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Exploring the Forbidden Fruit Effect: Generation Z's Perception of Reality and Risky Behaviour in TV Series.

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Department of Media Studies

School of Literature, Language and Media

Exploring the Forbidden Fruit Effect: Generation Z's Perception of Reality and Risky Behaviour in TV Series.

by Atiyya Danka Cassim

1039150

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Media Studies

Supervised by: Dr Dee Marco

March 2025

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I, _Atiyya Danka Cassim (Student number: 1039150), am a student registered for a Master of Arts in Media Studies in the year 2025. I hereby declare the following:

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Chapter 1 Introduction

In a world where streaming platforms have become an integral phenomenon that intersects with everyday life, the politics of representation on screen and the effect thereof raise important questions about the role of TV in shaping ideologies and behaviour, especially for adolescents on the cusp of development of their identity and maturation of self. According to the American Academy of Paediatrics (2024), by the time a teen reaches 18, the average teen has seen over 200,000 acts of violence and 16,000 murders on screen… but what about South African teens? Various studies from the Global North offer a multitude of data about the influence of media on youth ranging from social media to TV series and serial TV while for the Global South, there is a significant gap accounting for contemporary teen statistics and experiences. Given that we live in an increasingly globalised world, Crymble (2012) asserts that mass communication and media play a vital role in disseminating and creating discourses of identity, ideology, and difference, influencing consumers' ideology and perception within society. These discourses are especially significant in understanding globalised media narratives and their influence on the interpretations and potential emulation of behaviour observed on the screen.

Adolescence is widely recognised as a crucial transitional phase between childhood and adulthood. It is a developmental stage during which many adolescents exhibit a lust for life, characterised by a desire for excitement, novelty, and experimentation (Zaky, 2016). Despite the content warnings, these narratives often attract young audiences because of their raw portrayal of the forbidden, amplifying the forbidden fruit effect. Varava and Quick (2015:150) define the "forbidden fruit effect" as the phenomenon where something becomes more desirable precisely because it is prohibited. This phenomenon is observed in real-life experiences and contemporary television series, where restrictions or prohibitions often heighten young people's curiosity and desire. In real life, adolescents may be drawn to activities such as underage drinking, smoking and exploring illicit relationships because the behaviour is often disapproved of in society or by parental figures. Therefore, TV amplifies this allure by portraying teen characters who engage in the same forbidden actions, drawing viewers in. These narratives reflect the societal tensions experienced in real life and they resonate with teenage audiences naturally predisposed to rebellion, experimentation, and identity formation themes.

TV series such as *Euphoria* (2019) and *Blood and Water* (2020) serve as prime examples of this dynamic and are the media texts that will be examined in this study. *Euphoria* (2019) is a captivating American HBO series directed by Sam Levinson with the assistance of additional producers such as Hip-Hop icons Drake, Prince and Future. The eight-episode segment provides a provocative depiction of the experience of adolescence, underpinned by themes such as substance abuse, addiction, sexuality, and trauma, which sparked widespread concern within the social media space. The HBO website features an interview with the creator of the series *Euphoria* (2019), Sam Levinson, where he reflects on his struggle with addiction as a teenager, which served as his inspiration for the show. He recalls his struggles and describes his purpose in creating the show to answer the question, "How do we create empathy for this generation in an older generation?" (HBO, n.d.). Levinson emphasised his intention to "tell a realistic and authentic story" (HBO, n.d.).

In contrast, *Blood* (2020) is described on Netflix South Africa's website as a show offering a local narrative set in Cape Town, South Africa (Netflix, n.d.). *For brevity, Blood and Water (2020) will now be referred to as Blood (2020).* The show follows a teenager's journey to uncover whether a private school's swimming star is also her sister. The elite private school, Parkhurst High, serves as a backdrop for the story, situating the narrative within a unique socioeconomic context. *Blood* (2020) serves as a contrast to *Euphoria* (2019), as the former is in a local context in the Global South, addressing themes such as familial trauma, systemic corruption, and loss, while *Euphoria* (2019) features adolescents through a globalised lens, addressing universal issues of experimentation, substance use, and identity formation from a Global North context.

This research uses the terms *Global North* and *Global South* as conceptual frameworks rather than as strict geographic demarcations. While the *Global South* broadly reflects the region's histories of colonisation, socioeconomic disparities and cultural diaspora, South Africa is used as the point of reference in this study. Similarly, the *Global North* denotes regions with dominant economic and cultural power, so the United States of America is the primary reference point. This delineation is justified by the fact that these two media texts are set in these respective countries, and the influences shaping these narratives underscore the interplay and tensions in production for both regions.

Nosipho Dumisa, the director of *Blood* (2020), expressed similar commitments to producing an authentic narrative. In an interview with OkayAfrica, Dumisa stated, "We have not had

many young adult series being told with such diverse cases. Especially where people of colour live in a prestigious world" (OkayAfrica, 2020). Despite the intention of both series to produce an authentic narrative, both shows portray teenagers through highly stylised aesthetics with provocative storylines that glamourise risky behaviours, such as underage drinking, substance use and sexual activity, raising questions about how these narratives resonate with young audiences. These behaviours are frequently framed within glamorous and aspirational settings, creating a sensationalised portrayal of the teenage experience.

Euphoria (2019) and *Blood* (2020) use aesthetics, such as vibrant visuals, curated soundtracks and framed settings – which work together with inventive cinematography to portray risky adolescent behaviour as being enticing and normalised. While these artistic choices aim to reflect the rebellious nature of adolescence, they also glamourise risk and dangerous activities. This visual allure often distorts the real-world consequences of such behaviour, potentially making the appearance appealing and less harmful, which could lead to problematic emulation. The tension between authenticity and sensationalism in these series highlights the challenges faced by directors and media houses in maintaining the balance between portraying real-life topics without glorifying harmful behaviour and activity. Therefore, the directors' intention behind the inspiration and creation of storylines is imperative to the study.

Endendijk, Deković, Vossen, van Baar, and Reitz (2021) note that there appears to be a general absence of research regarding how much TV series affect teenagers' behaviour and their perceptions of reality. Given the general lack of research on how South African teenagers interact with TV series, this research explores how globalised TV series potentially shape teens' engagement with narratives on screen and affect their expectations of reality. By analysing the portrayal of risky behaviour and relationships on screen, both series represent significant developments in contemporary television storytelling, which can potentially generate critical discourses about youth in South Africa and their viewing practices. A comparative analysis allows for a closer interrogation of what screen media represents as teen narratives, how accurate these may be and how screen culture may reflect and shape the perspectives and behaviours of the youth.

Rationale

This study investigates how popular TV series with strong adult themes play a role in encouraging teenagers to engage in and mimic risky behaviour and activities within a South African context. My observations as a teacher and discussions with learners have been instrumental in shaping this research. Over time, I have witnessed how teenagers engage with media narratives, often discussing popular series with curiosity and enthusiasm. These interactions sparked my interest in wanting to understand how media influences might shape perceptions regarding identity, behaviour and activities on screen.

The research aims to understand how both media texts can challenge and reinforce current representations of adolescence, relationships, and risk-related behaviour in their portrayals of a high school setting. It will examine how distinct contextual differences shaped by socio-economic factors, language, culture, and history influence these narratives and the effect these may have on adolescent understanding and engagement.

Research Questions

1. Could the shows be considered as realistic representations of teenage life?
2. Have these shows influenced teenagers' perceptions of relationships and socialisation practices?
3. How do teenagers relate to these shows?

Chapter 2 Literature Review

Television series significantly shape adolescents' perceptions of risk-related behaviours, prompting ongoing debates regarding their societal impact (Vannucci, Simpson, Gagnon and Ohannessian,2020). On the one hand, these portrayals educate and serve as a cautionary narrative to deter risk-related activities and behaviours, while on the other hand, the representations of risk-related behaviour and relationships appear to glamourise harmful behaviour through the constant normalisation of these behaviours without depicting any negative consequences.

To explore how media representations influence adolescents, this study engages with a range of scholarship focused on youth, media effects, and globalisation. Vitor Ferreira's (2016) work on youth aesthetics is particularly important because it demonstrates how adolescent-focused media construct narratives framed by privilege, power, and beauty. These insights show how visual and stylistic choices behind *Blood* (2020) and *Euphoria* (2019) may glorify and normalise risk-related behaviours under the guise of a 'youth aesthetic'. Dalila Forni (2020) extends this by analysing TV serialisation's role in modern society, showing how narratives are deliberately structured to maximise audience engagement. This is significant for the present study because serialised storytelling further amplifies exposure to risky behaviours, making it vital to examine how repeated engagement affects adolescent perceptions.

In a complementary way, while aesthetics and serial design are significant factors in media representation, the study also draws on Francis Aka-Inyang and Sylvester Chima's (2021) work on African family and community values to further examine the intersection of upbringings, family influence, and beliefs intersect with media influences. In particular, they highlight how family contexts contribute to conversation, attitudes and exposure to risk-related behaviour on screen, making this a vital aspect for analysing adolescent reception of media in South Africa. These ideas are further contextualised by Nilüfer Aykaç's (2021) study on globalisation and by Robertson Tengeh and Nokuphiwa Udoakpan's (2021) work on cultural influence and consumer practices, as they highlight how media consumption is embedded within broader transnational dynamics that shape both cultural consumption and audience reception. This is relevant to both *Blood* (2020) and *Euphoria* (2019), which exemplify how globalised aesthetics and consumer-driven narratives circulate across contexts. Collectively, these perspectives provide a foundation for assessing how risk-related behaviours are represented on screen and

how such portrayals may shape adolescents' perceptions of risk, ultimately contributing to the reinforcement or normalisation of harmful behaviours.

2.1 Risk behaviour on screen

As adolescents often turn to media to understand and negotiate their own experiences, risk-taking and relationships have emerged as central themes within adolescent-targeted TV series. Various scholars have also categorised risk-taking behaviours into distinct groups. Lavery, Siegel, Cousins and Rubovits (1993) and Gullone and Moore (2000) identify and classify various risk-related behaviours into five categories, namely illegal activities (e.g., theft, drunk driving, vandalism); unsafe vehicle practices (e.g., speeding, driving with strangers, not wearing a seat belt, travelling with a drunk driver); health (e.g., having unprotected sex, bingeing/purging, crash dieting); status (e.g., running away from home, cheating during tests, fighting with peers, skipping school); and drug use (e.g., drinking alcohol, using other legal/illegal substances). While the categories are the same in Gullone and Moore (2000), their study included the health and social implications arising from such behaviour and activity.

In South Africa, according to the Youth Risk Behaviour Survey conducted in 2013, as well as insights from other scholars, there are six categories, namely unintentional injury and violence, tobacco use, substance abuse, sexual behaviour, unhealthy eating practices and physical inactivity (Flisher et al., 2003; Madu and Matla, 2003; Amoateng, Barber and Erickson, 2006; Sharp and Dellis, 2010; Amoateng and Kalule-Sabiti, 2013; Shilubane et al, 2013; Sharp and Dellis, 2010; Coleman et al,2014). While these categories are informative, in the context of this study, risk-taking behaviours, such as substance abuse and sexual activity, will be examined through the lens of *Euphoria* (2019) and *Blood* (2020), in conjunction with the representation of the relationship to identify how this influence each other and are framed as central to adolescent experiences. Earlier work by Moswang (2010) investigates the perceptions of television content on adolescent girls' sexual attitudes and behaviour; however, like most South African and international scholarship, existing literature predominantly associates risk-taking behaviour with socio-economic factors, such as poverty, with research efforts largely aimed at mitigating these issues (Chauke, Khashane and Mudau, 2021). This study shifts the focus towards the allure of mature content, particularly the way its aesthetics and narrative appeal can shape emulation and belief systems in this digitised media landscape.

2.2 The teenage aesthetic in Teen TV

Adolescence is a critical developmental period characterised by identity exploration and self-expression (Pfiefer and Berkman, 2018). During this stage, individuals actively engage with a multitude of social and cultural influences that shape their sense of self and belonging. Over the past several decades, the serialisation of teen drama has progressed through various cycles to allow more nuanced representations of teen narratives and adolescent experiences that shape characters and behaviour. While TV has mostly portrayed teen characters, these representations have historically been stereotypical and one-dimensional, frequently positioning teens as rebellious and angsty within adult-centred narratives. The 1980s shifted toward youth-centric narratives, forging multidimensional characters with unique perspectives and complex storylines (García-Muñoz and Fedele, 1988). As a result, the term 'teenagers' came to signify not only a biological age range but also a distinct set of social attitudes and beliefs—including specific lifestyles, peer dynamics, interests, and behaviours (Wee, 2016).

According to Ferreira (2016), the 'teenage aesthetic' holds significant value as it functions as a form of cultural resistance that challenges dominant ideologies, canonical structures, societal norms, and expectations. Ferreira (2016) further discusses how, through constructing an aesthetic, teenagers can create a sense of belonging and community through shared experiences, taste, and style. The application of this phenomenon is evident in teen TV, where character aesthetics—including language, fashion, personality traits, and behavioural patterns—resonate with adolescent viewers. These representations function as tools for socialisation, providing a framework through which adolescents negotiate their sense of self. Hall's (2007) encoding and decoding model is especially relevant as adolescents selectively identify with some models and elements associated with characters and narratives, or they reject them, thereby actively shaping their sense of self.

Therefore, teen TV shows can mirror youth culture while simultaneously functioning as active agents of socialisation, influencing individual perceptions and broader generational trends. While the aesthetic of teenagers has shifted through the different generational periods, so too has the canon of identity and representation of narratives to introduce controversial topics and issues. For example, *In My So-Called Life* (1994), Enrique Vasquez was a character in the show who confidently expressed his queerness through traditionally feminine-coded traits, such as wearing eyeliner, being in the girls' bathroom and dyeing his hair. The visual and behavioural markers challenge conventional gender norms, therefore fostering conversation about

LGBTQIA+ representation on screen. Monaghan (n.d) notes that Enrique's coming out in the series' finale, while progressive for its time, was framed as an expected outcome and, therefore, was more accepted by audiences. Similarly, *Beverly Hills 90210*, a 1990 show, also challenged the TV canon in representing socially taboo topics, such as Aids, alcoholism, and teenage pregnancy, which ultimately provided an opportunity for increasingly bold and progressive narratives. Wilks (2019) asserts that topics considered unsuitable and inappropriate for mainstream teen shows in the past has laid the groundwork for even more progressive narratives in subsequent decades, revealing TV's active role in inclusivity and acceptance for audiences.

By the 2000s, television narratives adopted realism, especially in the shifts to represent more liberal political and social discourses surrounding race, gender and identity. *Gossip Girl* (2007) exemplified this transition through the subversion of traditional gender dynamics, portraying female characters as sexually agentic and expressive, a stark contrast to the general representations that positioned women as submissive (Van Damme and Van Bauwel, 2013:175).

Despite the shift toward inclusivity within teen TV, this reinforced the prevalence of provocative and sensationalised narratives for cultural relevance. Perlman, Usdin and Button (2013), Kirsch and Murnen (2015), and Ferreira (2016) argue that the representations on screens significantly affect teens' identity roles, as teens often look to media and popular culture for inspiration and sometimes emulate the personalities, attitudes and behaviours of these characters. Therefore, research highlights just how impactful media can be in the socialisation process of teens, while it also highlights that both positive and negative influences can be internalised.

This emphasises the broader question of the functionality of teen media, showing that it is not merely entertainment but also a powerful tool that shapes identity and values. While global TV has embraced increasingly provocative and sensationalised narratives, South African teen TV has undergone its own evolution, shifting from an educational framework to a more globally enhanced form of storytelling (Teer-Tomaselli, 2005). Early post-apartheid productions, such as *Yizo Yizo* (1999) and *Intersexions* (2010), display tropes of social issues often considered taboo as a form of edutainment (education through entertainment). Both shows address social and health topics, ranging from crime, violence, gender and HIV/Aids, fostering more open

conversations for South Africans through entertainment and education (Barnett, 2004; Teer-Tomaselli, 2011). This trajectory of teen television has shifted from an explicitly educational stance toward narratives that align with global trends. *Blood* (2020) exemplifies this shift, foregrounding themes of privilege, ambition and scandal over the socially conscious narratives that once defined South African TV. This aligns with globalisation and seriality trends where local productions adopt globally marketable aesthetics and storylines often at the expense of locally embedded social critique. This raises critical questions surrounding the evolution of South African teen television: Are local shows relevant to the youth? Do SA teens resonate more with local or global shows, and why? The shift also draws attention to the commercialism of teen media, where global marketability could come at the expense of the loss of authentic local narratives.

Blood (2020) and *Euphoria* (2019) are both teen series, where aesthetics is a key narrative device that constructs an idealised version of teenage life. The unique visual style, carefully curated soundtrack, aspirational settings, and locations used in the production contribute to creating this distinction between a teen narrative and an adult one. In *Euphoria* (2019), the seductive cinematography involving dark rooms within a smoky, party-lit atmosphere evokes a dream-like aesthetic that makes transgressive behaviours, such as driving under the influence, drug use, and so forth, attractive and inviting as opposed to cautionary. Similarly, *Blood* (2020) uses a backdrop of privilege and wealth to create an aspirational world where dangerous relationships and actions without any negative consequences exist.

While some shows attempt to distinguish between teen and adult narratives by reinforcing rebellion and fun as an aesthetic, it is equally vital for production sites to evaluate how media representations can shape youth's perceptions of these behaviours. When media texts and screen narratives normalise and glamourise transgressive behaviour without depicting real consequences, they risk reinforcing dangerous actions and activities as aspirational and normal, increasing the likelihood of emulation and experimentation. Additionally, desensitisation and miseducation towards the reality of the consequences and harms that could follow shape youth's understanding of the real world and decision-making by downplaying the risks.

Ang's (2010:47) analysis in understanding aesthetics through the lens of emotional realism provides a useful framework for understanding how mature content can foster emulation in a digitised media landscape. Ang's study highlights that even in the absence of direct audience

identification with the overt glamour of highly stylised settings, costumes and narratives, viewers can still experience a profound connection to the sense of "inner" realism. This suggests that aesthetics does not need to be meaningful; rather, the emotional truths embedded in the narrative can resonate deeply, fostering identification despite the lack of literal realism. In the context of this study, such resonance can help explain why adolescents may internalise and emulate behaviours depicted in mature content, prompting a deeper critique of whether these representations actively encourage such emulation.

Screen portrayals influence identity formation by either reinforcing or challenging dominant narratives. *Blood* (2020) and *Euphoria* (2019) equally represent themes of rebellion, agency, and transgression within a global and local context, raising questions about how sustained exposure to such portals can shape teens' perceptions over time.

2.3 TV seriality and Augmented reality

TV seriality refers to the narrative structure of a show that draws audiences in through the continuous storylines and evolving characters (Dutta, 2020:1). This serialised format allows for long-term viewing and engagement with content (Forni, 2020). In *Euphoria* (2019), *Blood* (2020) and other teen narratives, storylines exploring adolescent defiance, challenging relationships and controversial choices illustrate how television shapes perceptions of reality, subtly guiding viewers' understanding of social dynamics and behavioural norms.

Cambi (1999) and Forni (2020) assert that through the serialisation of narratives, the complexities of character arcs can be explored to be more relatable to viewers. Products such as Blood (2020) and Euphoria (2019) maintain audience engagement through creative storytelling that resists simplistic moral binaries. Often, characters are portrayed with greater complexity, encouraging viewers to form their own moral judgment rather than relying on predetermined "good" or "bad" labels. Such shifts are significant for understanding audience engagement with content and their relatability to certain characters (Speinwall, 2014; Rossini, 2016; Forni, 2020), thereby adding to the perceived realism and relatability of these narratives. Similarly, Turner's (2019) notion of "cultures of use" highlights that audiences engage with serial content not as isolated segments but as integrated experiences across multiple platforms and devices, making it an integral part of their daily life.

Therefore, the influence of narrative structure and format is important to interrogate when considering the effect these have on audiences, especially teens. At the same time, global media

landscapes continue to dominate the cinematic space, especially in the production of TV narratives. Localised narratives have risen over time to create multilayered story arcs and character development that create more immersive experiences, featuring a balance of local and global inspiration. However, Forni (2020) describes how the proliferation and preference for global narratives and on-demand content can posit both positive and negative influences that need to be mediated.

Youth series play a crucial role in shaping the direction and appeal of TV production as they aim to mirror real-life experiences and current issues faced by youth. Streaming platforms such as Netflix and HBO play a key role in this process, serving three functions, according to Villarejo et al. (2022): to entertain, inform, and provide a social function of connectivity. However, there is a notable gap in research on how these functions influence teens' understanding of the narratives they consume and how these are interpreted. The importance of this lies in how these series contribute to youth's understanding of screen narratives and especially for an audience undergoing identity formation. Teen drama usually characterises youth experiences with themes of romance, friendship, identity and social issues alongside additional tropes of trauma, betrayal, and rebellion. These tropes are often used to explore the journey of self-discovery and belonging. Repeated exposure to such narratives, especially with negative associations and glamourised experiences of substances, recklessness and or toxic relationships, can eventually shape how teens perceive the world around them and internalise these representations as expected realities.

While older teen narratives, as I mentioned before, such as *Beverly Hills 90210(1990), Dawson Creek* (1998), *Gossip Girl* (2007) and *My So-Called Life* (1994) have been shown to present themes of rebellion, romance and substance use, these were more restrained, and conservative compared to narratives produced now that these as overly toxic and without consequence. Lobato (2009) and Fischer (2022:190) assert that "distribution works to shape film culture in its own image". Therefore, it is important to understand the influences of globalisation on media texts as this filters into reinforcing the norms and values embedded within these narratives that do not always align with local realities. Global streaming platforms often prioritise content that aligns with globalised tastes, leading to a homogenisation of cinematic narratives and aesthetics that dilute local authenticity. However, these platforms should not be demonised. They can also offer new possibilities for filmmakers from underrepresented regions

to gain visibility of their work to a global audience, with the potential to shape perceptions both locally and globally.

The digitisation of television has transformed not only the modes of distribution but also audience practices. Streaming platforms like Netflix have disrupted traditional broadcast models, enabling on-demand, transnational, and binge-watching practices (Turner, 2019). While the scholarly literature on television consumption is extensive, there remains a gap in empirical understanding of how audiences integrate these platforms into everyday life. Globalisation has intensified this transformation in the South African media landscape, expanding access to a wider range of content while introducing new cultural references, social norms and identity constructions that reflect the hybridisation of global and local influences (Tengeh and Udoakpan, 2021).

However, this shift also presents the risk of marginalisation, and misinformation of the authenticity of narratives, cultural references and minimisation of post-apartheid struggles as international producers maintain most of the control of narratives (Aykaç, 2021). Livingstone (2019) challenges the over-reliance on audience metrics such as surveys and user analytics, arguing that these data-driven methods often overlook lived experience. More critical scholarship is required to understand how mediatisation and datafication shape public life. civic engagement and the relationship between on-screen worlds and everyday realities. For this reason, the literature review foregrounds narrative structure and augmented reality as central to understanding how adolescents interpret and respond to television content. Such an approach is particularly relevant considering how serialised television, enriched with globalised cultural signifiers, contributes to an augmented sense of reality.

2.4 History of TV in SA

South Africa's unique history involving broadcasting originated in 1971 during the National Party's rule; however, these services were not offered to all nationally. The National Party asserted that 'black Africans' were not part of the viewing audiences, except on white terms, which resulted in either stereotypical representations or omission of blackness on TV (Teer-Tomaselli and Tomaselli, 1994:46). Over time, with the changes in political systems, platforms such as the South African Broadcasting Company (SABC) and later M-Net dominated the screens of South Africans with a wide variety of narratives, both local and US-based.

With the changes in government, broadcasting channels had three promises to uphold: To change the face and structure of channels to reflect a new South Africa, cater for the developmental and educational needs of the country, and undertake the responsibility of developing and representing varying discourses (Teer-Tomaselli and Tomaselli, 1994:50-53). The dominance of the SABC eventually gave rise to M-NET, a paid service in 1986 and in 1995 to DSTV, and e-TV, a private company defined by a black majority ownership, in 1998 (Boateng, 2008). The challenge remains that although South Africa's unique narratives resonate with a vast majority of local audiences, they still did not reach global interest and were not as popular in other markets (Teer-Tomaselli, 2005). Teer-Tomaselli (2005) outlines the main reasons for this, which were equated to the language differences, the profound cultural backdrop embedded within South African narratives, as well as the common trope that any given urban context is linked to as a violent place full of danger, dissonance, and dysphoria.

Over time, the rise of streaming platforms in African media systems, such as Showmax in 2015, Netflix in 2016, and, more recently, Disney+ and Amazon Prime, allowed for a unique curation and broad range of both local and global narratives (Mfolo, Jansen and Van Vuuren, 2022). In the context of this study, Netflix and HBO are the dominant sites of reference as the media texts being studied originate from there. In 2018, Netflix launched its 'strong black lead' initiative, which amplified black-led stories. Two years later, it had a 'made in Africa' collection that curated contemporary and classic films. This led to the production of Netflix originals, such as *Queen Sono* (2020), *Blood* (2020) and *Shadow* (2019) (Ibrahim, 2020).

While this expansion increased accessibility to African narratives and contributed to global recognition, it has also raised questions about how global production forums influence storytelling choices, characterisation, and aesthetic framing in ways that align with the best marketable forms. This makes these aspects relevant to this study as it examines how adolescents engage with these narratives and how the interplay between global production logic and local representation informs their perception of risk.

The rise of these platforms has therefore not only expanded accessibility but also transformed the cultural politics of representation. These shifts reflect changes in cultural priorities, language politics and youth representation as well as how contemporary "born free" audiences engage with media. South African shows generally explore the experiences, challenges, and aspirations of the multiple generations, capturing the social realities and cultural tensions that

shape identity. While other nationals may produce the same narrative with comparable themes, South African media remains distinct in the way it tells stories and frames youth identity within legacies of historical struggle. Much like what Andersson (2004) argues, pioneering cinema shows what is "already said", offering insight into the multifaceted realities of South African youth. *Blood* (2020) distinguishes itself by framing its themes within an aspirational, privileged context, reflecting changes in audience demographics and becoming more aligned with global teen dramas.

Contemporary teens engage with local and global content, allowing a comparative analysis that highlights divergence and convergence in narrative structure, production values and thematic focus. This shift positions *Blood* (2020) alongside international teen dramas, particularly *Euphoria* (2019), as both series normalise risk-related behaviour despite the differences in local inflexions. Beyond thematic similarities, *Blood* (2020) competes with *Euphoria* (2019) in the production quality, distribution and accessibility, illustrating the transformation of media in youth-centred spaces and the increasing competitiveness of local content within a globalised media landscape.

2.5 Motivations of choice

Rubin (1983) in Vaterlaus et al. (2019:471), established a foundational understanding of motivations associated with watching TV, including relaxation, companionship, entertainment, escape, information, and arousal. Building on these foundational ideas, Ruggiero (2000) extends on the understanding of gratification-seeking behaviour in the context of emerging web technologies as three critical concepts: Demassification (i.e., the individual's control over the medium), synchronicity (i.e., the staggering of messages that allows for convenience in interaction); and interactivity (i.e., watching series in real-time as opposed to a static schedule) (Tefertiller, 2018; Tengeh and Udoakpan, 2020). These concepts illustrate how new technologies give audiences a greater range of control, which is evident in the current digital age, where user preference and control over media are prioritised.

Digital platforms such as Netflix and Showmax have fundamentally transformed how media is consumed in South Africa, which closely aligns with demassification, synchroneity and interactivity. The features are outlined by the streaming platforms as follows: Autonomy in content selection (demassification), a flexible consumption schedule (synchroneity), and interactive experiences (interactivity), which cater to a range of personal gratifications that the youth seek from watching shows. Gohar and Asher (2022) extend this premise by highlighting

the motivations associated with youth binge-watching TV, including companionship, stress relief, escapism from tension, avoidance of negative emotions and as a way to stay connected socially with peers. While specific research on South African teenagers' motivations for media consumption remains limited, these findings provide a valuable framework for analysing how South African youth might engage with television content.

Often, teenagers relate to some of the storylines present and can see parts of themselves in the characters on screen. Their hopes, dreams and difficulties might be reflected in the performances on screen. Bragg (2006), cited in Qolbi, Wibowo and Fuady (2022), mentions the appeal to media as a site for information while also serving as a site for informal education, as teens can learn to deal with their problems as they see them on screen. Media consumption, however, also carries potential risks: excessive exposure to specific media content may have negative consequences. It is therefore important to consider not only the ways in which teens engage with media but also the structural and individual factors that shape viewing practices.

Socioeconomic status and accessibility can influence the motivations behind media consumption. For instance, in South Africa, where access to media and popular media content is still unequal, teens' viewing habits and engagement with content differ significantly, as these are not solely tied to personal satisfaction but also to structural barriers that determine content availability and accessibility. As a result, the theoretical application and broader sociocultural and economic factors that influence media consumption patterns must be considered. To understand how South African teenagers engage with media, it is essential to contextualise the country's media landscape. The evolution of TV in South Africa has played a crucial role in shaping viewing habits and consumption patterns, all of which influence and inform the gratifications sought by audiences. Although critics argue that television and streaming sites could continue to influence teens' media consumption, the rise of other media sources, such as social media, is equally influential, as it provides more personalised engagement and exposure to different content as a result of the algorithm (Hermann, Morgan and Shanahan, 2021). Building on these considerations, this literature review draws on the theoretical frameworks of socialisation theory, uses and gratification theory and cultivation theory, as these theories collectively capture the structural, cultural and individual factors that intersect to shape South African teenagers' media engagement.

Chapter 3 Theoretical Approach

This study draws on three key theoretical frameworks: the Theory of Socialisation, Uses and Gratification and Cultivation theory. These theories frame how the study interrogates South African teenagers' engagement with what the thesis calls 'risk-related behaviour' in contemporary TV series. Each framework offers a distinct analytical lens to understand media consumption patterns and the influence on South African teenagers, particularly the potential risks and motivations associated with engagement with mature content. Socialisation theory underscores the processes through which media transmits social norms and values. Uses and gratifications account for the active choices and motivations behind media consumption, while cultivation theory examines the long-term influence of repeated exposure to specific portrayals. Together, they provide a multidimensional approach that is well-suited to unpacking the interplay between media, identity formation and adolescent behaviour, particularly in the South African context, where media access, cultural hybridity and socio-economic inequality intersect.

Theory of Socialisation

Socialisation is a term first coined by Giddings in the late 19th century to describe the process through which specific norms, knowledge of values, and morals are indoctrinated into individuals from infancy. Socialisation occurs in two forms: primary and secondary. Primary socialisation occurs during childhood through family, while secondary socialisation occurs through external influences, such as peers, media, and institutions, where various social and cultural forms are transmitted. Parents and family are the first socialisation sites for any individual; however, as children mature and reach adolescence, these agents are not "replaced "by other models such as friends, peers and self-recognition mediators in the search for identity and autonomy (Balleys, 2015). In the context of this research, the secondary phase will be examined more closely as media plays a more central role, offering teenagers the platform to learn and experiment with different behaviours as they discover their sense of self. Analysing participants' engagement with these texts can potentially explain how teen behaviour and beliefs are created.

A study by Balleys, Millerand, Theory and Durque (2020:3) examined the role of YouTube videos in the production and reception of their own identity. The first study included a qualitative video content analysis focusing on 80 YouTube videos on exploring being a teen. The second study focused on the reception of these videos by 33 boys and 29 girls. The

consensus reached that socialisation presents itself in two ways for teenagers searching for identity. The first is finding themselves in others and being seen as unique individuals with social value (Berger & Luckmann, 1991; Balleys et al, 2020).

Building on this, the present research focuses on the secondary phase, as it examines the role of media as a socialisation site, especially in how media functions explicitly as a facilitating agent that shapes individual behaviours, values, and beliefs. The theory has many interpretations from various scholars; however, within this research, the theory is situated in Stuart Hall's (2007) paradigm of encoding and decoding to explore how media messages are produced, interpreted, and understood by audiences.

Socialisation significantly impacts young individuals' behaviours as young children learn about socially acceptable behaviour, such as respect for authority, empathy, and responsibility, as well as to exist within society's pre-existing norms and values. Pandey (1977) describes three central goals of the socialisation process: (1) Impulse control- which serves to aid the development of conscious individuals; (2) Role preparation and performance – this includes the process whereby individuals are shaped into certain roles (gender, work, parenthood) as well as institutions such as marriage. (3) Value and culture – individuals are expected to identify the importance of their role in society and function accordingly. Pandey's socialisation goals align with how teens may interpret and internalise behaviour and values seen in media. As adolescents engage with these portrayals, they actively form their own understanding of social norms, role expectations, and cultural values as they navigate social spaces.

Encoding and decoding

Hall's definition of socialisation asserts that messages have "a complex structure of dominance" as a result of each stage (communication, production, circulation and consumption) being "imprinted by institutional power relations" (2007:13). This suggests that media content is not created in isolation, but that it is shaped by broader institutional power structures, such as the dominant social, political and economic forces that dictate certain messages, beliefs and ideologies and how these should be presented. These influences are embedded within scripts and reinforced by images throughout the stages of production, known as the process of encoding. While this might propagate the idea that passive audiences accept media effects, decoding includes accepting or rejecting narratives based on the audience's

beliefs and ideologies. Therefore, decoding is an active process that reinforces, or challenges encoded messages on screen.

Hall (2007) describes three main ways of decoding texts: dominant (preferred) reading, where the audience decodes messages in the way producers intend it. This results in the acceptance of messages as it is. The second form is negotiated reading, which asserts that audiences negotiate texts against their own experiences and beliefs, and so, some elements are accepted as truths and others rejected. The last way of decoding entails oppositional reading, where the audience rejects the encoded messages and interprets them in an entirely different way to the way it is framed for consumption. The application of this framework to this study can provide valuable insights into how Generation Z audiences decode and navigate risk-related behaviour and relationships on screen and in their own lives. The study references producers' insights into the production and intention of each media text, while teen participants provide valuable insights into how messages are interpreted and potentially emulated.

It is a general assumption that in South African society, family and friends play a significant role in the socialisation of individuals, just as in any given society. Often, members of extended family and friends are considered close relatives and are active in the upbringing of children (Osak et al.,2018, in Matjila, Ameyibor and Saini, 2021). However, there is a general lack of literature on understanding the relationships that teenagers have with members of the family and the influence they have on them.

Families vary majorly, and as much as the research is focused on the reception of TV series on teenagers, peer and family influence will be considered as variables of influence. Media can be an effective instrument for socialisation since it can affect teens' attitudes and views regarding various social issues (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986).
Parents, educators, and media producers have the duty to promote appropriate media use and be aware of how the media may affect socialisation. Using this framework, I propose that by examining the intersection of media representation with real-life family and peer relationships and representations on screen, this study can provide insight into the influence media has in reinforcing or challenging representation of risk behaviour, societal norms and relationships.

Halls' model accounts for the variability of audience interpretation. This is particularly relevant to understanding South African adolescents, whose reception of media content may be

influenced by intersecting cultural nuances, linguistic diversity, and socio-economic realities. By integrating these perspectives, the analysis moves beyond a unidirectional model of value transmission to one that considers the active, negotiated and sometimes oppositional ways in which teenagers incorporate – or resist – media-derived norms in their identity formation.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

With the changes in media production, distribution, and inclusion of global media content, post-apartheid viewing practices evolved significantly, particularly for South African teens. The focus of teen series now reflects a hybrid blend of content, making it important to understand how and why teens engage with these texts. Therefore, Uses and gratification theory provides a valuable framework to explore the construction of preference and resonance with media texts for teens. Uses and gratification theory posits that individuals actively seek out and consume media content to fulfil their needs and desires (Ruggiero, 2000).

The theory was initially developed in the early 1940s by Katz and Blumler (1974) to explain why individuals choose specific media texts over others. The theory is not limited to understanding the attraction to the media text itself. It also serves to understand the need and gratification individuals attach to these texts and seek from these practices. Unlike passive audience theories, the theory reiterates that individuals are not passive in their consumption of media but rather make conscious decisions driven by personal interests and goals. Katz, Gurevitch and Haas (1973) cited in (Tan 1985:235-236) later conceptualised uses and gratifications into five key categories – cognitive (information and learning), affective (emotion and pleasure), personal integrative (enhancing credibility and status), social integrative (enhancing connections with friends and family and the community) and tension release (escape and diversion). In the context of this study, these categories can assist in understanding the gratifications derived from watching these shows, offering insights into the connection viewers feel towards them and the motivations that drive their engagement.

A study conducted in the US by Vaterlaus, Spruance, Frantz and Kruger (2019:472) on college students (aged 18-25 years) found that binge-watching mainly stemmed from the individuals' social spheres. They identified four main reasons: social engagement (e.g., to fit in), as a means of escape, the ease of accessibility of TV content, and advertising of certain shows. While this study may inform practices of binge-watching, it does not focus on teens' viewing habits tied

to binge-watching. However, the theory of the research will provide insights into factors that influence the consumption habits of South African teenagers and their motivations and engagement with selective media texts. For instance, if teens gravitate toward shows such as *Blood* (2020) and *Euphoria* (2019) as a form of escapism, it can be due to the dramatised and sensational version of teenage life—one that is more thrilling than their own. Teenagers generally face the constraints of school, parental oversight, and general societal expectations, so they engage with shows that are detached from reality and, possibly, the attending consequences that follow.

Gratification theory can help us understand why South African teenagers engage in certain viewing practices. Therefore, media consumption can provide gratifications such as entertainment and information; it is important to be aware of the potential negative consequences of excessive exposure to specific media content. While the theory provides valuable insights into media consumption, it has limitations, particularly in explaining the underlying structural and individual factors that motivate South African teenagers to engage with certain media types.

As mentioned, socioeconomic status and accessibility can influence the motivations behind media consumption. For example, socioeconomic status and accessibility significantly influence media exposure and its influence on teens. In a country like South Africa, the digital divide is amplified by factors such as the affordability of internet access, access to streaming devices and platforms, and media content language and cultural relevance. This discrepancy highlights the theory's limitations within a racially and culturally diverse context and further emphasises the need for more nuanced understandings of media consumption in South Africa.

Cultivation theory

George Gerbner developed cultivation theory in the 1960s, providing a framework for understanding the long-term effects of media exposure on audience perceptions. The theory asserts that prolonged and repetitive engagement with media content can shape individuals' understanding of norms, values, behaviour and expectations. Given the prevalence of sensationalised risk behaviour and realism themes in both media texts, it is essential to investigate how these portrayals influence adolescents' perspectives on identity, relationships,

and associations on screen. By applying this framework to the analysis of both media texts, new insights can be garnered.

Cultivation theory and media influence

Gerbner (1960) coined the concept of cultivation through three foundational research approaches: institutional process analysis, which investigates the forces shaping the production and distribution of messages; iMessage system analysis, which focuses on TV presentation and messages being conveyed; and, lastly, cultivation analysis, which explores TV viewing and perception of reality (Busselle and Van den Bulck,2019).

Initially, cultivation analysis focused on cultural products being reproduced, such as societal norms, community and family values, as well as traditional gender roles evident in soap operas, talk shows and news programmes. However, with the changes in media form and content, cultivation studies − as highlighted by Bussel and Van den Bulck (2019), have been investigated in various contexts, such as the influence of programming focused on crime-related TV (Brewer and Ley, 2010); TV news viewing (Lee and Niederdeppe, 2011); medical dramas (Cho, Wilson and Choi, 2011; Chung, 2014); romance (Lippman, Ward and Seabrook, 2014); and relationships (Gamble and Nelson, 2016). Thus, genre-specific cultivation became the basis for investigating the effects of cultivation theory on individuals.

This framework is especially relevant in the context of modern media, as the diversification of storytelling has transcended beyond traditional TV and now exists in varying forms, such as through streaming platforms, social media and online content. Gerbner and Gross (1976) conceptualised cultivation theory as a general perspective for understanding the effects of media on individuals. The theory further posits that individuals can develop an altered perspective of reality due to the lengthy exposure and type of exposure to content. Thus, the more repetitive certain themes and messages are, the more likely certain behaviours, attitudes and values can be altered.

Gerbner and Gross (1976:176) further argued that what is seen does not have to be “real” to have an effect, but the mere idea can be influential to perception. Feasey (2009) examined the effect of the show *Charmed* on teenagers and tweens alike. Surprisingly, it was found that viewers between the ages of 20 to 30 were influenced within their walks of life concerning marriage, home ownership and employment. Later studies by Cho, Wilson and Choi (2011)

examined audiences' perception of doctors within the framework of reality and three medical shows (*Grey's Anatomy, House* and *ER*). The results illustrated how narrative consistency and cultivation of positive attitudes toward doctors played a role in shaping audiences' social beliefs and affirmed how they responded in real life. Furthermore, Gamble and Nelson (2016) analysed the expectation of sex being framed by young adults on what is perceived on screen. The results showed a cultivated expectation of women anticipating more sex in their relationships.

Gerbner's media effects theory was based on several observations about the nature of the TV message, especially concerning the dissemination of violence. "TV violence is a dramatic demonstration of power, which communicates much about social norms and relationships, about goals and means, about winners and losers, about the risks of life and the price for transgressions of society's rules" (Gerbner and Gross, 1976:178) in Busselle and Van den Bulck (2019:70).

The same sentiment applies to studying the cultivated values and beliefs between the screen world and the real world, both from a South African and a global perspective. In a case study conducted by Manik and Tarisayi (2020), Afrophobia was examined in the context of the violent attack on foreign nationals in September 2019. Cultivation theory was used as a lens to scrutinise and interrogate the potential ramifications of this on audiences' perceptions. The results showed that the continuous negative portrayal of foreign nationals in newspaper articles linked to criminal activities and general political unrest contributed majorly to the outlook and perception of South African nationals, which fuelled the attack.

In *Euphoria* (2019) and *Blood* (2020), the recurring themes of rebellion, risky behaviour, and toxic relationships align with the premise of cultivation theory that TV does not merely reflect reality, but it also constructs it, therefore influencing adolescents to emulate relationships and transgressive behaviour seen on screen. However, with representations on screen, common misconceptions also exist, which can reinforce rather than challenge stereotypes, resulting in misinformation (Beukes, 1987).

The theory of socialisation uses and gratification, and cultivation theory provide a valuable set of frameworks to understand how prolonged exposure to risk-related media can shape

perception and behaviour. The type of media consumed, frequency of engagement and context of exposure play a significant role in informing teen behaviour and expectations. These theories illuminate how media portrayals – whether positive or negative – can impact identity formation, social learning and performance. In South Africa, where diverse cultural values, unequal media access and hybridised global-local television content intersect, this theoretical triangulation offers a nuanced lens for exploring how portrayals of risk-related behaviour in *Euphoria* (2019) and *Blood* (2020) are produced, selected, interpreted, and potentially enacted by adolescents. audiences

Chapter 4 Methodology

The progression of teen narratives in TV series from past to present has challenged various social taboos and settings of reality through the depiction of more explicit and controversial topics, such as substance abuse, mental health struggles and complex relationships, which relate to the evolving concerns and experiences of contemporary adolescents. This has allowed for critical thinking and conversation among teens, as cited by numerous scholars, such as García-Muñoz and Fedele (1988), Van Damme and Van Bauwel (2013), Wee (2016) and Wilks (2019).

Understanding media's role is vital, as teenagers are at the pinnacle stage of development, where their perception of reality is informed by lived social experiences, behaviours, norms and the expectation thereof on screen. Generation Z – individuals born post-1996 – is especially significant in this context, as they represent the first generation to grow up with more globalised media content and distinct viewing habits that include having access to on-demand streaming services and control over media devices, content and connectivity as a norm (Moseley et al., 2014; Siapera et al., 2019; Podara et al., 2020 in Podara et al., 2021). Despite the facilitation of nuanced shifts in representation in teen TV and the changes in viewing habits, there appears to be a general lack of research and literature regarding how TV series can affect teenagers' perceptions of reality and behaviour and their consumption of narratives (Endendijk et al., 2021).

Research Design

This study employs a thematic and qualitative content analysis. To examine the portrayal of risky behaviour on screen, qualitative content analysis by Elo and Kyngäs (2008) was used to analyse the chosen media texts, *Blood* (2020) and *Euphoria* (2019). Braun and Clarke's (2008) thematic analysis explored the patterns in participants' responses to the focus group discussions. Triangulation, a technique considered central to a mixed-methods approach by Heale and Forbes (2003), was applied to enhance the reliability and validity of the data. This approach utilises multiple methods, theories, and data sources to deepen the understanding of the phenomenon under discussion. By combining my analysis of the media texts and the findings from the focus groups to create a comprehensive analysis of data, the triangulation effect strengthens the credibility of the conclusions drawn, as multiple data sources corroborate the findings and insights drawn from the research study.

Data Collection

The data collection process was twofold. First, an in-depth analysis of the selected media texts was conducted. Thereafter, focus group sessions were conducted to gather insights from teenage participants about their engagement with the chosen media texts. As the study engages with a vulnerable group- adolescents- and addresses mature subject matter, ethical clearance was obtained to ensure that all considerations were thoroughly addressed before the interview process. Participants were also reminded before and after each session that their involvement was voluntary and they could withdraw at any stage. The latter part of the research process took place in a co-educational, English-medium private school in Johannesburg. The setting was selected because of the learners' economic class, as private school learners typically have greater access to and exposure to globalised media texts such as *Blood* (2020) and *Euphoria* (2019). While this might have introduced a socioeconomic bias, it ensured that the sample group was familiar with the series type and that they had access to chosen media texts, as these series are found on streaming platforms such as Netflix and HBO.

Within this study, the sample pool consisted of Grade 9 to Grade 12 learners aged 15 to 18 years, which I felt represents a critical middle developmental stage of adolescence. As the study investigates the media effects of TV series with adult themes on the possible influence on teenagers' imitation, the insights from this specific age group are crucial in analysing how TV series with adult themes may influence teenagers' perceptions of reality, decision-making and imitation of behaviours on screen. Additionally, the co-educational environment allowed for a diverse range of gendered perspectives, as the findings provided perspectives from male, female and non-binary participants. The intersection of age, race, gender, and grade levels offered diverse perspectives for teens. The diverse sample group also highlighted the diversity within Gen Z, capturing shifts in attitudes, maturity, and perspectives on media texts. Together, these factors provide a nuanced understanding of the interpretation of media narratives and representation and insight into how these mirror or differ from teens' real lives.

The research process began with a pre-screening phase to identify suitable and interested participants. Learners in grades 9-12 were given a preliminary survey to gauge their interest in the study and assess their suitability as participants. Following this, participants were selected based on their familiarity with both series and their willingness to discuss their opinions and general perspectives. Potential participants were contacted and given parent and learner

consent forms detailing the necessary information regarding the research topic, objectives, procedures and ethical considerations, ensuring that informed consent was obtained and that both parties, i.e. parents and learners, were aware that participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw at any time.

Focus group sessions were favoured over individual interviews and surveys, which encouraged discussion of the topic and collective perspectives to be shared. Three focus group sessions were conducted at the agreed time and place, following the consent provided by the learners, the parents, and the school body. Each session maintained a semi-structured format to encourage open dialogue among participants while maintaining a focus on the research objectives, as highlighted below:

Session 1: TV Series Preferences, Influence and Access (Appendix A)
Session 2: Themes and Impact of TV Series (Appendix B)
Session 3: Realism and Cultural Representation (Appendix C)

This study omits names and any identifying factors to ensure the participants' anonymity and confidentiality. Therefore, participants will be referred to as Participant 1, Participant 2 etc. Discussions held outside of the focus group setting were uncontrollable, but participants were reminded of their responsibility to respect the confidentiality of peers.

Method of analysis

Following the data collection, qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the content while remaining attentive to the underlying context. This methodology fosters a more detailed analysis of how dialogue, characterisation, music, and visual aesthetics contribute to framing narratives. Studying these elements is imperative to understanding what messages are being conveyed and how these are constructed and communicated to audiences. The selected media texts represent contrasting sociocultural contexts, Global North and Global South, which allow for a comparative analysis of these contexts and further explore the relatability of these differences to teens in South Africa, which was one of the research objectives of this study. While qualitative content analysis provides insight into the construction of these portrayals on screen, thematic analysis of the focus group discussions provides a more nuanced understanding of the influence and effect of these narratives on adolescents' interpretation. The

approach included a three-step analysis process to uncover the explicit and implicit messages conveyed through media texts. The first step includes familiarisation: becoming familiar with the content and context of the narrative. Step 2 includes coding and categorisation, which allows for breaking down and grouping the data into codes reflecting recurring themes and noticeable patterns. Step 3 comprises the interpretation. This involved interpreting the data from the categories to draw meaningful connections and answer the research questions.

To familiarise myself with the data, I watched *Blood* (2020) and *Euphoria* (2019) multiple times, recording detailed notes on aspects of the series that stood out as risk-related activities or toxic behaviours. I paid close attention to both the visual and textual elements of the series, focusing on how various components − such as music, camera angles, and dialogue − evoke emotion, convey the narrative and potentially encourage specific actions or attitudes in adolescent viewers. Next, I organised my notes by categorising the common themes, such as the glamourisation of risk and the normalisation of risk and risk as a form of escapism, which I found to be the three most profound themes in the shows. Lastly, I combined my analysis with the analysis from the focus group sessions to compare my interpretations with those of my participants.

Building on the insights from the qualitative content analysis, the next phase involved a thematic analysis of the data gathered from the participants' responses within the focus groups. Braun and Clarke (2006:6) define thematic analysis as a method used for identifying, analysing and reporting common patterns known as themes within data. Braun and Clark (2006) suggest two themes: semantic and lent. The former denotes themes "within the explicit surface or meaning of data, and the analyst is not looking for anything beyond what a participant said or written", while the latter "starts to identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions and conceptualisations ideologies that are theorised as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data" (Braun and Clarke, 2006:84). This research uses the latter, as the intention of choosing this methodology is to identify the most critical parts of the data derived from the participant's responses in the focus group discussions, where valuable insight regarding screen representations and their effect on shaping youth perspectives can be examined.

This method employs a detailed insight into the participants' experiences, behaviours, and perceptions through the following key phases: familiarisation with the data, the generation of

initial codes, searching for themes within the data, a review of the themes, the definition and naming of the themes, and lastly, the production of the analysis.

The first phase involved transcribing the recorded focus group discussions. These transcripts were read multiple times to understand the broad ideas emerging from the study, such as the feelings and attitudes of participants toward risky behaviour and the recurring words used to describe them. Next, after familiarisation, initial codes were generated by identifying frequent phrases and words used to describe these behaviours. For example, the words "curiosity", "normalisation of risk", and "glamourisation" were words used to describe how participants understood the portrayal of risky behaviour and relationships on screen. The initial codes were then examined and thereafter grouped into potential themes. The identified themes were reviewed and refined to extrapolate the connections between participants' discussions. The naming and definition of themes followed as each theme reflected the distinct qualities it was named after. Finally, the link between the research questions and theoretical underpinning connected the participants' consumption of both the series to reflect broader social and cultural influences, such as viewing practices, device use, and other factors that were also found to be influential in a particular perspective.

Limitations

This study is subject to certain limitations. Firstly, the small sample size restricts the ability to generalise the findings to the broader population of adolescents' viewing practices and the series' influence on their behaviour. Secondly, the gender composition of the sample being predominantly female, with one transgender participant and one male participant, offered a narrow lens to analyse gendered perspectives further. Next, the socioeconomic privilege of private school learners does not fully represent the viewing habits and interpretations of Gen-Z, as the research was carried out within the parameters of one private co-educational school in Johannesburg. However, the justification for using this school and the type of learners is that they have access and more exposure to globalised narratives. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insight into some contemporary South African perspectives on globalised media content, which is an under-researched area. It offers a comprehensive analysis of the insights gained into adolescents' interpretation of narratives on screen and perspective into their resonation thereof.

Chapter 5 Screens of Influence: Gen Z's Viewing Habits and Perspectives of Risk on Screen

Euphoria (2019) and *Blood* (2020) explore complex narratives with teenagers as the protagonists and have themes such as love, loss and identity, which are important characteristics for growing adolescents navigating the world. The progression of teen narratives in TV series from past to present has challenged various social taboos, such as mental health, substance abuse, sexual fluidity and systemic inequalities, through the representation of diverse narratives on screen. For example, *13 Reasons Why* (2017) received significant backlash for the graphic display of suicide, sparking debate about the ethical responsibility of media in addressing sensitive topics, which led to the episode being rewritten and the suicide scene itself being taken out. Similarly, *Euphoria* (2019) faced criticism for the explicit portrayal of sex and substance use, raising the question of "How much is too much?" While such explicit depictions intend to educate and provoke critical reflection, they can also trigger and teach teens how to emulate what they see on screen, resulting in dangerous outcomes in real life.

Scholars such as García-Muñoz and Fedele (1988), Van Damme and Van Bauwel (2013), Wee (2016) and Wilks (2019) assert that conversations and critical reflections are imperative in the development and understanding of teens. However, the implications of these portrayals, especially the behavioural and psychological impact, remain unexplored within general literature. Therefore, despite the content warnings, the graphic nature of these portrayals often blurs the lines between awareness and harm, reiterating the ongoing debate on the ethics of representation and presentation of information on the screen. There appears to be a general need for more nuanced research and literature on the effect of TV series on teenagers, especially in understanding how images on screen potentially shape perceptions and have an effect on their behaviour (Endendijk et al., 2021:1741). Teenagers' perception of reality is often informed by the combination of lived and observed experiences, societal norms and media representations, which collectively influence their expectations of the world. The proliferation of unrealistic or distorted portrayals in TV series raises concerns about their potential to shape teenage behaviour, reinforce stereotypes and blur the line between fiction and reality.

To understand teenagers' viewing practices, participants in the first focus group session (Appendix 1) were asked questions about their viewing habits, device use, and the platforms

they prefer to stream their favourite series. The following tables provide an overview of their responses, offering valuable insights into how teens engage with media and the factors influencing their viewing habits.

Table 1: Frequency[1] of platform and device used

Participant	Platforms Used to stream the show	Devices Used to watch the show
Participant 1	Showmax, Netflix, streaming sites	Laptop, TV
Participant 10	DStv, Showmax, Netflix, Apple TV	Phone, laptop, TV
Participant 11	Netflix, Apple TV, streaming sites	Phone, TV
Participant 13	DStv, Netflix, Disney Plus, Prime	TV, laptop
Participant 2	DStv, Netflix, Disney Plus, Prime, Showmax, stream	Phone, TV, laptop, tablet, monitor PC
Participant 3	Netflix, HDtv	Phone, TV, iPad
Participant 4	Netflix, Showmax, Disney, streaming sites	Phone, laptop
Participant 5	Netflix, Disney Plus, DStv, Prime	TV, laptop, phone
Participant 6	Apple TV, Netflix, DStv, Prime Video	TV, laptop, phone
Participant 7	Netflix, DStv	Phone, laptop
Participant 8	Netflix, Movie.io	Phone, laptop
Participant 9	Netflix, Disney, Apple TV, Prime	Phone, TV, laptop

[1] Frequency is referred to as the number of times something was accounted for.

Table 2: Frequency of Devices Used to watch TV shows

Device	**Frequency**
Phone	11
Laptop	10
TV	9
Tablet	1
Monitor PC	1
iPad	1

Table 3 : Frequency of Platforms used to watch TV shows

Platform	**Frequency**
Netflix	12
DStv	8
Apple TV	7
Prime Video	6
Showmax	6
Disney Plus	6
Streaming Sites	4
Movie.io	1
HDtv	1

The data in Table 1 and Table 2 above show the prioritisation of mobility and choice. This supports the observations made by Podara et al. (2021) of how Gen Z is characterised by hyperconnectivity and unique digital content consumption. Teen participants use multiple platforms and devices, indicating their preference for curating content that aligns with their lifestyle. The variety of devices reflects a demand for flexibility and access as they choose between platforms to cater to their preference.

Additionally, three key observations can be made regarding teen participants and their viewing practices in relation to Table 1, Table 2, and Table 3. Firstly, teenage participants take a

proactive approach to media consumption, actively selecting the content, platform and device rather than passively engaging with what is presented on screen. Next, the reliance on multiple devices and accessibility to various platforms suggests digital fluidity and a level of socioeconomic privilege. As mentioned, the participants interviewed were from a local private school in Johannesburg. Thus, their accessibility to a multitude of resources and platforms reveals class as a factor that shapes viewing habits, consumption and access to technology.

Lastly, the coexistence of traditional platforms and modern streaming, as seen in Table 3, as popular choices, reflects the interplay of globalisation and cultural relevance as teens navigate different screen narratives. These findings align with Tengeh and Udoakpan (2021), who argue that the increasing availability of diverse viewing options for South African teens has facilitated the emergence of new cultural references, social norms, and identity constructions. These dynamics reflect the hybridisation of global and local influences as teenagers navigate and incorporate elements from both worlds into their consumption and identity formation.

The tables above also highlight a clear alignment with the principles of Gratification theory's concepts of demassification, synchronicity and interactivity, as explained in Ruggiero (2000). Participants' active approach to selecting the device, platform and media text to meet their personal preferences and lifestyle highlights the concept of demassification, indicates their control over the medium, and the flexibility and ease of access to obtain series on-demand support the idea of synchronicity. As Ruggiero (2000) and Tefertiller (2018) describe real-time watching on platforms such as Netflix allows viewers to engage with content immediately, therefore aligning with the final principle, the connection between users and the responsiveness of the medium.

Navigating Gen Z's Social Landscape

The globalisation of media has led to a surge in the popularity of series originating in different parts of the world, including countries such as South Korea, Japan, Spain and Turkey, for teens and adults alike. The table below (Table 4) shows a list of series mentioned by participants as their general favourite series.

Table 4 : Frequency of TV series watched by participants

TV Series	**Frequency**
Euphoria	5
Big Mouth	4
Blood and Water	2
Brooklyn 99	2
Vampire Diaries	2
Gossip Girl	1
Gilmore Girls	1
Game of Thrones (GOT)	1
House of Dragon	1
Sex Education	1
Classified	1
Never Have I Ever	1
Black Lightning	1
Lucifer	1
Bridgeton	1
Skeem Saam	1
Kings of Joburg	1
Top Boy	1
Dubai Bling	1
Miseducation	1
BoJack Horseman	1
Good Girls	1
The Idol	1
Swaggers	1
Youngins	1
Killing Eve	1
Yellowjackets	1

Young Sheldon	1
Modern Family	1
Criminal Minds	1
Pretty Little Liars	1
The Office	1
Steven Universe	1
Let's Talk About Chu	1
Heartbreak High	1
XO Kitty	1

Table 4 reflects a preference for internationally sourced narratives over local narratives, with participants citing various reasons, ranging from relatability to authenticity and representation, which will be discussed later in this chapter. *Euphoria* (2019) and *Big Mouth* (2017) are the most frequently mentioned series. While some local South African series, such as *Skeem Saam* (2011), *Kings of Joburg* (2020), *Miseducation* (2023), *Classified* (2023) and *Youngins* (2024) are mentioned, primarily, global series are the most popular. These observations align with the findings of Tengeh and Udoakpan (2021), who highlight the effect globalisation of TV consumption has on teens' viewing practices in that increased exposure to international content via a variety of platforms influences the dominance of global narratives such as *Euphoria* (2019) and *Big Mouth* (2017), as opposed to local series. The table above also reflects the interest of some participants in niche series, such as *The Boys* (2019) and *Steven Universe* (2013), indicating access to streaming platforms such as Hulu and Amazon Prime, which offer a broad range of international content. This is a further indicator of globalisation's influence on teenagers in South Africa.

While international content offers more variety and a greater volume of series, local series stand out because of their relevance, familiarity and cultural connection, as highlighted by participants' responses below.

With Puleng's situation with not affording school fees is something that's relatable. A lot of people actually got through that with scholarship, and you have to go through a lot of things in order to afford it. Yes, you're going to a private school, but there's a few learners that have that and can't afford it and excel at so many things, but the problem is the fees. (Participant 1, Session 3).

Now, if you watch something on Netflix, it's romanticised. They want the whole world to be interested, not just South Africans. Most South African shows are played on DSTV, and we see that Love Moja they go into community issues, but like I said, if you watch something on Disney Plus or whatever, it won't be the same. People involved in the creation are not just South African. (Participant 10, Session 3).

Participant 1's sentiment reflects a common challenge by many South Africans regarding accessibility to education. Her response reflects how the affordability of schooling does not always only determine accessibility but also physical access, supporting the argument made by Motala, Dieltiens and Sayed (2009) that these struggles are ongoing and complex to remedy. Similarly, Participant 10 points out how local platforms such as DSTV tackle community issues without the dramatisation often seen on international platforms such as Netflix. Participant 10's engagement with a long-standing series such as *Skeem Saam* (2011) shows the powerful and deep-rooted connection that some teens can have with local content, reflecting that cultural and social relevance is essential for some.

Gen Z's viewing habits also reveal a strong preference for more mature content, as highlighted by the mention of series such as *Game of Thrones* (2011), *Yellow Jackets* (2021), and *Sex Education* (2019), which have ratings that are TV-MA or are rated at 18+ (IMBD, n.d). This introduces a new layer to the teens' socialisation practices as they become exposed to complex ideas from an international market that inform and educate in explicit ways. This suggests that teens actively seek out this type of content to gratify their reflecting needs, reflecting the central premise of the gratification theory. While their 'needs' might be unclear − as this was not the study's objective − this reveals some understanding of why teens tend to gravitate toward global narratives. Additionally, the engagement with mature content also shows the indirect socialisation of audiences. The norms and values embedded within these screen narratives, such as social norms (those relating to relationship dynamics and power), cultural norms (images of success and identity construction), behavioural norms and societal norms

(workplace behaviour or codes of morality), are absorbed by teen viewers and can be internalised or emulated.

This phenomenon parallels studies showing that young people turn to pornography for sexual education due to the lack of comprehensive sexual education or discussions at home (Albury, 2014; Wright, 2018, cited in Dudek, Woodley and Green, 2022). Just as pornography can challenge traditional sexual norms and introduce new sexual ideals (Green, 2020; McKee et al., cited in Dudek Woodley and Green, 2022), the content in TV shows can shift teens' perceptions of social and cultural expectations.

The ratings of films and TV series is under a classification guide that rates material produced for the information of parents and the general public. The dominant institution in the US is the Motion Picture Association (MPA), founded in 1968 (Motion Picture Association, n.d.). In South Africa, the Film and Publication Board (FPB) was founded in 1996 "to regulate the creation, production, possession and distribution of films, games and certain publications" (Content Regulatory Authority of South Africa, n.d). The core of the South African Film Board particularly specifically emphasises the protection of children (those aged under 18 years) from harmful and prohibited content. The FPB works hand-in-hand with various platforms such as Google, Apple, Showmax and Netflix to ensure the safe transmission and rating of TV shows according to the South African rating standards (McLeod, 2021).

While TV shows display content warnings at the beginning of each episode, these are often ignored by parents and teens alike. Participants in this study are primarily under the age of 16, and their engagement with these shows indicates the desire and allure fostered by these 'forbidden' narratives. Within the focus group discussion, participants were asked if they were monitored or blocked from watching any series, to which all participants indicated they were not. Several participants note that their parents would be more involved in monitoring what they watched when they were younger; however, they became more relaxed as they became teenagers.

Participants reflected on the evolution of parents' role in monitoring their media consumption, noting that as the participants 'got older and more mature', their parents allowed them free rein over what they watched. Initially, strict boundaries such as codes and blocked channels were set, but over time, these restrictions were lessened. This indicates a shift from parental

gatekeeping to a more collaborative approach, exemplified by Participant 2's statement that shows the recognition some parents have of the potential media has to educate and foster development.

> *For me, when I was younger, when DStv was still the prime of everything, they used to have a code for it, but now that I'm older, they say that I must watch TV. I'll learn from it. Yeah, no, there's no restrictions. There will be times when they ask for suggestions, and yeah, I will give them.* (Participant 2, Session 1).

Despite the increased freedom, participants Participant 5 and Participant 8 share that stigmas around explicit content remain prevalent within their households. They are often questioned about what they watch, and parents express concerns over certain scenes.

> *So, when I think about watching some of the episodes with my mom, like, you know, in Season 1, Nate and his dad had a whole encounter; if my mom had walked in, she would have told me off about it and asked why I watch shows like that."* (Participant 5, Session 1). *"She would say to me, 'Oh, you're also going to go do that, take a white line, or sleep with older men?* (Participant 8, Session 1).

These insights reveal the complexity of media consumption and the navigation between personal interest and parental influence. Participants, in general, demonstrate a self-censorship strategy when encountering explicit content, such as passing the scene and watching alone, as opposed to co-viewing and discussing too many details about a show such as *Euphoria* (2019).

Surprisingly, Participant 11, a 17-year-old male participant, reveals that,

> *We used to have the code. Like my parents. I couldn't watch anything above 13 until last year. That's why I started watching crazy shows.* (Participant 11, Session 1).

Participant 11's comment illustrates the universal appeal of the "forbidden" as his response shows that restriction and curiosity, regardless of gender and age, can amplify the allure of such media content. In Participant 11's case, once the restrictions were lifted, he actively sought out content he was unable to access before, reflecting how media consumption is not only shaped by influences but also by the conscious decision to seek out certain shows and narratives.

To follow up, when participants were asked if they felt the need to hide *Blood* (2020) and *Euphoria* (2019), 5 out of 13 participants indicated they would hide watching *Blood* (2020), while 12 participants indicated they would hide *Euphoria* (2019). Participants provided a range of reasons attributed to respect for their parents, especially when an explicit scene was aired. A few note that while explicit scenes would prompt them to pause or stop the show if their parent walked in, it did not warrant prohibition from watching these shows. The general consensus seems to be that stopping or pausing the show is done out of respect for their parents. For some, like Participant 10, viewing these shows can be a form of bonding.

> *I mean, I watched The Wife with my mother, which is way more intense …, My mom and I watch the same series, she put me on Euphoria. But I will never watch it with her, or if she walks into the room, I will pause. So, we can still discuss it; you don't have sex and don't do this. I allow her to do that because she's my mom* (Participant 10, Session 1).

Participant 10's account also highlights the flexibility within her household, demonstrating how parents' roles can influence viewing habits. Participant 3, however, feels that her room is her own space, showing the openness of her relationship with her parents.

> *It's not about having to hide, like in a sex scene. I mean, you did this to create me. It's natural. But if you come into my room, I'm not going to switch it off. Things that happen in the show are normal, like when I know you had sex* (Participant 3, Session 1).

The lack of hesitation to continue watching reflects an evolved family dynamic, where openness about topics such as sex, especially graphic sex, is normalised. However, for Participant 2, viewing and interacting with series in her household is more social.

> *Like Participant 3 said, our parents have gone through the stuff. But if they walk into my room, I know we are about to have a conversation, so I have to pause. But I know for a fact that there are three of us at home. We all watched the show and related to it in our own ways. I have a 30-year-old sister; I'm 18, and my mother is 55. We like to conversate (sic) with each other and hear the different perspectives.* (Participant 2, Session 1).

Participant 2's experience emphasises how media can transcend generational gaps, where series and TV can offer a shared experience for collaboration and discussion. Therefore, participants' reflections about their watching practices support the argument made by Matrix (2014) in Foni (2020) that watching television series can serve as a means of connection with friends and peers, as individuals tend to discuss and exchange views, therefore contributing to their active participation even more. Despite the generational gap, intergenerational relatability, as seen above, illustrates how local and global narratives can resonate with individuals based on different aspects of their lives.

The framework by Nichols and Selim (2022) also offers a valuable lens to understand how parents can mediate and influence their teenagers' media consumption, ranging from enforcing rules and restrictions to fostering shared viewing experiences evident in participants' varying responses to parental mediation. The framework asserts that parental mediation typically falls into three categories: restrictive mediation, where parents enforce the rules and limitations; active mediation, which involves discussions about media content and reasoning; and lastly, co-viewing, where parents facilitate a shared media experience by watching with their children. Family is the first natural site of socialisation, offering individuals their first system of norms, values, and beliefs. When combined with media consumption, the dual impact can play a role in shaping perceptions of norms and behaviour, therefore creating a powerful framework for understanding the world (Genner and Süss, 2017). These findings illustrate how teens navigate their viewing habits alongside their autonomy and family dynamics. Beyond individual choice and family interactions, the screen is a powerful medium for engagement and socialisation, as will be illustrated below.

Socialisation through screens

The screen has become central to understanding behaviour and norms in society, serving a dual role as a mirror and a mediator of societal values, expectations, and identities. From serial TVs to computer monitors and smartphones, these interfaces function as passive tools for entertainment and information and as active agents of socialisation. Genner and Süss (2017) and Qolbi et al. (2022) assert that adolescents tend to absorb what they see and internalise these depictions, which influence their social expectations and behaviour. For example, shows such as *Euphoria* (2019) display a graphic collection of scenes and images at a frequent rate, which can play a role in how teens view and understand intimacy, consent and relationships, which will be explained in a later chapter.

The role of media as a socialisation tool is often intertwined with other equally powerful agents, such as family dynamics, peer influence, and socioeconomic background. While media can support certain norms and values presented, such as the family dynamics, where mutual respect is an important family value, it can also reject and challenge this by presenting narratives where familial relationships are not only marred with toxicity, but they are sensationalised, which can leave a lasting impression on teenagers who are not yet able to differentiate clearly between reality and fiction.

A total of 7 out of 12 (58%) participants note that social media is the primary source of discovering the series. While 6 out of 12 (50%) participants indicate that family and friends are the primary sources of their discovery, 2 out of 13 (15%) state that they found the series through scrolling on Netflix. The shift from the traditional discovery methods, such as word of mouth or channel surfing on television, reflects the influence of secondary screens, where smartphones and social media serve as the first point of engagement.

TikTok, in particular, was mentioned as the catalyst that led these teenagers to watch their favourite series. Participants elaborate that TikTok edits—short, fan-made teaser video clips where emotional or dramatic moments are captured—spark an interest that leads them to seek out the series actively. TikTok challenges, edits, and sounds have become popular for the youth to interact with the series, allowing viewers and fans to engage with content beyond the narrative. For instance, the viral make-up recreation trends of *Euphoria* (2019) reflect the unique style, colour palates and aesthetics used within the show, and this displays the lasting effects left by the show on individuals. Similarly, the iconic show *Wednesday* (2022) featured

a dance scene, which soon became a viral trend, influencing many teens and individuals to copy the dance dressed up as Wednesday, the character. These interactions not only cater to the community of fans, but they also enable others to contribute to the popularity of media text and underscore how passive browsing on social media translates into active viewing and participatory action.

Platforms such as TikTok illustrate how secondary screens can effectively generate interest in a show and act as a catalyst for media consumption. This is reflected in Participant 8's statement regarding how she found some of the series she watches:

> *On TikTok, it's like when the owners of these accounts don't post Part 2, so I go look for the stories.* (Participant 8,).

Participant 8's response further exemplifies the gratification theory, as she actively seeks the series to engage with it. This trend is also consistent with the findings by Faltesek et al. (2023), who argue that TikTok operates more as a TV than a traditional social media app. It replicates the flow of satellite TV, offering viewers an entertainment experience as they compare, similar to them 'flipping through the channels' with a remote.

Balleys. Millerand, Thoër and Duque (2020), Qolbi, Wibowo and Fuady (2022), and Villarejo-Carballido et al. (2022) highlight that viewers tend to identify with characters differently as they find reinforcement of self on screen. For example, in *Blood* (2020), Puleng's journey of uncovering family secrets while balancing school life and friendships shows the complexities of a teen's life with dual identities. Her struggles might resonate with teens who also feel torn between different circles of their lives. Additionally, within TV narratives, teen characters are often shown to redefine themselves as the year begins by 'trying on' different versions of themselves as they experiment with identities and navigate new and old relationships (Woloszyn, 2021). This newfound 'self', Woloszyn (2021) explains, is instead a range of selves, as teens are shown to navigate different identities within varying social spheres. This dynamic resonates with participants in this study, for example, Participant 10, who notes how shows such as *Euphoria* (2019) allow teens to resonate with the character's personal struggles and personality traits:

> *Like in Euphoria, I feel like everyone here can pick a character they relate to on a personal level, whether it be insecurity and stuff.* (Participant 10, Session 3).

While secondary screens play a significant role in socialising teens, screen media, combined with the influence of peers and family, can also shape teens' construction of self, as shown by Participant 6's comment.

> *I mean, ever since this show came out, people have been comparing me to Rue. And I'm just like, OK, yeah. I mean, they see me as Rue, and that sort of thing got into my head, and now I look at other people and do the same. Like you would remind me of Cassie and you of Maddie … like that.* (Participant 6, Session 3).

These reflections reveal the powerful role of screen culture in shaping teens' identity, acting as both a mirror and an active, powerful tool for constructing and expressing their own identity. Social media platforms such as TikTok solidify the visibility of these shows, while peers and family play a significant role in reinforcing their cultural relevance. This dynamic reflects the dual nature of modern socialisation, where media not only reflects the teens' identity and challenges but actively contributes to the formation thereof. In addition to these insights, some participants also reflect on how TV shows influence their lives beyond passive viewing. For instance, Participant 4 and Participant 8 illustrate how these shows also affect their personal interests and actions. Participant 4 and Shannon's reflections exemplify the influence that shows can have beyond the screen and discussion.

> *There's a lot I also take away from the show, like drama, because I do drama after school. I'll tell my mom that this monologue or scene is from Euphoria.* (Participant 4, Session 1).

> *So, when I listen to the playlist and she asks where this is from, I tell her about the scene. I'm still open, but with Euphoria specifically, she would say to me, oh, you're also going to do that, take a white line, or sleep with older men?* (Participant 8, Session 1).

Their statements reveal how shows can inspire creative expression, such as Participant 4 using monologues for her drama classes while Participant 8 connects with the music from the show. This demonstrates the interconnectivity between screen media and reality, highlighting how

media can reinforce teens' preferences and self-expression as teens engage in the content. The ability of media to shape and influence teens' identity also raises questions about the effect of certain portrayals and behaviours. The characters and media texts that teens resonate with often include depictions of risk-related behaviour, such as substance use and unsafe and toxic relationships, which could potentially influence their perception and emulation thereof. The connection between relatability and exposure invites a critical discussion to understand how these depictions can be either empowering and educational or harmful.

Screen narratives, secondary screens, and peer influence play a primary role in socialising youth's engagement with media and shaping preferences. The discussion points from the focus group sessions illustrate that while teenagers find global shows relatable in addressing universal issues and themes, localised content is equally important to the youth as teens navigate the balance between global and local narratives as South African teens. It is important for media creators and producers, especially with locally produced series, to strike a balance between storytelling and producing authentic narratives that reflect societal relevance for teens. The subsequent chapters will explore teens' perspectives of risky behaviour and relationships to gather more profound insights into these images' effect on the behaviour and development of these teenagers.

Teens' perceptions of risky behaviour

In an era that is dominated by personalised media content, the intersection of media portrayals and risk-related behaviour invites critical reflection regarding one's engagement with these depictions and narratives. While content mediation is intended to regulate exposure, the sophisticated algorithms and allure of provocative teen-focused narratives foster curiosity among the youth. To understand risky behaviour among teens in South Africa, Khuzwayo, Taylor, and Connolly (2020) conducted a meta-analysis in 16 KZN schools, examining 2000 pupils to outline what constitutes risky behaviour. The following five categories were identified, along with the statistics: weapon carrying (27%), cigarette smoking (33%), alcohol consumption (25%), drug use (15%), and unsafe sex practices (56.8%). Similarly, Osuafor, Okoli, and Phateng's (2023) study of Grade 8 learners in the Western Cape found the three salient categories identified were alcohol consumption (42,7%), sexual intercourse (36,0%), and drug use (22,1%). These findings underscore the need for further exploration and more research regarding how media can contribute to or challenge existing perceptions of risk-related behaviour. To understand how teens engage with these portrayals, participants were

asked to identify what they would consider as risk-related behaviour. The following categories emerge in this study:

Table 5 : indicates the identified risk-associated behaviour by participants on screen.

Risk associated behaviour	**Frequency**
Drug use/abuse	8
Unprotected sex	6
Underage drinking	4
Violence/weapon usage	2
Underage sex	4
Crime/theft/hacking	3
Sneaking out	3
Acting on impulsive thoughts	1
Obsessiveness	1

In a follow-up question, participants were asked if they felt encouraged to explore any of the risk-related behaviour or activities they saw on screen, to which 11 out of 12 participants (91%) indicated that they were motivated by some activities on screen. Participants also provide a range of examples, some of which include the use of drugs in *Euphoria* (2019), or having multiple relationships, similar to what Elena from *Vampire Diaries* (2009) does in the show, or even the allure of the affluent lifestyle seen in *Gossip Girl* (2007). However, when asked in the focus group session, participants indicated that the word 'encouraged' is too definite, and they would rather use words such as "*curious*" and *"desire*" or "*intrusive thoughts*" to describe their allure to participate in these activities.

Only two participants reveal that they feel strongly encouraged to follow the example shown on screen. Participant 11 states that the felt encouraged to host a party while his parents were out, while Participant 9 recalls how her experimentation with drugs came from seeing it on TV.

> *Um, yeah, actually. Like, uh, I thought it (drugs) was cool when I saw it on TV, and I was like, oh, let me try it. And then when I tried it, I don't know, it wasn't nice. The one part is nice, getting high, you know. The rest is bad.* (Participant 9, Session 1).

Participant 9's uncertainty in her comment, "…*the one part is nice, getting high…*" suggests an awareness of the duality of emulating these behaviours, which can be both alluring and harmful. Participant 9 and Participant 11's reflections suggest that for some teenagers, the portrayal of these behaviours and activities on screen can foster curiosity and lead to real-life experimentation. In contrast, for others, these portrayals can also deter emulation.

Participants who reveal that they felt curious and "desire to emulate" also express what deterred them from emulation, which included the fear of their parent and guardian figures and the fear of consequences. Matrix (2014) suggested that demonising these portrayals without considering the broader context of individual experience and perception results in a one-dimensional understanding of media influence. To follow up, participants were asked to identify specific activities they would engage in based on what they observed their favourite characters do on screen. The table below summarises the responses and frequency of the activities mentioned.

Table 6: Identification of risk-related activities participants would engage with

Category	**Activities or Responses**	**Frequency**
Investigation and Adventure	Investigating, going out late to solve mysteries	2
Lifestyle and Freedom	Freedom without consequence	3
	Having money to splurge	1
	Sneaking out	3
Social Behaviours	Partying, clubbing	2
	Drug usage	5
	Smoking cigarettes	1
	Sexual intercourse	1
	Multiple sexual partners	3
	Unprotected sex	1
	Crime	1

Some participants offer thought-provoking contributions when describing the activities they would consider engaging in, inspired by the characters they admire. For example, Participant 10 candidly expresses a fascination with activities beyond moral boundaries and codes of society.

> *Um, I want to do everything. This will sound silly again, but I want to do stuff that doesn't align with my morals. Like having multiple sexual partners, having affairs, dating an older man, dating a younger man. Stuff like that. I also want to try cocaine since this is a safe space. Not that I would actually try it. But it looks cool to try it. And not cool in a way that, like, oh my gosh, two people do this. But the feeling looks like a vacation. Yeah. I'm also going to try crime. Like murder, theft, hijacking, kidnapping, um, what do you call it? I don't know what you call it, but when you chop someone up, something like that in you, what do you call it when you burn stuff up?* (Participant 10, Session 2).

While Participant 10 recognises these activities and behaviours as morally questionable and even destructive, her reflection and other participants' revelations of activities they would engage in reveal how media depictions shape the allure of these activities. This aligns with Kirsch and Murnen (2015), who discuss how screen characters serve as role models of behaviour for teenagers, shaping their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours. Participants' responses indicate that their favourite characters' behaviours are a source of curiosity and inspiration, showing how media portrayals can shape the perception of risk-related behaviour. Furthermore, the responses reflect the complexities producers face in providing an authentic representation on screen while also displaying the truth in the potential euphoric elements of some of the behaviours and some consequences.

These findings suggest that secondary screens and parent and peer influence serve as powerful tools in shaping media preference and viewership. The influence of family and friends reinforces the social aspect of media consumption, where shared recommendations play an important role in content discovery. While participants exhibit autonomy in selecting media content, the narratives consumed still function as agents of socialisation, shaping perceptions of relationships, self-identity and risk-taking behaviour. Building on this, the following few chapters will examine how *Euphoria* (2019) and *Blood* (2020) depict the two most prominent risk-related behaviours, substance use and sexual behaviour, as well as relationships, to explore how these portrayals may influence the real-life attitudes and beliefs of adolescents.

Chapter 6 Screen Narratives and Risky Behaviour: Substance Use

This chapter explores three themes from the content analysis of both series, *Blood (2020)* and *Euphoria* (2019), and the focus group sessions with teen participants. These themes refer to the glamourisation of substance use, the casual nature of drug consumption and the role of substance use as a coping mechanism for adolescents. By examining these themes, this study aims to uncover teenagers' perspectives as they engage with both series.

Under the influence: The glamourisation of substance use

"It was the end of summer, and I had no intention of staying clean."

Rue Bennet in Euphoria (2019) S1E1

The pervasive influence of substance use in *Blood* (2020) and *Euphoria* (2019) is not an isolated trend. It can also be seen in other teen shows, such as *Elite* (2018), *Sex Education* (2020), and *13 Reasons Why* (2017). *Elite* (2018), for example, mirrors the glamourised portrayal of drug use that is also present in *Euphoria* (2019), while it also shares sentiments of the lavish, indulgent lifestyle seen in *Blood* (2020). This combination of visual and narrative elements within series like these reiterates the pervasive presence of recreational use of substances. In contrast, other series, like *13 Reasons Why* (2017), seem to suggest that navigation of difficult emotions is made easier and bearable with the use of a substance. In this way, substances are shown to be beneficial, even crucial to making it through difficult experiences. Therefore, the engagement with substances is not displayed as an act of teen rebellion, but it is shown to be almost an integral part of teens' socialisation.

In the first episode of *Blood* (2020), Fikile celebrates her 17th birthday at her best friend Chris's lavish house. The open-plan layout allows guests to flitter effortlessly between different spaces of the house, creating an environment where they are able to socialise happily. Inside the rooms with high-rise ceilings, the unrestrained freedom of teenagers laughing, dancing and drinking underscores the absence of parents shown in the guests' free movements and unrestrained selves. The sprawling multi-storey mansion radiates affluence and privilege. Outside, a fire thrower captivates the attention of people queuing outside to enter the party. The exclusivity of the event is enforced by the beefy bouncer standing at the door, clutching the clipboard in his hand as he consults the lists of invited guests. In the house, the glass windows stretch from ceiling to floor and are decorated with neon-coloured party streamers, which adds to the energetic atmosphere. In the centre of the house, a glass dining table is lined with neon-

coloured orange cups, awaiting the next round of beer pong while music beats blend seamlessly with the chatter and laughter of the crowd. Characters are visible on various balconies and staircases and littered throughout the house, further emphasising the scale and grandeur of the house. Outside, the party spills onto the manicured lawn, where guests dance around the luminous blue pool.

Characters are seen laughing, dancing, and helping themselves to an open bar as the evening festivities progress. The setting mirrors the affluence experienced by these teen characters in their social circle, where they have the privilege to act without consequence because of the absence of parental supervision. This unrestrained freedom underscores the casual nature of underage drinking and partying that appears to be a norm, which reinforces the idea that privilege can shield teenagers from the consequences of their actions. Underage drinking and partying are central to the social lives of these characters, those from very affluent families. The actions and behaviour of these teen characters are framed as routine aspects of their daily socialisation, as there is no immediate intervention or repercussion from any parental figures. This absence of consequence can be interpreted as a reflection of the characters' socioeconomic privilege that shields them from the real-world consequences of legal implications of underage drinking and being in an unsupervised space.

As Chris addresses the crowd to locate Fikile, he holds a champagne bottle, symbolising class and excess. He welcomes Fikile beside him as they stand elevated on the balcony, affirming a kind of social dominance above the other partygoers. In the background, we see their friend's light sparkles on an elaborate three-tiered cake, illuminated by the soft white light. A birthday cake is typically a symbol of milestones and growth. In this scene, the loss of innocence at this moment is evident as Chris raises his glass to toast to Fikile, saying, "Happy 17th birthday, you old hag, I love you", followed by a kiss on the cheek and "Now, let us drink!", (Figure 1) further symbolising Fikile's arrival in assumed adulthood, even though Fikile is not yet 18. The grand display of fireworks lights up the sky, further emphasising the extravagance of the event. Everyone moves with casual ease, and their bodies sway rhythmically to the beat of *Who* by Lady X and *Afrikan Roots*. Within the chaos, the characters blow out clouds of smoke, adding to the air of rebellion as normal: cigarettes, hubbly bubbly, garden, a variety of drugs and lots of alcohol. At the open bar, bartenders move swiftly to serve the thirsty crowds, lines of eager teens clink their glasses in unison as they down shots of alcohol in quick succession. The entire segment shows the unrestrained freedom that teens have as they indulge in excessive amounts

of alcohol and smoking amid the euphoric atmosphere. The ease with which teen characters participate in adult behaviours in these scenes reflects the casual nature in which underage drinking and partying are treated, reinforcing this as a normalised narrative for a typical teenager.



Figure 1 Chris hosts Fikile's 17th Birthday party



Figure 2 Rue's altered perspective of Jules

Equally, in *Euphoria* (2019), many scenes display substance use as an integral aspect of social interactions. The use of drugs, especially in the case of Rue, is seen to be glamourised in the display of the euphoric effect on characters. At the beginning of Episode 2, Rue and Jules sit and lie casually on the bed in Jules's room when Rue says, "Wanna get high? "Jules responds with, "Didn't you just get out of rehab?", to which Rue replies, "Yeah". Jules raises her eyebrows with a playful smile and asks, "Should I be concerned?". Rue nonchalantly replies, "Maybe", raising her eyebrows and pursing her lips. Despite the fleeting moment of concern and doubt, Jules weakly dismisses the suggestion with, "This doesn't seem like a good idea", to which Rue shakes her head and says, "I kinda disagree". They share a smile, and Jules plops back down on the bed, signalling her acceptance. The camera shifts to Rue as she follows the sound of Jules's voice from across the room, in a makeshift fort, the voice sounding distorted and muffled. There is a shift in the scene as the lighting, and the camera shot change to reflect the influence of the drugs on Rue's perspective. The deliberate use of slow motion as the camera pans to a close-up of Jules and the radiant kaleidoscopic lighting creates a dream-like atmosphere, where reality seemingly blurs into fantasy for Rue. The series of close-ups and glittery aesthetics shows the intensity of Rue's state, where Jules becomes a figure of fantasy and desire to her as the camera focuses on Jules and her laughter (Figure 2). Jules's voice sounds distant as she asks Rue if she is feeling anything; her voice appears to float softly in and out of focus, watching the dream-like atmosphere that Rue is in. The song lyrics "I'm on

top of the world." perfectly encapsulate Rue's altered state as she gazes at Jules in awe and replies slurring, "I'm just so happy".

The scene abruptly cuts to Rue and Jules facing each other in a very ordinary setting. The music cuts abruptly, and the visual effects vanish, bringing the viewer back to reality. The disorientation felt by Rue is clear as she is shown to sway forward toward Jules, tenderly touching her face as she slurs, "Woah?". This captures Rue's feelings of *Euphoria* at this moment. The earlier dream-like sequence returns briefly as the viewer is shifted to Rue's perspective, as Rue relishes her moment. The sequence is intentionally seductive, drawing the viewer into the allure of the euphoric experience. The combination of the visual and textual elements not only creates an allure, but it positions the experience as transformative and liberating because it presents a reality where consequence is absent and reinforces the idea that experimentation in such leads to self-discovery, empowerment and a form of escapism from the realities of life.

Both series depict drugs and alcohol as a form of celebration and as a way to have fun, and not as dangerous. The second focus group session (Appendix 2) reflects the sentiments expressed above in that teen participants' observations reveal that the portrayal of substance use creates an allure and fascination, as reflected below.

> *Rue takes drugs. She is so at peace, and she is like… everything is just okay. And it just closes out everything else that's happening in the world. And I just want to share that. I just want to know why she is so. And I just want to know what type what is, and why so many people do drug the way they do, and why they get in a mood where they feel like they can't function without drugs or whatever.* (Participant 7, Session 2).

> *But also, I just want to smoke drugs and experience things like what they experience. I mean, I have smoked weed, but it was not like I was hearing echoes and seeing colours*. (Participant 1, Session 2).

These sentiments reflect how the visual techniques successfully convey the emotional escapism drugs can offer. Participants are fascinated and intrigued, reinforcing the premise of cultivation theory that prolonged exposure to such portrayals can shape perception. However, participants like Participant 1 describe that her experimentation with substances is tied to seeing it in person

and on screen, she admits that the feeling was underwhelming and still desires to replicate this type of liberating experience that Rue feels. This response not only highlights the premise of cultivation theory, which posits that prolonged exposure can shape perception, but it also connects with gratification theory, as Participant 1 expresses the desire to satisfy the insatiable feeling shown on screen.

> *You see how people partying like Cassie and Maddy look so eccentric or euphoric dancing at the parties … It shows us what parties or things should look like, like the high school experience. I think it also makes people feel that I need to do this to have the full package of [what] high school should look like. So many people say, your best years are in high school, so it's sort of living up to that expectation.* (Participant 12, Session 2).

Participant 12 reflects on the normalisation of such behaviour, noting how media tends to depict partying and substance use as an integral feature of the "full package" of the high school experience. *Euphoria* (2019) has constructed a particular vision of what high school experiences should be like, creating an expectation for viewers of for what they perceive on screen.

The responses above highlight curiosity about the varying effects of substances and reflect a broader societal belief or idealised perception of what high school is supposed to be like. These statements reveal the significant effect of the constructed experiences shown on screen on teenagers' perceptions, where the actual, real-life effect is not shown. While some participants acknowledge the dangers that drug use and addiction might present, they admit feeling drawn to the pleasant feelings that drugs can produce, referencing instances where characters seem very relaxed, happy and less anxious. For some participants also believe that drug addiction and drug use shown in *Euphoria* (2019) is something they believe to be accurate, which is reflected in their own experiences at parties, for example, Participant 3 admits that.

> *Euphoria actually depicts what can actually happen and what has happened* (Participant 3; Session 3).

Participant 3's response reveals that while this allure may be created, it can also manifest in reality. Her response recognises the dual impact of media in that it can validate lived experiences while also perpetuating an idealised version. Within the context of the media texts the portrayal of parties, substance use and freedom to indulge without any negative consequences creates a template of expectations for what the teenage experience should look like, setting unrealistic benchmarks for viewers. However, for participants such as Participant 4 and Participant 9, the experience of engaging in these activities is underwhelming.

> *We met these guys, and we were hanging out with these guys in … like the … like the lounge area, like on the couch and like thing. And they were like, oh, you see this white stuff on the table? And I feel like … when you look at it in retrospect, you're like, oh, I like it, but it looks so cool. But then when you see it, you're like, what the … Like, what are you doing? What do you mean you're on cocaine? And then, like, we had made out with some of them. And then we were like, oh my gosh, I wonder if cocaine can transfer. The next day, they invited us to Cresta to go to the rooftops to smoke. And there was a whole bunch of them and their friends, and they were all drinking … When you look at it in retrospect, it's not as cool as it seems. Because when we got to that rooftop and, all these random people that we didn't know were sitting there drinking and smoking. So, when you see it on TV, it looks much more cooler. And in real life … it's, I wouldn't say a let-down, or it's underwhelming, but it's … it's just like, it's just like, oh, this is it.* (Participant 4, Session 2)

> *I thought drugs was cool when I saw it on TV, and I was like, oh, let me try it. And then when I tried it, I don't know, it wasn't nice. The one part is nice, getting high, you know. The rest is bad.* (Participant 9, Session 2)

Equally, participants such as Participant 8 and Participant 10 indicate that their own experiences of a family member being a drug addict or participating in substance abuse; was very different to what is shown on screen.

> *I have a … family friend, and she was like, she was open, she was like, I've done cocaine before. But she, the reason why cocaine is so addictive is that you get the same feeling of it from smoking Sativa or Indica. But the feeling you get the following day is your*

> *body's aching. It's like a hangover, plus you … went to the gym.* (Participant 8, Session 2)

Participant 8's reflection reveals a grounded perspective compared to the sensational depiction often shown in these shows, highlighting the gap between representation on screen and showing the negative consequences. Participant 10's account further critiques the lack of depth in portraying addiction and its long-term effects in TV shows. Her reflection on the impact of her brother's addiction on her and her family reveals the emotional strain and anxiety abuse often not shown on screen. The overprotectiveness of her family, coupled with the family's initial denial, sheds light on the real difficulties experienced by families with drug addiction, which are not really shown in the series.

> *In terms of the long-term consequences and how it affects everyone around you, I don't think people treat that critically. For example, my brother was in rehab, guys, and when he first left, the whole family said to me you're not going anywhere. Nah, nah, nah, my mom wanted to have an app. where she can see what I'm doing on my phone because she was like in so much panic that, like, oh my gosh, my child's doing the same thing. And with my brother, they ignored all the signs. Like, we all knew he's been doing drugs forever. But we chose to ignore it. So, now, our parents have become very protective. Yeah, overprotective. Like, really overprotective. Um, so they don't show them in TV shows … how they're feeling.* (Participant 10, Session 2)

The focus group discussion then led to participants' own experiences at parties, where drugs and alcohol were consumed in excess and conversations and the experiences they have had with their families. Participants describe instances, where cocaine was lined up and available, which reflects some of the realities shown on screen. The contesting opinions from participants show the dual impact media plays in shaping perceptions, as well as validating the lived narratives of others. In both series, the combination of visual framing, soundscapes and aesthetics creates an allure for substance use, as it is framed as integral to celebration, escapism and bonding. Escapism also seems to offer a solution to some of the challenges teenagers face. While the techniques differ between the two shows, both create immersive experiences that draw the audience's attention to the highs of the moment. For participants, the depiction of these narratives validates some of their own lived experiences, but it also perpetuates unattainable ideals outside of these privileged contexts.

The subtle art of casual indulgence

The second theme is the casual display and engagement with substances. In contemporary series, substance use has become seamlessly integrated into narratives as routine or casual entertainment, which diminishes the actual risks as they romanticise these activities. In *Euphoria* (2019), the representation of drugs as a casual form of entertainment and experimentation is mainly through characters such as Maddy and Cassie. Their experience not only highlights the allure and ease of access to substances but also reveals the dangers associated with recreational use and the varying effects it can have on individuals. Maddy and Cassie are shown to have emotionally challenging encounters with their boyfriends at a local carnival, and given their feelings of humiliation and rejection, they decide to take Ecstasy to lift their respective moods. They buy the drugs from the local drug dealer, Fezco, who sells takeout as a guise. The carnival depicts a chaotic environment with crowds of children, parents, and teens blending in with vibrant lights and loud music. The chaotic backdrop provides the perfect space for them to indulge in the anonymity created by the large crowds.

The effect on Cassie is quite disturbing, as she decides to go on the carousel with a boy from her school. As the camera pans to focus on Cassie, the effect of the drugs is evident, as she is shown to have a flushed face and downturned eyes, and the camera rocks back and forth to mimic the effect the drugs are having on Cassie as she is under the influence (Figure 3). Cassie gazes seductively at the boy as she moves her body up and down to the rhythm of the carousel horse ride, as she leans in to brush her lips against his. This seems to add to her arousal. Rather than featuring a distinct song, the soundscape of the scene employs a dull, repetitive beat that mimics the mechanical rhythm of the carousel itself. The beat is punctured by a distinct “dish” sound, echoing through the scene that adds to the tension of the scene as people below watch in horror. The switch between close-up shots and wide angles draws the viewer’s attention to the disturbingly intimate scene between Cassie and Daniel while equally bringing attention to the public meeting with children and parents in the crowd below watching. The juxtaposition between the child-like innocent atmosphere with Cassie moaning and her contorted face of pleasure appears to both glamourise and critique the effects of drug use.



Figure 4 Cassie on the carasol



Figure 3 Reece drinks on school property

While the portrayal of substance use in *Blood* (2020) is more subtle compared to *Euphoria* (2019), it is similarly normalised through characters like KB and Reece, who are shown as everyday smokers and drinkers, both in public and in private. While *Euphoria* (2019) shows teens engaging in substance use away from parents, KB smokes weed casually in his bedroom, in front of and with his father. The collection of scenes frames this as normal and, even accepted by parents rather than as a dangerous activity.

Another significant example of the casual nature with which substance use is framed can be seen in the opening scene of the Episode. Reece is seen leaning casually against the school wall, sipping from a hip flask, in full view of the school gates' drop-off zone, a place often frequented by parents (Figure 4). Her facial expression suggests a lack of concern and indifference; she smiles coyly, mocking the reprimand when a school prefect tells her to remove the flask. This scene captures her disregard and nonchalance of the school's rules and societal expectations. Ironically, despite her actions, Reece is pristinely dressed in her school uniform. Her girlish hairstyle captures her youthfulness and innocence, which strongly contrasts with her rebellious actions. While KB and Fikile come from more privileged backgrounds, Reece's less privileged status adds a different layer of complexity to her engagement with substances. Her rebellious attitude allows her to mingle with the likes of the more privileged group, even serving as their dealer. Although this is briefly alluded to in season 1 of the series, season 2 explores this more. Reece's indifference to the consequences illustrates her elevated social standing now in being associated with the popular, wealthy group of students, which also shields her from punishment.

Similarly, casual engagement in more private settings can be seen in the final episode of *Blood and Water* (2019). In Episode 5, Fikile and KB retreat to the quiet of his room to relax after a stressful family dinner. The scene is set in an intimate, softly lit room that casts a comforting glow over the expensive décor, subtly reinforcing their affluence. Fikile strolls in barefoot, placing the bottle of alcohol on the bed. She makes herself comfortable by cradling a whisky glass. Meanwhile, KB sits on the floor, lighting a joint (Figure 5). The scene is quiet, with no background music − only their voices filling the space. The silence amplifies the moment's intimacy, but it also underscores the adult-like nature of their behaviour. Their actions mirror that of an adult couple unwinding after a long day. The two discuss their tumultuous love lives, sipping their whisky and smoking as if their actions hold no consequence, regardless of potential interruptions.



Figure 5 Fikile and KB decompress post dinner

From drinking at local bars to partying on a random weeknight to smoking casually with parents and peers, the casual engagement with substances in the presence of authoritative spaces such as home and school emphasises the lack of accountability for teens and the normalisation of their behaviour. The visual framing of these moments, where rebellion and innocence are juxtaposed, reinforces the underlying danger in portraying teen engagement with substances as being unchallenged and acceptable both in public and private settings. Such portrayals are not limited to fictional narratives, but they also manifest in reality. Participant 5 reflects on how real-life influencers also contribute to the normalisation of these actions.

> *Like, there's a bunch of influencers that talk about things that they do. And I feel like when you say things like that, you sort of normalise these activities, you know. And by doing so … as all of us, right? Like, our brains aren't fully developed yet. So, you know, we won't necessarily know how to do it. I mean, we can, but we won't say, you know,*

> *how to differentiate right from wrong. So, we would think that participating in said activities isn't a bad thing or something that isn't going to affect us negatively in the future because we're constantly learning. Okay.* (Participant 5, Session 2).

Participant 5's response highlights the invasive exposure of media, which is not limited to screen narratives but also by soft power influencers and celebrities alike, which might have normalised certain behaviours. She also highlights teenagers' developmental stage as impressionable and admits that, at times, the long-term consequences can be overlooked, as the maturity needed for understanding some scenes can be above her age group's level of development. García- Muñoz and Fedele (1988), Zaky (2016), Kaufman et al. (2021), and Villarejo-Carballido (2022) support these findings as they discuss how premature exposure to substances and risk-related behaviour warrants damaging effects long term that TV often omits in its narratives.

In contrast to the normalisation of behaviour from various media sources, Participant 1 and Participant 13 bring attention to the internal conflict many teens feel when watching shows.

> *Okay. I agree with you on that. But also, I find it's normalised to see things that everyone is, seeing everyone doing this. It's normalised to do it. So, you know, that's what I'm trying to do.* (Participant 1, Session 2).

> *"Yeah. And, um, I agree with what Participant 1 said. Um, you have that curiosity of wanting to try out those things, but then at the back of your mind, it's like, um, what would happen, like, all the consequences that come with doing all of that. And you see with all, like, the shows, like, so much happens. Like, so much bad stuff. So, it's like, um, you wouldn't really want to be in that position where you have to deal with all of that.".* (Participant 13, Session 2).

Adding another layer to the discussion, Participant 1 acknowledges that these behaviours are widely accepted because of their regular exposure, and she admits that she feels compelled to participate. While Participant 13 agrees, she also emphasises the importance of critical literacy and self-reflection for young viewers to navigate media they consume. While participants acknowledge the normalisation of these depictions, most participants indicate that reality does not always involve emulation, although it does for some.

> *But I feel like another thing is … like with these shows like Euphoria or Blood and Water, or any of these teenage shows … is when they do all of these things, and they go out to these clubs, and they do drugs, they don't show the after-effects, And I feel like that was a lot of people's problem with Euphoria Season 1 … that they were like, oh these people are just doing drugs and it makes them look so happy, y'all romanticise drugs. So then, in Season 2, when they showed how drugs really fucked up Rue and her family. Then everyone was like, oh, like, I don't know if you guys have watched, like, Requiem for a Dream, but it's basically a movie about, like, this drug addict, and he does heroin. And maybe someone's in your life who wants to do heroin. Watch that movie. Because as much as in the first half of the movie, it's showing how cool and how happy they look. Like, by the end of it, you wouldn't even want to be in that position.* (Participant 4, Session 2).

Similar to Participant 13's response, Participant 4 provides a mature outlook in highlighting how series can romanticise drugs, but it is also based on the audience's reception. By reflecting on the shifts in *Euphoria* Season 2, she provides a nuanced perspective, emphasising the importance of shows portraying consequences. Equally, she encourages others to watch other narratives that can show the negative consequences more harrowingly, such as in *Requiem for a Dream* (2000). Beyond the glamourisation and normalisation lies the portrayal of substances as a means of escapism, which will be explored below.

Escapism

The third theme examines the portrayal of substance use as a coping mechanism, where characters turn to drugs and alcohol to escape emotional pain, trauma, and societal pressure. However, rather than framing these moments as a desperate cry for help, both series present them seductively and performatively. What further underscores this theme is the presence of substances to alleviate tension and as a form of escapism. For example, in *Blood* (2020), Episode 6, there is a family gathering at Puleng's boyfriend's house, KB, where both adults and teens are offered cocktails as waiters fawn over the guests. Fikile and Puleng sip from cocktail glasses - an act typically associated with sophistication and adulthood - symbolically positioning them as equals to adults. The moment highlights how alcohol is not only normalised within the home but also serves as a marker of social status, where underage drinking is not a transgression but towards adulthood, not a transgression, especially for the elite. Puleng's

hesitation in accepting the drink—evident in her quick glance at the adults in the room, as if she searches for approval or dismissal—suggests that for someone from a middle-class background, drinking alongside adults is not a norm but something associated with privilege. *Blood* (2020) explicitly frames class distinction through moments like this, such as with characters like Wade and Puleng, who have stricter parents concerned about their whereabouts compared to their wealthier friends, where indulgence is normalised and accepted as a rite of passage. While in *Euphoria* (2019), substance engagement is widespread and not linked to socioeconomic background both series capture moments of vulnerability where substances are used as a form of escapism from their troubles.

Following the public exposure of coach Chad and student Fikile's relationship in *Blood* (2020), Fikile turns to alcohol to "drown her sorrows". In an emotional segment in Episode 6, Fikile shuts the door on her parents, arguing about their daughter's involvement with the swimming coach. She grabs a bottle of alcohol that she already had in her room, takes a few gulps, and then is seen playing loud music to drown out the sound of them arguing. Then, she proceeds to scream and cry. What follows is an emotional segment of Fikile clearly under the influence of alcohol as she tethers barefoot along the edge of the pool at home, holding the bottle at her side. The imagery created reflects the vulnerable state that she is in as the camera pans from her balancing feet to a close-up of her distraught expression and dishevelled appearance. Fikile is shown fully clothed in her school uniform – a symbol of discipline and dedication to her public persona of being a star athlete. This moment is significant as the pool is the very space that highlights her abilities and connects her to her lover. Her glance toward the house suggests a sense of finality as she sighs, takes a final deep sip, and then freefalls into the pool with her arms raised above her head, symbolising surrender (Figure 6). The bottle of alcohol remains in her hand even as she lands in the pool. Fikile's free fall is in slow motion, illuminated by the soft glow of the water, which poignantly conveys her deep sense of resignation and hopelessness. Chris is seen diving in shortly afterwards, pulling her toward the surface, where he shouts at her, asking her what was she thinking. This scene reflects not only the dangerous use of alcohol as a coping mechanism but also highlights the influence thereof on decision-making and judgement, which could potentially lead to irreparable damage and life-threatening situations.



Figure 7 Fikile tries to drown herself.



Figure 6 Rue's extreme methods for passing a drug test

Likewise, in *Euphoria (2019),* the childhood of the narrator Rue is shown to be challenging in her diagnoses she receives, such as obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD), Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and possibly Bipolar Disorder (BP). Her addition to drugs is catalysed by her father's illness and her experimentation with his prescription drugs, which, after his death, turns into a gruelling habit. Despite the tragic events being shown on screen to contextualise Rue's addiction, it also presents more problematic aspects, such as the ways used to hide an addiction, fake drug test results, and her general attitude toward the substance tying her dependency to a traumatic and personal event.

Upon her return from rehab, after her recent overdose escapade, Rue's opening statement at the beginning of Episode 1 is, "It was the end of summer, and I had no intention of staying clean*"* (Rue Bennet, *Euphoria*, Episode 1), which already reflects her indifference to her habit. Rue's mother tests her on the first day of her return from rehab, eliciting a range of emotions in Rue. At first, she is stressed about the situation as she surveys her options. The scene cuts to a scene, where Rue is demonstrated to address the audience as a teacher would in a classroom in her guide to overcoming a drug test. Rue lists four options as ways to win a drug test as follows: Option 1: Stop doing drugs. She rolls her eyes, dismissing the idea. Option 2: Take Niacin (B vitamin 2000 mg) for 2-3 days as it will flush out her system. The voice-over reflects her nonchalance as she lists the side effects associated with Niacin, which include skin flushing, extreme dizziness, vomiting, rapid heartbeat, and death. The scene cuts to Rue chugging multiple large canteens of water; the water runs down her front, and her eyes are full of tears, showing her discomfort and desperation (Figure 7). The camera swirls as the rest of the side effects are listed, "extreme dizziness, vomiting, rapid heartbeat". With a pulse beat getting

increasingly loud, Rue loses her balance and falls to the ground; the pulse beat finally stops as the last word, "death", which is said, shows Rue lying on the floor with her eyes open, imitating death.

Option 3 would be to order a sample of synthetic urine, to which Rue shrugs, expressing casual nonchalance. She is shown to shut the laptop, frustrated by the 90-dollar price. Lastly, Option 4, which is revealed to be her regular mechanism, is to get a non-drug addict friend to pee in a cup. However, she mentions that the catch is to beat the urine heat sensor; you need it fresh. This is shown to be a calculated and practised routine for Rue in her deception and in enabling her addiction. Rue jumps out the window and sprints to her friend Lexi's house, asking for "eyeliner", a code word between them, as Lexi is clearly upset by Rue's choice to be out of rehab and not clean for even one day. The shot cuts back to her mother waiting anxiously outside the bathroom door; the tension in the scene contrasts sharply with Rue's easy-going demeanour as she hands the sample to her mother. Scenes such as this and Rue's general attitude expose how easy it can be to stay addicted and continue to take drugs.

The image of drug dealing is equally exemplified by the sympathetic gaze through which they are positioned. Participant 1 and Participant 13 mention the characters Reece from *Blood* (2020) and Fezco and Ash (2019), who deal drugs to support their livelihood. Despite the relatability of the narrative of having to deal drugs as a form of income, the problems lie in the presentation of normalised friendships with drug dealers. This blurs the lines between criminality and victimhood of the character as, in both cases, the circumstances are shown to be complex. Both characters are portrayed as victims of circumstance, which seemingly appears to soften the audience's perception of their actions, and this raises ethical concerns about the portrayal of drug and substance use on screen.

Participant 13, from the focus group session, comments on how this made her sympathise and empathise with the struggles she faces with characters such as Reece, as reflected in her response.

> *Yeah, I would also say that Reece (in Blood and Water) has to deal drugs so she can pay for her school fees. And for her mother's … what was it? … therapy or going to the hospital or something? To pay for her pills and stuff, she has to do these random jobs and go to an extent to sell drugs to make money because she can't afford stuff.* (Participant 13, Session 3)

As much as the depiction of drug abuse on screen is problematic, what is even more disturbing is the negative portrayal and positioning of institutions and rehabilitation centres that are designed to assist with healing and intervention. These representations can undermine the perceived effectiveness of these support centres and further reiterate broader societal stigma and stereotypes.

Television and film often depict mental illness in a negative manner, associating it with violence, shame and unpredictability (Pirkis et al., 2006; Fond and Capdevielle, 2011; Henderson, 2018). For instance, in the critically acclaimed film *Joker* (2019), Arthur Fleck is shown to struggle with severe mental health problems that result in him becoming involved in acts of violence. While the film explores the general societal neglect and failed health system, it reinforces the stereotype of individuals with mental health illness as being dangerous and unpredictable. His character eventually becomes known in the *Marvel* comics and *Batman* franchise, depicting Joker as unhinged and erratic. Similarly, in the teen-orientated series *13 Reasons Why* (2017), Hannah Baker's final attempt to seek help from the school counsellor is met with a dismissive and unhelpful response. This is emphasised within the series as the final reason for her suicide. These inaccurate and sensationalised portrayals create misconceptions and stigmas that could discourage individuals from seeking help. In the case of teenagers, little is known in the literature about what effect this might have on the perception and understanding of these institutions. As Maiorano, Lasalvia, Sampogna, Pocai, Ruggeri and Henderson (2017:703) assert, the reinforcement of prejudice and discrimination associated with mass media communication is often misinterpretation, specifically with the associations and prejudices regarding mental health. They further argue that despite the best intention, this form of prejudice and discrimination is referred to as "structural (institutional) stigma".

In *Euphoria (2019)* specifically, the portrayal of feelings toward these institutions are shown to be harmful even from the beginning of the show onwards. In the first episode, upon Rue processing her diagnosis during puberty, her mother offers her comfort by saying that many famous people have mental disorders. She lists various names, for example Van Gogh (who suffered from manic depression), and the scene cuts to Van Gogh killing himself with a gunshot wound to the belly. Then she mentions Sylvia Plath (who suffered from major depression) and again, the scene cuts to her putting herself in the oven. Lastly, Britney Spears (who has bipolar disorder) is shown to be pushed away on a medical stretcher. The dark comedic effects used to satire these events reinforce the stigma against mental health disorders. While the humour

might stem from Rue's imaginative interpretation of these stories to lighten the topic, it adversely trivialises mental health struggles, downplaying real difficulties.

Similarly, in the narration of Jules's experience, in a later episode, of a rehabilitation centre as a child − instead of her treatment for depression. The scene shows Jules being taken for a tour of the institution by one of the doctors. Jules's experience is unpleasant as they stop at a locked door, where a group therapy session occurs. As she peers through the tiny window in the door, a teen male patient is shown to be stroking his penis while looking at her, then he screams at the doctor giving the tour, saying, "Suck my dick, you fucking cunt". The detainment of the patient is also shown to be violent as the staff grab him to hold him down, while his screams can be heard down the hall. A terrified Jules walks away and tries to reach her mother on the other side of the passage, when suddenly, the door shuts between her and her mother, who then leaves her there, much to her dismay. These institutions are framed as cold, isolated and traumatic places and not as places for help or healing. The rehab centres are also framed as places that 'others' go, possibly others with bigger problems. There is a sense of dissociation from the problem that the character may have and the effect of this on young viewers may be that they too feel they do not have a problem or that behaviour like this does not lead to challenges later.

Therefore, in both *Blood* (2020) and *Euphoria* (2019), substance use is not only normalised within social interactions among peers and family but also glamourised in the liberating experiences on screen. This normalisation is further reinforced by the indifference of parental figures who seem to condone these behaviours or fail to intervene. Ultimately, this creates an illusion of a carefree, indulgent lifestyle with no real consequences. While these series might intend to educate and inform viewers by displaying the dangers of these substances, these representations remain attractive, and the visuals overshadow the actual harm. Beyond substance use and abuse, media also plays a significant role in shaping sexual behaviour. The next chapter will explore how *Euphoria* (2019) and *Blood* (2020) frame sexual behaviour and narrative, exploring the effect this has on teens' perspectives on the construction of sexual norms.

Chapter 7 Screen Narratives: Sexual Behaviour on Screen

"Bitch, this isn't the 80s; you better catch a dick".

Jules Vaughn in Euphoria S1E1

The body has emerged over time as a site for profound political and cultural significance in contemporary society. Teen TV has acknowledged the shift from a conservative portrayal of youth to accommodate more nuanced storylines that feature more openness in conversations and displays of sex and sexual attitudes (Villarejo-Carballido et al.,2022). The act of sexual intercourse in both series appears as a rite of passage for many teens in their discovery of identity and preferences. However, simultaneously, TV series promote underage sex as a core component of socialisation and play a significant factor in their relationships. Often, these narratives are displayed as graphic, casual and without much consequence for safety. They do not warn against the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, teenage pregnancies and backstreet abortions or any other consequence to teenagers becoming involved in sexual activities. This chapter explores how sexual narratives are constructed in these series through two major themes. The first, promiscuity and performance, which examines how characters such as Jules and Kat from *Euphoria* (2019) engage in sexual scripts that reflect hyper-sexualisation and commodification of the female body. The second, sexual scripts in South African teen media focuses on Puleng and Fikile in *Blood* (2020) to interrogate how modern depictions exist within cultural and local realities are constructed.

Promiscuity and performance

Over time, women have challenged the canon concerning virginity and purity, as media has now changed to promote modern and more positive images of expression of sexuality, agency, and autonomy concerning the female body. These tropes, as discussed by Davis (2012), have also become salient symbols connected to identity and self-expression for teenage narratives on screen. In *Euphoria* (2019), the themes of promiscuity and performance emerge as significant elements through which female characters navigate their sexual scripts and their sexuality. Characters such as Kat, Jules and Maddy from *Euphoria* (2019) illustrate this in varied ways throughout the series. Their actions not only depict the constant graphic, glamourised portrayal of adolescent engagement in sexual activity, but they also show these characters as 'performers' as they engage in sexual activities. In the context of this study, 'performance' refers to the engagement of characters in sexual activity that is glamourised and appears to mimic pornographic scripts. These performances are seen as pivotal to their sense

of expression and identity, as they use their bodies as tools to control others and as commodities. They are not linked to shared emotions of love and intimacy.

In Episode 1 of *Euphoria* (2019), Jules is seen approaching a motel by bike late at night to meet up with DominantDaddy. Jules is a transgender character in the show that is shown to express her identity in ways that often leave her in vulnerable and toxic situations, which will be explored in the following scene. Jules reveals over text to him that she is nervous, to which he reassures her that she should not be. The scene shows Jules' youthfulness and vulnerability in her following text, as she playfully texts back, *"*Promise or not a serial killer? lol*",* which also acknowledges her potentially dangerous situation and her awareness of risk. His text back, "haha, I promise*",* downplay the fear and anxiety typically associated with scenes such as these and reflecting the underlying causal attitude toward cyber danger. The interaction minimises the potential risk and not only normalises encounters with strangers online but presents this as exciting and enticing.

The camera shot shifts from a blurry image of DominantDaddy's torso walking up toward Jules to a more focused close-up of his hands as he offers her a glass of champagne. His face is not yet shown, instead there is a close-up camera shot of his wedding ring as he asks her how old she is, to which she lies, saying she is 22. The high camera angle positions Jules in a vulnerable state as she looks up at his dominating figure. This reflects the imbalance of power dynamics between them, further reiterated by him caressing her hair and dragging his thumb across her lips seductively as he talks about the luxury of freedom that Jules must live as she wishes, further implying his double life (Figure 8). DominantDaddy is revealed to be Cal Jacobs, a classmate's father − Nate Jacobs − which is only shown in a later episode.

Cal gently inserts his thumb into her mouth, saying, "Wider" until she gags, calling her a good girl. As this unsettling moment unfolds, Rue's voice-over recounts a childhood story that Jules told her. In between Cal calling her a good girl, telling her to spit, and ripping her clothes off, Rue narrates how, when Jules was five years old, she would get on her hands and knees and pray that she would be 25 years old, living with her best friend. The contrast between the innocence in a child's prayer and the graphic pornographic scene is disturbing, as it highlights her current vulnerability and loss of innocence in her discovery of self, which is shown as very graphic and disturbing.

Jules is then seen to lay on her stomach as Cal rips off her fishnet stockings and then stuffs his hand in her mouth, commanding her to spit. He then inserts himself quite violently into her, to which Jules cries out in pain as her face is pushed into the pillow (Figure 9). Cal whispers into Jules's ear after he ejaculates, "You are so clean, do you know how rare that is". The camera lingers on her face, capturing moments of blankness and distance as she mentally appears to dissociate from the violence and hurt of this encounter. As Cal showers, his phone beeps on the side table, and Jules picks up the phone to see his family as his phone's screensaver, and she toys with the gold wedding ring he has left on the bedside.



Figure 8 Jules and Cal



Figure 9 Jules violent sexual experience

Cal is portrayed in the series as a highly respected business and family man whose presence commands authority and admiration. This image enhances his status as a dominant and influential figure within the series in his life's private and public settings. Despite the hidden relationship with individuals such as Jules who exist outside of heteronormative norms, the element of power, control and dominance is evident in his sexual encounters, where he is shown to mimic the same role-play of him being the dominant figure with a submissive partner. This is supported in Kirch and Murnen (2015) who highlight how heterosexual scripts continue to be reinforced through the associated gendered tropes, depicting ne partner as dominant and more masculine while the other is more submissive and feminine. The line, "open ... open wider", is said almost every time he engages in sexual acts. In this scene, the broader implication seen from their exchange is the power imbalance in the following ways. Cal is significantly older and larger than Jules and thus holds a more authoritative position over her. Further, nobody would suspect such behaviour from Cal because of his social standing. At the same time, Jules faces direct consequences for her gender non-conformity. This can be seen in other scenes where Cal's son, Nate, bullies her.

Jules's sexual encounters throughout the series are depicted with a similar intensity as the scene above, which is shown through the fragmented snippets of her other "hook-ups". The portrayal of these is sharp and abrupt, with quick cuts between each other that seem to mirror Jules's fragmented emotional state and the frequency of these encounters. The use of close-ups of Jules during these moments also emphasises her dissociation from the sexual acts, a technique explained further by Rue's voice-over*,"* When things get too uncomfortable, Jules dissociates".

Over time, women have challenged the canon concerning virginity and purity, as media has now changed to promote more positive images of expression of sexuality, agency, and autonomy concerning the female body (Van Damme and Van Bauwel, 2013; Seabrook et al, 2017). These tropes, as discussed by Davis (2012), and Van Damme and Van Bauwel (2013) have become salient symbols connected to identity and self-expression for teenage narratives on screen. In the context of *Euphoria* (2019), the themes of promiscuity and performance have emerged as significant elements through which female characters navigate their sexual scripts and their sexuality. Characters like Kat, Jules and Maddy from *Euphoria* (2019) illustrate this in varied ways throughout the series. Their actions not only depict the constant graphic, glamourised portrayal of adolescent engagement in sexual activity but also show these characters as 'performers' as they engage in sexual activities. In the context of this study, 'performance' refers to the engagement of characters in sexual activity that is glamorised and appears to mimic pornographic scripts (Dudek, Woodley and Green, 2022). These performances are seen as pivotal to their sense of expression and identity, as they use their bodies as tools to control others and as commodities.

Each character engages in sexual activity in different ways that reveal the underlying insecurities and struggles associated with sexual agency. The character's body and agency are framed as commodities of sexual desire, whether deliberate or not, for consumption for both characters on screen and audiences, as these characters are often shown to dress in provocative outfits and 'perform' sexually', which blurs the boundaries between exploitation and empowerment (Dudek, Woodley and Green, 2022). Jules performs and embodies hyper-femininity as she navigates her transgressive identity. She seeks out men who fit a specific type; as narrated by Rue, they are "…cis, white, married or in a serious relation and always straight". The emphasis placed on the phrase "always straight", reflected in Rue's tone, reiterates the rigid societal expectations and norms surrounding sexual orientation and relationships shown in the series. Jules's focus on this category of men also reflects the internal

conflict she feels in her identity. It is only in a much later episode that it is revealed that she gravitates toward men who are this specific type, as this is her way of "owning femininity". This choice highlights her struggle to assert her identity within a society that marginalises non-binary and queer individuals. The compulsive pursuit of acceptance is nonetheless dangerous, especially considering that Jules is a high school learner who navigates dangerous spaces to understand herself better. Despite this approach, Jules is not depicted as entirely innocent, as she is shown to lie to her sexual partners about her age. This deceit raises ethical concerns regarding the age of consent and is shown to be used as blackmail in later episodes.

As much as these scenes may serve to illustrate the complexities of difference, it also reinforces misrepresentation and stereotypes of heteronormative and non-binary individuals. The scene is layered with various tropes associated with gender, identity, sexuality, and issues of consent, which are all underpinned by lies and manipulation, faded with a forefront graphic display of normalised sexual behaviour between a teen and an adult. While Jules's actions and relationship with men are structured as complex, she is positioned as an individual who challenges normative ideals of gender and femininity, and she seeks validation and acceptance from the same type of men who would outwardly reject her.

While Jules's sexual autonomy is framed as being empowering, the series does not fully explore the risks and problems that transgender women face, including violence, discrimination and exclusion, in navigating cisnormative spaces (Masanet, Ventura and Ballesté ,2022).The repeated framing of her experiences as overly sexual, combined with the minimisation of the risk and consequence for viewers such as Participant 4, this repetition can subtly encourage such behaviour and normalise the hyper-sexualised trope:

> *I really relate to Euphoria more in terms of representations, such as having a character like Jules, who is a transgender girl like me. I want to be like Jules. Where she sleeps around openly.* (Participant 4, Session 2).

Participant 4's statement introduces an important aspect of media, particularly for individuals from marginalised communities. This sentiment reflects the power of media to influence self-perception and perceived notions of transgender identities navigating the world. For a viewer such as Participant 4, Jules's actions might appear empowering in that way, Jules exercises her sexual agency and navigates her gender fluidity. However, this sexual freedom does not fully

explore the dangers associated with differences other than the violence shown in one of the episodes. This portrayal aligns with long-standing media tropes that reduce transgender women to their sexual identities and stereotypical beliefs of their sexual agency (Masanet, Ventura and Ballesté,2022).

In a similar way, Kat from *Euphoria* (2019) challenges the traditional feminine ideals associated with the body through her performance, erotic outfit choices, and nonchalant attitude toward people's perception of her. Kat is initially presented as the token innocent 'chubby' best friend within a popular girl group, and she is portrayed as someone who lacks self-confidence and self-worth. In Episode 3, Rue narrates Kat's fall from grace, which was a pivotal moment for Kat when she was nine years old and on holiday with her family in Jamaica. Kat was away for only eight days in Jamaica, and in that time, she picked up twenty pounds. Kat noticed her drastic change, and upon her return to school, she faces her childhood sweetheart's rejection and is shown to have never fully recovered from that. Kat is shown to find solace in writing erotic fan fiction and eventually rises to fame as an amateur author. Her friends often tease her for being a virgin until she decides to take her fate into her own hands, where she loses her virginity to the very same ex-boyfriend at a party.

A video of this is leaked, to which she denies her involvement; however, as the episode plays out, Kat sees the number of views and positive comments about her body, which inspires her journey of sexual exploration, and, because of the social media endorsement, she gains confidence. Kat is positioned in the series as a girl who has grown to love her body through the power she gets from sexual attention. She develops a dominatrix fashion sense to mark her new identity by wearing sexy collars, harnesses, mesh and latex (Figure 10). These materials are often associated with adult performers in pornography. Kat joins a streaming site and performs for her 'pay pigs' in black lingerie and a cat mask.

A profound moment in this episode happens when Kat wears her black lingerie set and faces the mirror. Her shoulders are hunched as she stares at herself leaning on the bathroom counter. The song "*Nonstop*" by Drake plays in the background as the camera pans to a close-up of her as she puts on the cat-eared mask, which hides most of her face (Figure 11). The symbolism behind the mask reflects Kat, masking her insecurity and shyness. Kat walks toward the laptop on her bed, her movements reflecting more confidence as the camera pans to show a wide shot, including Kat's room. The lyrics: "I just flipped the switch" reflects the switch in Kat's

personality to her more dominant, sexy self. She proceeds to press ‘record’ and begins twerking on camera, the blinking red light being brought into focus as a reminder of her activity. Her performance for adult viewers throughout the series is shown to be quite disturbing, as her ‘pay pigs’ are usually insecure men who want to engage in acts of sexual masochism, whereby they are humiliated by Kat, and should they not obey her, they pay the penalty.



Figure 9 Kat getting ready to perform



Figure 8 Kat's empowering look

Kat presents a direct example of the performance of pornography as she starts camming online, which positions her as an object of desire. The digital media space amplifies her performance as she becomes a spectacle for consumption. The growing allure of camming online for viewers is examined by Hernández (2019:4), who discusses that as a viewer, the experience creates a sense of “realness” in “real-time” in “real life” as the interaction is more intimate and personalised for the paying viewer. While the study focuses on the allure of camming for the viewer, this study can be understood as a reference point for what Kat gains from her performance online. Camming allows Kat financial freedom and the platform for her to express her identity while simultaneously getting 'live' attention from her pay. Kat’s promiscuity extends beyond her activities online, but it also manifests in her sexual conquests. She is shown to sleep around with a sense of casualty and without concern for any danger: “I have been afraid my whole life that people were going to find out I was fat. But honestly, who gives a shit? There’s nothing more powerful than a fat girl who doesn’t give a fuck”, states Kat Hernandez in Episode 3.

Despite this sense of power and autonomy felt by Kat, she becomes a product of fetishism as she sells her body and performs online. Her narrative highlights the pressure of conforming to society’s expectations, especially for men. Although Kat’s journey of self-discovery is a legitimate narrative, the exotic elements and romanticism of underage cyber-porn are disturbing and misleading to audiences. Kat’s camming storyline reflects the rise of digital sex

work, which the show normalises for a teen, positioning it as an empowering choice rather than being part of a physically risky and exploitative industry. The show positions Kat's journey as a path to confidence rather than one of concern or a source of potential harm. Similarly, for Jules, her sexual relationships with older men are framed as sexual agency and preference rather than being unsafe and problematic. Repeated exposure to such narratives shapes viewers' beliefs about sexuality, as seen in Participant 4's response, where Jules's actions are admired rather than critiqued, or they might reinforce the exclusive focus on body positivity through an over-sexualised lens, such as with Kat's narrative. Narratives such as these are dangerous, as the assumption and interpretation are that teenage girls who look like Kat or Jules can only ever be rejected if they lack confidence or are fetishised, should they have plumper or too skinny bodies, in other words, bodies 'othered' [2]by regular understandings of beauty and acceptability. This notion perpetuates the idea that a body is meant for public validation rather than for their sense of self-worth and acceptance (Seabrook et al.,2017).

Kat's journey also emerges as a point of resonance for Participant 3 regarding her struggle with her body image and self-worth: *"Even with Kat … and feeling insecure about her weight. It's more relatable".* (Participant 3, Session 2) Despite Participant 3's identification with Kat's body image struggles, the broader appeal of *Euphoria*'s (2019) attempt at body inclusivity is questionable. While Kat's character arc frames her sexual confidence as empowering, it is problematically tied to her lack of self-worth and validation through sex work. This resonates with Pezoldt's (2022) findings, which argue that media often combine body positivity with hyper-sexualisation, reinforcing the idea that confidence for plus-size women must come being sexually desirable rather than self-loving and possessing self-acceptance. While this study does not measure these potential effects, it is crucial to acknowledge and recognise how characters such as Kat could promote behaviours of seeking validation at the cost of sexual health, emotional wellbeing, and safety for herself online.

The lack of depth in sexual scripts within these narratives rarely presents conversation or exploration of consent, sexual health or varying attitudes, therefore resulting in a one-sided

[2] The term 'othered' refers to the process of marginalising individuals through social binaries within society (AbdulMagied, 2020). In this thesis, the term is used to describe individuals who do not fit within societal norms of beauty, desirability and acceptance.

view of teen sexuality and sexual experiences. The issue of representation of the sexual narratives is not located within the debate of morality but more so asserts the need for nuanced narratives that provide more depth to them and authenticity to them. *Girls* (2013) reiterates the natural journey of growth and experimentation of a group of girlfriends as they navigate their 20s. The show gained popularity for capturing an ordinary narrative of youth that exists without the chains of conformity and hegemonic beauty to provide a post-feminist narrative that rejects the typical associations of hypersexualisation and agency as post feminism positions sex (Kim,2017; Van Damme and Van Bauwel, 2013:178).

The focus group shifted to how sex is presented on screen, revealing the gap between what media depicts and real-life experiences. Participant 3 captures this sentiment, reflecting how fictionalised portrayals can lead to unrealistic expectations.

> *I think we all sit in this room, and we've all wanted to try the sex. You know what I'm saying? Listen, it's like a very intrusive time at the back of your mind. You see a sex scene, and you're like, oh wow, they're doing it nice. They're getting into it. But then when you get there, and it's all good, and you're like, where's the music that was playing in the scene? Why isn't it just popping up all out?* (Participant 3, Session 2).

This response reiterates Lin, Liu and Yi's (2020) argument of how invasive Western influences can be in shaping expectations of love, sex, and relationships based on Western norms as a result of the global influence evident in how Participant 3 illustrates the disconnect between expectations and reality. Additionally, Participant 3's statement underscores how sexual behaviour for female characters still stands out as being a site for judgement despite the liberal stance media has. The discussion led to another character from *Euphoria* (2019), Cassie, whose sexual expression is a site for public scrutiny.

> *They are talking about Cassie's nudes, and Nate says, oh yeah, she is a slut, just fuck like the whore she is and throw her ass to the side. Christopher was really into her, and that got in his head. Normalising that nudes are the currency of love, but also people should not be shamed for it.* (Participant 4, Session 2).

Pezoldt's (2024) findings, in understanding the perspectives of on-screen romantic relationships, further reflect Participant 4's sentiment in this study, suggesting that sexual double standards still exist in the way male characters can engage in sexual relationships and

activities, while female characters are viewed and judged in a discriminating manner. Participant 4's responses highlight the invasive nature of pornography in teen narratives. On the one hand, Cassie's narrative reflects the contemporary struggles faced by youth in being sexually agentic and maintaining more openness in that regard. This also reveals, how sometimes teens choose to navigate these complexities in the digital space, which can often lead to damaging consequences.

Seabrook et al. (2017:240) argue that exposure to television content and perceived realism significantly influences young women's endorsement of gendered sexual scripts, which, in turn, reduces their sexual agency. While this study examines the perceptions of teens on sex on screen, the literature shows how gendered sexual scripts exist within the traditional portrayal of female characters, whether this is through seeking male validation (Jules), commodifying their bodies (Kat) or being shamed for their sexual choices (Cassie). These portrayals, as seen in *Euphoria* (2019), largely align with Western media's tendency to depict sex as performative, transactional, and often detached from emotional involvement or consequences. While South African teen media engages with similar themes of the youth's sexuality, it operates within a conservative framework, which will be discussed below.

Hyper-femininity and toxic masculinity

In *Euphoria* (2019), toxic masculinity and hyper-femininity exist as interconnected forces, shaping both male and female characters' engagement with power, sexuality and self-worth. Masculinity is presented as an assertion of dominance and control, while femininity becomes a performance of desirability, manipulation and self-surveillance. This is especially evident in characters such as Cal and Nate Jacobs, who embody traditional, oppressive masculinity, while Jules, Kat and Maddy navigate their femininity as both a source of agency and entrapment. Cal Jacobs exemplifies toxic male dominance, as seen in his interaction with Jules. His calculated control over their sexual encounter highlights the power imbalance between an older closeted man and a vulnerable transgender teenager. Cal's emotionally detached demeanour, paired with his sexual aggression, reinforces his internalised fear of vulnerability or weakness as he strives to protect his 'family man' image and status within the town. This toxic ideology is ingrained into Nate from a young age, who is then shown to control Maddy's sexual performance of femininity. Nate, similar to Cal, embodies dominant traditional masculinity, a concept

described by Villarejo-Carballido et al. (2022) as a set of rigid societal expectations where control, emotional detachment and physical dominance are embedded.

Despite Nate's physical display of his masculinity, his preference for his sex partner to be the extreme opposite of men and the need to protect resembles his fear of vulnerability in the series. Nate's attraction to Maddy's hyper-feminine qualities, such as her hairlessness and virginity, reflects not only the idealisation of traditional gender roles and expectations, but also his fear of associating with anything remotely masculine. His desire to have a partner who embodies hyper-femininity reiterates his validation of being a masculine man. Nate's preferences are narrated as follows.

"He liked tennis skirts and jeans cut-offs, but not the kind so short you could see the pockets; he liked ballet flats and heels; he hated sneakers and dress shoes, but was fine with sandals, as long as they were worn with a fresh pedicure. He liked thigh gaps; he hated canckles[3]. He liked tan lines, long necks and slender shoulders, he liked good posture, fruit-scented body mist. He liked full lips, small noses, and lacy chokers − the ones with flower cut-outs or the ones with delicate patterns. He hated girls who sat like boys, who talked like boys, acted like boys. There was nothing on this planet Earth he hated more than body hair. That's one of the first things he noticed about Maddy; she was basically hairless." (Rue narrates Nate's preferences). The policing of women's appearance and actions, as seen in the above statement, reflects the cultural hegemony of femininity and beauty according to broader patriarchal codes that still exist within media landscapes despite the evolution of societies (Van Damme and Bauwel,2013). For young teenagers, a message such as the one above reinforces the idea that women should be subservient to men, and their physical appearance should be tailored to men's desires with their ultimate goal to be accepted by men. This also reiterates that a woman's appearance, actions, and mannerisms dictate her worth.

Similarly, in Episode 2 of *Euphoria* (2019), Rue narrates the history of Maddy and Nate's relationship and reveals how Maddy lost her virginity. Maddy is a 14-year-old in Panama Beach. She lies on a beach towel and wears a black bikini patterned with red cherries. Maddy is noticeably alone despite her age. Her white sunglasses hide her expression when an older

[3]. Canckles is a portmanteau of the words calf and ankles describing the lack of separation between the ankle and calf, which produces visually large ankles.

guy approaches her, asking her if she is from around here. Rue's narration voices over their encounter, saying, "She met a guy who was like 40, in retrospect it seems kind of rapey and weird, but honestly, she was the one in control". Maddy is shown to take off her sunglasses suggestively as she surveys him before the scene cuts to her in a pink lingerie that has pretty bows and frills, sitting on the bed, as she gazes at her boyfriend with doe eyes, lying to him that she is a virgin. The scene is short, but it positions Maddy as an innocent girl as the camera pans to her chest, contrasting the pink set with her rosary, as she swears to Nate that another man has never touched her. The setting is romantic, as seen by the soft pink lighting and fairy lights that highlight Maddy's position poised on the bed, waiting for Nate.

This narration serves as a critique of how femininity is reduced to male-defined aesthetics, reinforcing the ideas that women's bodies are sites of control, judgement and fetishisation. Maddy, despite her outward confidence, ultimately performs hyper-femininity in a way that aligns with Nate's idealised standards. Jules, in contrast, hyper-performs femininity as an act of agency as a way to affirm her gender identity and reclaim power in a world that seeks to marginalise her. This aligns with Gill's (2007:149) argument that the female body, even when positioned as a site for empowerment, remains subject to surveillance, conformity and reinforcement of gendered expectations. Jules's pursuit of validation, similar to Kat's through their sexual encounters, reveals a paradox of empowerment through self-objectification. Similarly, Kats' transformation into a dominant, hyper-sexualised version of herself reflects the allure of the dark feminine agency as a response to male control. Unlike Jules and Maddy, who adopt a hyper-feminine version of themselves, Kat adopts a more aggressive, hyper-sexualised persona, rejecting passive and submissive femininity for one that exerts control over men's desires. However, her transformation is not entirely liberating, as it still operates within the framework of male-centred validation.

Maddy, Jules and Kat illustrate different facets of hyper-femininity. However, despite their attempt to weaponise femininity as a means of control, they ultimately remain trapped in the confines of male expectations. Therefore, does this individualisation of women and the construction of sexual agentic women serve as a site of empowerment? Or does femininity still reiterate tropes of constant surveillance and self-improvement within a post-feminist matrix? The reinforcement of the fetishisation of bodies and a woman's worth being tied to this is a problematic narrative to control.

In both shows, the consequences and dangerous potential outcomes are downplayed. Despite sex being a norm for teenagers, none of the shows foster a conversation about sexual health or general safety. Instead, sex is positioned as erotic, graphic and glamourised. While female characters are shown to embrace their autonomy and sexual agency, their empowerment remains limited to the parameters set out by patriarchy. Often, female characters are expected to perform within a hyper-feminine role, being subservient, dependent, and seeking validation from their male counterparts, while male characters are positioned as dominating, fiercely protective and controlling. The tension between empowerment and control highlights the broader implications of media representation, including how these narratives might shape adolescents' perceptions of identity, relationships, and social expectations. The reliability of a series—whether through the themes within the show or general narrative—can have an effect on how the youth interpret their world and experiences. The next section explores how *Euphoria* (2020) and *Blood* (2019) resonate with participants, revealing the complex relationship between fiction and reality in screen media.

Sexual scripts in South African teen media

Although *Blood (2020*) presents a more subdued presentation of sexual activity compared to *Euphoria* (2019), the theme is still prevalent. The most relevant scene is in Episode 5, when Puleng loses her virginity to KB. In this scene, Puleng and KB join some friends as they break into school property to have some fun after their first date at the skate park. KB and Puleng sneak away from the group for some privacy and land up in the principal's office. Puleng apologises for being awkward on their date and in between talking, they kiss passionately. Puleng makes the first move in undressing, standing before KB with only her panties on as she cradles her breasts, telling him that she is ready. The soft glow of the trophy case illuminates their bodies as she puts her arms around his neck, and they continue to kiss passionately, which leads to them laying on the floor, with KB on top of her. She tells him that she loves him and then proceeds to take off the rest of his clothes, kissing in between. She nods to him as he pulls down her panties, lifting her hips, implying that she is ready to lose her virginity to him. While the scene has the soft lull of the song *'Love's Light'*, the song's lyrics, *"I sing for joy, I sing for you, I sing for love, I sing for you..."* by Mpho Sebini plays in the background as Puleng loses her virginity to KB. The backdrop of the principal's office adds to the irony of an authoritative space being misused by rebellious and reckless behaviour.



Figure 10 Puleng loses her virginity to KB

Equally, Fikile from *Blood* (2020) engages in a sexual relationship with her swim coach, Chad, which will be explored more in another chapter. Interestingly, sex with a teacher is positioned as exciting rather than a cause of concern. In Episode 2, Fikile fixes her appearance, adjusting her braids and checking that she looks good, as her ex-boyfriend, who is still her close friend, chats with her. KB asks her, "How come you have never been with anyone after me?". She looks down, smiling coyly, to which she tilts her head and says flirtatiously, "Who says I haven't?" as she is shown to saunter away down the hallway. Shortly after, the scene shows her skipping toward the classroom of coach Chad, where they proceed to have sex. Chad sets Fikile on his desk as though a doll, emphasising a childlike lightness of her body. He kisses her torso all the way down her stomach and then kneels to pull her panties off (Figure 13). The two happily undress each other, smiling and laughing in between in a sensual montage as they begin to have passionate sex. Chad is shown to be fully naked compared to Fikile, who is partially undressed in her school uniform, a reminder of her child status.



Figure 11 Fikile and Coach Chad

While sexual relationships between teachers and learners are not uncommon in media representations and reality, despite being illegal, the portrayal here reflects a Westernised which tends to be romanticised such. This is reflected in other teen shows, such as *Glee* (2009),

Pretty Little Liars (2010), and *Riverdale* (2017), where inappropriate sexual relationships between learners and teachers are framed as forbidden but attainable. This portrayal glosses over the ethical and legal violations, focusing on the intensity of these relationships.

Research on sexual scripts in South Africa, as mentioned earlier, incorporates sexual education into their narratives where consequence and accountability are emphasised. *Blood* (2020), however, aligns more closely with Western ideals, where casual sex appears encouraged, and inappropriate relationships between adult and teen characters are glamorised. This shift normalises a version of teen sex without consideration for cultural, religious, and socioeconomic sensitivities, raising questions about what these shifts mean for South African TV canon. This shift raises important questions about how media influences youth's perceptions of intimacy, agency and pleasure, especially in contexts where formal sex education can be limited for some or shaped by cultural taboos. Therefore, while sexual education is important, there needs to be more insightful research into how South Africans negotiate sexual scripts and where intimacy, agency and emotional connection can be explored further. South African television shows, especially those revolving around teen narratives such as *MTV Shuga* (2009), *Skeem Saam* (2011), *Grassroots* (2012) or *Isthunzi* (2017) tend to take a more conservative approach when displaying teenage intimacy. *Blood* (2020) represents a shift toward more liberal and bold depictions of teenage intimacy, aligning more with Western narratives, especially American shows, than with South African TV shows.

Therefore, while sexual education is important, there needs to be more insightful research into how South Africans negotiate sexual scripts and where intimacy, agency and emotional connection can be explored further. Building on this need for deeper insights into sexual scripts, participants interestingly identified the need for more developed it is also interesting to note that participants in this study felt strongly about the lack of consequences depicted in the shows, especially about abortions and sexual health.

> *It's a process to get an abortion, you know. You can't just pull up there and be like, I want an abortion; let's do this five-minute thing, and it's done. I also feel that some characters don't necessarily portray how that affected them. Like with Maeve (from Sex Education), her character is based on her being a badass, but when she is pregnant, she becomes shut off ... I've read a book where they did an illegal abortion, but this was like a 25-year-old woman, she was a prostitute, the abortion she got was so scary,*

like, it was just this random lady in this random basement. The next day, she woke up, and she had Blood all over her; she was sick and crawling, and, like, you know … Because, let's be honest, the next day, you may have noticed that Maeve goes back to doing the sex therapy thing. It was just that they moved on from that situation. You know? (Participant 5, Session 2).

Participant 5's response reveals a critical reflection on the difference between reality and constructed realities. This sentiment is shared with other participants, such as Participant 3, Participant 2, Participant 12, and Participant 1, as they acknowledge how shows often normalise abortion, but they do not show the aftermath of dealing with the emotional and physical challenges that come with an abortion.

I can say, like, the industry … normalising these situations, because if you just say, someone, of course, she has sex, and then tomorrow she's able to, to go get an abortion. Cassie's abortion, they just went for it. It's annoying when shows that are genuinely controversial don't attack controversial topics … (Participant 2, Session 2)

Yeah, it kind of bothered me how they showed the abortion, and then Cassie was not even careful after that. Cassie's mom was very supportive. (Participant 12, Session 2)

Participant 12 and Participant 2 share Participant 5's sentiment that these procedures have become minimised, normalised, and glamourised in these shows. They are portrayed as painless, quick, and easy solutions without accounting for physical and emotional complications or aspects associated with the process. Participant 2's statement also highlights a significant

I just wanted to touch on something that nobody seemed to touch on yet. Abortions are not free. And they are not cheap … There was this thing that I saw where at Medicare, an abortion is like R30,000. And no (TV) shows show that monetary value. So, I feel like in shows [such as] Sex Education, Maeve is shown to be poor, how did she afford that abortion? Like, there's nothing that looks at it from a realistic point of view. But there are free abortions. Yeah, there are, but a lot of them, when you look at it, they come from government funding. And everybody knows when things come to the government. There is a lack of political structure and a lack of economic structure. So

even, like, especially in government hospitals here, there is a lack of beds and medicine. So how do you guarantee yourself that you will get that abortion for free without endangering yourself? Like, there's no anaesthesia, now there's no bed. Now you, you must do this freehand and sleep on the floor. Magical, no way. So, I feel like things like that, they're not looked at properly. Because like, Cassie, I'd say Cassie's like middle class, she's okay to some extent. But like, abortions are still expensive. There's no way, especially, even if it is free, you're not guaranteed that safety. That's why the ones that are expensive, guarantee you that safety. I feel like shows lack that. So that's why most people can't attach themselves to shows because, like, you can't tell me that you have an abortion, and you did, and you're poor, and there's no way you did that without some monetary value toward your name. (Participant 3, Session 2).

Participant 3's argument underscores an important aspect that is often unaddressed, which is the cost of these procedures. According to Lince-Deroche et al. (2017:12), the cost of a safe abortion is as follows: medicine-based abortion is 65,83 dollars (approximately R1196.47), a Manual Vacuum Aspiration (MVA) costs 70,60 dollars (approx. R1283.16), but with hospitalisation, the cost is 84.83 dollars (approx. R1541.79). Even if this may be affordable for some, for others, this is an expense that is unpredictable as complications can often arise. Similarly, accessibility to these services is not as attainable as TV shows frame them to be. In South Africa, more than half of these procedures are still done through unsafe methods (Moseley et al.,2017:2). The discussion shifted to the general reflections on the reception of abortion. Participant 1 feels strongly about a local interpretation of such procedures, highlighting the stigma that still exists.

I can speak for African parents. I have experienced it with two of my friends; one had to have an abortion, and the other had the child. African parents have this mentality to deal with your consequences; it's shamed upon. It's a whole big culture… oh, did you see she's pregnant? It's not talked enough about … sex is not talked enough about … even sex. It's only you going to have sex when you get married. An abortion is even shamed upon; my friend's family is so strict about abortions and pregnancy. Her mother still doesn't know she had one, and if she finds out, she's dead. Her mother had her young, so you see where she's coming from. My own grandmother was also married at a young age. (Participant 1, Session 2).

Participant 1 describes her friend's experience as entirely different to what is shown on TV, commenting on the cultural impact that shows can omit. Mosely et al. (2017) highlight how various social and cultural norms exist within SA that frame the way abortion is perceived. Multiple studies support that religion, morality and culture served as the main backdrop for the negative associations for abortion (Gresh and Maharaj, 2014; Macleod et al.,2011; Ronco, 2014; Varga, 2002) cited in Mosely et al. (2017:3). While this study could not interrogate these observations. Participant 13 revealed another insightful observation about the reactions shown in TV shows in comparison to the reality of most.

> *They normally show … like those kind-hearted parents, and that's why most of the time, you will see … like they don't make it a big deal when they do get pregnant and like abortions aren't a big deal.* (Participant 13, session 2).

While TV shows attempt to destigmatise abortion, underage sex and pregnancy in South African households, these are still considered taboo topics, especially with family and community structures. Participant 13's response illustrates this by observing that TV often homogenises experiences, which sometimes become inauthentic. The attempt to create more progressive depictions on screen in some parts can be educational and informative; however, these should be carefully considered and constructed better to account for factors that shape the lived realities of sensitive issues as these.

> *The ability to portray the emotions felt is lacking. In the last season of Blood and Water, Puleng and Blaine's sex tape got released. And they really moved past that so quickly. She had a full-on sex tape released. Sound, audio, everything. And like the emotions that she felt, um, wasn't the emotions that I would think someone would feel once their sex tape gets released. They didn't show that. They made it seem like, okay, if I release a sex tape, everyone's going to talk about it for like a day and by Wednesday, the whole school is going to get over it. When in reality, you're not going to hear the end of something like that. Something like that affects your future. It affects your positive applications, your job applications. So, they really need to look into showing the consequences further, onto now.* (Participant 10, Session 2).

Furthermore, Participant 10's critique reveals a broader concern raised by participants, where narratives tend to normalise risky behaviour and reinforce it by failing to depict real-life consequences. This recurring theme is evident in participants' responses, showing the gap between media representation and lived experiences. While TV shows attempt to destigmatise sensitive topics such as substance abuse and teenage sex, they do so at the expense of oversimplifying or glamourising situations. This results in their failure to address the emotional, cultural and societal complexities accompanying these problems, as highlighted in participants' responses.

Euphoria (2019) and *Blood* (2020), with their dramatic lighting, music, and sensationalised montages of teen sex, remove the elements of consequence and safety, therefore making these behaviours appear appealing and normalised. This aligns with Qolbi et al.'s (2022:115) assertion of how television frequently depicts sex as "exciting, glamourous and risk-free". This pattern is also evident in the depiction of relationships on screen that are inherently represented as toxic and dysfunctional. The next chapter will examine how television constructs relationships by exploring how friendships, romance and family are portrayed and how this might influence audience perceptions of social connection and conflict.

Chapter 8 Relationships on Screen

"Nudes are the currency of love. "

(Participant 4 vis Rue from *Euphoria* (2019)

The previous chapters illustrate how substance use, and risky sexual behaviour are presented as problematic and normalised in both series. This chapter shifts the focus to relationships - an equally significant component of adolescence where the primary forms of relationships - romantic, platonic and familial relationships will be explored. TV series do not display risky behaviour and relationships as isolated themes or tropes within narratives but in conjuncture with another, as these narratives are underpinned by toxic patterns of abuse, manipulation and emotional co-dependency, much like how sex and substance use are portrayed on screen. The analysis examines how toxic romantic relationships are framed by characters Nate and Maddy from *Euphoria* (2019) and Fikile and Chad from *Blood* (2020). Next, the chapter explores how friendship displays toxic loyalty by examining Rue and Fezco in *Euphoria* (2019) and Fikile and Wade in *Blood* (2020). Additionally, the chapter explores the dysfunctionality of family by examining Kat for *Euphoria* (2019) and Puleng from *Blood* (2020).

Toxic romantic relationships

The general tropes of teen dramas and series featuring teenagers typically highlight the challenges and emotional rollercoaster of first love and heartbreak. These narratives usually present an idealised version of teenagers' experiences (Galloway et al.,2015)). To gain a more nuanced understanding of the effect of these portrayals on teenage viewers, it is crucial to examine them on screen and discuss the broader implications they have on the adolescents' understanding of intimacy, love and the required characteristics of relationships. Specifically, the relationships between Maddy and Nate from *Euphoria* (2019) and Fikile and Chad from *Blood and Water* (2020) will be analysed to explore the representation of relationships.

Maddy and Nate from *Euphoria* (2019) exemplify toxicity and destructive patterns within their relationship, as both characters are controlling and manipulative. Their relationship reflects patterns of romance situated within dysfunctionality that is often framed as passionate rather than violent (Massenet et al.,2018; Villarejo-Carballido., et al.,2022). Galloway et al. (2015) discuss this trope by referring to the "that love conquers all" premise that TV narratives often situate narratives within, which is evident with the characterisation of Maddy and Nate.

In Episode 3, titled *Bonnie and Clyde*, the relationship is explored in more detail, revealing the constant juxtaposition of extremities within their relationship. Throughout the series, Nate showers Maddy with extravagant gifts and takes her on expensive dates; however, when they fight, it often involves verbal and physical abuse. Nate compensates for his toxic behaviour and a means of apology by gifting her and taking her out on expensive dates. Maddy relishes these moments, and having come from a less privileged background, she perceives the gifts as a token of love. Nate surprises her with a replica of the same luxurious coat the character Ace, a successful mobster from *Casino* (1995), gifts his lover, Ginger. The coat for Ginger is a symbol of luxury, status and validation, just as it is for Maddy. Similar to Ginger's dependence on Ace, Maddy's attachment to Nate is deeply tied to gifts and material tokens of love, further highlighting the unhealthy dynamics at play. Much like Gingers to Ace, Maddy's attachment to Nate is tied to material tokens of love, further highlighting the unhealthy dynamics at play.

In Episode 3, a disturbing scene unfolds between Nate and Maddy, where he physically abuses her. After a distasteful public disagreement between Nate's family, he drags her away to a nearby alleyway calling her out for embarrassing him: "Don't you ever fucking embarrass me like that. I swear to fucking God". Maddy laughs, to which Nate responds, saying, "Shut the fuck up, I'm not done with you...". Her laughter seems to provoke him further when suddenly, he violently slams her into one of the containers, where he chokes her and says, "You are fucking dead to me, fuck you". (Figure 14).



Figure 12 Nate chokes Maddy.

The wide shot displays the dark alley that silhouettes both figures, framing their expressions carefully as Nate's grip tightens around Maddy's neck. Maddy's indifference to his violent actions and insults is captured by her defiant smile as her arms hang down at her side, suggesting that this is a norm within their relationship. Her reaction suggests fearlessness, something that is sharp with traditional responses of victims on screen in similar scenarios. The lack of recreation, paired with Nate's comfortability to be physically and verbally abusive in a public setting, by dragging Maddy out to a nearby alleyway in front of his family and the crowd at the carnival, reveals two things. Firstly, he shows his dominance over her; regardless of space and place, he can act as he wants to without consequence. Secondly, this also reveals how the lack of intervention from his family reiterates the normalisation of his aggressive and abusive ways towards Maddy- reflecting a broader societal pattern where women often carry the burden of male actions where their misconduct is rationalised rather than criticised (Pietayte and Suzina, 2022:44).

After the violent interaction with Nate, Maddy stands alone in front of her bathroom mirror. The medium camera shot lingers on Maddy as she looks at her neck, tracing the deep purple bruises left by Nate. She stares at these when finally, she breaks her façade of strength and defiance and sobs, revealing her feelings of defeat and resignation. The intimacy of this shot allows the audience to witness her vulnerability and shows the toll the relationship has on her.

However, with this image on the screen, Rue's voice-over reveals a disturbing reality: "It wasn't the violence that scared Maddy; it is the fact that no matter what he did, she would always love him." The combination of Rue's voice-over and Maddy's vulnerability reinforces the idea that toxic love and relationships such as these should be tolerated rather than confronted or left behind. The scene captures the painful cycle of abuse -where victims like Maddy do not just endure violence but eventually justify it. This framing implicitly validates a young woman's endurance over empowerment, positioning this narrative as a norm (Galloway et al., 2015; Masanet et al., 2018; Coyne et al., 2019).

While physical abuse is not an uncommon theme in narratives on screen, the aftermath of such events often reveals the cycles of abuse that victims like Maddy become accustomed to. Despite her effort to cover up the bruises with make-up and clothing, when discovered, the school alerts her family, and Nate is suspended, pending an investigation. Throughout the series, Maddy protects Nate, refusing to name him as her abuser. At home, in an emotional monologue, she

screams at her mother, "Love is a million things; sometimes it feels good, sometimes it doesn't. So, one thing I know is that Nate loves me, no matter what; he would kill for me, and I'd kill for him. It's good to know there's at least one person in this fucked up world who has my back. Do you think I want this, gesturing to the relationship between her mother and father? You live in the same house and don't say a word to each other. That's the difference between you and me". (Maddy, Episode 7). These scenes, although accurate in terms of representing the complexities of an abusive relationship, where the victim shifts blame from the abuser and justifies their actions.

Nate and Maddy secretly meet up in motels, acting like bandits on the run. The title of this episode, *Bonnie and Clyde*, is a fitting yet unsettling comparison of Nate and Maddy's relationship. The Bonnie and Clyde reference is not just an unsettling comparison, but it disguises toxicity as devotion. The reference reiterates the notorious criminal couple's ride-or-die mentality as they foster a deep loyalty for each other despite how toxic the relationship is. The season encourages the audience to root for Nate and Maddy's destructive relationships by framing their reunion as triumphant despite the reality that Nate is the problem. The collection of scenes of Maddy and Nate is problematic as their narrative is romanticised, where endurance and self-sacrifice are encouraged for female teen characters.

It is important to note that the subliminal reinforcement of substance use is shown through Maddy's actions. Just before she addresses Nate's family, she takes ecstasy when she arrives at the carnival, knowing she will run into Nate after an earlier fight. This drug is known for its euphoric effects. However, the effect on Maddy is quite the opposite as she behaves crudely - publicly humiliates his family-revealing the unsavoury impact that drugs can have. However, the cause for concern in this scene is twofold; one, it reveals how substance use is not just an isolated act of rebellion but is tied to emotional responses and feelings. Furthermore, it normalises the use of substances as a coping mechanism rather. Sex and intimacy are his tools for control in the relationship, as the couple frequently reconcile after a fight through sex. Although this was briefly discussed in an earlier chapter, it is essential to understand that the nature of their relationship is rooted in their sexual affair rather than any emotional connection.

Similarly, in *Blood* (2020), Chad, like Nate, frequently takes Fikile out to expensive places and hotels as a way to affirm their relationship and his interest in her. However, for Fikile, coming

from money, these gestures only create doubt and uncertainty, as seen throughout the season in her hesitation to be with Chad, a married man. She constantly questions him about how their relationship would work and when he plans to leave his wife. Yet, Chad's manipulative tactics are always cloaked in gestures of affection as he usually reassures her through soft kisses, warm embraces and sex. Figure 15 below illustrates a scene in episode 4 where Chad holds her tenderly after sex. The soft glow of the light in the room, dishevelled bed sheets and unrestrained physical closeness create an illusion of love and intimacy. Fikile stares out the window, lost in thought, when Chad hugs her from behind, holding her towards him tightly. She thanks him for the night, and Chad pulls her even closer to him, saying, "I know you've been going through some things, Babe, but you'll bounce back. You always do; that's what I love about you so much".

His comment and gesture suggest a protective stance as he plays the 'good boyfriend' who is concerned for her wellbeing; however, the scene itself reveals just how much of their relationship is based on sex. Fikile was recently rejected as head girl, something she is shown to really want. He pulls her away from the window toward the bed, where he pulls her on top of him, suggesting that they have sex again, which Fikile obediently follows, then stops apologising. She attempts to have a deeper conversation with him, asking him about life in general, when he turns the conversation to his accident – an incident that changed the course of his life forever. He looks away, saying, "I lost my purpose..." then he looks up at her, smiling, "...until I met you". This prompts Fikile to smile back shyly as she climbs back on top of him, kissing him when they are interrupted by a call from Chad's wife.

In an earlier episode, Riley, Chad's wife, comes to school unannounced to drop off his lunch, interrupting Chad and Fikile's conversation. As they sit in the car, Riley is shown to be pregnant, a secret he keeps from Fikile. The secrets and lies for Chad reveal just how superficial and self-serving their relationship is. While the relationship is explored shortly in the series, the effects of the relationship are lasting as Fikile faces most of the backlash when their affair is exposed in episode 6. Chad is dismissed quietly from his position as a swim coach while Fikile becomes socially ostracised by her peers. The camera lingers on the judgemental stares of her classmate as a heavily pregnant Riley confronts Fikile in class.

The use of the song "*SMA*" by Nasty C feat and Rowlene's lyrics during a pivotal scene in Episode 6 in the show contribute a layer of romanticism and emotional intensity as the viewer watches Riley being dragged away by Chad. He avoids eye contact with Fikile, shifting

responsibility for the situation from himself to her as he plays the hero in preventing this violent interaction. The lyrics*, "How did I? End up falling for you. I find myself calling for you..."* and the combined effect of the slow-motion segment of Riley being dragged away by Chad, paired with Chad being unable to meet Fikile's eyes to the crushing realisation hitting Fikile seeing Riley's pregnant belly, creates a melancholic and almost poignant atmosphere for the viewer as the relationship is positioned as one of heartbreak and longing rather than an acknowledgement of something transgressive and predatory.

Chad's quiet dismissal, compared to Fikile's public humiliation, mirrors reality where victims usually face heavy repercussions; however, in the show, Chad's narrative is built around sympathy, casting him as a man burned by his crushed dreams and unfulfilled potential. His marriage to Riley, a successful lawyer, becomes a silent battleground as he grips with her ongoing success while he festers in his insecurities. He presents himself as a doting and supportive husband. Yet, beneath his facade, Chad's character is also underpinned by his feelings of emasculation and unhappiness in his marriage stemming from the power imbalance between them.

He lies to Riley about his whereabouts and manipulates her by gaslighting her. This is seen when he blames her for forgetting about his swim meets and work, blaming her pregnancy brain and long hours, implying that she is inattentive to his needs. This makes Riley feel guilty, and whenever she asks if they can do something together, he dismisses it by saying he's equally busy, using his time to meet up secretly with Fikile. Despite Riley's success, which allows them to live a comfortable and stable life, this success only magnifies Chad's insecurities. In his attempt to shift the blame for his infidelity, he says to Riley, "You never wanted a high school swimming coach," exposing his deep-seated insecurity and perceived inadequacy. His justification for his relationship with Fikile is tied to his victim mentality, as Fikile's vulnerability and need for his affirmation attracts Chad to her. This allows him to reclaim the power and sense of control he feels he does not have in his marriage.



Figure 13 Chad and Fikile as -crossed star-crossed lovers

Therefore, Chad fosters a relationship where Fikile becomes co-dependent on him, seeking validation through her swimming accolades and through sex, which becomes a tool for manipulation for Chad. This selective honesty and emotional "breadcrumbing" [4]ensure that Fikile remains tied to him, thereby fostering toxicity in the relationship. The aftermath of their relationship, paired with the public humiliation, leaves Fikile in a distressed state as she turns to alcohol to cope. While her drinking is shown as a response to her heartbreak, the series inadvertently normalises this method for teenagers who can be going through the same thing. Their love affair is presented as star-crossed lovers separated cruelly by societal norms and moral boundaries. This presentation romanticises the exploitative dynamic and redirects the focus on the romantic elements rather than the stark reality of child grooming. Patterns of abuse are not uncommon, and while the series explores some implications and harm caused by such relationships, it also perpetuates a harmful narrative and desensitisation that aligns with the real world, as seen in the recent docuseries *School Ties* (2024). Film productions need to recognise the systemic abuse of power and use it as a tool to educate rather than glamourise and glorify. This romanticised framing not only obscures the exploitative nature of the relationships, but it also reflects the gendered disparities in how power and consequence are distributed in both narratives, which will be discussed below.

[4] Breadcrumbing refers to the manipulative tactic of leading someone on with superficial acts and signs of validation (Rodríguez-García et al, 2020:2)

Power, gender and consequences

While dysfunctionality is a norm on and off screen within romantic relationships, the sensationalised portrayal on screen is problematic. The romantic relationships between Maddy and Nate and Fikile and Chad indicate how dominance and submissiveness remain a gendered trope in the screen media. Chad, like Nate, asserts dominance and control under the guise of love and protection. They shower their lovers with affection, expensive dates and gifts, which serve as points of validation and security for the recipients. However, the relationships remain toxic, especially in how Fikile and Maddy strive to protect their men when they are being held accountable for their actions. Just as Maddy protects Nate after he physically attacks her, Fikile does the same for Chad after he is dismissed from his job for sexual misconduct and child grooming, turning the blame to herself.

Participant 8's observation reinforces this gendered disparity as she notes that conversations with peers often deflect from Chad's misconduct but scrutinise Riley's reaction.

> *I felt more as if they weren't focusing on the fact that it was rape, but they focused more on the point that he's cheating on his wife with a high school girl … because, on top of that, I've heard people making excuses for him, like, yeah, I know, but his wife was sort of abusive".* (Participant 8, Session 2).

This aligns with Villarejo-Carballido et al.'s (2022) argument that screen narratives normalise the tendency for women to bear the consequence of men's actions while male misconduct is rationalised or excused, even where it constitutes illegal actions, such as sex with minors, sex between teachers and learners, or physical assault and rape. Additionally, participants generally note how narratives seem to normalise cycles of abuse, manipulation and emotional immaturity, aligning with Masanet et al. (2018) argument of how representations on screen often blur the line between passion and abuse, which creates a normalised perception where possessiveness is positioned as overprotectiveness and control as commitment. Therefore, a cycle of abuse continues, becoming an acceptable narrative.

Participant 9 highlights how sex is a central feature in romantic relationships that is often normalised as a tool for reconciliation.

It's usually like toxic relationships based on sexual stuff. There's never a connection. It's always them fighting, getting over it, getting back together and having sex, then being like 'Oh my God, I love you, baby'. And it's not really what relationships is. It's way more than that. You think sex is gonna make up for all that cheating, lying, manipulating and gaslighting? (Participant 9, session 3).

Participant 9's observation highlights how often sex is normalised on screen as a tool for reconciliation, reinforcing the idea that physical intimacy can override deeper issues like manipulation and dishonesty. This is supported by Qolbi et al. (2022:116), who argue that the proliferation of sexual images throughout shows eventually normalises it as a central feature in relationships, while Coyne et al. (2019) further emphasise that this normalisation results in emotional intimacy being bypassed in favour of physical connections. In the context of Fikile and Chad, sex is a power move that ensures that the subordinate partner (Fikile) remains emotionally dependent on the relationship.

While many participants critique the portrayal of these relationships as being overly toxic and sensationalised, others, for example, Participant 4 and Participant 10, argue that the series explores the complexities well and a more analytical approach by the viewer can allow for struggles of identity, addiction and patterns for abuse to be recognised more easily.

I feel like it's accurate to an extent. So basically, like with Nate and Maddie. I think they portrayed it accurately to show what it's like to be in an abusive relationship. To show how a person can be hot and cold. I really liked the complexity of it … But between like Rue and Jules, they also did well in showing how complex it is. It appears … surface level, but they actually talk about how Rue's addiction to Jules … it was hard for her to deal with it. So, in that sense, also getting into a relationship with a trans[gender] woman and the complexities of it. I feel like, in that sense … the complexity of those relationships. Again, with some characters, there's emotional immaturity because … I don't know. (Participant 4, Session 3).

I think they show how teenage relationships are, but they don't go into the depth of the complexities within the relationship, right? To a certain extent, I get it; they only have a certain amount of screen time and can't go through everything. But if you watch the

> *show to analyse it, you'll see how they do show the complexities of teenage relationships… Even the whole sex without really speaking to each other. It is a thing that happens. It might not relate to a couple of people, but it is something that happens within relationships and the whole manipulating and gaslighting … achieving that is the … that is what happens in relationships. I think they represented it really good*. (Participant 10, Session 3).

Participant 4 and Participant 10's insights reveal that while narratives may appear sensationalised, they argue that the series does engage with deeper relationship struggles, including identity, addiction, and emotional immaturity. Therefore, they highlight how media depictions, while dramatised, can still serve as a point of resonation for complexities such as these. Participant 4's statement of "a person can be hot and cold" when referring to Nate and Maddy's relationship highlights the power imbalance within the relationship itself, where Nate's constant shift between affection and aggression reinforces his control. This emotional unpredictability keeps Maddy in a continual state of dependence as his influence shapes her emotional climate to switch between feelings of security and distress.

For others, such as Participant 3 and Participant 8, feel that the level of secrecy and manipulation embedded in the relationships is problematic. Participant 3 expresses that transparency is a fundamental element needed within a relationship. Yet, romantic dynamics fail to reflect this:

> *"I understand that some characters don't have a part to play, where it is not their business, but I feel to some extent … is that you are with someone. You should be somewhat transparent with them …"* (Participant 3, Session 3).

Participant 8 echoes this concern by referencing how Puleng and KB's relationship reflects how secrecy is justifiable under the guise of love and protection.

> *Even with Puleng and KB in Blood and Water, how are you going to hide your investigation on your boyfriend's parents, from your boyfriend? Like, I understand the worry of him being upset and stuff, but you hid it for so long, and now your relationship is constantly being built on lies. Relationships between friends are just lies, and toxicity is the word. Toxicity?* (Participant 8, Session 3).

Although the relationship is positioned as a genuine connection between Puleng and KB, her hidden agenda of investigating his father's involvement in her sister's kidnapping reveals the inauthenticity of these connections. The show positions Puleng's actions and manipulations as acceptable and justified as they are displaced within the pursuit of the greater good. This observation supports Buselle et al. (2019), who argue that secrecy, particularly under the guise of love and protection, is often portrayed as acceptable in society. This normalisation of such secrecy and manipulative tactics speaks to the larger issue of character development; as Woloszyn (2021:5) suggests, the 'performance' of characters stems from a lack of stable self and creates tension between teenagers' identities and the relationships they may have. While romantic relationships often revolve around power imbalance and gendered disparities, this dysfunctionality also manifests in friendship and family relationships, albeit in different ways. The analysis below examines the friendships of Rue and Fezco in *Euphoria* (2019) and Fikile and Chad in *Blood and Water* (2020), alongside the familial tensions between Puleng and her family, and Kat and her mother, to explore how these toxic and dysfunctional dynamics leave lasting impacts on characters and shape their choices and identities.

Frenemies in Teen TV

Friendships are depicted as the primary support system in most teen narratives as they offer encouragement and inspiration as teens navigate their identities (Woloszyn, 2019). While this has been a trope for many years on screen, recently, these have evolved to be underpinned by co-dependency and manipulation as its core.

This is supported by Corwin (2022), who exposes the complexities of friendship, discussing how friendships are often overlooked as a forum where trauma and toxicity issues can exist. Corwin (2022:11) references the series *13 Reasons Why* (2017), focusing on how the narrative centres around the character Hannah Baker. Hannah commits suicide and releases her reasons for it and the people responsible for it within 13 cassette tapes. While her narrative raises attention to factors and events that leads up to her making this harrowing decision, the series overlooks the impact the release of these tapes and her death has on everyone left behind, neglecting the less dominant narratives. The same sentiment can be applied to *Euphoria* (2019) and *Blood* (2020), where the dominant 'friend' has centralised issues while the other friend(s) are overlooked and underexplored. While this may be evident in some narratives in others, the subtle connections of manipulation and toxicity override this representation revealing one that enables bad habits and behaviour (Woloszyn,2019).

In *Euphoria* (2019), the dynamic between Fezco and Rue reflects a pattern of imbalance and toxicity. While Rue's addition remains at the forefront, Fez remains a morally ambiguous figure in her life as he is presented as both her protector and enabler. In Episode 3, Rue's immediate reaction to riding her bike to Fez after Jules rejected her reveals her dependency on him- as an understanding friend and dealer. Rue bangs ferociously on the door, asking him to open up; she "needs something to take the edge off". The scene reinforces once more how, despite Rue's addiction, the ease of accessibility of getting these substances to cope with unwanted emotions positions drugs as a solution to every inconvenience rather than as a caution for addiction.

Fezco opens the door, but his stiff posture, averted gaze and distance from the screen door reveal his internal conflict in supplying her with drugs. Unlike the previous encounters, where he readily enabled her addiction, Fezco now only hesitates, realising just how far gone his 'friend' is, revealing his sense of responsibility to her request for drugs. The physical barrier and distance between them symbolise the physical and moral boundary Fezco attempts to create between Rue and himself as he meekly tells her that he cannot help her. This moment is filled with tension as Rue perceives this as an act of betrayal. Her voice trembles in her monologue, revealing the striking combination of vulnerability and anger as she lashes out at Fezco for having introduced her to drugs. "You're full of shit, man; you know you make a living out of selling drugs to teenagers, and now you want to have a moral high ground. You're a fucking dropout drug dealer with seven functioning brain cells". The irony of her accusation − holding Fezco responsible for her addiction while simultaneously demanding that he must continue to supply her − highlights the manipulative tendencies often seen in relationships with addicts: "Are you doing this because you care about me? If you gave a shit about me, you wouldn't have sold me drugs in the first place, but you did … open the goddamn door … you did this to me … you fucking ruined my life … The least you could do is open the goddamn door … if you don't open this door, I will hate you till the day I die".



Figure 14 Rue asking Fez for drugs

The tense silences in between her increasingly frantic monologue heights the emotional manipulation at play while Fezco walks away from the door, whispering, "I'm sorry", leaving Rue to scream and cry in frustration. The camera shifts to pan away from the door slowly, as Rue's cries and accusations are drowned out by the lyrics, *"taking it all, taking it all for us"* from the song *All for Us* by Labyrinth, the haunting lyrics reinforcing the emotional toll of Rue's addiction.

Comparably, *Blood* (2020) also exposes the superficial nature of friendships, where one-sided loyalty, toxic devotion and performative support are key elements. Chris is portrayed as a supportive friend and fiercely loyal to Fikile. He is the only friend who knows about her inappropriate affair with coach Chad, and despite Chad's disrespect toward him, he remains faithful and devoted to Fikile. At the same time, she does little to defend her friend or defuse the tension between them. Throughout the series, Chris consistently defends Fikile, especially when she attempts to drown herself after the affair is exposed. In a rather heroic segment, he jumps into the pool, fully clothed, and pulls her back to the surface, acting as her saviour, which is a deeply embedded trait within the friendship. This scene, much like others, where he shields her from Chad's wife, reinforces his role as the saviour and rescuer rather than a friend who holds her accountable for her actions.



Figure 15 Chris opening up to Fikile

Chris fails to recognise his unhealthy friendship with Fikile, which is evident in his prioritising loyalty and allegiance over morality and genuine connection. This can be seen when he actively participates in cyberbullying with Fikile, creating a sensationalised video of Puleng's family scandal as a way for Fikile to get revenge on her. Their collaborative nature rivals how their friendship thrives on toxicity, shared destruction, and unquestionable allegiance. Despite Chris's extreme loyalty to Fikile, the true nature of their friendship is revealed in a subtle interaction in Episode 2. Fikile and Chad sit comfortably beside each other on the pool steps amid a party scene at his house. In a rare moment of vulnerability catalysed by his drunkenness, Chris expresses his deep-seated fear of loneliness and concern for his many failed relationships. Rather than addressing his feelings and concerns, Fikile brushes them off by saying, "Let's face it, babe, you aren't the easiest person to be with. See you later, okay?". This line, coupled with Fikile's body language, as she turns away without offering any emotional support to Chris, reinforces her role as a self-centred character who takes Chris's loyalty and love for granted. His role in her life is evident; he is there to serve her emotional needs and be her protector while his own emotional struggles are largely ignored.

Therefore, like Rue and Fezco's, Chris and Fikile's friendship exists within a façade of care and concern, masking the deeper problems of co-dependency and emotional manipulation. Some focus group participants, for example, Participant 1, exemplify the emotional toxicity present within friendships by referencing Rue and Fezco:

> *The friendships are also toxic. With Fezco, he knew Rue was doing drugs, and it was bad for her, but he kept doing it (supplying her) until she overdosed. He only stopped them. As a normal person, you weren't supposed to give your friend drugs*." (Participant 1, Session 3).

Participant 1's comments support the arguments made previously that while Fezco is portrayed as a protector, he is also Rue's enabler, reflecting the morally grey area. Despite other scenes showing Fezco risking his life and his finances for Rue, in an episode where she refuses to leave his house when a dangerous drug dealer comes along, the relationship is glamourised on screen, raising important questions about the normalisation of unhealthy friendships. This also extends into other examples, such as the friendship between Fikile and Chris in *Blood* (2020), as mentioned by Participant 13, where she states that despite his care and concern for her wellbeing and acts of heroism of standing up for her and protecting her, he enables her to protect her relationship with the swimming coach.

> *Also sometimes with the friend, how they just support their friend's actions like in Blood and Water, like with Chris and Fiks, (Chris) knew Fiks was sleeping with that coach, they (he) knew it was bad, they (he) supported it and when the relationship got out, because they found out Puleng was the one who said something about it. They made a revenge plan for Puleng but did not say that at the end of the day, this relationship was wrong. So just supporting their friend's actions and making it okay…* (Participant 13, Session 2).

Beyond these ambiguous friendships, Participant 13 extends her argument to include Wade and Puleng from *Blood* (2020) who also display other forms of toxicity.

> *I feel like with TV shows, they glamourise the toxicity. We don't see where friends do a positive thing, where it's healthy … like even with relationships. Puleng in Season 1 uses Wade to do stuff for her. She uses his feelings as an advantage. She knows he will follow her around and do things for her.* (Participant 13, Session 3).

Puleng exploits Wade's romantic feelings and loyalty to her to further her personal investigation, dragging him along in her reckless, illegal and dangerous journey to find out the truth about her sister's kidnapping. Puleng keeps Wade in the dark for a long time before she reveals her true motives for changing schools and befriending Fikile. Her emotional manipulation is evident when she uses his leverage as the principal's son to steal Fikile's birth certificate information. They bunk school to get to Home Affairs, where they lie and bribe officials for information regarding the document. Wade's decision to visit the Pollsmoor prison alone indicates the sense of toxic loyalty and devotion he has toward Puleng, as this is one of South Africa's most notorious maximum-security prisons. There, he bribes and interviews an inmate about her involvement in the kidnapping cases years before to assist Puleng with her

quest. Wade's acceptance, like Chad's, of a one-sided friendship reinforces that friendship is acceptable, thereby validating unhealthy relationships.

Manipulation and exploitation of others' feelings are also seen in other teen series, such as *Sex Education* (2017), depicted through similar friendship dynamics between Maeve and Otis. Otis develops feelings for her, which she uses to her advantage, often manipulating him for her own benefit. For instance, she encourages him to steal information and listen in on his mother's therapy sessions so that they might use the advice, something he is not comfortable with. Yet, she encourages it, therefore showing a lack of respect for his boundaries. Likewise, in older series such as *Gossip Girl* (2007), Serena and Blair are positioned as aristocratic besties who love each other but constantly sabotage and compete with each other. The difference between the newer series compared to the older ones is in the delivery of narratives. Older series tend to have a resolution factor where consequence meets with the characters' actions, while newer series allow for the manifestation of trauma bonds and unresolved conflict resulting in a superficial friendship. This notion is further reiterated within family dynamics, too, as mistrust, secrecy and family tension normalise dysfunctionality and perpetuate unhealthy patterns, which will be explored more below.

Family Trauma in Teen Narratives

Family dynamics in teen TV often highlight the tension between the characters' growing independence and how this affects their family ties and expectations (Balley's et al., 2019). The result is that relationships frequently being marked by dysfunction, detachment and emotional turmoil. As Forni (2020) reports, family relationship dynamics within a TV show tend to reinforce further the connection to certain characters and a deeper understanding of their decisions and lifestyles. While family trauma and dysfunction within families are not unrealistic and uncommon elements within teen TV shows, the series amplifies these tensions, which reinforces mistrust, secrecy and emotions of parental intervention and offered support or help as being interpreted by the teenagers as being intrusive and unwanted.

Teenagers are often shown to make significant- life-changing decisions without parental guidance, leading to actions and consequences that place them in compromising situations. This detachment and hyper-independence are evident in other teen series, too, such as *Riverdale* (2016) and *13 Reasons Why* (2017), where teens take matters into their own hands in solving murders, challenging drug lords or becoming gang members, and these actions place them in dangerous situations. Teenagers shown in family settings are, for example, illustrating

the strained relationship between Puleng and her family and the indifference displayed by Kat's family, which reinforces a negative stereotype, further suggesting that this is normal, which will be explored below.

Puleng from *Blood* (2020) grapples with the enduring trauma of her older sister's abduction 17 years ago. This tragedy casts a shadow over her upbringing, shaping her relationship with her parents, which is unstable and strained. The title of the first episode, '*Fiksation*', captures the intensity of Puleng's actions and obsession with creating stability in her family. While her intention behind her actions is motivated by uncovering the truth, the burden of finding her lost sister leads Puleng to break codes of morality and the law as she breaks into the principal's office to steal information and manipulates the principal's son to help her bribe Home Affairs officials and prisoners in the Pollsmoor prison for information.

The opening scene of *Blood* (2020) depicts the strained and uncomfortable space the family is in as they stand together, united in grief. Puleng and her brother Siya are shown to stand between their parents as they commemorate the birthday of the missing daughter. Puleng leaves the house mid-celebration and joins her friend at a party; a passing comment made by another teen at the party that Puleng looks a bit like the party's host. It is a coincidence that the host, Fikile, shares a birthday with her long-lost sister, which leads Puleng to latch on to wanting to prove that Fikile is her sister. Puleng's obsession leads her to lie, manipulate her way into changing schools, and run her investigation into proving that Fikile is her sister. Her obsession leads her to stalk Fikile on social media, infiltrate her social circle, and, in more concerning ways, steal Fikile's tampon for a *Blood* sample. These actions illustrate Puleng's desperate wish to fix her fractured family.

The magnitude of this burden on Puleng can be seen in Episode 3, where Puleng stands in the preserved pink room of her sister, an unchanged shrine, except for the array of pictures and newspaper clippings on the wall that seem to keep records and information about potential leads in finding her sister. The red tape weaves connections between various pieces of information, reflecting the urgency and obsession in the relentless pursuit of finding Pume. The low shot camera angle positions Puleng as vulnerable, as the clippings are looming over her, a representation of the overwhelming shadow of grief that dominates over the family's existence and Puleng's identity and role within the family. The scene not only underscores Puleng's determination to erase the pain and grief her family has gone through, but it also shows her internal struggle to define her own identity beyond her sister's shadow.

The room, basking in the soft, dimmed glow of the lamp, further adds to the sombre mood of the scene as Puleng stares at the wall, contemplating her quest for closure. Puleng's erratic obsessive behaviour is captured throughout the series through a series of close-up shots of her phone screen as she stalks Fikile, to her search bar entries of finding a DNA kit to prove that Fikile is her sister, as well as through segments where she sits watching Fikile intently, scribbling notes in her notebook. This fixation eventually culminates in her notebook, becoming a collage filled with images, clippings and notes about Fikile and her inner circle, which closely mirrors the chaotic, obsessive wall in her family home.

The general trope of family within South African TV shows reinforces a community system which emphasises respect and collective values (Akpa-Inyang et al., 2021). For Puleng, her family's trauma overshadows her emotional needs, leading to a suppression of neglect that manifests as an obsession as she attempts to find her sister as a way to reconcile with her family. The slow build of the series is filled with intense moments where Puleng makes a discovery, capturing the paranoia and depression felt by Puleng and showing the lasting effects of her family's trauma on her psyche.



Figure 16 Puleng stands in Pume's room.

While dysfunctionality remains a recurring trope in the representation of family on screen, indifference and neglect also emerge as central themes, as exemplified by the storyline of Kat from *Euphoria* (2019). As the previous chapter discussed her transformation, this analysis explores how her family perceived her transformation. In Episode 3, Kat's experimentation with her dress marks a pivotal moment as she embraces her new-found confidence. Kat saunters up to the mirror, where she looks at herself briefly before she is shown to take her time to put on a choker, meticulously applying her make-up and adjusting her clothes with careful

precision. Her movements are deliberate, twisting and turning her body, tossing her hair to one side as she admires her reflection. She wears fishnet stockings, a mini red and black chequered skirt, a white t-shirt and a black harness − a signature item tied to her new identity.

Her strikingly red lips and darkly lined eyes make her appear older and very assertive. The use of the song *X gon give it to ya* by DMX reinforces her new-found confidence, defiance and determination to reclaim control over her identity. The aggressive beat and bold lyrics mirror her shift in attitude − she is no longer waiting for validation from others but will give it to herself. The lyrics, "Fuck, waiting for you to get it on your own, X gon deliver it to ya. knock-knock open up the foot, it's real", suggest an apologetic entrance into her new phase of life. The synergy of the song, combined with her deliberate actions to take control by applying her make-up, fastening her choker and admiring herself, creates a powerful scene to capture her transforming herself.

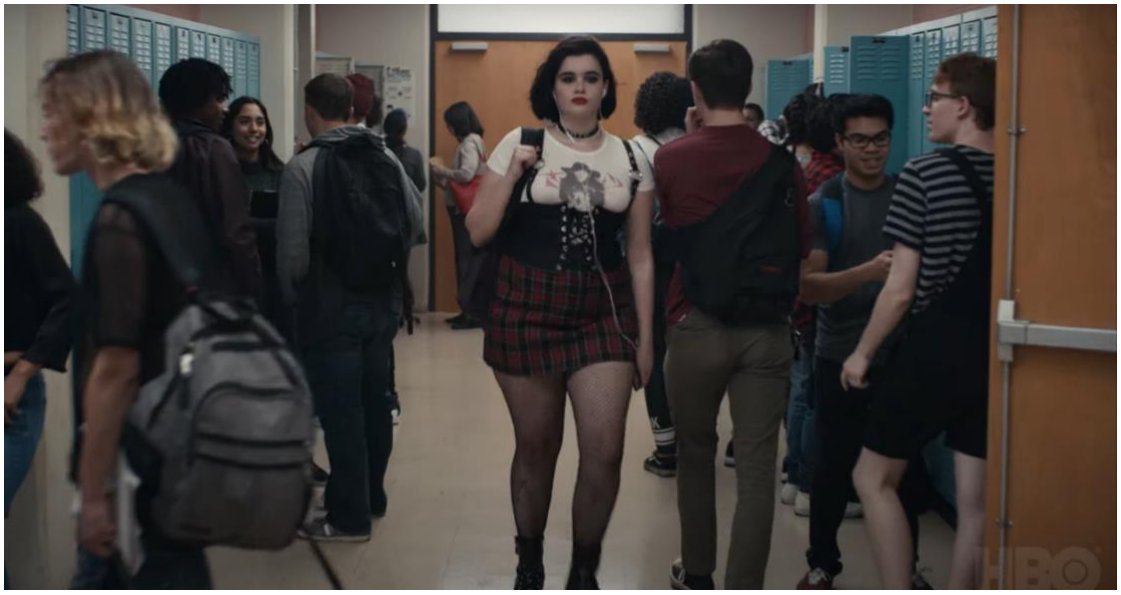


Figure 17 Kat's newfound confidence

The camera follows Kat as she walks briskly through the house and out through the door, earphones in her ears, absorbed in her world. A quick cut shifts the focus to her mother, who stands in the kitchen sipping coffee. The moment briefly catches her expression, her mouth open, eyes slightly raised, and she watches her daughter leave. Despite the brief reaction, neither of her parents addresses or acknowledges her transformation at any point in the season. This change extends beyond her dress style; it includes changes in her eating habits, sudden financial gains, and behaviour, all of which go unchallenged. Kat's transformation and narrative exemplify parents' lack of support and concern in the teen series, which sets the

precedent that parents seem unfazed by the problems or struggles their children face or go through. There is a general lack of literature that supports this despite the growing evidence of these examples in various series. For example, *Riverdale* (2016) has physically absent parents, while *Outerbanks* (2020) reveals the emotional manipulation and absence of parental figures. Within both examples, parents lead their own narrative, separate and detached from their children, revealing a more profound sense of neglect.

Kat's story exemplifies the recurring portrayal of parental presence but a lack of parental care on screen, reinforcing the notion that teens must seek validation elsewhere. This normalises the emotional distance and perpetuates the image that parental figures are inattentive to the adolescents' struggles and conflicts, which encourages alienation from familial support. This trope is discussed by Brooks et al. (2012), who identify that lack of support and breakdown of communication between parent and child often leads to emulation of risk behaviour and alienation as a result thereof. Representations of an emotionally absent parent, such as in the case of Kat from *Euphoria* (2019), lead teens to become involved in risky situations where they can be harmed. Aside from her slight reaction to Kat's change, in a follow-up episode, she downplays her taking pictures of her feet as a humorous activity rather than one of concern.

This parental neglect extends beyond Kat's sudden transformation but has already started in early childhood; as described in the episode, Kat's family also shaped her perception of food and eating habits -allowing her to overindulge and gain 20 pounds with little concern for her health or wellbeing. Their parental neglect leads Kat down a path where she struggles with her body image and self-esteem and, therefore, starts to seek validation through sexual activity with much older men, both in person and online. Parents' failure to pay attention to their teens and offer parental support remains a recurring theme in these narratives, which provides a normalised image of teens' emotional abandonment and forced independence from their parents. Although most of the insights from the focus group participants are based on the romantic and friendship elements within the media texts, Participant 3 and Participant 1 provide unique perspectives regarding the role of family. Participant 3 emphasises the impact of generational trauma and the lack of parental intervention, except when the situation was dire:

> *The mom knew she had another baby daddy for Fikile and said nothing to nobody about it. Until she felt, oh no, my daughter is basically on the brink of death. I should tell people* (Participant 3, Session 3).

Participant 3's comment reveals how secrecy and neglect within the family can lead to teens being more mistrusting and emotionally distant from their parents and avoiding contact or discussions with their parents. Puleng's mother, by withholding crucial information, reinforces that honesty within her marriage and family is secondary to maintaining her family's image and control. This lack of transparency not only fractures Puleng's trust in her family but also compels her to take matters into her own hands. A similar pattern can also be seen in *Riverdale* (2016), where Betty Cooper investigates her family, trying to uncover the death of her sister and her boyfriend. Like Puleng, Betty does this on her own, shouldering the emotional burden of family secrets, eventually leading to her self-destructive path. Narratives such as these encourage the notion that teens put themselves at risk to maintain their own identity, given their family's toxic image. This is also reflected in Participant 1's comment, where she mentions how emotionally absent parents can foster negative relationships between the teens and the parents, causing strain and tension, similar to Nate's relationship with his father, Cal.

> *If I can add, Nate and his father's relationship is something they can relate to. You can have a parent at home, but he's just like the furniture. You can have a parent at home, and you don't have a relationship with them. You don't talk to … and that was also realistic. Sometimes you see your parents, but they are not even there.* (Participant 1, Session 3).

While Participant 1's comment about absent parents is valid, within these shows, the issues experienced are amplified to show extreme toxicity, such as with Nate and his father. The father-son relationship between Nate and his father is marked by complexity, secrecy and challenges associated with conforming to society. Nate's knowledge of his father's double life, paired with Cal's iron fist rule over the household and strict expectations for his family's appearance within society, results in a challenging relationship between him and Nate that leads to physical confrontations.

While substance use can be tied to relationships, so too can sex, like how Jules and Kat interact with older men sexually while being underage. These can also be interpreted as mere acts of transgressions and a coping mechanism for the lack of validation they receive in their lives. Kat's transformation into a cam girl is not just an act of rebellion but a direct consequence of parental neglect. The lack of intervention and concern sends a border message of parental

disengagement that becomes a narrative device rather than a critique. Therefore, reinforcing independence as synonymous with isolation.

While absent and indifferent parent emerges as an underexplored trope in teen narratives. Some participants like Participant 3, Participant 10 and Participant 5 shift the conversation to the representation of black families discussing how media still subtly reinforces stereotypes such as cheating, absent parents and dishonesty.

> *I think yeah, quite a bit, especially in racial terms of relationships … like the way they portrayed black relationships about other racial relationships, like if you can see in the show in black relationships … like Puleng had like quite a bit of like cheating scandals. But if you look at the other relationships, it's like a very stereotypical thing that black people cheat. But they're not wrong. They do have things where black men or women will always cheat on men. It was somewhat accurate. Even if you look in the media, its normally black people cheating on each other, or black people ending up with … like unhappy relationship, because we are the ones that fall into those cheating, gaslighting, manipulating relationship types. So, I feel like they came with that in Blood and Water, Puleng cheating on Wade and commits to the other. You don't see them cheating. You don't see these scandals happening, but the only white person that did cheat was Chris … think it was. But if you look at this, his upbringing is around black people. So, maybe that culture also influenced him.* (Participant 3, Session 3)

Participant 3's' comment highlights how black narratives are still being portrayed as a generational cycle constituting infidelity and conflict, thus perpetuating negative stereotypes of black people and families. The inferences drawn relate to Puleng and Fikile. In Puleng's family, her mother is shown to be guilty of hiding her first daughter's paternity, thus highlighting a stereotype of fractured parental relationships. For Fikile, the secrecy surrounding her birth, being kidnapped and sold by an adoption agency, enabled by her adoptive parents, further reinforces the stereotypes of black families being involved in immoral acts and being dysfunctional and unstable.

The follow-up comments by Participant 10 and Participant 5 highlight critical tensions regarding perceptions of representation on screen. While Participant 5 agrees that representation of black families still mirrors the negative stereotypes of black families having

absent and unfaithful fathers, Participant 10 challenges this stereotype by arguing how the series subverts the generational perception of black males by showing Chris Ackerman, a white character, as the one who engages in infidelity. For Participant 3, however, her comment highlights an entirely different perspective, and she states that as much as she agrees that black people are negatively represented in a family narrative, she feels that the societal pressure placed on black female characters is often overlooked in maintaining family relationships and the image of families.

> *I want to touch on what Participant 5 said about the father stereotype that's also in Blood and Water, so like that black people don't have one baby daddy. I think they really show that well with Fikile and Puleng's story, where they have two different dads. The mom knew she had another baby daddy for Fikile and said nothing to nobody … Until she felt, oh no, my daughter is basically on the brink of death. I should tell people. I feel like so much pressure is put on her. It's not that she wanted to hide it; it's more like she had to. The play on that … having more than one baby daddy is made for people of colour, so black people are upper to middle class. I also feel like this becomes too stereotypical, although it's made for us. The show did great to show cheating, multiple baby daddies to being groomed to become gang members. It's not true because it degrades black people.* (Participant 3, Session 3).

These contesting opinions raise essential questions regarding the interpretations of representation on screen. The responses highlight the complexities of balancing what the series reflects in authentic narratives, including narratives that do not reinforce stereotypical generalisations. While this perspective acknowledges that the media's purpose is to provide entertainment, it also raises questions about the implications of such portrayals. Relationships, whether family, romantic or platonic, are consistently framed as flawed and superficial in all three spheres of on-screen relationships, leading to unrealistic expectations of relationships and distortion of reality. If such portrayals are over-romanticised, they evoke unrealistic expectations; however, the continuous portrayal of dysfunctional families, flawed relationships and mistrust can also normalise teenagers' low or even lacking expectations of ever having stable, trusting relationships.

Both series display relationships − whether romantic, familial or platonic − as rooted in cycles of co-dependency, toxicity and dysfunction. As relationships are a central element of

adolescents' identity, the cycles of conflict and reconciliation create a distorted reality of what healthy relationships should constitute, as most of the presentations of relationships are portrayed in a negative setting. Research has shown that media depictions of love, while exaggerated, can lead to unrealistic expectations of romance as a result of the distorted and sensationalised display on the screen (Rivadeneyra and Lebo, 2008; Hefner and Wilson, 2013; Galloway, Engstrom and Emmers-Sommer, 2015). This portrayal extends beyond the depictions of romantic relationships and is also seen within familial and peer interactions. While parents and family are the first sites of socialisation (Berger and Luckmann, 1991; Balleys, 2015 in Balleys et al., 2015), this changes to friends and peers who act as sites of identity and recognition for teens. However, as examined above, both sites in screen media are normalised to toxic, unsupportive and dysfunctional relationships.

Given these significant portrayals, it is essential to consider how much of these narratives are relatable to teen viewers. The next chapter will explore how teens engage with screen narratives, focusing on the relatability of these portrayals. It will explore how and why teens resonate with these media texts, offering insight into participants' acceptance, rejection, and interpretation of content. This exploration will shed light on how teens navigate and make meaning from screen portrayals, therefore providing insight into participants' consumption practices.

Chapter 9 Reel Vs Real: Teen Relatability to *Blood* (2020) And *Euphoria* (2019)

This chapter examines how Gen Z navigates the intersection of global and local narratives in exploring their reliability to both media texts. It becomes evident that relatability is not only about representation but also about the authentic feel of narratives. While *Euphoria* (2019) resonates with participants due to its raw portrayal of universal struggles, *Blood* (2020)'s narrative is overshadowed by the Westernised framing, which raises concerns about the dominance of Western narratives and cultural imperialism in media. By interrogating how participants make meaning and negotiate representations on screen with their own realities, the analysis explores how media functions as both a site for critique and resonation for participants as they navigate being South African teens with varying media sources

Table 7: Relatability to Euphoria (2019) and Blood (2020)

Series	**Frequency**	**Relatable factors**
Euphoria (2019)	9	Realistic teenage issues, relationships, drug use, eating disorders, peer pressure, mental health representation, diverse identities and characters
Blood and Water (2020)	4	South African culture, characters around the same age, educational aspects, family dynamics, socioeconomic factors: affordability of school fees

Table 7 reveals that, firstly, *Euphoria* (2019) resonates more with participants because the series presents universal[5] topics such as mental health, identity, and relationship struggles. Participants generally believe these aspects are represented well and consider them to be authentic and relatable despite some of the more dramatised scenes in the show. Participants elaborated that they felt the show of raw intensity in capturing emotion, betrayal, and the highs and lows of experiences were particular points of resonation.

In contrast, *Blood* (2020) resonates with other participants because the series represents familiarity with the language and culture, as well as some mention of financial struggles and family issues. These findings underscore the tension between global and local authenticity in

[5] The term universal refers to globally recognised tropes commonly shown in media narratives.

the production of series – a pivotal aspect to explore more in relation to media socialisation and its influence on teen perception in general, which will be explored more below.

Gen Z Navigating Global and Local Narratives

Given that 9 out of 13 (69%) participants found *Euphoria* (2019) more relatable to *Blood* (2020), it reveals a concerning reality that local productions are failing to capture the complexities of contemporary South African youth experiences Rather than challenging global production, South African media systems appear to conform to Western portrayals, therefore actively contributing to the dilution of narratives.

Participants raise interesting points, particularly with how influential Western media and narratives can be in creating an idealised image and lifestyle that many South Africans are not accustomed to. An observation by Teer-Tomilson (1991) explains that this can be interpreted as a form of cultural imperialism. While these influences can be subtle, Participant 3's statement critiques how, even in *Blood* (2020), western philosophies of equality and homogenisation are often imposed on newer South African narratives, thereby diluting the existing diverse narratives.

> *You can see, even like in Blood and Water … that these kids go to these schools, which makes it look attainable, but it is not. We can't all go to Parkhurst High or have it easy. You can see that they added Western philosophy to the story. They made it seem like we could just easily live that life. You're shifting Western societies onto us. Like with Skeem Saam and Generations, it was more realistic. But in South Africa, in film, we can see there are shifts to allow a colonised gaze. They make us seem like everyone else, but because of the fact that we were colonised, like the ethnic cleansing ritual of black people, I've never seen in Blood and Water any African ritual being practised. The only thing was the language barrier. You don't see heritage. Chris's house always has a party, but never a braai. Things like that can shift philosophies. We seem Westernised … like we want to fit into the Western world.* (Participant 3, Session 1).

Participant 3's statement reveals a critical gap in *Blood* and Water (2020) that beyond the visible markers of culture like language diversity, the show lacks representation of local

traditional practices, cultural references and everyday South African customs such as a braai. This contributes to narratives being framed through a Westernised (or rather American) lens. This absence underscores the integrity of local narratives and marginalises the richness of South African heritage Her critique resonates with scholars such as Lobato (2009), and Fischer (2022:190), who also emphasise how African media's success can only exist within the parameters of Western ideals rather than authentic local South African experiences. While it is important not to demonise these influences, it is equally important to understand the generalisation and impact of narratives produced, which can dilute or obscure local narratives in favour of global norms.

Furthermore, as Tengeh and Udoakpan (2021) argue, the profound effects of globalisation in South African landscapes have led to increased availability of a diverse range of content but has also facilitated the emergence of new cultural references, social norms, and identity constructions that reflect the hybridisation of global and local influences. These 'new' references reflect the localised and globalised emergence from screen media, known as 'glocalisation'. Participant 3's response demonstrates the concept of glocalisation in her recognition of the omission of the general South African lifestyle being represented. While reality may be reflected on screen for some, such as Participant 5 and Participant 12, who comment that they felt represented in terms of the money aspect, growing up as a privileged black South African, for most participants in this study, it reveals the failure to capture the general essence of being an ordinary South African. Rao (2011:518) cautions that while globalisation's influence does impact local productions, it is important to recognise that media and society, in general, are ever-changing, and so what is considered as 'local' will be influenced by external factors shaping contemporary culture.

Participant 4's statement reflects some of Participant 3's sentiments and observes how South African TV shows, including *Blood* (2020), often overcompensate by trying to glamourise a lifestyle to gain more engagement. This can be seen in how Showmax productions equate success to just wealth and social status as Hollywood does (Wang, Jetten and Steffens, 2020).

> *I definitely feel like Western media has a big influence over Africa, not just South African TV shows, but all of them. South Africa's shows try to be relatable and quirky and appeal to younger viewers. They have that Western influence, houses that are big, fancy schools, which is not real. You don't really see how anything actually is; everything is glamourised on TV. I don't want South Africa to think that drug use in*

> *Euphoria is glamourised because it is real. At the same time, they show the highs of drug use; they also show how it affects Rue's family and relationships. But in terms of Blood and Water, like them going out, the things they do are very glamourised, which is obviously influenced by other TV shows. 90% of South African TV shows do that. Look at Showmax; it's very much based on American shows.* (Participant 4, Session 1).

International series, such as *Euphoria* (2019), often assume the baseline of accessibility and privilege that does not align with the working-class realities worldwide. While the show presents some characters as economically struggling, such as Maddy and Cassie, who come from low-income homes, they live quite indulgent lives, whether through their access to parties, designer clothes or even healthcare. Financial struggle is aestheticised rather than fully interrogated as a genuine struggle. For example, Cassie from *Euphoria* (2019) is shown to be from a single-income household with an alcoholic mother. Despite this, she is able to afford access to a sterile, functional hospital (one can assume this is a private hospital, given its appearance) when she goes for her abortion. The show ignores the reality of the affordability of medical care. This is also evident in other shows, which participants mentioned in an earlier discussion in this chapter, such as *Sex Education* (2019), where participants discuss Maeve and her being able to afford an abortion without any problems despite her living in a trailer park and having no money. These portrayals overlook the financial and logistical barriers to medical care that many working classes individuals face.

While *Blood* (2020) alludes to the issues of affordability, the real impact is barely acknowledged and explored. For example, despite Puleng's working-class background, she is a learner at an elite school where wealth is the standard. Little attention is given to how Puleng would have to sustain her place in such an expensive institution regarding financial requirements for schoolbooks, sports uniforms, and so forth. Even so, within her narrative, the acts of rebellion, stealing out of her mother's wallet, leaving the house in the middle of an argument with her mother to simply take an Uber illustrates why there is a lack of resonation with some participants' feelings towards *Blood* (2020). *Euphoria* (2019) presents privilege as invisible, while *Blood* (2020) alludes to it but does not fully explore such topics therefore *Blood* (2020) appears glamourised and positioned to be like Western narratives that have similar actions embedded within their narratives.

Participant 3 followed up and refined her perspective by acknowledging the factors such as target market or demographic that influence the production of these series and the industry's decisions. However, she maintains that cultural references have become tokenised rather than fully integrated into storytelling.

> *Looking back, I see my flaw in what I said. In Blood and Water, the film industry wants to obtain a specific target market and demographic that will link back to those who understand the show. The use of traditions in SA could switch the narrative. Okay, we have one character who embraces tradition. You can't use one or two people in a 40-minute episode to make it culturally relevant.* (Participant 3, Session 1).

Participant 10, however, cautions and offers a contrasting perspective, arguing that overemphasis creates inauthenticity. She believes that South Africans do not constantly reinforce their cultural identity and acknowledgement thereof, and doing so in a show could lead to performative representation and tokenism:

> *What tends to happen is that people overdo things, like if they consistently show culture and stuff. No one really walks around school with African beads or walks around saying, 'I'm coloured, I'm coloured'. There's a fine line between inclusivity and overdoing it.* (Participant 10, Session 1).

Both perspectives raise valid points about the complexities of representation on screen, which draws attention to global platforms such as Netflix that produce African narratives. While the platforms have the soft power to shape perceptions worldwide and educate audiences about diverse experiences in South Africa, they are also faced with the pressure to balance authenticity with global relatability. Cultural relatability goes beyond mere representation. It also intersects with race, class and social norms, shaping subjective audience reception and engagement.

In a later session, Participant 3 expands on this concept in the second focus group session (Appendix B) when discussing the representations of narratives on screen. She highlights how cultural backgrounds influence interpretations of screen narratives, especially regarding privilege and race. However, she also makes assumptions about white teenagers' normalisation of drugs and sex, a strongly opinionated comment driven by her own experiences:

> *I feel like with shows like this, they are very subjective. When I talk to my white friends about it, it's all okay with their parents. It's relevant to cultural backgrounds. It's normal, but they would feel limitations with friends or people of colour. White people normalise drug addiction and having sex. These types of shows are more relatable to them. Look at Blood and Water; as a Grade 11 student, you can't just jump out of the window of the house. It's not regular or will happen in a black environment. I mean, I know white people who party any time; people come up to me and say they went to this club. It is a normalised culture on their side. If you look at the black perspective, it's more like, we can talk about this, but there's also a particular line or boundary. I know with my cultural upbringing and norms; we don't normalise things like that.* (Participant 3, Session 2).

Participant 12 followed up by including how in general, even when narratives are being presented, they are severely underexplored also as a viewer you do not see the gaps in the plot until later

> These shows often, they cut out so many important plots, which, at the time, while you're watching the show, you wouldn't think of these things until, later when you're discussing it, like right now. (Participant 12, session 2). T

This comment raises important reflections regarding the internalisation of complex or controversial representations on screen and how teens negotiate these representations with their knowledge of their known truths. The tendency to omit crucial details speaks to the broader pattern in serialised screen media where repetitive themes and condensed storytelling often prioritise fast-paced narratives to capture audience's attention over depth which is reflected in most on-demand platforms (Forni,2020)

Participant 3 and Participant 12's response reflects the concept of 'grobalisation', a term coined by Ritzer (2007), which, according to Matusitz and Palermo (2014:93), refers to the rapid

expansion of cultural products at the expense of local traditions. While international platforms may strive to extend their production sites and harness their creativity in other spaces, the issue remains that general local nuances are often omitted; therefore, narratives are viewed as superficial. Although Participant 3's statement is subjective in some parts, it also reveals the complexities of being a South African teen, where wealth disparities, racial differences in upbringing, and gendered restrictions influence how young individuals navigate their social spaces.

This aligns with Olofsson, Öhman, and Nygren's (2016) findings in risk theory, which argue that risk is a socially constructed concept shaped by the environmental, geographic, and social spaces. These inform how risk is perceived and potentially emulated. Participant 3's statement reflects this sentiment, illustrating how the intersection of privilege and risk is often influenced by factors such as class, race, and gender, which are frequently overlooked and underrepresented in mainstream media. This omission becomes more apparent in the responses by Participant 11 and Participant 8 as they reveal some insights into gender disparities and family influence faced by South African teens. Participant 11, for instance, in the first session mentions a personal experience of going to these 'parties' that TV shows and states that the protective parents' roles are not shown in media, alluding to the influence of grobilisation.

> *I told my parents that I wanted to go to some party at like 10 p.m., and it was like 30 minutes away, and my dad would say, 'Okay, let's go. I want you to see what these parties are like and how far we have to come."* (Participant 11, Session 1).

Participant 8 equally shifts the conversation to include how such experiences are not typical, especially for girls. She points out that the gender disparity is not acknowledged in the media, as she exemplifies Puleng's actions in comparison to her own.

> *For girls, you need to be protected. I know in December, I lied, and said I was going to a friend's house. I ended up at a house party by … everything, and I'm glad I was safe. Looking back, I can see how many things could have gone wrong. If I had not been the responsible one, compared to how my friends came out, things could have gone very differently. But it's a fact that I feel the measures for girls are extreme sometimes. On TV, they don't show that. They don't show parents shouting. I mean, Puleng ran out of the house in Blood and Water while her mother was shouting at her. If I had done that,*

> *a slipper would have been thrown at me. So, the reality does not really match.* (Participant 8, Session 1).

The general perception is that despite media texts' pervasive influence on teens, there is a critical awareness of what distinguishes scripted TV from real-life experiences. Participant 8's reflection reveals two things: gender difference and teen autonomy are central themes that shape how adolescents perceive and engage with freedom, risk, and social expectations. Participant 8's reference to Puleng running out of the house mid-argument with her mother reflects an implausible reality for many teens worldwide. The increasing statistics of kidnapping, human trafficking, and rape is a worldwide concern that is completely overlooked. Next, Participant 8's reflection reveals a paradox in society: while precautions or restrictions are placed within societal and family constructs for young women with the intent for safety, this also creates a greater attraction to activities. This notion is supported by scholars such as Smith, Chein, and Steinberg (2014), Seabrook et al. (2017), and Vannucci et al. (2020), who reveal that prevention and restraint increase the likelihood of emulation as teens attempt to navigate both social pressures and parental constraints. This critique asserts a need for representation to engage with complexities rather than omit them.

The insights from participants reveal a rich tapestry of information on how teens watch shows and their opinions about the presentation of risky behaviour and relationships that most feel are presented without consequence and are not a true reflection of reality. While these responses are reflected through the sessions and not in a singular session, it reveals the unfiltered thoughts of teens as they engage with each other and reflect on their own lives and experiences.

The concluding remarks in the third session included a very important question raised by Participant 10 in their reflections on South African TV shows.

> *The question I have is, do you watch the right shows? I mean, Skeem Saam shows real life, especially with a middle-class person. So, to answer the question, I do believe that they represent real life. I love that show so much. It shows different aspects of everyone's lives, whether it's corruption, cheating, rape. It's not dramatic. It happens as it happens in real life.* (Participant 10, Session 3).

Skeem Saam (2011) emerges in the discussion as a show that rejects the Westernised representation of South Africans and offers a realistic portrayal of South African youth culture.

Despite the influence of globalisation and the rejection of a Westernised narrative, the show remains popular with some Gen Zs, as local realities are presented authentically. An example of this can be seen in the representation of relationships, where female characters engaging with older men are treated as a social problem and are not glamourised as in *Blood* (2020). These insights highlight how South African media can resist the Westernisation of youth narratives, but the key factor impacting these texts lies in their production. *Skeem Saam* (2011) is produced by South Africans for a local audience, ensuring the narrative is grounded, while, as reflected in an earlier chapter in this report, production sites such as Netflix and HBO are influenced by a mixture of local trends and universal themes to resonate with a local audience.

Participant 10 underscores an important observation highlighting how it is important to consider the production aspect when reflecting on TV shows because even if shows are produced in South Africa, it still need to hold global interest, not just local.

> *If you watch something on Netflix, it's romanticised. They want the whole world to be interested, not just South Africans. Most South African shows are played on DSTV, and we see that Love Moja; they go into community issues, but like I said, if you watch something on Disney Plus or whatever, it won't be the same. People involved in the creation are not just South Africans.* (Participant 10, Session 3).

Participant 10's observations align with the broader discussions on the effect of globalisation on media production, supporting Aykaç's (2021) critique of how globalisation has led to the dominance of Western storytelling formats. Global marketability is a factor that heavily influences production and so will inherently shape how youth relate to or reject these narratives. This disparity reinforces the subtle influence of cultural imperialism as the global reach positions Western media as a benchmark for authentic youth experiences (Tomlinson,1991). Participant 4 and Participant 10's statements reflect the 'dominance' Aykaç (2021) mentions that the creation of narratives by non-South Africans not only reflects a Western narrative structure and plot but also a lack of cultural depth and nuances. Participants reiterated this throughout the discussion when discussing their preference for *Euphoria* (2019), saying that the combination of Western aesthetics, such as glamourised settings, lifestyles and even characters' actions, dilutes the narrative, making it difficult to engage with the *Blood* (2020).

The varying perspectives participants share display the tensions between globally produced series and local ones. While participants do not explicitly comment on why they do not relate to some of the South African TV series, their sentiments are alluded to that shows aimed at South Africans do not just involve teen characters as Western shows do. Teenagers exist and are heavily influenced by society and family, something most participants feel overshadows the experiences of being a teenager. Even so with the varying disparities and dissonance seen on screen, Participant 12 concludes the session by noting that regardless of the media text, media engagement is purely subjective.

> *I do believe they do. It depends on the generation. I'm thinking of Yizo Yizo. My Moms and grandmothers generations could relate to a lot of what was shown on that show. Like my grandmother was a teacher so she said a lot of what happened in there, happened in real-life. But obviously not every TV show will be relatable to every kind of teenager. So, it's very subjective* (Participant 12, session 3)

These insights underscore the difficulties production sites face in balancing genuine and authentic narrations while still appealing to the demand for entertainment by a diverse audience. Gen Z's relationship with media is multifaceted. While they exhibit autonomy in content selection, their behaviours and perceptions are still socialised through the cultivation effects, such as ideas and beliefs through the narratives they consume. The findings in this chapter contribute to the growing discourse on media influence in non-western contexts, emphasising the importance of interrogating media texts produced to understand the values , ideologies and beliefs imparted., Ultimately, this reflection of responses from participants reinforces the central focus of this study, which is to explore what attracts teens to media texts and what they learn from them.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how Gen Z South African teenagers engage with risk-related (forbidden fruit) portrayals in local -*Blood* (2020)-and international TV narratives -*Euphoria* (2019). The study provides a unique perspective by going beyond just a content analysis of existing literature and media texts but interrogates this phenomenon through the contributions of teen participants to gather their unfiltered insights and attitudes towards contemporary media representations and their relation to it. While the forbidden fruit effect can warrant a broad spectrum of behaviours and attitudes, this study aims to understand the interpretations of teens on risk behaviour and relationships in general. Given the general lack of research about teen viewing habits and perceptions of risk on screen, the first focus group session (Appendix A) examines the type of content, viewing habits and practices of teens to understand some of the factors that contribute to teens' preference and choice to watch certain shows as Chapter 5 outlines.

Chapter 5 illustrates the broad range of content teens watch, which is facilitated by their accessibility to various platforms and devices. Participants reveal their exposure to the series mainly through peer and family recommendations and increasingly through social media clickbait. These responses demonstrate the significant influence of TV that extends beyond just watching a show but one that becomes embedded in daily conversation at home, school and through viral trends shown on secondary screens such as TikTok. The viewing habits of teens also reveal how initial socialisation practices are driven by family influence, and viewing practices remain an important influence on their tastes and interests.

Participants reveal how their parents would allow them to watch what they were watching when they were younger, regardless of the type of shows. Eventually, as they grew up, they would watch shows privately and openly discuss what they watched with their parents. Surprisingly, quite a few participants mentioned that *Euphoria* (2019) is also watched by their parents and that, in some cases, it was recommended by their parents as they believed this would be a good learning tool. These responses reveal an interesting shift in attitude between generations, illustrating how media can sometimes fill the gap and foster discussion and intergenerational relatability rather than just be considered a negative influence.

Participants in this study are primarily under the age of 17, and their engagement with these shows indicates an interest in mature themes. Participants admitted that, at times, they felt they related to characters and issues presented within both shows, supporting Qolbi et al. (2022) argument that viewers relate to the narratives, characterisation and issues on screen as they see parts of themselves reflected.

The study could not cover the scope of specificity of 'what draws teens in' to these shows aside from the few insights participants mention, such as the aesthetics, representation of issues and narratives. Therefore, to further explore this, future research should study gratification theory in conjunction with both forums − television and secondary screens −to understand how and why teens engage with specific content. In their engagement with content, participants' responses also reflect Hall's (2007) decoding framework, as some adopt a dominant reading, accepting narratives as intended by producers; others use a negotiated reading to interpret elements based on personal experience selectively; meanwhile, others engage in oppositional reading, rejecting the producers' intended message entirely.

The second focus group session (Appendix B) reveals the three most significant risk behaviours identified by participants in TV shows, which are drug abuse, alcohol abuse and sex, which I have classified as substance use in Chapter 6 and sexual behaviour in Chapter 7. Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 highlight how substance use, and sex are equally presented as alluring and inviting rather than as destructive for teens. This is shown through the excessive amount of drinking, drug use and unsafe and dangerous sexual relationships and entanglements that young teens engage in. Participants noted that while some depictions attempt to show the negative consequences that are attached to engaging in these behaviours, the overall framing and aestheticisation of the activities diminish the perceived severity of harm and instead portray indulgence and addiction as a lifestyle choice rather than an issue of concern.

The study challenges the assumption that media effects are universally internalised in the same way and argues that interpretation is shaped by social, cultural, and generational contexts that are unique to teens Therefore .it is essential to consider how vital framing is in constructing narratives, as these serve as sites for accepting and rejecting narratives (Monaghan, n.d). Participants admit that they are drawn to emulate some risk-related activities, ranging from theft to sneaking out to having multiple sexual partners and even to murder and arson. Participants use the words "curiosity," "desire," or "having intrusive thoughts" when they

discuss the possibility of emulation, revealing how these images of representation on screen can have a lasting impact; however, most participants admit that fear of consequence is a significant deterrent for them. Others admitted to experimenting with substances driven by a combination of what they had seen on TV and in real life but admitted that these experiences were underwhelming. The responses gathered in this session reveal the influence that narratives can have as TV can mirror youth culture while simultaneously functioning as active agents of socialisation, influencing individual perceptions and broader generational trends (Ferreira, 2016). Even though the emulation of these behaviours is limited, the sample size only represents a small percentage of teenagers, suggesting that further research is needed to understand the broader impact.

Chapter 8 shifts the focus to relationships (Appendix C) on screen as they play a crucial role in shaping norms, behaviour, and expectations. Most participants acknowledge that the representations of romantic, familial, or friendly relationships on the screen are equally dramatised, just as substance use and sexual relationships are. Participants, in particular, critique the way sex remains a central aspect of relationships and that within these sexual scripts, there is rarely any depiction of real-life consequences of engaging in promiscuity or even unsafe sexual practices. While it is unclear whether these narratives influenced these teens' socialisation practices, teen participants were able to identify patterns of toxicity and dysfunctionality within different relationship formats, and their responses once more reiterated that they enjoy the 'drama' created by these narratives. Both media texts present three common themes in their representation of substance use, sex, and relationships, which are that these are glamorised, normalised and positioned as common mechanisms for teens. The visual and textual analysis and the participants' insights reveal that despite the producers' intention to create realistic narratives, these portrayals often do not match reality and usually ignore crucial factors such as race, class and social divides in their narratives, which most participants felt strongly about.

Building on the exploration of toxicity and dramatised narratives, Chapter 9 focuses on how teens relate to these shows. Most of the participants resonated with Global North narratives because they explored universal themes of mental health, identity, and sexuality, as opposed to local narratives that tend to concentrate on societal problems. The focus group sessions uncovered that *Blood* (2020) and *Euphoria* (2019) were profoundly relatable, albeit in different ways. *Euphoria* (2019) offered universally relatable themes, such as identity, sexuality, and the

intricate facts of relationships, on screen, which resonated with some participants. *Blood* and Water (2020) resonated with others in the display of being a local drama that displayed the complexities of underlying racial and societal dynamics, generational trauma, and cultural authenticity. Participants generally resonated more with *Euphoria* (2019) than *Blood* (2020), discussing how the narrative is much more engaging and explores controversial topics like mental health, navigating gender, and addiction compared to *Blood* (2020), which participants felt is only relevant because it has teens in South Africa. *Blood* (2020) was found to be unrealistic primarily because of the storyline and the lack of cultural nuances often present in South African TV shows.

These insights revealed the gap in Netflix's production, where global narratives and local authenticity tend to clash. Participants' critique reveals their dissatisfaction with the lack of authenticity in these shows as they highlight Western influences - free from the common problems faced by South Africans—an acknowledgement of structural and functionalist concerns of inequalities, gendered differences, and racial stereotypes that still exist in a contemporary South African society. Meanwhile, other participants argued that *Blood* (2020), as the director Dumisa mentioned, shows the elite of South Africa a more nuanced approach than the "same old" narrative. Equally, others felt that while representation is essential, it is equally necessary to avoid tokenising culture as, in reality, cultural reference and inference are not communicated or shown as much as what local shows claim.

While parents, peers and media texts are major influencers that shape adolescents' behaviour and the potential deviation of such behaviour, the collective effect of these influencers has not been studied holistically. The current research highlights the lack of research about the role of television and streaming platforms in potentially influencing and shaping teens' perceptions of reality and behaviour. Teenagers' exposure to content cannot always be mediated, so teaching critical literacy and facilitating open discussions prevents teens from seeking answers within complex narratives embedded with stereotypes, misinformation and glamourised performance. Scholars such as García-Muñoz and Fedele (1988), Van Damme and Van Bauwel (2013), Wee (2016), and Wilks (2019) assert that conversations and critical reflections are imperative in the development and understanding of teens, yet this remains unexplored within general literature. Additionally, this calls attention to media production platforms. Despite the visible content warnings and recommended restrictions, these shows feature teen-centred narratives where

teen characters navigate these narratives. It is essential to consider what these representations could mean for teens.

The research study contributes to the gap in the literature by examining the influence of popular TV shows with mature adult themes on South African teenagers to gather insights about the perspective on the representation of both local and international narratives. As media continues to evolve, so must society's approach to understanding its effect on audiences, especially adolescents. The research is predisposed to some limitations, such as the fact that this study's small sample size restricts broader generalisations of the survey to teens in a South African society. Next, the gender composition of the sample, which is predominantly female, with one transgender participant and one male participant, offers a narrow lens to analyse gendered perspectives about gender disparities on screen.

Next, as mentioned, the research included only private school learners, so the interrogations of privilege and wealth brought up in the focus group could not be fully explored. However, the research required this school setting and type of learners as they are most likely to have access and exposure to a greater range of international narratives. The study explores how South African Gen Z engages with risk-related portrayals within narratives, which reveals that while some narratives are glamorised and dramatised, the interpretation of these texts is subjective to the participant's experiences. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insight into contemporary South African teen engagement with risk-related portrayals in media. Therefore, the research challenges existing media to revisit the influence of TV narratives and interrogate what the long-term effects are on teens to the exposure of such narratives.

This study contributes to the growing discourse on media influence in non-western contexts, emphasising the importance of interrogating media texts produced. While the research provides valuable insights, it also raises important questions for future studies to explore, particularly regarding the role of secondary screens, parental mediation and the narrative being produced that encourages rather than cautions adolescents about risk behaviour and relationship constructions on screen.

Previous research largely centralises Northern teen audiences as a point of reference for understanding the influence of media effects. This study fills a significant gap by offering a South African perspective, revealing that future research must address the growing gap in teen studies worldwide. An interdisciplinary approach is encouraged to examine the psychological,

sociological and contextual nuances contributing to teen identity and behaviour. As Gen Z continues to engage with more mature themes and products of unmediated content, it raises a critical question: Do teens possess the necessary critical literacy skills to navigate the sensationalised proliferation of images in media? Or are they merely positioned as mature and capable to do so?

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