

Revisiting Viewers' Experiences with a Television Narrative Representing Depression in a Pandemic era of Increased Media Consumption & Mental Health Concern

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Introduction: During this current pandemic, people are consuming more media across all platforms and mediums. According to Nielsen (2020), weekly time spent watching connected TVs grew by more than one billion hours as the weeks of nationwide shelter-in-place and stay at home orders passed. A rise in mental health issues such as anxiety and depression are increasing as people are isolated during this difficult time. An April 2020 Kaiser Foundation survey found 45 percent of adults in the United States reported that the pandemic has affected their mental health, with 19 percent saying it has had a “major impact.” The pandemic has also illuminated certain inequities within the U.S. healthcare system where minority groups see greater impact of illness and mortality due to COVID-19 (CDC, 2020). These inequities are also apparent in mental health treatment. Compared to White individuals, Black individuals are more likely to be affected by depression, have more severe symptoms, and be less likely to seek out treatment (Pratt & Brody, 2014). These findings and statistics prompted a revisiting to a 2019 study on viewers experiences in meaning-making with the TV narrative of *A Million Little Things*, a primetime drama with storylines centered around mental health including suicide, grief, and depression. The representation of one character in particular, that of Rome, a Black male who attempted suicide and subsequently sought treatment for his depression resonated with respondents of various different demographics. Given the interconnection of the rise in media consumption and mental health concern nationally, stories that represent mental health and portray seeking treatment and care can be particularly important.

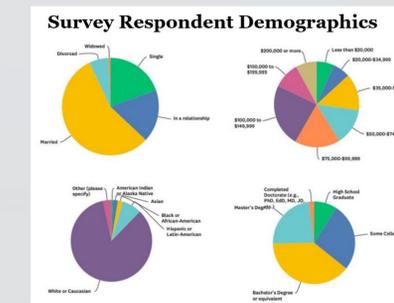


Younger men of color who report daily feelings of depression or anxiety are also less likely to take medication or talk to a mental health professional compared to their white peers (Pratt & Brody, 2014).

Findings: In all, 239 respondents passed the screening questions of the survey and 154 respondents answered the quantitative Likert scale questions. Over 130 respondents shared their own experiences in connecting with *A Million Little Things*’ themes and storylines through the qualitative short answers. Participants responded as female (85%), married (56%), and 72% watched the show alone. They ranged in age from 18-72 with an average age of 37. About three quarters of the respondents (n=154) agreed that they were searching for meaning, purpose, and significance in their lives. In reference to the show, about 50% of the respondents (n=154) strongly agreed that the show was meaningful, thought provoking, and they felt moved by the show. About half of the participants agreed somewhat or strongly that the show makes them think about themselves and helps them understand others. Sixty percent agreed that the show inspires them to think about important issues. Respondents that skipped the personal qualitative questions gravitated to the storylines, unfolding mystery, plot twists, writing, acting, and music. Even respondents that did not find the show to be personally relevant, they noted that the show was a good reminder of the importance of friends and family or a good form of escapism. The few detractors of the show felt there was too much or unrealistic drama, or ended up not liking a character. They were hooked enough by the story, though, to watch most of the first season. Only three stated they were not planning on watching Season 2 while 98% of respondents reported that did intend to watch the next season.

“The character Rome - his experience with depression mirrored mine so much even though I’m a woman who is half white. I was able to show members of my family what it felt like to be me by asking them to watch it with me. It sparked a much-needed discussion.”

Discussion: While this survey collected data in the months prior to the onset of the global pandemic, the findings show the importance of diverse media representations and also representation of mental health topics with positive outcomes. This is particularly important in an environment of increased television/media viewership. This study uncovered thoughts and sentiments that the representation of people who identify differently than the survey respondents, is effective and important. Rome’s struggles were seen as helpful to Black viewers because they could relate or identify. One Black female commented that the show was “the most accurate” description of depression she had seen and it resonated strongly with her because she too struggles with depression. A Black male felt that the show made him become more available to his friends.



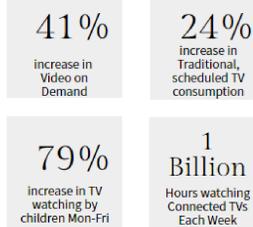
[Click here to view the A Million Little Things PSA for Suicide Prevention](#)

While representation of people of color and different ethnicities is important to individuals in those diverse groups to be able to see themselves, it is also important for majority groups as well. Several participants commented that they could relate to Rome’s struggles even though they were demographically different. They were able to relate to mental health issues regardless of racial and gender differences and relate on various levels of experiences of pain and emotional struggle. The representation of Rome was helpful to one respondent, who commented that even though she was widely different from Rome, and identified as a White/Mexican/Japanese female, she was able to use Rome’s situation as a springboard of representation of mental health struggle, disclosure and conversation with her family. In summary, in times of physical distance and increased media consumption, positive connection to TV narrative can provide meaningful connection.

“I have struggled with depression my whole life and have been suicidal, but when Rome says “It’s not that I don’t want to live. I don’t want to live like this” hit me right in the spot because it’s exactly how I feel. The ups and downs of depression are one of the hardest things to deal with and knowing that you will deal with it for the rest of your life is a harder pill to swallow.”

“As someone who suffers from depression, Rome has strongly resonated with me. It’s the most accurate to my life description of depression I’ve seen.”

Worldwide TV Content Consumption February 1-April 30, 2020



Source: Mirada data & Nielsen Global Media

Methods: A mixed methods survey of Likert scales, open-ended questions, and demographic questions was developed utilizing SurveyMonkey. The survey titled “A Million Little Things: Viewer Perspectives on Narrative & Meaning-Making,” was posted to social media fan sites and discussion boards through Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit using the hashtag #amillionlittletings, which is the official hashtag promoted by the show and its network. To better understand how viewers derive meaning from their viewership of *A Million Little Things*, the Search for Meaning in Life subscale from the Meaning in Life questionnaire (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006), Eudaimonic Appreciation Scale (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010), and Bartsch’s (2012) Reflective Thoughts Scale were used in addition to open-ended questions specific to the show’s themes and relevance to life. The survey was open and collected data from August 10 – September 26, 2019 prior to the start of the show’s second season. Data was collected, stored, and aggregated by SurveyMonkey. The research team utilized SPSS, MAXQDA, and manual coding tactics to interpret the results.