceptions about that domain of their life as well as their greater sense of identity.

### **Study**

In an attempt to better understand how media and fandom can play a role in identity development, this study used a qualitative methodology to understand how fans of the HBO series Euphoria experienced the show. Specifically, I aimed to explore the following research questions: How does media influence people’s self-identity and narrative?

1. How does media contribute to romantic identity development?

2. How do the parasocial relationships that people form with media, specifically Euphoria, contribute to their self-identity development?
3. How does the HBO show Euphoria lead to people's understanding of their values, goals, and plans for the future ?
4. How has Euphoria impacted how people form their love life narrative identities?

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

There were a total of six participants. Five out of six of the participants were recruited via Twitter, a social media platform. A tweet was posted with a brief description of the study and linked was a recruitment script which prospective participants could read. The last participant was recruited through a class at a medium-sized Northeast college. To be part of the study participants had to be 18, English-speakers, have watched the first season of Euphoria in its entirety and consider themselves part of the fan community. After reading the recruitment script, participants emailed the researcher with a date and time availability to conduct the interview.

### ***Procedure***

Interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom. They ranged from 30 minutes to an hour. During this time participants answered 16 open ended questions from a script that was prepared. The questions focus on three main areas of my research which were, identity development, media influence and romantic relationship beliefs. Examples of questions looking at identity development were: "Is there a character(s) that you identify with most?" and "How do you feel

you're most like this character?". This subset of questions was looking to see how fans either did or did not identify with characters in Euphoria. The second focus of the interview was media influence on identity which was inquiring about how Euphoria may have shaped part of fans' identity. Sample questions are, "Has Euphoria changed/influenced your values?" and "What values have you adopted from Euphoria?". Lastly, there were questions about romantic relationship beliefs. This section started with asking participants to explain their romantic history and then followed with questions about their thoughts and opinions about the romantic relationships in Euphoria and how they relate to the participant. Examples are, "What relationship do you most admire in Euphoria?" And "Have any of the relationships depicted in Euphoria been similar to any of the relationships that you've had?". Participants were able to answer the questions however they saw fit and could give as much or as little information as they wanted. The full list of questions can be found in the appendix.

### ***Materials***

This study is a qualitative study which examined the relationship between media and its influence on an individual's identity and love life narrative. This study also specifically looks at how HBO's Euphoria has influenced its fans' identity and relationships. HBO's Euphoria's first episode of its first season premiered June 16th, 2019 and was the American adaptation of the Israeli show of the same name. The series stars Emmy-award winning actress, Zendaya as the lead character Rue Bennett and follows her and her friends and family through their high school experiences of navigating drugs, love and friendship in eight episodes.

The first season premiered in 2019 and introduced the audience to a plethora of characters and personalities. Rue, the main character and narrator, enters as just a voice who takes the viewers through her life story in a condensed but precise way. They learn about Rue's

childhood, and her various diagnoses of OCD, ADHD, Generalized Anxiety Disorder and possibly Bipolar disorder at a young age. Rue does not know what to attribute this to but states that all she knew was that “the world moved fast and [her] brain moved slow”. When the season starts it is summer, Rue is 17 years old and had just come back from rehab after an overdose, for her junior year in high school. During this sequence the audience also meets Rue’s mom, Leslie, and her younger sister, Gia.

To expand, the character plotlines and stories in *Euphoria* are not told chronologically. Often, the audience bounces around from character to character and in order to explain the present, the show goes into the past. As mentioned, Rue Bennet is the main character and narrator of *Euphoria*. Everything the audience understands and learns is through Rue. Rue is very charismatic and lovable although she has moments that are really hard to fully grasp and empathize with. Her story begins when she returns to Highland from rehab. She mentions that she has no intention of staying clean and almost immediately goes to buy drugs to attend a party. When high, Rue goes to speak to Fez, her drug dealer when he questions her about her drug use and expresses concern for her well-being. Rue answers by telling a story about how she had a panic attack when she was 12 and had to be taken to the hospital where they gave her liquid valium to calm her down; she says, “This is it. This is the feeling I have been searching for my entire life, for as long as I could remember, because suddenly the world went quiet and I felt safe in my own head”. This statement sets the foundation for how the audience understands Rue’s addiction, what happens inside her head and what her motivations are for doing drugs, which is ultimately relief for her overwhelming thoughts and anxiety. The rest of the seasons leads the audience through the trials and tribulations that Rue endures with the season finale being Rue

breaking her sobriety because Jules leaves her at the train station, them both collapsing under all the pressure that had been placed on her.

Season 2 of Euphoria which premiered from January 9th 2022 to February 27th 2022 begins with a party where all characters are present. The audience is aware that Rue broke her sobriety though Jules is not. Jules eventually finds out this fact and is heartbroken, which Rue notices. This leads Rue to, for the first time, be honest with Jules about how she feels and how she wants to pursue a romantic relationship with her. This is the first step that Rue takes toward building something of substance with Jules. However, that same day she does drugs, knowing that Jules would disapprove. The rest of the season takes fans and viewers through many different extreme experiences from Rue trying heroin for the first time to Jules cheating on Rue and even a death. The second season of the show delves deeper into the lives of Rue, Nate, and Nate's dad while some characters like Kat and Maddy get sidelined. The season ends with Rue as an omnipresent narrator. She finishes by saying that she was sober for the rest of junior year and that, "Jules was my first love. I'd like to remember it that way. I don't know if that's actually true though. I think I was high for too much of it. I know it wasn't easy for her. I hope she forgives me."

Overall, Euphoria tackles many topics in the field of identity, sexuality, gender and relationships. Euphoria characters are complex and to some extent polarizing. Many people really dislike some of the characters and see them as morally corrupt. While some people thoroughly relate with the characters and have come to understand their own self concept through them. There's such a breadth to the characters, unlike other television series which have one-dimensional stereotypes that ultimately end up being stale and unrelatable though they might be entertaining to watch. And for this reason is why Euphoria was chosen for this study.

## **Results**

### ***Participant Demographics***

There were a total of six participants in this qualitative study. Each participant was asked their age, race and ethnicity, relationship status, if currently in a relationship, relationship length, sexual orientation and lastly, gender identity and pronouns. Participant ages ranged from 18 to 21. Half of the participants were white, two were Asian, and one was Black. All participants were single. Four of the six were cisgendered women and two were non-binary. Three participants were bisexual, another described herself as bi-curious, one was lesbian and the last was straight.

### ***Analytic Procedure***

As previously mentioned, each participant was interviewed through Zoom. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. The data was analyzed using inductive qualitative analysis. This means that there were no codes prior to starting the analysis. The transcripts were read and used to generate theme codes relevant to the topics discussed by the primary researcher and participants. A preliminary list of nine codes were identified which included code descriptions and examples. After reviewing codes, the primary researcher was able to produce a finalized version of the list which included five codes representing five salient and frequent themes in participant responses most relevant to the current study.

### **Relating to and Seeing Themselves in Characters**

Participants were asked if there was a character(s) that they identified most with and how they felt they were most like the aforementioned character(s). This question is most relevant to questions of identity, narrative formation and the role that fandoms and media play in the process of identity development. The majority of participants (five out of six) mentioned relating or

seeing themselves in Euphoria characters. Participants either had been in similar situations as one of the characters or saw aspects of themselves in the characters. One participant, Anna touches on this by saying that she relates to Rue's younger sister Gia, "because I've had really, really similar situations and experiences as her and felt the position of a younger sister trying to help an older sister [through addiction] and stuff like that. I really related and felt for her." Similarly, Amelia, another participant, saw herself in Kat, a self-described fat character who goes on to do online sex work. Amelia admits "I feel like I literally [was] following her journey with my own life, like in season one when she was doing her whole cam girl thing and that was insane. Obviously, I wasn't doing that but during that period of my life, I was. It's embarrassing to admit, but I was catfishing people online...I definitely related to her a lot in that aspect". Similarly to what Anna expressed, Euphoria following Kat's journey through her using the internet to discover herself and understand how she feels about her body and how romance fits into that is something that Amelia related to.

Lastly, there was a participant who differed from the rest wherein they found Kat inspiring as opposed to seeing themselves in Kat. The participant, Tess said, "Her [Kat's] storyline is about her becoming comfortable in her body enough to do sex work. Obviously, that's not a goal of mine, but being comfortable and wearing what I want and owning that is something that really inspired me when I watched season one". Different from other participants, more than seeing herself in Kat, Tess was inspired by Kat's ability to be more comfortable in her body as a fat person and saw that as aspirational. This is a really nice point.

### ***Increased Open Mindedness***

Four out of the six participants mentioned either taking on the perspective of the character in order to further understand their motivations and actions even if still not fully

empathizing with the character. This increased their open mindedness to other possible life experiences or just piqued their interest when thinking about different human experiences and the variety that exists. Claire mentioned, “it just sort of, it got me to think more about people, more about, why they are the way they are, if that makes sense... why they are the way they are and not necessarily empathize, but understand why but also not excuse them, you know, so I feel I've gotten better at that.” Watching Euphoria for Claire was a way to further understand different life perspectives and exercise perspective taking in a more effective way than she did in the past. Another participant expressed a similar experience. Naomi mentioned how her feelings about different characters changed as the series progressed and when asked how, she responded, “just having more of an understanding for a lot of characters like Nate's dad and kind of understanding why he is the way he is. Again, not agreeing, but seeing how certain things can lead someone to make certain decisions.” Naomi’s understanding is similar to Claire since she has also grown to be able to see the perspective of the characters whose behaviors are the most challenging to excuse and used this to get a better understanding of their motivations. In addition, Anna, who has a sister who struggles with addiction, said that, “ seeing [Euphoria] from the perspective of Rue has really helped me see it from the perspective of my sister, or other family members. And it really helped me feel less angry and more understanding.” Unlike Claire and Naomi, Anna had personal experience with individuals similar to the characters in Euphoria which informed her thoughts.

### **Relationship Lessons**

Euphoria also centers on many romantic relationships in the series. All of the relationships have trials and tribulations which viewers experience with the characters. One of the participants, Amelia, mentioned that she learned that “relationships are messy sometimes.

And then if it's worth it, you'll both find a way to make it work out. And if it's not worth it. Even if you tried very hard to make it work, it's not going to work out. So, sometimes it's hard to do but you just have to let the universe make some decisions for you. And also, if it's worth it you have to make those decisions for yourself too. You've got to take responsibility, but also know when to let go". This shows how Amelia was able to watch Euphoria and receive information about relationships. Another participant, Anna, also learned a profound lesson about what it means to be in a relationship with another person and how to decipher what decisions to make. They said that Euphoria taught them that, "sometimes love is not enough and not in a super depressing way. But like, in a way that this relationship is not going to fix your problems. And sometimes even if someone genuinely loves you and cares for you, it might even make the situation worse. So you have to, you can't just choose a person without choosing yourself too." Through Euphoria, Anna was able to explore what it meant to choose yourself in a relationship. Lastly, Claire said something similar to Anna in reference to the relationship between Maddy and Nate saying, "I feel the message there's that people are toxic and you just got to ditch it, you just gotta like, ditch the relationship and grow from it and don't let that darkness consume you". Claire specifically pointed out that she learned a message about relationships.

### **Wants in Relationships**

As mentioned, Euphoria features many types of romantic relationships which present viewers with a wide range of relationship paths. Through watching these relationships participants were able to identify different qualities that they would want or look for in their own romantic relationships. One participant Ava said, "it's (Euphoria) just taught me how I want to be treated. Like Cassie as an example, and season two. That's never how I want to be treated. And let's say Rue and Jules. it's really hard to talk badly about them in a way [but] they're both at

different points in their lives. And maybe they'll find each other again, but I don't know. I feel like I can never go through that...they both have very different perceptions of love And I think that I couldn't [do the same]". Here Ava is explaining that Euphoria gave her relationship examples which lead her to think more about what she wanted in romantic relationships. Furthermore, Euphoria is a show which centers on a sapphic relationship which provides an avenue for young people to feel safe in wanting romance that is considered nontraditional. One participant, Claire, touches on this by saying, "I think I selfishly want something like Rue and Jules. I want this grand sapphic love story. I feel like I've been fed that and I feel I expect it now but I want to do the things that Rue and Jules did. I want someone to straddle me while doing my makeup or something". Claire has been able to explore what it would be like and mean to be in a sapphic relationship and because of this, realizes that it's something she desires and wants for herself.

In addition, another participant was able to look at Rue and Jules' relationship and identify a more specific quality that they would want in their relationship. Anna said they admired Rue and Jules' commitment to helping each other and loyalty is something she would like to adopt. She expands by saying, "I think that their commitment to do things for the other person, especially Jules telling Leslie that rue's not sober. I was like, I'd appreciate it if someone did that. Like they did something, even if I didn't want it or I didn't personally like it. But it was still for my benefit. Even though I'd be mad at first, at the end of the day, I'd probably appreciate that. its commitment to their [each other's] well being at times". Through watching Rue and Jules, Anna realized that they want a high level of commitment and care in their relationship and would hope that their partner supports them, even when difficult like how Jules supported Rue through her active addiction.

***Increased Closeness in Relationships***

Two participants, Ava and Anna, mentioned how Euphoria helped them develop closer familial relationships. Ava, who divulged that she did not have a strong relationship with her mom said that she is a very closed off person but “seeing how much Rue and Cassie rely on their mom(s) a little bit...I think that's kind of what I want and my mom even started watching euphoria, it's kind of weird but I think that's like good for both of us”. Through Euphoria, Ava was able to see how both Rue and Cassie depend on their moms for emotional support and how their moms give them the support that they need which allows them to have a relationship.

Second, there was Anna who said that they had not set specific goals for their relationships prior to Euphoria but said that the show shifted that, “I didn't think about the dynamic of my relationships that much especially with my family. And it (Euphoria) made me think deeper about what the dynamics were like [with] my sister, my mom, my dad. To find out what they actually mean and what type of results they're bringing out in our family. So that's one way it's changed [my goals in relationships]. It just made me think more about it.” Because of Euphoria Anna was able to analyze and think about her various relationships with family members and what dynamics exist.

Furthermore, two other participants, Amelia and Naomi, mentioned that they were able to build or form closer relationships with their friends through watching Euphoria and then discussing it. Amelia said, “because of all these varied characters, it brought me and two of my friends closer together, because for season two, we watched every episode together and it was a nice tradition we had every week. And we got to discuss and see these characters from different perspectives. So even though it's not completely related to the show, I feel like it did bring a lot of people together.” Because of Euphoria, in an indirect way Amelia was able to build

relationships with the people around her in a way that might have not been available before through discussing the stories and characters present in Euphoria. Naomi mentioned how her social media was also influenced by the show and this created the space for her to further think and talk about the show with her friends. She said she would go on Tik Tok and “every single video on my page would be psychoanalyzing the episode and all of my friends watched. I would literally FaceTime call all my friends and watch the episode at the same time. And talk about it after for hours...talking about the show afterwards was almost more fun to me than watching the show”. Naomi made the point to say that discussing the show with friends was sometimes more enriching than actually watching it. That the social aspect of talking about it with friends was more fulfilling than watching Euphoria

### **Subjectivity**

Research is subject to bias which is important to address as a researcher. I consider myself a part of the Euphoria fandom and have been a fan of the show for about two years. Therefore, this may impact my recollection of characters and plotlines. I also grew up being part of different fandoms and incorporated them into my own identity. This experience led me to subconsciously form different ideas about love and relationships which I came to realize when I was older. Hence, I believed that this would be the same for many other fans growing up.

### **Discussion**

As expected, this study revealed that, for some emerging adults, watching a show such as Euphoria can serve as a powerful opportunity to learn about the self and others in ways that contribute to identity development. This will be discussed more fully below.

### ***Increased Open Mindedness***

Considering the results from this study the consumption of media can lead to perspective taking and increased openmindedness in viewers and fans. Euphoria has a diverse cast of characters, storylines and personalities, many of which can be challenging and frustrating to empathize with. This still has led many fans to consider the inner workings of these characters in order to get a better understanding of people in their lives or humans in general. Euphoria was a way to further understand different life perspectives and exercise perspective taking in a more effective way than they did in the past as highlighted by participants. In this way this study supports the idea that fiction has the ability to enhance our ability to understand other people (Gottschall, 2020). More than that, watching the characters in Euphoria helped a participant identify the disparities in their understanding of their sister's active addiction. Euphoria helped them cope with their own emotions about their family members and their experiences through perspective taking. This process aids identity development through further understanding the self as social actor and agent, and author which work together so that the individual can understand their social roles, their position in the world and what that means about them (McAdams, 2013).

### ***Relationship Lessons***

It's apparent that through Euphoria fans learned lessons about relationships. In this way, fans learn lessons about relationships from Euphoria which impacts how they move through romance and love. Participants watched Euphoria and received information about relationships which helped them understand how to make decisions in relationships for themselves. They explored what it means to have someone love you, how that can make you feel, and what to do with that love once you have received it. By understanding this, fans were able to solidify their own feelings about relationships and social functioning. Even more, they were able to look at an abusive relationship and understand the toxicity that exists within that dynamic. Learning this

lesson through fictional media meant that participants were able to explore that type of romantic relationship through Euphoria but safely. This incorporates the idea of pending romance which is neither an experience of a serious relationship or casual dating. Pending romance is a method of experimenting with romantic and sexual feelings and understanding what they feel like (Kindelberger, Mallet, & Galharret, 2020) which can lead to exploration of the self (Kindelberger, Mallet, & Galharret, 2020). Exploration can lead to further understanding personal goals and wants which influence the autobiographical narrative (McAdams, 2013).

### ***Wants in Relationships***

Through watching relationships in Euphoria participants were able to identify different qualities that they would want or look for in their own romantic relationships. This is important as this is part of understanding the self as an agent, which is concerned with goals, values and plans for the future (McAdams, 2013). A participant also was able to look at two different types of relationships in Euphoria and decipher her own wants and needs from those portrayals. These discoveries can serve as a way through which fans experience romance and relationships indirectly and, henceforth, come to understand a part of their sexuality and identity (Kindelberger, Mallet, & Galharret, 2020). Overall, participants being able to recognize qualities they want in their relationship based on what they have observed in Euphoria has allowed them to evaluate their goals, values and plans for the future through exploring what they want for themselves in relationships.

### ***Closeness in Relationships***

According to my research, Euphoria has led to some fans having closer relationships with people in their lives. This has occurred either after seeing positive relationships in Euphoria which encouraged them to critically think about their own relationships or through communal

watching and discussion of the show. Two participants were able to build closer relationships with their family. The positive relationships represented in Euphoria were able to encourage them to begin the process of developing a closer relationship with their close ones. Euphoria influenced the way they understood themselves, their roles in relation to their family, and the narrative they created about their family life which contribute to identity development (McAdams, 2013). In addition, participants were also able to build closer friendships through communal watching of Euphoria or discussing it with friends. As discussing the show became a part of their relationships and socialization, fans began to feel like they were brought together with their friends.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

The current research built on McAdams presented theory of the psychological self as actor, agent and author (2013) which described how over the lifespan individuals develop these different facets which inform each other on building a narrative about one's life. It also built on the understanding that fictional media and fandom have the ability to shape individuals relationships and identity.

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**Appendix**

**Table 1: Demographics**

Name	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Relationship Status/Length	Gender Identity	Sexual Orientation
Adin	21	Black/Ethiopian	Single	Non-binary	Bi
Toni	20	White/Latinx	Singe	Non-binary	Lesbian
Agnes	19	Asian/Chinese	Single	Cis Woman	Bi
Chloe	18	Asian/Chinese	Single	Cis Woman	Bi
Natalie	21	White/Italian	Single	Cis Woman	Bi-curious
Amber	18	White/Canadian	Single	Cis Woman	Straight

**Table 2**

Theme	Anna	Tess	Amelia	Claire	Ava	Naomi	Percentage of Who Mentioned Theme
Increased Open Mindedness	X	X		X		X	66
Learned Relationship Lessons	X	X	X	X		X	83
Wants in Relationship	X		X	X	X		66
Increased Closeness in Personal Relationships	X		X		X	X	66
Relating to and Seeing Themselves in Characters	X	X	X		X	X	83

**Interview Questions:**

To begin with, tell me a bit about your experience with Euphoria:

- a.) When did you start watching it?
- b.) Have you watched the entire season 1? How many times?

- c.) How did you feel when you first started watching it?
- d.) Did your feelings change as the show went on?
- e.) Have you watched the new season?
- f.) How many episodes have you watched?
- g.) How did you feel when you first started watching season 2?
- h.) Have your feelings changed as the show has progressed?
- i.) How did you find the Euphoria fan community?

I am now going to ask you more specific questions about Euphoria and its characters

1. Is there a character(s) that you identify with most?
2. How do you feel you're most like this character?
3. How do you feel you're most different from this character?

The following questions are about how Euphoria has led you to understand your values, goals, and plans for the future

- Has Euphoria changed/influenced your values
  - **4. What values have you adopted from Euphoria?**
  - If needed, values are defined as beliefs that serve as motivation for your actions
  - For example, you believe in always being honest, therefore, you choose to always tell the truth to your friends and family
- Has Euphoria changed/influenced your goals
  - **5. How do you feel your goals have changed since watching Euphoria?** These goals can be professional, romantic, personal, financial
  - These goals can also be short term or long term
- Has Euphoria changed/influenced your plans for the future
  - **6. In what ways do you think Euphoria has shaped your life and plans for your future**

Okay, so now the next couple of questions will be about your thoughts and opinions about the romantic relationships in Euphoria and how they relate to you

7. Firstly, what is your romantic history? This can encompass anything you wish, doesn't just have to be committed, long-term relationships
8. Overall, what do you think about the relationships represented in Euphoria?
9. Did your perception of these relationships change as the series progressed?
  - If they don't mention season 1/ season 2, then ask for a follow-up. Has your perception changed between the second and first season?

10. What relationship do you most admire in Euphoria? Why?
11. What relationship would you least like to be in Euphoria?
  - Follow up with why questions
12. Have any of the relationships depicted in Euphoria been similar to any of the relationships that you've had?
13. Please describe any relationship qualities in the show Euphoria that you would like to adopt
14. Has Euphoria changed the way you envision relationships?
15. What have you learned about relationships from Euphoria?

Final Question:

16. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your experiences with Euphoria/any media that has influenced your ideas about romance and relationships or self-concept