

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rationale

The HBO series *Euphoria* (2019) depicts a transgender character named Jules, who struggles with gender stereotypes in an attempt to come to terms with her gender identity. Through the depth and complexity of her character development, Jules is written to be a significant representation of gender stereotype resistance. *Euphoria* itself follows the story of a group of high school students who struggle with problems revolving around drugs, relationships, and traumas that connect directly with their mental health. This series displays the premises of its characters explicitly, showing their problems in an emotional and provocative way.

TV series that include topics regarding mental health have their own concept on how people with mental disorders are portrayed. However, there are certain nuances that could lead to misunderstandings on how viewers perceive actual mental health issues. While exaggerating is justifiable for dramatic purposes, depiction of mental disorders should still be handled responsibly to prevent overgeneralization. In *Euphoria*, mental health conditions are displayed in every character as a part of their daily life. Symptoms of mental disorders are presented bluntly through narrations and subtly through actions. An analysis on structure and narratology are required to further discern how *Euphoria* depicts mental health issues.

Another topic highlighted in this series is gender, which is indirectly convoluted with the topic of sexuality. The most noticeable character that struggles with issues related to gender is Jules. The representation of transgenders in films and TV series are important since they are rarely portrayed in popular media. Moreover, the actress who plays the role of Jules, Hunter Schafer, is actually a transgender woman. Transgender characters in popular shows are mostly played by cisgender actors, which is deemed problematic since they cannot accurately depict the experience of actual trans women and takes work away from actual trans actresses (Reitz, 2017).

Jules' identity as a trans woman was not initially disclosed by the series in an explicit way, but in a more understated way. As the story progresses, she is indicated to be struggling with gender conformity after transitioning. During her time settling with her new gender, Jules deals with gender stereotypes which conflicts her view in performing her own identity. By the beginning of Season Two, *Euphoria* shows a shift in Jules' personality that implies character development. In order to recognize how *Euphoria* views gender and sexuality, this extensive portrayal of a teenage trans woman character will be studied.

Euphoria itself is an adaptation of אופוריה (read Oforia), an Israeli teen drama TV series created by Ron Leshem in 2012. The original *Euphoria* has a similar plot and characters with HBO's *Euphoria* where each character is associated with various mental health conditions and the main protagonist struggles with drug addiction. Several alterations concerning characterization and intercharacter relationships were made in HBO's *Euphoria*. These changes were applied most likely to adapt with issues more relevant to United States teenagers in late 2010s rather than Israeli teenagers in early 2010s.

Euphoria raises the newer concepts of mental health and gender which are relevant to the current young generation. These topics, accompanied with an immersive plot and a distinctive style of cinematography, successfully appealed to a large number of viewers. The HBO series not only gained high ratings, but also received 25 nominations and 9 wins from Primetime Emmy Awards (Television Academy, n.d.). The depiction of mental health as a normal condition and gender as a performative expression challenges mainstream norms. As a result, this study will discuss how *Euphoria* represents issues regarding mental health and gender among teenagers through narratology, specifically through the character Jules Vaughn, thus evaluating *Euphoria*'s impact as a product of popular discourse.

1.2 Research Questions

The questions underlying this research are as follows:

1. How does *Euphoria* depict Jules' character development as a transgender woman?
2. How can *Euphoria*'s portrayal of Jules be regarded as an important representation of breaking gender stereotypes?

1.3 Research Objectives

This research aims to achieve objectives such as:

1. To break down the depiction of Jules' complex character development as a transgender woman in *Euphoria*.
2. To explain *Euphoria*'s portrayal of the character Jules and its role as an important representation of breaking gender stereotypes.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

To reach the objectives of this research, I will use the study by Cixous (1981) about sexism as a base of the analysis on traditional gender stereotypes. The research argued that the symbol of phallus is used as a subjectification of men and masculinity, leading to inequality and overgeneralization to both male and female genders. The paper by Spivak (1978) discusses how history has been focusing merely on men and putting women as a subaltern, surfacing the idea of a womanhood that does not center around men as an act of gender stereotype resistance.

With reference to Butler's (1988) argument on gender constitution as a social construct, I will observe how the queer theory interprets gender as a fluid concept. The idea that gender and its characterization are able to shift according to every individual's way of expressing it is visible in Jules' character development that I will discuss further in this research.

The narratological methods used in the series are mainly visual channels, including the actors' appearance, the actors' performance, and cinematography. TV series tend to have a progressive continuity instead of a definite closure at the end of each episode, establishing dynamic plotlines with higher structural complexity of individual episodes (Allrath et al., 2005) With this approach, I will examine how the

series depict mental health and gender identity, mainly through the character Jules, and how episodic format offers a room for the character to be amplified.

Other than narrative elements such as characterization and dialogues, the analysis on *Euphoria* will also be conducted from audiovisual approach, specifically freeze-frames. Referring to Chatman (1978), the detailed description in film only seems to occur when it actually "stops". The role of the narrator in presenting the story and the duration of every character's screen time are analyzed as well using the narrative theory by Genette (1980).

Along with all the frameworks mentioned above, this study continues further by analyzing the depiction of mental health and gender in the series, examining the representation of a trans woman character in a high school setting, and evaluating how the series became immensely popular, especially among teenagers, concurrently serving as an influential figure for gender stereotype resistance.