

# Content Analysis: Relationships and Sexual Behavior in Euphoria Series Season One

Pudyaning Putri Noor Qolbi<sup>1</sup>, S. Kunto Adi Wibowo<sup>2</sup>, and Ikhsan Fuady<sup>3</sup>  
<sup>1,2,3</sup> Padjadjaran University, Sumedang, Indonesia

## ABSTRACT

Teenage life is not far from romance and identity formation. Programs on television have an essential role in shaping the lives of these teenagers. Teenagers use media such as television to form perceptions and images of how relationships are. Not only relationships, but the programs on television also show a lot of sexual content, which is a source of sexual information for said teenagers. Because of these television programs, teenagers expect their lives to be like what is shown on television, as explained in cultivation theory. This study analyzes how Euphoria season one creates expectations through its depiction of relationships and sexual behaviors. All Euphoria season one episodes were gathered to analyze the frequency of relationships and sexual behaviors portrayed to an adolescent audience. This research explores the types of relationships, ages, genders, and sexual behaviors shown and implied using a frequency distribution table and cross-tabulation. The results show all episodes consisted of sexual behavior, suggesting that a television program significantly impacts on a teenager's sexual socialization.

## KEYWORDS

*Teen drama;  
television;  
cultivation theory;  
relationship;  
sexual behavior*

## INTRODUCTION

Most American media products create content based on teenagers' daily lives, for example, teen series. Teen series portray a specific reality of youth culture in so many aspects, content, and setting to attract teen audiences (García-Muñoz & Fedele, 2011). Not only that, it also displays a very understanding relation of teenagers through representations of gender, age, and popular culture (Aslinger, 2008). In teen series, the potential consumers – the teenagers – can find themselves in a critical moment to construct their identities because it provides them with information on topics that cannot be separated from them, for example, love and sexual relationships (Masanet, Medina-Bravo, & Ferrés, 2018). Television taught them more about relationships and intimacy rather than peers, parents, and school (García-Muñoz & Fedele, 2011) because particularly, television has been labeled as a “super sexual peer” when it comes to the portrayal of norms and expectations toward teens (Kunkel, Eyal, Finnerty, Biely, & Donnerstein, 2005). Television and its content also have a significant impact and powerful force to influence young people's sexualities. Young audiences nowadays are more likely to watch shows without any control from their parents or grown-ups. Thus, it is hard for parents to know what their children watch. It is part of their concern.

However, these informal educational practices cannot be disregarded because young people learn from the media because of its appeal to them as informative and mature (Bragg, 2006).

There has been so many sexual content on television, but it is still a discussion for some scholars whether such media promotes sexual behavior (Ferguson, Nielsen, & Markey, 2017). There is not much talk about the positive or negative consequences of this “sexy media”. The vast amount of sexual socialization presented on television is written and molded into the norm of any relationship (Lamb, 2018).

HBO series, *Euphoria*, was premiered on June 16, 2019. This raw and bold show reveals how it looks like to be a Generation Z with so many layers. The characters face problems regarding sexuality, trauma and violence, mental health concerns, relationships, and identity (Euphoria, 2020). This show has a main character that is also the narrator of this show, Rue Bennet (portrayed by Zendaya), a 17-year-old girl with anxiety and complicated adolescent life. This show also shows us society’s gender standards, complex and toxic relationships, sexual encounters, and sexualities. *Euphoria*’s themes and issues aren’t new to academics but still taboo to the public. So, this is a game-changer.

The things that we will highlight in this study are the characters’ relationships and how they sexually behave. What kind of sexual behaviors happens in those relationships. This might be unfamiliar to some people, but this can also occur in real life and our surroundings.

There are now many studies that examine how teen series affect and influence people at such a young age. This phenomenon is the reason why this study is necessary. Informed by cultivation theory, this research will analyze how a television show creates expectations about relationships and sexual behavior and encounters, especially for young people. It will also examine the number of sexual behaviors implied and depicted and how often they are portrayed. Another result in this study is what types of relationships are seen based on ages and genders in this show. Teenagers’ expectations for relationships and intimacy can also develop their sexual desire and socialization.

People spend most of their youth talking, dealing, and thinking about romantic relationships. It is expected since it is known as a mark of adolescence in western culture (Collins & Furman, 2009). But globalization and westernization also made western culture become popular and more common in Indonesian societies as well. “Feeling butterflies in the stomach” is the feeling that most teenagers will experience when they are in a relationship where both parties fall in love, a typical situation for a romantic relationship. Basically, romantic relationships are people that are committed to each other and express themselves by showing fondness and intimacy and possibly current or anticipated sexual behavior (Brown, Feiring, & Furman, 1999).

Relationships of any kind are meaningful and significantly impact teenagers' lives, both positive and negative. A successful and healthy relationship can make teenagers feel valued, have healthier behaviors, and become positive. Otherwise, a toxic and unsuccessful relationship will ruin people's moral, hamper intellectual development, and negatively affect an individual's well-being.

Relationship experiences help people discover their identities. The development of family relationships, close relationships with acquaintances, and sexuality (Furman & Shaffer, 2003). To develop one's relationship, it must have an interpersonal process that exists. Based on Sullivan's Theory (1953), those interpersonal processes are intimacy and lust. Intimacy is the experience of intense feelings of closeness, connectedness, and bonding (Sternberg, 1986). While, lust is an isolating tendency, requiring no other person for its pleasure (Sullivan, 1953). It usually obstructs an intimate relationship.

Relationships are also associated with the transition to sexual intercourse. In the past two decades, the sexual content in mass media has become increasingly frequent and explicit (Brown J. D., *Television Viewing and Adolescents' Sexual Behavior*, 1991). Previous studies have discussed how TV shows are one of the most important sources of information about teenagers' sexual behaviors and attitudes (Callister, Stern, Coyne, Robinson, & Bennion, 2011). For the last few years, the number of teenagers who have had sex has increased rapidly (Besharov & Gardiner, 1997). With the influence of media that we consume day-to-day, teenagers nowadays become more sexually active, with more partners at such a young age. That being said, it does not mean these young people know how to practice healthy sexual activities. Unhealthy sex practices can also bring trauma to individuals. Television often shows the audience that sex is exciting, glamorous, and risk-free. It is also something that the public has been criticized. Undeniably, television is not the only reason how teenagers sexually behave. Juveniles also cite peers as one of the most important sources of information about sex (Strouse & Fabes, 1985).

At this young age, adolescents are still looking for their absolute integrity. Feasibly, sex information that they receive from the television makes them realize who they are. Mass media are often used as sources of knowledge about sexuality, at some times more than others. It is essential for young people to explore their own sexual beliefs (Brown J. D., 2002). From time to time, TV shows became a comfort to closeted queer people as they normalize queer representation on television nowadays.

Growing up with the media feeding us so many kinds of content, by all means, will influence people's perceptions of the real world. The more the audiences feel related to shows and characters, the more likely they will adopt and mirror their attitudes and behaviors portrayed in those shows. Some TV shows will help the audience answer the questions about something in their lives when they could not get it in real life (Lamb, 2018).

Since young people cannot be separated from their love interests, they constantly look for romantic content in the media to get to know how relationships work despite all the barriers, as well as learning about an established relationship (Hefner & Wilson, 2013). Not every young people are open with their parents. That makes it hard for them to learn about relationships and dating through parents. Hence, they observe it on television alone. Movies and shows offer stories that show the relationships from the beginning to the end with all obstacles they are going through in one packaged narrative (Hefner & Wilson, 2013). The media usually portray the “sparks” of relationships. It is one of the reasons why the audiences have high expectations about relationships and love. Although media constantly feeds us with happy relationships, there are also many shows that reveal toxic and abusive relationships.

Cultivation is a theory about sociocultural regarding the role of television in shaping viewers’ perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and values. This theory was introduced by George Gerbner (1976). He believed that the more individuals see something, the more they will think what they see on television will happen in real life. Gerbner worked on many studies about television violence. He also created the term “mean world syndrome”, which means that the more media portrays violence, the more audiences will believe that the real world is violent as well.

We are not aware of how media influences audiences. That is the point of cultivation theory. Television has become one of the most general mass media we always use. It has immense power to affect how people think and behave (Raley & Lucas, 2008). On the other side, Galloway, Engstrom, and Emmers-Sommers (2015) believed that this theory is the opposite of the “mean world,” which is a “wonderful world” where true love exists, everlasting, and minim-conflict. Frequently watching TV shows reveal an affirmation of idealistic expectations for romantic relationships. Not only desire about relationships, but it also can be a wishful identification to be or act like a character from a show. The audiences will reflect on what is seen on television.

## **METHOD**

This study used a descriptive statistical test. This test aims to describe the research results of each variable, in general, using a frequency distribution table. The researcher also used a particular type of table called a cross-tabulation (or “crosstab” for short) chi-square to describe the relationship between two categorical variables. The overall statistical test in this study was calculated using *Software Statistical Product and Service Solutions* (SPSS).

This study uses a quantitative and content analysis approach. Quantitative research methods identify objective calculations and the statistical, mathematical, or numerical data analysis. This method focuses on collecting numerical data (Babbie, 2010). In

contrast, content analysis is a research tool used to determine the presence of certain concepts within some given data. With this tool, researchers can quantify and analyze the presence of such specific ideas (Columbia Public Health, n.d.). Quantitative content analysis is a research method that features textual, visual, or material that are systematically categorized to be analyzed. It has benefits in various other fields (Coe, 2017).

The population in this study is two seasons of *Euphoria*. Population is the entire group that researchers want to conclude about (Bhandari, 2021). These two seasons were chosen because the latest season of the television show had just ended and still had so much hype from many people. Also, it had a complete first season with easy access to watch on a streaming platform such as HBO Max. Moreover, both seasons have many types of relationships and sexual activities.

As previously mentioned, this study aimed to analyze what types of relationships and sexual behaviors showed on *Euphoria* and how they can influence and create high expectations for teenagers by using a quantitative content analysis approach. Researchers have two options to select a subset of units from the population; probability and non-probability sampling. In this study, the researcher employed non-probability sampling with purposive sampling method. Showkat and Parveen (2017) examined that the non-probability sampling technique mainly involves judgment. That being said, purposive sampling is also known as judgment sampling. The main objective of a purposive sample is to construct a sample that can be assumed to be representative of the population (Trobia & Lavrakas, 2008).

Sample is a subset enclosing the characteristics of a larger population. The sample size of a survey mainly refers to the number selected for data collection (Trobia & Lavrakas, 2008). This study chose all episodes of the first season of *Euphoria*. This season provided a total of eight episodes with approximately one-hour long duration. The researcher chose the first season because it was a better season to analyze. This season gave us the development in both characters and relationships, which can contribute to the development of ideological beliefs of relationships. The first season also showed the audience more diverse relationships and sexual behaviors.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

All the data in this study were first set up in SPSS version 25 (IBM Corp). There is no missing data, so the data was already clean and nothing to be removed. A total of eight episodes were analyzed for occurrences in 30 variables and six predetermined categories. Forty-one couples were coded from these eight episodes.

The first research question asked about the types of relationships seen in the *Euphoria* series. In eight-episode with a total of 41 coded couples, there were 20 occurrences of “flirting” (48.8%) and eight occurrences of “hanging out-group” (19.5%). “In a relationship” was coded eight times (19.5%), whereas “dating” was coded five times (12.2%).

**Table 1. Type of Relationships**

Type of Relationship	Frequency	Percent
Flirting	20	48.8%
Hanging out-group	8	19.5%
In a Relationship	8	19.5%
Dating	5	12.2%
Total	41	100%

The second research question asked about the ages and genders attraction of the relationship depicted in the *Euphoria* series season one. Genders in this study are essential to note. Of the 41 coded couples, there were 31 occurrences of “male-female” relationships (75.6%), and ten coded couples were “female-female” relationships (24.4%). In eight episodes, there were no “male-male” relationships in any episodes.

**Table 2. Genders Attraction**

Genders Attraction	Frequency	Percent
Male – Female	31	75.6%
Female – Female	10	24.4%
Total	41	100%

Besides genders attraction, ages of relationships are also important. In the eight episodes of *Euphoria* season one, couples in the age ranges of 13-17 were coded 23 times (56.1%), there were also 15 times (36.6%) when one partner in the relationship in the age ranges of 13-17 while the other partner from the 18-25 age range. Not only that, there were also some couples where one partner in the 13-17 age range and the other from the age ranges of 40+. These couples showed up two times (4.9%) in this season. There was only one couple coded once who were in the age range of 18-25 and 40+ (2.4%). We can conclude that from eight episodes, 13-to-17-year-olds, which we consider as teens, that are in relationships are the highest frequency.

**Table 3. Ages of Characters in Relationships**

Ages	Frequency	Percent
13 - 17	23	56.1%
13 - 17 & 18 - 25	15	36.6%
13 - 17 & 40+	2	4.9%

18 - 25 & 40+	1	2.4%
Total	41	100%

The third research question was “What kind of sexual encounters appear and how often are they portrayed?”. Of all episodes in *Euphoria* series season one, majority of the episodes showed “one-night stand” which happened 15 times (36.6%). While, there were 13 occurrences of “extended sexual relationships” (31.7%). Same as “extended sexual relationship”, “serious sexual relationships” was depicted 13 times (31.7%). This series did not have any serious sexual relationship portrayed throughout the first season.

**Table 4. Sexual Encounters Among Relationships**

Sexual Encounter	Frequency	Percent
One-night Stand	15	36.6%
Extended Sexual Relationship	13	31.7%
No Sexual Encounter	13	31.7%
Total	41	100%

The last research question asked about the portrayals of safe sex practice presented in the *Euphoria* series season one. Of all 41 coded couples, there was only two occurrences (4.9%) when some couples were coded for “condom use”. There were 39 occurrences (95.1%) that showed nothing for safe sex practice.

**Table 5. Safe Sex Practice Shown in Relationships**

Safe Sex Practice	Frequency	Percent
Condom Use	2	4.9%
None	39	95.1%
Total	41	100%

The researcher used chi-square to answer the “There are differences between shown sexual behavior and implied sexual behavior in the Euphoria series” hypothesis. The sexual behavior variable showed 2x2 cross-tabulation and didn’t have an expected count less than five. Therefore, the value used was continuity correction. There are a few items that have a p-value >0.05, which means they don’t have any differences between shown sexual behavior and implied sexual behavior, such as holding hands (1.000), holding/embracing/hugging (.092), cuddling (.065), petting (.124), and disrobing (.065). At the same time, short kiss (.002), passionate kissing (.000), and sexual intercourse (.008) have a p-value <0.05, which means they do have any differences between shown sexual behavior and implied sexual behavior.



**Table 6. Differences between Shown Sexual Behavior and Implied Sexual Behavior**

Item	Continuity Correction	df	p
Holding Hands	.000	1	1.000
Holding/Embracing/Hugging	2.847	1	.092
Cuddling	3.408	1	.065
Short Kiss	9.225	1	.002
Passionate Kissing	13.123	1	.000
Petting	2.365	1	.124
Disrobing	3.408	1	.065
Sexual Intercourse	7.128	1	.008

This study examined the relationships and sexual behaviors portrayed in *Euphoria* season one that creates expectations for teenage audiences. From the results, most types of relationships were “flirting” since many characters are teenagers, in the age range of 13-17 years old, and most relationships begin with “flirting”. All couples except one couple showed male-female relationships. Jules and Rue were in a female-female relationship, but they weren’t dating. The highest number of sexual encounters in all episodes was “one-night stand”. At the same time, they didn’t show many safe sex practices in relationships. Only two occurrences led to “condom-use.”. So many sexual behaviors have been shown, but protection is almost insignificant. Even sexually transmitted diseases were not brought up at all, even though so many characters changed their sex partners.

## CONCLUSION

With the frequencies of relationships and sexual behaviors depicted, according to the cultivation theory, they are more likely to believe reality is the same as what is portrayed on the television. Sex without any safety may necessarily be a bad influence. These teenagers will watch these scenes and think that it is normal behavior. It impacts teenagers’ relationships and how they want to move forward in their relationship. They see how it happens on television and follow the same pattern and expect the same outcomes. Television can be a good and bad influence depending on how the audience reacts.

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