

# Youth Substance Use Portrayal on TV: Analyzing “Euphoria”

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*In 2019, the TV show “Euphoria” aired its first season and quickly became a hit, with an average of [6.6 million viewers across platforms in its first 90 days](#). The intense plot undoubtedly contributes to the show’s large fanbase and iconic presence in pop culture. “Euphoria” begins by focusing on the main protagonist, Ruby “Rue” Bennett, a teenager from California who struggles with substance use disorder (SUD). Her road to recovery proves itself to be a difficult one, as she falls back into her old habits despite attempts to get better. The show’s focus on high schoolers dealing with issues such as sex, drugs and alcohol set in a backdrop of parties and glamorous outfits begs an important question: Does the show accurately depict the struggle of youth substance use or glorify it?*

## **Rue’s Struggle With Substances**

In the show, it is made known that Rue’s history with mental health challenges, such as anxiety, depression and bipolar disorder, has resulted in her being heavily medicated. After losing her father to cancer, Rue finds it even harder to cope. Traumatic experiences and SUD are related, and “Euphoria” doesn’t shy away from this. For example, Rue begins to use non-prescribed substances to escape her trauma. Her dependency on substances increases to the point that Gia, her sister, finds Rue on the floor experiencing an overdose. It is traumatic for Gia, who looks up to her big sister, to see how much Rue is suffering.

Throughout the show, Rue can be seen falling into a cycle of addiction as she returns to her past habits. Her actions begin to drastically affect the people close to her, as well as her newfound relationships. Rue relapses shortly after leaving rehab, admitting that she “never intended to stay clean.” As someone from a low-income background, Rue also struggles to find appropriate treatment for her SUD. Rue experiences intense withdrawal symptoms and takes extreme measures to experience the substance’s euphoric effects again. She lashes out at loved ones and uses dangerous methods to acquire money to pay for substances. Rue’s portrayal demonstrates an example of how SUD can consume one’s life.

## **How Teens View Their Depictions on TV**

In shows like “Euphoria,” characters’ behaviors seem misaligned with their supposed age [Also, it might be worth noting that the actors portraying them most of the time are not teens]. “Riverdale” is another show that depicts teen party culture and -- with its frequent partying, sexual activity and violence -- is known for its glamorized portrayal of teenagers. In “Euphoria,” viewers are shown the drastic effects of substance use disorder on Rue’s health and relationships. The negative impacts of substance use are frequently the main focal point of the plot. For some teens who don’t use substances, this portrayal may send the message that substance use is harmful. Alternatively, this exaggerated portrayal may lead young viewers to believe that teenage party culture isn’t truly problematic and unintentionally normalizes teen substance use.

“Euphoria” is known for dramatic portrayals of high school life that involve underage drinking and sex. How is this portrayal received by high school viewers? When asking my classmates, one said “They could’ve made this show about any other age range but decided that it would fit high schoolers perfectly. It’s weird and hard to watch from any angle.” Another classmate, however, stated, “I don’t think it’s unrealistic. I know a lot of people our age who drink.” For me, having met other people my age who have shared their drinking and partying experiences, Euphoria’s depictions of substance use seem more relatable, but are they glamorized for viewers?

## **Glamorization vs. Representation**

“Euphoria” tells a story of substance use and its detrimental effects, often as part of dramatic plotlines designed to capture audience attention. There are many shows and movies that glamorize “teenage party culture” by lightheartedly integrating it into scenes, thereby feeding into the impression that teen substance use is a normal occurrence with few repercussions. While “Euphoria” potentially glamorizes teen party culture, the focus and detail on Rue’s story depicts the darker possibilities. The scenes that portray Rue’s struggles are designed to be taken seriously by viewers. Substance use and other extreme content in “Euphoria” is portrayed as a harsh reality, rather than a pleasant experience. The show also acknowledges the difficulties young people may face in accessing high-quality substance use care and treatment, especially youth from a lower-income background.

Overall, criticism of its graphic content is to be expected, but the show’s powerful portrayal of youth substance use brings to light challenges teenagers like Rue face today. “Euphoria” does not attempt to mask the consequences of substance use. The show isn’t meant to be a representation of how all teenagers act. It is meant to shed light on how easy it is for youth experiencing mental health challenges to become involved in substance use and the difficulties of accessing treatment — it doesn’t glorify this struggle.

**BACKGROUND:** *Getting Candid: Framing the Conversation Around Youth Substance Use Prevention addresses the rising concern of youth substance use during the COVID-19 pandemic through the creation of a comprehensive message guide and toolkit to equip youth-serving providers with enhanced skills for delivering meaningful substance use prevention messaging.*

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