

**When drugs are no longer cool.
Coming-of-age narratives on addiction from *Skins* to *Euphoria***
**Cuando las drogas ya no molan.
Narrativas de madurez sobre la adicción de *Skins* a *Euphoria***

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Abstract

Introduction: Television series can act as one of the primary sources of information on addiction. However, research on the accurate representation of addiction concerning its clinical and social reality is still lacking, mainly because it requires an interdisciplinary approach with higher complexity. *Methods:* this article aims to analyze the narrative depiction of drug addiction through two TV series case studies: *Euphoria* (Levinson et al., 2017-2021) and *Skins* (Elsley et al., 2013-2017). Moreover, it intends to identify which stereotypes are still predominant on-screen. *Results:* current TV series try to opt for better representations. *Discussion:* the perpetuation of misconceptions and misrepresentations is still due to a tension between showing realistic, educational values (edutainment) and opting for a gripping audio-visual and narrative drama. Finally, the TV series criticizes how the responsibility for the recovery is placed on the persona rather than the system.

Keywords

TV series; drugs; addiction; social representation; coming-of-age.

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Resumen

Introducción: Las series de televisión pueden actuar como una de las principales fuentes de información sobre las adicciones. Sin embargo, la investigación sobre la representación fiel de la adicción en cuanto a su realidad clínica y social es todavía escasa, principalmente porque requiere un enfoque interdisciplinar de mayor complejidad. **Metodología:** este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar la representación narrativa de la adicción a las drogas a través de dos estudios de caso de series de televisión: *Euphoria* (Levinson et al., 2017-2021) y *Skins* (Elsley et al., 2013-2017). Además, pretende identificar qué estereotipos siguen predominando en la pantalla. **Resultados:** Los resultados muestran que las series de televisión actuales intentan optar por mejores representaciones. **Discusión y conclusiones:** a pesar de la complejidad de los imaginarios sobre las drogas en estas series, todavía se produce una perpetuación de ideas y representaciones erróneas debido a una tensión entre mostrar valores realistas y educativos (*edutainment*) o bien optar por un drama audiovisual y narrativo apasionante. Finalmente, cabe señalar que la serie de televisión critica cómo la responsabilidad de la recuperación recae en la persona y no en el sistema.

Palabras clave

Series de televisión; drogas; adicción; representación social; adolescencia.

INTRODUCTION

Television series can act as one of the primary sources concerning drug depiction and they “acquire a special interest during adolescence, since this stage of development is considered crucial for the development of personal identity” (Donstrup, 2022, p. 263). Most academic articles on substance use portrayals on television have focused on alcohol (Christenson et al., 2000). Nonetheless, this research will focus on the depiction of synthetic drugs since it is considered one of the most worrying substance problems besides alcohol and smoking (Mueller 2007, p. 341).

In an academic study conducted in 2022 by Donstrup, it was demonstrated that in coming-of-age TV series, illegal drugs made a lesser appearance than legal ones. Marijuana and hashish were the most prominent ones, consumed mainly by young boys. However, it also noted that synthetic drugs were con-

sumed to a great extent, and the consumption of those drugs was generally associated with the most remarkable negative consequences. However, many positive consequences, such as fun or relaxation, were also shown. This article focuses on analyzing two paradigmatic series that talk about drug addiction among teenagers using content narrative analysis to explore the depiction of drug substances in contemporary television series, focusing on type of drug; recovery; socio-economic context; and its relationship with youth.

EUPHORIA: HIGH ETHICAL TENSIONS WHEN GETTING HIGH

The US HBO teen coming-of-age drama hit series, *Euphoria*, released in 2019, created and written mainly by Sam Levinson, is based on the Israeli miniseries with a homonymous



title. The series revolves around a group of high schoolers in the fictional town of East Highland who seek to find themselves while balancing the strains of love, loss and addiction. The TV series' main character is Rue Bennet (Zendaya Maree Stoermer Coleman), a recovering teenage drug addict struggling to cope with the loss of her father while navigating teenagehood and sexual discovery. Rue consumes a variety of different types of drugs throughout the seasons, but mainly: Alprazolam, marijuana and, most concerning, opioids. The latter is not surprising since the TV series is set in the US, where there is a straightforward narrative that revolves around the opioid epidemic due to being one of the deadliest drug crises in US history, by killing about 90 Americans every day (New York Times, 2017).

Many scholars and associations, such as the DARE—The Drug Abuse Resistance Education program, have made rightful concerns about the potential glorification of high school drug use in the show, particularly regarding the number of youngsters that consume. Nonetheless, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2020) stated that “in the US, about 6.3% of the adolescent population had a substance use disorder”, making *Euphoria* (Levinson, 2019-2021) quite a realistic portrayal in terms of consumers. Nonetheless, *Euphoria* tries to frame itself as a criticism of social issues and inequalities in the US, particularly under the treatment of drug abuse and dealing under evocative environments that resemble some of the characteristics of *noir* works. *Euphoria* presents an aesthetic with bold superheated colors and bass-based songs, mostly from Labyrinth, with camera movements that rarely are still shoots, while the series has been praised from its audiovisual aesthetics and art direction that ignited

cultural fervor from costumes, social media trends, themed parties to influencing runway shows at New York Fashion Week, many times *Euphoria* fails to deliver the critical message because often it gets shadowed by their own aesthetics.

The series shows a limited range of substance abuse treatments despite its intention to depict the actual reach of treatment for non-wealthy families. Most drug behavior interventions are misrepresented in previous films or TV series, such as *Recovery Road* (Freeform, 2016) and *Do Revenge* (Netflix, 2022). Treatments are almost always presented as available, desirable and successful methods of recovery without accounting for their cost and the barriers to accessing such treatment, particularly in the US private health system. Unfortunately, the idyllic resort-like treatment settings are typically not within reach of families with an addicted member. The series assertively -although it can have certain flaws- depicts inpatient rehab in season one without emphasizing that rehab programs can vary in quality and be very expensive. Particularly in season two Narcotics Anonymous (NA) is portrayed as a program that can alienate non-religious people. For instance, the series has not yet depicted successful treatments for opioid-use disorder with medications such as buprenorphine, naltrexone, and methadone, which have been found to reduce opioid use, decrease the risk of overdose and increase the odds that a patient will stay in treatment. Surprisingly, the show forgets to bring onto the screen other types of therapies contrary to the trends we have been seeing in the last 15 years in coming-of-age series such as *Atypical* (Rashid et al., 2017-2021); *Never have I ever* (Kaling et al., 2020-present), *Grown-ish* (Anderson et al., 2018-present), among others, since it is shown that cogni-



tive behavioral therapy, family therapy, motivational interviewing and support therapy can contribute significantly to the recovery from addiction and the intrinsic link with mental disorders, as mentioned. This is no exception for Rue since the root of her addiction relies on childhood trauma, particularly the loss of her father at a very young age, which led her to suffer from anxiety, panic attacks and other mental health issues. At the beginning of the TV series, she is diagnosed with attention deficit disorder (ADHD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) and bipolar disorder (BD), creating a vicious cycle in which drugs attenuate the symptoms momentarily for the person, but then they make the condition worse.

In fact, beyond these multiple diagnoses, one of the elements to highlight in *Euphoria* is the representation of simultaneous consumption of different drugs that obeys a concept of overflowing anxiety on the part of the main character, but which at the same time describes a particular distributed narrative, because it shows the protagonist under the effects of these different drugs with varied plot results and, especially, with different consequences. This allows the notion of consumption to be linked to that of plurality and expansion of the plots, even complexity in a sense conferred by Jason Mittel (2015), to the point of increasing the story's dramatic arc through the drug as an inducing factor. Moreover, this gives rise to behaviors that are not merely descriptive but have a weight in the course of the story: the destruction of her own home, the looting of other houses or the mistreatment of people, in principle, dear to her, obeys the effect of transference between the descriptive gesture and the narrative unfolding through drugs as an instrument.

The use of drug consumption as a plot device acquires two dimensions throughout the series. The first acts from a consecutive function, as it raises conflicts of different characteristics so that the plot can unfold from that expansive prism we were talking about. In this sense, it acts as a catalyst for action and increases the story's complexity. On the other hand, the second is offered as an element of threat and, therefore, is presented from a conclusive function: it introduces the sensation of denouement due to the extreme risk that drug consumption can produce. The end of the second season is very eloquent to this effect because it triggers a contradictory sensation in the viewer. In this finale, Rue appears to show signs of recovery from her addiction. This is interpreted as conclusive and positive for the character from the point of view of empathy for the protagonist. However, this decision by the scriptwriters is weighed down by an antagonistic impulse on the part of the audience: the use of addiction as a plot device generally calls for the character's relapse into drug use because this perpetuates the conflict that makes the development of the series effective. The contradiction that arises between the viewer's natural desire to see the protagonist recover and the ultimate desire for this not to be the case to favor serial continuity is a receptive dilemma that provokes satisfaction from the tension. Furthermore, it is here that the questions of realistic representation, exposition of a message and ethical function of the story offer multiple readings and, above all, a certain plasticity when it comes to understanding that the narrative-medicine conjugation, in its most general sense, is made up of many concessions.

This tension involves ethical and moral questions, and it seems acceptable to un-



derstand that drug use undergoes a particular sacralisation effect. Hence the reaction of the American programme D.A.R.E. and its denunciation, focusing particularly on the trivialisation of the process described in the series and, beyond that, its triumphalist and normalizing approach. The anodyne, everyday nature of drug use in the series can be understood not only from a health point of view but as a highly de-instructive element. But, beyond its educational function, the discourses that attack this approach do so from the point of view of the installation of an imaginary which they conceive as an exception and not from the norm installed as general and, therefore, acceptable behavior. Here again, the contradictions between the narrative and the representative function of the story emerge: from a narrative point of view, the plot is signified. It gains interest from the audiences from the singular and conflictive, not from the formative mechanisms and politically correct discourses. The balance between the reflection of a society where drug consumption is increasing at an early age and the eventual message of normalization through the mere exposition of the plot generates an interesting debate precisely because of the audiovisual industry's responsibility in dealing with subjects of this caliber.

The story places the protagonist in a highly complex state in this dialectic between the need for *conflictualisation* of the plot, the representation of reality and the assumption of a context of normalisation. This is especially so because the consumption of various substances, with a predominance of opiates, is one of the significant causes of death among young people and this undoubtedly pushes the series' proposal to the extreme. The radicalisation of the proposal allows *Euphoria* to pose plot knots that are

guided by drug addiction. It is in the division between *narrative knot* and *catalysis* that Roland Barthes (1966) suggests distinguishing the fundamental elements of a story -in the first case- and the transitions between one conflict and another -in the second, the episodes related to drug use always obey the creation of a knot. They do so, in reality, as both cause and consequence, and here the spiral of addiction is perfectly drawn: Rue's adolescent problems require, in her case, the consumption of different substances as a means of escape, but, at the same time, this consumption has consequences that provoke new conflicts. For example, the rupture of relationships with her closest friends responds to this conflict-solution-conflict chain, where the solution - consumption - is wrongly interpreted because it lengthens the tunnel in which the protagonist is submerged. In this sense, the maximalist version of the problem that is described is also a more acute representation of the case. Perhaps a more distilled version would be less dramatic but also convey another dimension of *addiction*.

The series effectively depicts that drug addiction is everywhere and does not have *per se* a recognizable face. In other words, it is a disease that does not discriminate across race, class, or gender. *Euphoria* assertively humanizes the struggles with addiction and opposes previous narratives in which addiction can be overcome through support from families, sponsors, friends, etc., as it depicts, more often than not, occasions of failure and defeat. This realistic tone states that drug addicts can be manipulators and drug abuse can wreck someone's closest relationships. For example, when Rue refuses to pee as a "suicidal gesture" (because she is damaging her kidneys on purpose) both to get medication and also to shout for help. Thus,



it shows that addiction is not an easy fix or something that can be overcome overnight and that even the most determined recovering addicts can easily fall back into a vicious cycle of drug use. Finally, one of the highlights of the TV series that aligns with many of teenage reality is the unquestionability of the drugs provided, due to Rue's drug dealer being one of his best friends, Fezco (Angus Cloud), from childhood that after denying her to buy from him, there seems not to be much concern for whether drugs are mislabeled or adulterated. However, it is a pretty common practice. This is especially relevant in the opioid pandemic because many can be contaminated by the highly potent opioid fentanyl. Thus, it is a missed opportunity to showcase "harm-reduction methods, like Narcan and fentanyl test strips, can help make drug use safer" (Law, 2022).

SKINS: PERPETUAL PARTY IN THE PARADISE OF EXCESSES

Skins (Elsley et al., 2007-2013) is a British teen comedy-drama television series that follows the lives of a group of teenagers in Bristol in issue-based stories. Each episode focused on a main character or subset of characters and their struggles routinely; with the episodes named after those featured characters -who were replaced every two years-. It has become a cult series drawing appraisal for its depiction of youth changing things up from milder depictions of teen life, such as *Dawson's Creek* (Kapinos et al., 1998-2003) or *Gilmore Girls* (Sherman-Palladino et al., 2000-2007), and has become one of the most successful and longest-running British youth TV dramas. The series provoked a change in previous broadcasting

programming in part due to the switch of behavior by youngsters concerning media use and reflecting "a wider process of change in the lives of young people themselves – a sense of growing instability and uncertainty that some have seen as characteristic of the 'precarious generation'" (Buckingham, 2021). There was a claim that *Skins* was more "authentic" than the youth television dramas that had preceded it, and it quickly began to be seen as controversial due to its heavy storylines such as dysfunctional families, mental and neurological disorders, sexual orientation, gender, substance abuse, death, and bullying.

The series wanted to move away from moralizing perspectives on drug abuse, particularly in the first seasons. The consumed drugs were mostly cannabis, MDMA and (less frequently) cocaine and ketamine, which were seen as a relatively banal fact of life. Nonetheless, *Skins* does not altogether eschew it since it shows the consequences of drug abuse behavior. For example, in season 3, Effy Stonem (Kaya Scodelario) has a bad trip due to eating mushrooms and attacks Katie Fitch (Megan Prescott), leaving her hospitalized. In contrast, season 4 begins with the suicide of a marginal character who has taken MDMA supplied by Naomi Campbell (Lily Loveless). Moreover, there is an intrinsic link with promiscuity, drugs and unwanted pregnancy, in season 4 with Jal's (Larissa Wilson) character and in season 6 with Mini (Freya Mavor).

However, drug abuse is explored mainly through Effy's character due to her high consumption of substances, including alcohol. As a result, she develops psychotic episodes and delusional symptoms, developing psychotic depression alongside her bipolar disorder. *Skins* has been highly criticized



with this character since Effy became the epitome of the “cool girl” Tumblr aesthetic trope more than a three-dimensional character exploring issues such as addiction, depression, and bipolar disorder. In fact, at the beginning of the series, due to its open depiction mainly of recreational drug consumption, in many places across Europe, the term “Skins party” was coined and became part of the common lexicon, to its inclusion in the Urban Dictionary. It is defined as the following: “A skins party is a huge party in someone’s house where nearly everything is broke, lots of people are having sex, and almost everyone is either drunk or drugged up”. While teenagers have always undertaken drugs, this phenomenon shows a slight correlation of a younger generation exposed to the kind of party culture they might not have encountered until university.

Nonetheless, in season 4, Effy’s addiction and mental disorders are explored through hospital internalization. There is an apparent descent from blank nihilism to mental breakdown, and audiences highly criticized it for being under-developed. However, the reality is that the National Institute of Mental Health (2022) estimates that 10-15% of US adolescents experience a major depressive episode each year. The rate among girls is more than double that among boys. Following the abdication of responsibility and manipulative manner she displayed in season 3, “Skins US’ s direct translation of this narrative structure was a key point in the controversy surrounding the show, as it conflicted with US network television’s narrative and ideological expectations” (Woods, 2016, p. 122). Unfortunately, the TV series fails to showcase good medical practice by making Effy’s doctor obsessed with her to the point of killing her boyfriend, Freddie (Luke Pasqualino), but it successfully shows that the path to recovery is not

always straight or easy. Furthermore, *Skins* portrayed mental disorders and drug abuse in a manner that opened the room for debate since, until then, it was slightly underrepresented in youth TV series.

Comparatively, the evacuating effect produced in *Euphoria* through drugs has other aspects in *Skins* that can easily be read as effects that are also consecutive to the consumption of addictive substances, but which at the same time do not necessarily have to be so. *Skins* is offered as a series that portrays the post-crisis of whole adolescence. In this sense, its discourse describes a generational context that encompasses the different themes mentioned above, with a clear emphasis on openness towards different ways of understanding sexuality. Exploration, as a general concept in each of the themes addressed by *Skins*, is produced ostensibly without necessarily creating dynamics of pathological or behavioral relationships. If in *Euphoria* this consecutive circuit appears between the conflict, the drug as a temporary solution and the new conflict as a result of substance consumption, in *Skins*, the plot is atomised, and the relationship between the narrative plot and addiction is not so much constructed according to linearity but taking into account the explosion of multiple factors that happen to the protagonists.

Effy’s personality disorder precisely proposes a space of intersection between different problems that converge, but at the same time means that not everything depends on a single factor. The plot tries to reflect this multifaceted reality where some behaviors are due to a depressive state and some are due to a certain irrationality. It is precisely the complexity of the character and the identification with the different corners that such a polyhedral personality hides that make Effy



such a fascinating character for audiences that her development and following in social networks have contributed to the mythification of her behaviors. Here we observe, as in *Euphoria*, the contradiction between the character's own struggle with the audience's inertial support for improvement and the secret desire for Effy to remain immersed in the state that singles her out because this is the source of the conflicts that fuel the most genuine sense of seriality.

The concept of allegiance from which Noël Carroll (2004) explains the sympathy that the audience feels for the anti-hero of the story goes one step further and becomes destructive idolatry: support for the negative character does not arise from an attraction to a complex antagonist who seduces, among other reasons and beyond his transgressive capacity, because of his leading position in the story, but the attachment to characters like Effy derives from an empathy arising from compassion for the weak to such an extent that it becomes a glorification of self-harming behavior. This is especially true for young audiences, for whom these stories work in contrast to the maelstrom of images and audiovisual productions that glorify success. The aestheticization of failure, with which anyone can easily connect, becomes an element of ascription to the series and is strengthened by the appearance of elements that favor it or act as narrative clues. Drug use is no exception here.

The romanticisation effect, enhanced by the irreverent quality of the series, places *Skins* again in the diatribe between the spectacularization of specific pathologies and the desire for a representation free of taboos. Nevertheless, the desire for a shocking reception experience prevails, very much in line with the policies of the E4 channel,

which has sought to attract a young audience through various productions. But in this process of disruptive storytelling with a certain impact, the narrative is proposed through the atomisation of plots, almost as if it were a soap opera, and this contributes to the appearance of the plots related to drug consumption, which are intermingled among other action nuclei that dissipate a logical and consecutive circuit of what the treatment of addiction means.

It may seem paradoxical how E4, as part of Channel 4, must obey the founding principles of public service and, at the same time, offer ethically ambivalent content, at least as far as its characters are concerned. However, one contextual aspect is worth raising: the impact of mental health problems among teenagers has been at its peak, especially in the last ten years (Lopera et al., 2023), thus before the start of the *Skins* series. In this respect, it might be worth asking what role the production has played in reflecting on aspects such as addictions, eating disorders or depression, among others, and in what way it has opened the way, even if it was through overacting or spectacularization.

However, "while *Skins* ended in 2013, its effect on young-adult television is still felt. *Skins* paved the way for several shows to tackle the complexities of mental disorders such as Lena Dunham's *Girls* (HBO, 2012-2017)" (Wheeler, 2017). Finally, it is essential to note that while *Skins* claims authenticity with its alleged realism and, in some instances, effectively does since it is primarily constructed discursively, read on to both the import and the translation through industrial and critical discourse. Nonetheless, the series constantly pulls away from social realism in two opposite directions – towards comedy and melodrama (Buckingham, 2021).



RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

As Byung-Chul Han (2019) states, in our current neoliberalism, the contemporary subject is a performance subject, a self-exploiting subject. This self-exploitation leads to an excess of positivity, leading to a society full of exhaustion, *Müdigkeitsgesellschaft*, provoking frustrated and depressed individuals, in which each individual is simultaneously a master and slave. This excessive positivism can lead, in many cases, to emptiness, depression, self-medication or induced drugs to help in performance which leads to the idea that the responsibility and recovery of the individual is placed on the person instead of the system. Paradoxically, the damage caused by drug abuse and addiction is reflected in an overburdened justice system, a strained healthcare system, lost productivity and environmental destruction

In this state of exhaustion, series such as *Euphoria* and *Skins*, with different vocations and produced in different contexts, respond to a generational narrative that aims to show an updated version of the relationship between adolescents and mental disorders and, more specifically in what concerns us here, drug addiction. Even though they differ in their proposals, both question the plots' effective (and attractive) representation on the consumption of harmful substances and the faithful reproduction of the pathological processes that this entails. These two generational series respond to a historical moment in which mental disorders have occupied part of the media agenda.

Euphoria effectively showcases the harmful effects of drugs and the difficulty of recovery. In fact,

shows like *Euphoria* could be accused of taking its UK ancestor to new heights by packaging similar issues into a glittering, technicolor suburban dreamscape; however, the difference here is that *Euphoria*, while not entirely based in reality, portrays the low lows of addiction and mental illness in devastating detail. (Hampton, 2021)

Skins proposes an impressionistic drawing of the relationship between the characters and their state of life and therefore appeals to the plot of drug use as an element of transgression with dire and simultaneously idealized consequences. The harmful effects of addiction are, at the same time, subsumed in a more pluralistic plot, where other pathologies and behaviors are less important than the drug use storyline. The two productions show how the inclusion of this theme conditions the result in equal parts. They showcase a notable tension between the effect of the narrative plot and the reproduction of the dynamics of the pathology itself. It is a dialectic that, depending on the genre, the character's description, the channel's mission, the audience to be reached and the aesthetic and narrative proposals themselves, accentuate one aspect or the other. Nevertheless, in any case, it feeds back in a much stricter way than it may seem at first sight.

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