Article

Beyond the "Trans Fact"? Trans Representation in the Teen Series *Euphoria*: Complexity, Recognition, and Comfort

Maria-Jose Masanet [1], Rafael Ventura [2,*], and Eduard Ballesté [3]

[1] Faculty of Information and Audiovisual Media, University of Barcelona, Spain
[2] UPF Barcelona School of Management, Spain
[3] Faculty of Communication, Pompeu Fabra University, Spain

* Corresponding author (rafael.ventura@bsm.upf.edu)

Abstract
Recent anti-LGBTQ+ discourse has increased the threat of violence against people who do not follow the cisheteronormative mandates. To face these dialectics, the media can offer alternative discourses, in particular by providing realistic and non-stereotyped LGBTQ+ representations. Media portrayals can be seen as both positive and negative. On one hand, they may offer stereotypical and narrow representations, but on the other, they can include representations that can become aspirational models and improve visibility. The objective of this article is to explore this second perspective by analyzing the representation of Jules, a trans female character from the American series *Euphoria* (Levinson et al., 2019–present). To this end, we conducted a close reading analysis (Castelló, 2008) of the first season of the series. The results show three axes of representation that move away from the traditional portrayal of trans characters: (a) a narrative that moves beyond the "trans fact" and presents complex and plural stories, (b) a representation of the trans individual as an element of value and love, away from fetishism, and (c) a link between the trans realm and specific spaces of comfort and freedom.

Issue
This article is part of the issue "Promoting Social Inclusive Experiences in Uncertain Times" edited by Ana Belén Cano-Hila (University of Barcelona).

1. Introduction

In recent times, anti-LGBTQ+ violence has drastically intensified in most countries. Many consider that the growing popularity of the openly LGBTQ+-phobic far-right has led to an increase in hate crimes against the LGBTQ+ community, mainly fueled by their anti-LGBTQ+ discourse (Anarte, 2021; Korolczuk, 2020; Moreau, 2018; Reid, 2021).

In order to counteract these anti-human-rights dialectics, the media can serve as tools to offer alternative discourses, in particular by providing realistic and non-stereotyped LGBTQ+ representations. A broader and more diverse LGBTQ+ representation in media products can contribute to generating pedagogies that reduce social prejudice towards LGBTQ+ people and also offer aspirational models for them to identify with. TV series have the potential to help portray LGBTQ+ people in an everyday way.

From an evolutionary perspective, the media representation of LGBTQ+ people is understood as a process that has evolved through three main stages: invisibility (absence of representation, censorship, omission, underrepresentation, etc.), imperfect representation (stereotyping, only-negative representations, ridiculization, simplistic representations, stigmatizing portrayal, cliché-ridden, queerbaiting, etc.), and fair representation (effective representation, rich and multi-layered

portrayal, positive models, complex and realistic characters, diversity of roles and identities, etc.; see Ventura et al., 2019). It is important to note that these stages are not rigid categories of analysis, but rather a guiding classification that allows us to understand the complexities of the LGBTQ+ representation in the media. A media product could therefore fluctuate between two different stages depending on which elements of its representation are analyzed.

The inclusion of LGBTQ+ characters in fictional products has increased in recent decades, favoring a transition that has left behind the first stage of invisibility. The ingredient that marks the step towards the next stage is basically measured in quantitative values: the amount of LGBTQ+ characters included in media products. GLAAD, a media monitoring organization that advocates for fair LGBTQ+ representation, has published an annual report since 2005 analyzing the number of regular and recurring LGBTQ+ characters in TV series. These reports show a rise in representation from 1.4% of regular characters in the 2005–2006 season, to 9.1% in the 2020–2021 season (GLAAD, 2021).

However, a quantitative increase in LGBTQ+ characters is not enough to achieve fair representation, and most media products are still in a stage of imperfect representation. Furthermore, although this increased representation may be positive on the surface, it is not free from flaws. Media inclusion is marked by the homonormative mandate and privileges LGBTQ+ people who conform to the cisheteronormative model, that is, men, white, Western, middle or upper class, in monogamous relationships, and with a normative gender identity and expression (Francisco Amat et al., 2020; Robinson, 2016). Thereby, gay cisgender men receive much more media attention, while trans and gender diverse people receive much less recognition and are not as positively represented in the media (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017). Most media portrayals of trans women are often stigmatizing and reinforce harmful stereotypes (Glover, 2016). In this sense, trans women are frequently linked to clandestinity, tragedy, and rejection, depicted as sex workers, victims of mockery and violent attacks, and objects of disgust to cisgender protagonists (Solomon & Kurtz-Costes, 2018; Vegas, 2019).

In addition, it is common for the fiction narratives including trans characters to focus exclusively on the "trans fact," that is, when the fact of being trans is the main attribute of this character within the plot. So that the character's journey within the series storytelling is focused on their particularity as a trans individual, which leads to limited characters that rarely explore a richer and multi-layered portrayal. The "trans fact" narrative involves stories centered on the "coming out" and the "transition story": the hormonal process, surgery, depression, struggles and traumas, among others (Funk & Funk, 2016; Tortajada et al., 2021). As a consequence, trans characters tend to occupy support roles but never the lead (Vir et al., 2018).

In recent years, the media have witnessed a constant rise in visibility with a strong trend towards an increasingly positive representation of trans people (Stryker, 2017). Nonetheless, what for some is understood as a positive representation, for others is actually the deployment of logics of transnormativity. Transnormativity privileges trans people who display attributes valued by the cisheteronormative society (chiefly, normative gender expression sticking to gender-binary and heterosexuality), and omit alternative explanations of gender non-conformity that do not fit the medical and legal standards (Johnson, 2016). Transnormativity also reinforces the tropes of the good trans person and the bad queer (Girshick, 2008).

Transnormativity displays a narrow view of the acceptable representations of trans and gender diverse people (Mocarski et al., 2019), which may serve to strengthen the gender binary rather than disassemble it (Funk & Funk, 2016). According to Mocarski et al. (2019, p. 425), these types of representations may narrow the publicly accepted trans identification forms, "thereby stigmatizing those who either do not meet these fully binary and fully transitioned standards." Therefore, trans individuals who do not adhere to transnormativity are more likely to suffer transphobic situations (Miller, 2019), especially because they do not match the transnormative mediated portrayals that the general public is used to.

Following the binary logic, tropes of authenticity via bodily transformation (including surgery or hormone therapy) have enabled transgender to become culturally legible through the wrong body trope (Lovelock, 2017), reinforcing the myth that the trans person lives in the wrong body and that, therefore, their appearance needs to be corrected (Missé, 2018; Mocarski et al., 2019). This assimilationist and exclusionary ideal of "authentic" and "acceptable" transgender subject implants in trans individuals the constant feeling of being incomplete subjects, constantly waiting to reach their true authenticity and acceptance based on external approval.

However, not all media representations of trans people have negative consequences. The media also allows exposure to trans people, which is beneficial to those who are discovering their own identities (Mocarski et al., 2019). It can especially benefit young people questioning their gender (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). Many scholars have highlighted that media representations of transgender people have significant implications for the identity development of young trans people (Kosenko et al., 2018; McInroy & Craig, 2015; Ringo, 2002). Previous research has also concluded that these representations have an impact on trans people's lives since the perceptions and behavior of people they meet are influenced by the media (Gillig et al., 2018; Heinz, 2012; Shewade, 2020).

Within the "imperfect representation" stage (Ventura et al., 2019), media portrayals can be seen as both positive and negative. On one hand, they may

offer stereotypical and narrow representations, but on the other, they include various representations that can become aspirational models and improve visibility. Some specific media products show an approach that is closer to a "fair representation" stage. The objective of this article is to explore this perspective by analyzing the trans representation in the American series *Euphoria* (Levinson et al., 2019–present), which includes a trans female character: Jules Vaughn.

2. *Euphoria* and Jules: The HBO Teen Series and the Trans Leading Character

Euphoria is the first American teen drama series produced by the HBO company (Porter, 2019). It is based on the Israeli series of the same name broadcasted in 2012. The first season of the series premiered in 2019, and in 2020 and 2021 two special episodes focusing on Jules and Rue were released. *Euphoria*'s views were not significantly high on the days of its premiere, but they were significant afterward on the viewing platform (Porter, 2019).

Euphoria is one of the most discussed and polemic teen series from the last few years. The series explores the experiences and conflicts of a group of teenagers from an American suburb where the middle and lower-middle classes coexist. The character of Rue, a 17-year-old racialized girl with disordered substance use, narrates and guides the story through its eight episodes. In addition, each episode focuses on each of the different young protagonists with whom Rue shares high school and/or social relationships. The series explains to us how these teens coexist and navigate through alcohol and drug use, sex, unstructured families, situations of anguish and stress, "new" identities and their relationships with their own bodies, among others (Goodman, 2019; Kaufman et al., 2021; Masanet, 2021). In a way, *Euphoria* presents a generational break that produces a large distance between the adult and young characters.

One of the main characters of the series is Jules, a young trans woman who, after her mother abandons her, moves in with her father in the same neighborhood. The impact of the series and especially of the character of Jules, played by trans actress Hunter Schafer, has made this actress an important public figure and also a (media) symbol of the LGBTQ+ struggles. Before starring in *Euphoria*, she became famous for her appearance on the cover of *Teen Vogue* magazine in 2017 and for modeling for different brands such as Dior and Versace (Megía, 2019). But it was her participation in *Euphoria* that made her a symbol of the collective.

Despite *Euphoria*'s popularity and the media impact of its protagonists, there are still few academic studies that analyze the representations in the series and the audience's discourses about it. One of the few studies is that of Kaufman et al. (2021), linked to the meanings produced by the audience in relation to drug abuse and mental illness. However, in contrast, there are no studies

focused on the character of Jules and her experiences in the series as a young trans woman. This is a key element of *Euphoria* and, for this reason, the series has included on its official website (www.hbo.com/euphoria) a section of resources linked to LGBTQ+ organizations and groups.

3. Materials and Methods

The main objective of this study is to analyze the representation of Jules, the trans female character from the American series *Euphoria*, focusing on the construction of the character and exploring her narratives and interactions with other characters in the series.

To do this, we made a close reading (Castelló, 2008) of the first season of the series. This technique is a method widely applied within cultural studies in the context of contemporary popular culture (Brummett, 2019; Castelló, 2008), and specifically for analyzing fiction series and films (e.g., Araüna et al., 2018; Fedele & Masanet, 2021). In this article, the analysis has been organized into four areas following previous studies carried out by the researchers of the project (Fedele & Masanet, 2021):

- Context: historical-social setting, environments, and spaces.
- Aesthetics: formal, visual, sound elements, technical codes expressed through the construction of the shots, the rhythm of the storytelling, the soundtrack, etc.
- Storytelling: plots, characters, actions, and time structure. Special attention is paid to the most important narrative threads in the story. The main characters are identified and their actions, objectives, and plot resolutions are observed.
- Content and meaning: themes, problems, subjects, and institutions. The main conflict lines are detected in relation to the ideological code that gives coherence to the text and places it in a certain discourse.

Finally, the inductive/deductive analysis process followed five specific steps in which the three researchers in the team worked together, by discussing and sharing their different views:

1. The series was watched several times in order to detect and record the key elements of the three areas of analysis.
2. One of the viewings was specifically focused on the storytelling, noting and analyzing the main plots in which the character of Jules occupied an important position. We analyzed the threads of each Jules' story and the actions of the characters in them.
3. The data from the analysis were contrasted with the theoretical background and previous studies

around the construction of trans female characters in fiction.

4. The data were discussed and a joint final interpretation was reached.

5. The analysis was written up and also the final draft of the article.

Finally, it is necessary to mention the position from which the authors of this article speak and construct the research analysis. We approach the trans issue from the feminist and trans theories (see, among others, Butler, 2006; Halberstam, 2017; Lugones, 2010; Stryker, 2017). However, we are always aware of the implicit limitations in the construction of our discourse due to being cis, white, heterosexual, gay, and Euro-centered people. Our situation of privilege within the scheme of relationships of power and oppression must be taken into account to understand how we structure the analysis objects. Even so, this reflection on the place we occupy allows readers to understand from which "place" we "speak" (Spivak, 1988). Finally, like previous research, such as that of Tortajada et al. (2021), our study is situated within the framework of transfeminism and tries to be useful for the well-being of trans people.

4. Results and Discussion

The results focus on three main areas of representation that aim to move away from the traditional portrayal of trans characters. We consider that these are the elements that are important to highlight in this article, but we are aware that the series contains other elements that could be explored in depth in future research.

4.1. Beyond the "Trans Fact": Complex and Plural Narratives

It is common for the narrative of trans characters in fiction to focus exclusively on the "trans fact," that is, on the "coming out of the closet" and the "transition story." This makes the trans characters flat and not multidimensional because the different facets of their reality are not explored.

In Jules's case, we find a narrative that does not avoid the character's transition story, but doesn't focus exclusively on it either. In fact, Jules' transition story is not introduced until episode four. In it, the series summarizes her experiences from the age of 11 to the present in only eight minutes: her feelings surrounding her body, being put in a psychiatric institution, the suicide attempt (self-injury), her mother abandoning her (the symbolic rejection), and her first sexual experiences (as an object of fetishism and violence), among others. This journey through Jules's adolescence is made through an initial flashback that has a fast and sharp rhythm so that we experience all the traumatic moments of her transition story in a quick and fragmented way. The narrative doesn't stop to explore and analyze in detail all

these moments, but these scenes help us understand who Jules is and what she has gone through. The series focuses on what her life is like today.

The narrative therefore does not forget or omit Jules' individual transition story, but rather summarizes it without focusing solely on it. Through this brief flashback we understand Jules' experiences and feelings, and her own particular transition story. Throughout the series we can observe that Jules has gone through different stages of her transition, but she still has doubts about her own process. Following the reflections of Tortajada et al. (2021) around trans activism on YouTube, we find that Jules' story makes public a different kind of transition story and therefore this allows different experiences and bodily transitions to be collectivized, including unlikely ones, since each story is unique. We thus get particular transition stories that can help us escape from the social constructions that perpetuate transnormative representations (Mocarski et al., 2019), that is: narratives that focus exclusively on the transition of the body as a linear process with specific objectives and milestones that every trans person must follow to achieve a successful transition (Horak, 2014). On the contrary, *Euphoria* does not tell us what exact steps a trans person must follow during the transition process, nor does it explain how these should be experienced. Jules' journey is neither better nor worse; it is her own journey and it is individual and personal.

Beyond this summary of Jules's transition story, we also find some images and scenes in the series that show us that she is undergoing certain transition processes such as hormonal treatment, which becomes visible through close-ups in which Jules injects herself with hormones in front of a mirror (Figure 1).

However, her present storytelling, the one that occupies most of the episodes, focuses on her experiences of friendship, sex, and love. In the first episode, she meets Rue, with whom she will develop a story of friendship, love, and intimacy that will permeate most of her plots. Later, this story will be complemented by the love affair that Jules begins virtually with Tyler (Nate under a pseudonym). Therefore, the main plot of Jules in *Euphoria* does not focus on her transition story, but on the construction of loving intimacy.

It is also important to note that the acceptance of Jules by her close environment seems to be natural (with the exception of her mother). For example, at no point is there a reference to her "dead name." Deadnaming refers to the act of speaking about trans people by the names assigned to them in infancy when they have rejected those names (Turton, 2021). Referring to the "dead name" may lead to the denaturalization or delegitimization of the self-determination acts of the trans person. There is no "misgendering" either. That is, the use of pronouns, designations, or terms that identify the trans person with another gender different from the one with which they identify and, therefore, which do not represent, exclude, or marginalize the trans persona (Julia
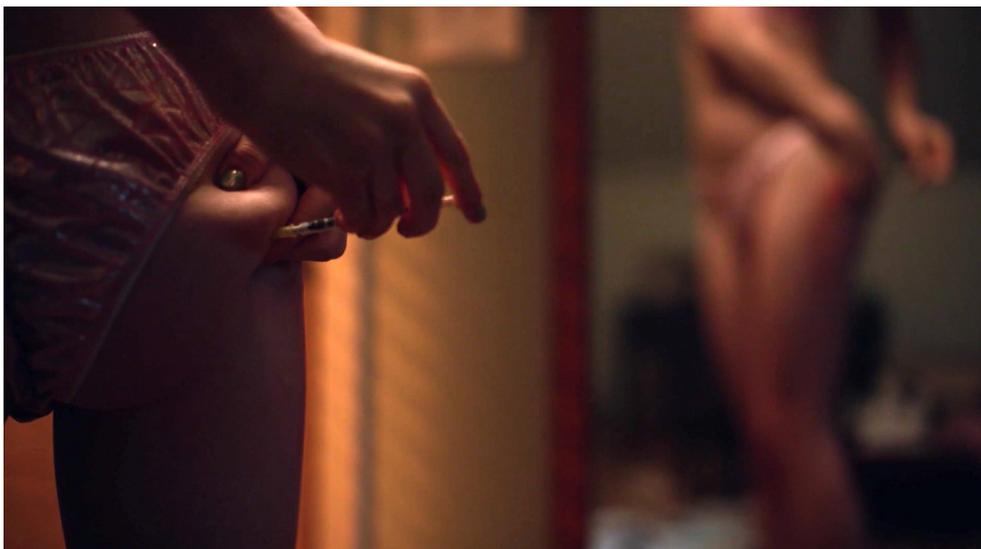
Figure 1. Jules injecting hormones. Source: Levinson and Frizzell (2019).

Kapusta, 2016). Only those male characters who define themselves as "heterosexual" and have sexual encounters with Jules do "misgendering" in the series.

We cannot end this section without mentioning that, despite being a complex narrative that escapes the "trans fact," it does not allow the character of Jules to speak for herself. It is the character of Rue who guides the narration through a voice-over and this, in one way or another, ends up compromising Jules's authorial voice. In other words, Rue explains Jules's story based on her own experience, knowledge, and perceptions and, therefore, turns off Jules's first-person voice, the voice of the trans subject. It is a complex voice-over because it comes from a main character, Rue, who narrates her experience in the first person, but also tells the personal stories of the rest of the characters in the series in the third person and in an omniscient way. According to Kozloff (1988), there are a series of strategies that help to build the third-person voice-over as the main narrating voice and, therefore, as "the teller" of the whole fiction. These strategies include placing the voice-over at the beginning of the episode, directing this voice to the audience and not to the characters of the narrative to build intimacy and an exclusive connection with the viewers, and giving the omniscient voice-over access to the intimacy, thoughts, and feeling of the characters, among others. This helps build a powerful all-knowing voice and can guide the viewer, as in the case of *Euphoria*. "These narrators, who speak for (or rather as) the image-maker, are particularly likely to provide guidance concerning what conclusions the viewers should draw. They tend to voice the ideological and/or moral agenda behind the film" (Kozloff, 1988, p. 80). As the author states, all of this means that Jules' world is enveloped by another world, by another speech, by Rue's narrative voice. A voice that can generalize, judge and interpret Jules.

On the other hand, it is also important to analyze how this third-person voice can work in the specific case

of the narrative of a trans character like Jules. From trans studies, we could argue, that being a character with complex experiences and steeped in violence, this assignment to a third voice can serve to preserve the trans character from the obligation to relive her traumatic experiences, and thus avoids re-victimizing her (Fernández-Rouco et al., 2017). This does not escape complexity, however, since turning off her voice to avoid re-victimization also includes turning off her narration of positive experiences, like falling in love with Rue.

4.2. From Fetishism to Love: the Trans Female Character as Subject of Value

It is also common for trans characters to be represented in fiction as "objects" of fetishistic desire (Vegas, 2019). This is the reason why their sexual and love relationships are usually linked to violence, morbidity, and exclusion. Trans characters are subjects who can feel love and intimacy for other characters but their representation in the narrative is often exclusively sexual. It is, therefore, a representation conditioned by a fetishistic and masculine gaze (Serano, 2016).

In the case of *Euphoria*, although in the first episode it seems that Jules will be defined as the object of fetishistic desire for a man three times her age (Cal), we will soon see how her character also becomes an element of value and love. Rue falls in love with Jules and shares with her something that goes beyond physical passion and results in intimacy and loving complicity. Likewise, Jules also shares a love story with Nate, although it ultimately turns out to be unsuccessful and he ends up using extortion against her. It is important, therefore, to analyze these three relationships to observe how the narrative moves from the construction of Jules as an object of fetishism and violence to a subject of love and intimacy.

Episode one presents Jules's first contact and meeting with Cal. They meet virtually in a gay dating app.

Jules finds Cal's profile, where he defines himself as a "dominant daddy" who is "sweet and gentle" and who loves "twinks and femboys." They meet that same night and Jules sets out on her bike to the meeting point. A journey that is, aesthetically, dark, eerie, and lonely. Symmetrical shots with Jules in the center (Figure 2) are combined with subjective shots of the character's gaze on the path that leads her to Cal. A journey through empty streets, with low lighting, cold tones, and a stormy and rainy atmosphere. The cinematography conveys vulnerability, insecurity, and danger, as Jules follows the path to a sordid and dark roadside motel (Figure 2). This journey leads Jules to clandestinity, to a furtive sexual encounter. This representation of Jules' journey, as well as her meeting with Cal, remind us of the trans representations linked to dark, dangerous, and painful spaces, which reproduce that stereotypical vision of the trans character as an inhabitant of marginality (Ford, 2017; McLaren et al., 2021) and the object of extreme, utilitarian, and violent sexuality.

The scene of Jules' sexual encounter with Cal represents an unequal relationship. It is some time before Cal's face enters the shot. We only see his hands and body. Jules is represented through high-angle shots that show her in a situation of inferiority and vulnerability. Cal's face first appears, on the other hand, in low-angle shots that show his superiority and control (Figure 3). Jules is sitting on the bed and practically does not talk, while Cal stands and touches her freely. Next, Cal exercises vio-

lent and painful sex on Jules. This is represented by a fixed close-up of Jules, who closes her eyes and squeezes the sheets tightly (Figure 4). Cal is practically out of the shot throughout the act and is only present in the scene through a joint shot in which we can see how Cal penetrates Jules with force while she writhes on the bed. This scene refers to the fetishistic and violent clichés that are used to represent trans characters in fiction. The scene in the roadside motel brings us back again to other media representations that have tended to portray trans characters stereotypically, usually linked to prostitution or pornography (Abbott, 2013; Ford, 2017).

Later, we will discover that Jules has experienced many other similar scenes. In episode four, Rue explains Jules' first sexual experiences, all of them with the same kind of people: married or engaged white men who define themselves as heterosexual. The series presents various scenes of Jules with different men and, in all of them, it does not show their faces. The shot focuses on their hands unbuttoning their belts and pants to start the sexual act with Jules. These characters always follow the same pattern: They use Jules to satisfy their fetishistic sexual desires. This is how the series traces Jules' first sexual experiences, situating her as an object of sexual use that seems to be limited only to this type of experience, precisely because of her condition as a trans person. This coincides with the "trans/romance dilemma" posed by Abbott (2013), that is, the lack of romance for transgender characters.
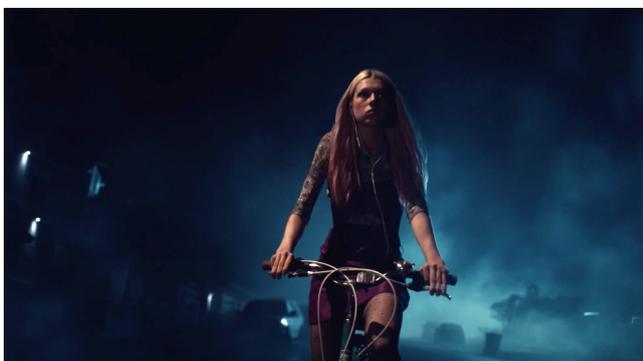
Figure 2. Jules on the way to the motel; Jules in the model's parking lot. Source: Levinson and Frizzell (2019).

Figure 3. Cal touches Jules; Cal talks to Jules. Source: Levinson and Frizzell (2019).
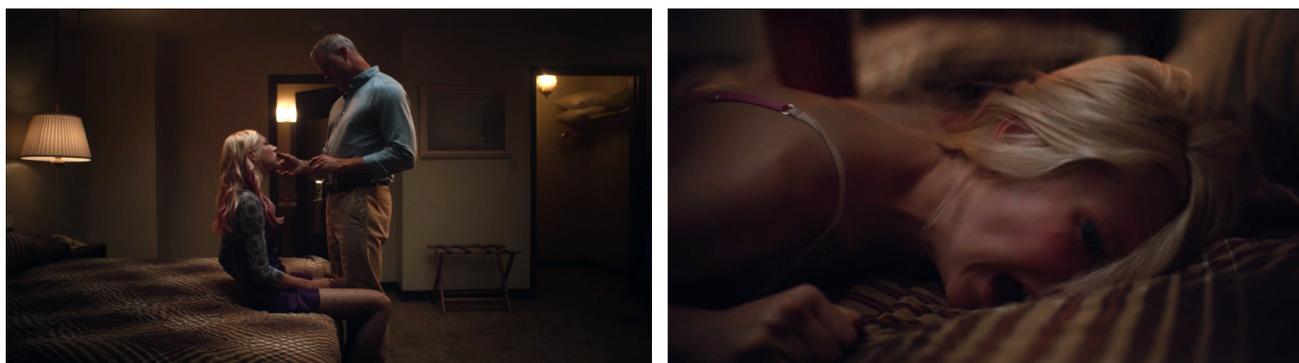
Figure 4. Cal facing Jules in bed; Jules in pain while Cal penetrates her. Source: Levinson and Frizzell (2019).

The relationship between Jules and Nate (Cal's son) is similar in some ways. Nate also approaches Jules anonymously through an app. Jules, rather, never hides her identity. Little by little a complicity between them is established that awakens Jules's loving feeling towards Nate. In episode four their first encounter takes place, in which Nate reveals his identity. As in his father's scene, Nate meets Jules in a dark and remote place, where secrecy and "the forbidden" can take place. The path to the park shows us, again, a lonely Jules who delves into the dangers of the night. The meeting involves the revelation of Nate's secret and, what begins as a declaration of love from Nate to Jules, ends up becoming extortion and threats (Nate is afraid that Jules will reveal his secret). This scene takes many aesthetic elements from the previous motel scene with Cal (Figure 5). Nate presents himself, thus, as a homophobic person who cannot accept his own sexuality. In fact, Nate is obsessed with building a hyper-masculinity that helps him hide his non-normative sexual orientation. The character of Nate seems to put on a "face" and defines the rest of the male characters who have been part of Jules' sex life so far: men who do not accept their own sexuality and use Jules in secret to satisfy their non-normative desires. Again, Jules is presented as an object for the pleasure of others.

The relationship between Jules and Rue, however, is quite different. It is at this point that *Euphoria* attempts to go beyond clichés and stereotypes by trying to represent Jules as a trans woman who also inhabits other spaces beyond those related to the margins and exclusion. This is how a multidimensional image of the character is constructed through the more complex affective relationships she develops (Koch-Rein et al., 2020). The love story between Jules and Rue distances Jules' character from the streets, from violence and death, and therefore, from the archetype of the "fallen woman" (marginalized and humiliated female characters linked to death), which has tended to be connected in fiction to trans characters (Ford, 2017). Already from their first shared scene, we observe that Rue is attracted to Jules. Rue has just got out of the detox center and is driving home when she sees Jules riding her bike. This first contact already indicates that Rue is dazzled by Jules: time stretches, the image lights up with warm tones, the music is relaxed and expansive and the shots slow down to show us Rue's gaze on Jules. Through a game of shot/reverse shots, the image tells us that there is a connection between these two characters, an initial crush. However, it seems that it is only Rue who is attracted to Jules.

In the first personal interaction between them, Rue accompanies Jules home after a party (Figure 6). The streets continue to be dark, reality continues to be harsh and complicated for them, but it seems that now they face it together. Intimate music accompanies them to Jules's room, where she takes off her clothes and shows herself in a natural way to Rue, who heals Jules' wounds (a self-injury) through moments of complicity and intimacy (Figure 6).
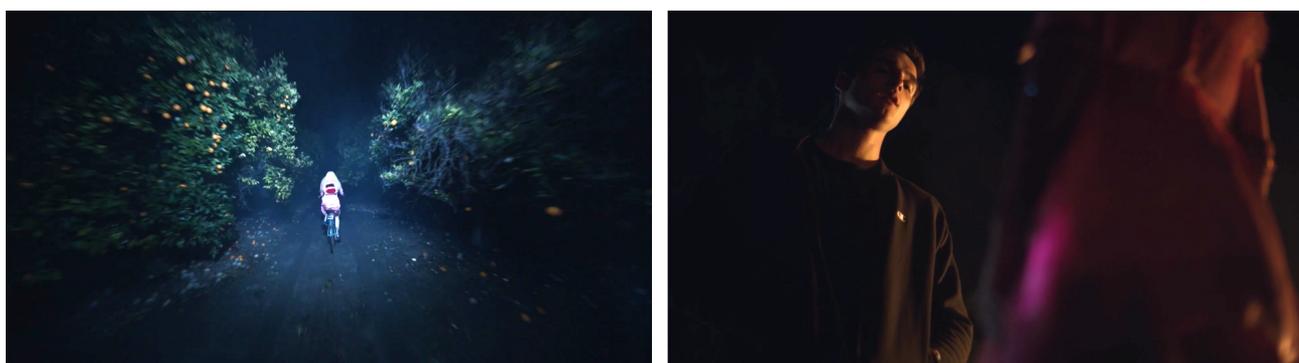
Figure 5. Jules on the way to the park; Nate threatens Jules. Source: Levinson (2019).

Figure 6. Rue hugs Jules; Jules and Rue in Jules's bed. Source: Levinson and Frizzell (2019).

This complicity between Jules and Rue increases throughout the series and they build a relationship of emotional intimacy that goes beyond friendship. An intimacy that includes feelings of closeness, bonding, support, understanding, acceptance, and self-exploration of one towards the other (Sternberg, 2000). This is how Jules becomes the subject of value in Rue's storytelling.

In episode 6, *Euphoria* offers us a symbolic representation of their relationship. Rue and Jules go to a party dressed as Romeo and Juliet from Luhrmann's (1996) film and end up representing, literally, a scene from this film (Figure 7). At this point, the series establishes an intertextual relationship with Luhmann's work to take advantage of the film's textual connotations to establish its own meaning (Sorókina, 2006). That is, the series introduces the universal plot of "forbidden love" (Balló & Pérez, 1995): Love that is not possible because of external factors. In this case, their love is conditioned by the emotional burdens and violence that both Rue and Jules have experienced and, also, because of Nate's extortion of Jules. However, the series brings us one of the greatest universal love plots in contemporary narrative.

In short, *Euphoria* presents some clichés associated with the trans individual (fetishism and the male gaze) and gradually moves away from them to end up showing a love story in which Jules is a subject of value. As Jules is a character defined as an object of fetishistic desire, but also as a subject of loving value, it is important here to reflect on how her gender expression

is constructed and whether this construction is related to the external recognition that she receives from the other characters. We observe that Jules' gender expression is situated, mainly, in a cisnormative passing space that is located in gender binarism as a necessary prerequisite to obtaining recognition and external attraction. This is even expressed by Cal in their first encounter and, later on, we will see the contrast between Jules and other trans people with whom Cal has had relationships. Characters who, unlike Jules, do not adhere to the attributes valued by a cisheteronormative society in terms of their gender expression and, therefore, distance themselves from transnormativity (Girshick, 2008). This can help us understand why Cal "prefers" Jules and not these other characters.

However, as we already indicated previously, *Euphoria* constructs a complex character who, despite adhering to certain cisnormative mandates, also attempts to escape them in certain ways. It is important, at this point, to note that the relationship between Jules and Rue breaks with certain heteronormative structures (Robinson, 2016): There is no clear definition of their relationship, there are moments that escape monogamy and neither Jules nor Rue define their sexual orientation at any point. This is how *Euphoria* also tries to escape normative sexuality as a possible option for trans people (Tortajada et al., 2021).

Finally, despite the complexities of the narrative, we can affirm that *Euphoria* breaks in some way with the

Figure 7. Jules and Rue in the pool; Jules kisses Rue. Source: Source: Levinson and Bianco (2019).

trans/romance dilemma (Abbott, 2013) by constructing the character of Jules and portraying her as likable and complex (McLaren et al., 2021), as well as giving her "recognition" by making her a subject of love who is appreciated and valued.

4.3. Spaces of Comfort and Spaces of Violence

Trans characters are usually presented in fiction as "inhabitants" of marginality and clandestinity (Solomon & Kurtz-Costes, 2018). Thus, "space" becomes a symbolic element of the social place attributed to the character through a system of intersectional oppressions (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 2015) in which trans people are normally placed in a peripheral location occupied by various categories of marginalization (Serano, 2016). In some fictions, this peripheralization and marginality is exaggerated and becomes central (and unique) in the representation of trans people. However, *Euphoria* represents Jules by playing with the alternation between dark (nocturnal) and dangerous marginal spaces (motels, parks, or alleys), shown as an existing reality, and spaces of comfort (her room), ease (virtual space), and security (Rue's room). With this, the spaces, far from having an exclusively physical component, contain a condensed meaning (social, economic, and political relationships) that run through them (Lefebvre, 1991) and allow us to analyze and understand the different elements that accompany Jules.

In the first episode, the series already introduces us to the different spaces (scenarios) that Jules will inhabit. Spaces that show the double interaction that the character experiences with the environment and oscillate between violence and discomfort and esteem and comfort. This contrast between situations of comfort, familiarity, or "tranquility" versus others based on danger, fear, or violence is constantly reflected through the different scenarios where her life takes place. Jules's "own room" is the main refuge where the integrity of the character is shown. Despite being wrapped in cold tones, warm colors constantly enter through the window and "fill" this place where she shows her body and her intimate moments with Rue. It is a refuge from hostility and violence, a place where she can take care of herself and, also, be cared for. It is a space of care. The very architecture of the room refers to protection and privacy, simulating the silhouette of what could be a "tree house" (Figure 8). Jules's room contrasts with the rest of the house, which is sad, neutral, and gray.

In contrast, the rest of Jules's affective relationships are built in diametrically opposed spaces, such as run-down motels or the dark and nocturnal streets and parks. It is in these second places, symbols of fear, uneasiness, and mistrust, where her main relationships with men occur. First, in the dark and dilapidated roadside motel, where she experiences Cal's abuse. Similarly, the encounter with Nate takes place in a lonely park, secluded and in the dead of night. Here, again, Jules will be the victim of violence (extortion).

These second dark and restless spaces will alternate with Jules's third space, the virtual space linked to gay dating apps. This space is treated as a place of comfort and familiarity for Jules. In her interactions through the app, she sends pictures of herself naked and develops "deep" romantic relationships. Although the face-to-face encounters that arise from these apps end in disappointment, violence, and abuse, the apps continue to be a space of comfort where Jules moves with confidence. Jules shows herself in these apps, she doesn't hide (contrary to many of the men she interacts with through them). This is because Jules has already connected with her real and digital identity, and therefore, the app becomes a space where she can show herself without fear.

Figure 8. Rue heals Jules in her bed. Source: Levinson and Frizzell (2019).

As the season progresses, Rue's bedroom also becomes a space of comfort and protection for Jules. Indeed, it's the first place where she goes when she's threatened by Nate. It is in these intimate spaces where we can see the character of Jules from a perspective away from marginality, violence, and danger.

This alternation between spaces of comfort and spaces of conflict gives a complex view of the places inhabited by Jules' character. Thus, the series does not construct an exclusive image linked to peace, care, and comfort in all spaces, nor does it construct all spaces connected with violence and insecurity, which can often occur in other media representations.

5. Conclusion

The concepts of complexity, recognition, and comfort reflect the general state of the trans representation in *Euphoria*: "Complexity" because the series presents a narrative that tries to escape from the exclusive representation of the "trans fact." It does not avoid it, but rather also presents other objects of value in the narrative of the trans individual. Therefore, it explores different facets of the character so that "being trans" is not the main attribute of this character within the plot. "Recognition" because the trans character becomes a subject of love and not only of fetishism and violence. There is an acknowledgment of her validity as a worthy and appreciated subject. Finally, "comfort" because the series not only shows spaces that this character can inhabit serenely and calmly, but the general experience of the trans character reflects a state of physical ease and freedom from pain or constraint.

All these constitute examples of good practices that allow us to start leaving behind an audiovisual stage characterized by an "imperfect representation." At the same time, it helps us to begin to materialize the discursive horizon that brings us closer to a "fair representation" (Ventura et al., 2019) of trans characters. In this sense, here we have explored specific examples of how to overcome a simplistic and stigmatizing portrayal and build more complex and realistic trans characters with a richer and multi-layered representation. These are necessary references in the audiovisual context since they can become positive models of inspiration, aspiration, and attraction (Fedele & Masanet, 2021).

However, although we find signs of a "fair representation," we must not ignore some problematic issues that can be ascribed rather to an "imperfect representation," such as the fact that the character does not have her own voice (despite the arguments that can justify this), or that her gender expression is situated within a cisnormative passing located in binarism as a prerequisite for obtaining external recognition (both from the audience and the rest of the characters) as a valid subject.

Despite this, *Euphoria* becomes an audiovisual work that helps us collectivize the stories of trans people (Stryker, 2017) from the representation of different experiences that include unique and also unlikely transition stories (Tortajada et al., 2021). Furthermore, the series contains thought-provoking material that could be used to spark debates and discussions around trans individuals in educational contexts. As indicated by Masanet and Dhaenens (2019), we should take advantage of the critical interplay that can provide fiction representations to work on critical issues in schools. This could help us to fight against the increasing discrimination and violence that the LGBTQ+ community is experiencing.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

Abbott, T. (2013). The trans/romance dilemma in Transamerica and other films. *The Journal of American Culture*, *36*(1), 32–41. https://doi.org/10.1111/jacc.12011

Anarte, E. (2021). *Hate crimes against LGBT+ people in Germany rise 36% in 2020*. Reuters. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-lgbt-crime-idUSKBN2CL1TN

Araüna, N., Tortajada, I., & Willem, C. (2018). Portrayals of caring masculinities in fiction film: The male caregiver in still mine, intouchables and Nebraska. *Masculinities & Social Change*, *7*(1), 82–102. https://doi.org/10.17583/MCS.2018.2749

Balló, J., & Pérez, X. (1995). *La semilla inmortal: Los argumentos universales en el cine* [The immortal seed: The universal arguments in the cinema]. Editorial Anagrama.

Beemyn, G., & Rankin, S. (2011). *The lives of transgender people*. Columbia University Press.

Brummett, B. (2019). *Techniques of close reading*. SAGE.

Butler, J. (2006). *Gender trouble. Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.

Capuzza, J. C., & Spencer, L. G. (2017). Regressing, progressing, or transgressing on the small screen? Transgender characters on US scripted television series. *Communication Quarterly*, *65*(2), 214–230. https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2016.1221438

Castelló, E. (2008). *Identidades mediáticas: Introducción a las teorías, métodos y casos* [Media identities: Intro-

duction to theories, methods and cases]. Editorial UOC.

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, *43*(6), 1241–1299. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039

Fedele, M., & Masanet, M.-J. (2021). The "trouble rebel girl" and the "boy-next-door": The apparent inversion of gender and love archetypes in 13 Reasons Why, Élite and Sex Education. *Journal of Popular Television*, *9*(3), 334–353. https://doi.org/10.1386/jptv_00061_1

Fernández-Rouco, N., Fernández-Fuertes, A. A., Carcedo, R. J., Lázaro-Visa, S., & Gómez-Pérez, E. (2017). Sexual violence history and welfare in transgender people. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *32*(19), 2885–2907. https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260516657911

Ford, A. (2017). Whose club is it anyway? The problematic of trans representation in mainstream films "Rayon" and Dallas Buyers Club. *Screen Bodies*, *1*(2), 64–86.

Francisco Amat, A., González-de-Garay, B., & Moliner Miravet, L. (2020). Between invisibility and homonormativity: LGBT+ referents for Spanish adolescents. *Journal of LGBT Youth*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2020.1800548

Funk, S., & Funk, J. (2016). Transgender dispossession in Transparent: Coming out as a euphemism for honesty. *Sexuality & Culture*, *20*(4), 879–905. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-016-9363-0

Gillig, T. K., Rosenthal, E. L., Murphy, S. T., & Folb, K. L. (2018). More than a media moment: The influence of televised storylines on viewers' attitudes toward transgender people and policies. *Sex Roles*, *78*(7), 515–527. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-017-0816-1

Girshick, L. B. (2008). *Transgender voices: Beyond women and men*. University Press of New England.

GLAAD. (2021). *Where we are on TV: 2020–2021*. GLAAD Media Institute. https://www.glaad.org/whereweareontv20

Glover, J. K. (2016). Redefining realness? On Janet Mock, Laverne Cox, TS Madison, and the representation of transgender women of color in media. *Souls*, *18*(2/4), 338–357. https://doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2016.1230824

Goodman, T. (2019, June 5). Euphoria: TV review. *The Hollywood Reporter*. https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-reviews/euphoria-review-1215681

Halberstam, J. (2017). *Trans: A quick and quirky account of gender variability* (Vol. 3). University of California Press.

Heinz, M. (2012). Transmen on the web: Inscribing multiple discourses. In K. Ross (Ed.), *The handbook of gender, sex, and media* (pp. 326–343). John Wiley & Sons.

Hill Collins, P. (2015). Intersectionality's definitional dilemmas. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *41*, 1–20.

Horak, L. (2014). Trans on YouTube: Intimacy, visibility, temporality. *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *1*(4), 572–585. https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2815255

Johnson, A. H. (2016). Transnormativity: A new concept and its validation through documentary film about transgender men. *Sociological Inquiry*, *86*(4), 465–491. https://doi.org/10.1111/soin.12127

Julia Kapusta, S. (2016). Misgendering and its moral contestability. *Hypatia*, *31*(3), 502–519. https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12259

Kaufman, M. R., Bazell, A. T., Collaco, A., & Sedoc, J. (2021). "This show hits really close to home on so many levels": An analysis of Reddit comments about HBO's Euphoria to understand viewers' experiences of and reactions to substance use and mental illness. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, *220*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2020.108468

Koch-Rein, A., Haschemi Yekani, E., & Verlinden, J. J. (2020). Representing trans: Visibility and its discontents. *European Journal of English Studies*, *24*(1), 1–12. http://doi.org/10.1080/13825577.2020.1730040

Korolczuk, E. (2020). The fight against "gender" and "LGBT ideology": New developments in Poland. *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, *3*(1), 165–167. https://doi.org/10.1332/251510819X15744244471843

Kosenko, K. A., Bond, B. J., & Hurley, R. J. (2018). An exploration into the uses and gratifications of media for transgender individuals. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, *7*(3), 274–288. https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000135

Kozloff, S. (1988). *Invisible storytellers: Voice-over narration in American fiction film*. University of California Press.

Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space*. Blackwell Publishing.

Levinson, S. (Writer & Director). (2019). Shook ones pt. II (Season 1, Episode 4) [TV series episode]. In S. Levinson, R. Nandan, K. Turen, H. M. Lichtenstein, T. Yardeni, M. Toovi, Y. Mokadi, G. Lennon, R. Leshem, & D. Levin (Executive Producers), *Euphoria*. HBO.

Levinson, S. (Writer & Director), & Bianco, P. (Director). (2019). The next episode (Season 1, Episode 6) [TV series episode]. In S. Levinson, R. Nandan, K. Turen, H. M. Lichtenstein, T. Yardeni, M. Toovi, Y. Mokadi, G. Lennon, R. Leshem, & D. Levin (Executive Producers), *Euphoria*. HBO.

Levinson, S. (Writer & Director), & Frizzell, A. (Director). (2019). Pilot (Season 1, Episode 1) [TV series episode]. In S. Levinson, R. Nandan, K. Turen, H. M. Lichtenstein, T. Yardeni, M. Toovi, Y. Mokadi, G. Lennon, R. Leshem, & D. Levin (Executive Producers), *Euphoria*. HBO.

Levinson, S., Nandan, R., Turen, K., Lichtenstein, H. M., Yardeni, T., Toovi, M., Mokadi, Y., Lennon, G., Leshem,

R., & Levin, D. (Executive Producers). (2019–present). *Euphoria* [TV series]. HBO.

Lovelock, M. (2017). Call me Caitlyn: Making and making over the "authentic" transgender body in Anglo-American popular culture. *Journal of Gender Studies*, *26*(6), 675–687. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2016.1155978

Lugones, M. (2010). Toward a decolonial feminism. *Hypatia*, *25*(4), 742–759. https://doi.org/10.1590/s0104-026x2014000300013

Luhrmann, B. (Director). (1996). *Williams Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* [Motion Picture]. 20th Century Fox; Bazmark Films; Estudios Churubusco.

Masanet, M.-J. (2021, January 13). De "Élite" a "Euphoria": Sexualidades, relaciones, sentimientos y preocupaciones adolescentes [From "Élite" to "Euphoria": Adolescent sexualities, relationships, feelings and concerns]. *The Conversation*. https://theconversation.com/de-elite-a-euphoria-sexualidades-relaciones-sentimientos-y-preocupaciones-adolescentes-150928

Masanet, M.-J., & Dhaenens, F. (2019). Representing gender-based violence in teen series: Young people's discourses on the Spanish series Física o Química. *Journal of Youth Studies*, *22*(9), 1202–1217. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2019.1570096

McInroy, L. B., & Craig, S. L. (2015). Transgender representation in offline and online media: LGBTQ youth perspectives. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, *25*(6), 606–617. https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2014.995392

McLaren, J. C., Bryant, S., & Brown, B. (2021). "See me! Recognize me!" An analysis of transgender media representation. *Communication Quarterly*, *69*(2), 172–191. https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2021.1901759

Megía, C. (2019, July 1). Hunter Schafer, la actriz y modelo del momento que se querelló contra todo un estado [Hunter Schafer, the actress and model of the moment who sued against an entire state]. *El País*. https://smoda.elpais.com/moda/actualidad/hunter-schafer-actriz-modelo-trans-euphoria-hbo

Miller, J. F. (2019). YouTube as a site of counternarratives to transnormativity. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *66*(6), 815–837. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2018.1484629

Missé, M. (2018). *A la conquista del cuerpo equivocado* [To conquer the wrong body]. Egales.

Mocarski, R., King, R., Butler, S., Holt, N. R., Huit, T. Z., Hope, D. A., Meyer, H. M., & Woodruff, N. (2019). The rise of transgender and gender diverse representation in the media: Impacts on the population. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, *12*(3), 416–433. https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcz031

Moreau, J. (2018). Trump in transnational perspective: Insights from global LGBT politics. *Politics & Gender*, *14*(4), 619–648. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X18000752

Porter, R. (2019, June 18). "Euphoria": Premiere gets big ratings boost from streaming. *The Hollywood Reporter*. https://headtopics.com/us/euphoria-premiere-gets-big-ratings-boost-from-streaming-6466800

Reid, G. (2021). *Political homophobia ramps up*. Human Rights Watch. www.hrw.org/news/2021/08/13/political-homophobia-ramps

Ringo, P. (2002). Media roles in female-to-male transsexual and transgender identity formation. *International Journal of Transgenderism*, *6*(3), 1–17.

Robinson, B. A. (2016). *Heteronormativity and homonormativity*. *Wiley Online Library*. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9781118663219.wbegss013

Serano, J. (2016). *Whipping girl: A transsexual woman on sexism and the scapegoating of femininity*. Hachette.

Shewade, R. R. (2020). *Transgender in India: A semiotic and reception analysis of Bollywood movies* [Master's thesis, University of North Texas]. UNT Digital Library. https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc1703360

Solomon, H. E., & Kurtz-Costes, B. (2018). Media's influence on perceptions of trans women. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, *15*(1), 34–47. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-017-0280-2

Sorókina, T. (2006). La intertextualización de la realidad discursiva [The intertextualization of discursive reality]. *Version*, *18*, 69–85.

Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press Urbana. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446212233.n7

Sternberg, R. J. (2000). *La experiencia del amor. La evolución de la relación amorosa a lo largo del tiempo* [The experience of love. The evolution of the love relationship over time]. Paidós.

Stryker, S. (2017). *Transgender history: The roots of today's revolution*. Hachette.

Tortajada, I., Willem, C., Platero Méndez, R. L., & Araüna, N. (2021). Lost in transition? Digital trans activism on Youtube. *Information, Communication & Society*, *24*(8), 1091–1107. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1797850

Turton, S. (2021). Deadnaming as disformative utterance: The redefinition of trans womanhood on Urban Dictionary. *Gender and Language*, *15*(1), 42–64. https://doi.org/10.1558/genl.18816

Vegas, V. (2019). *Vestidas de azul: Análisis social y cinematográfico de la mujer transexual en los años de la transición española* [Dressed in blue: Social and cinematographic analysis of the transsexual woman in the years of the Spanish transition]. Dos Bigotes.

Ventura, R., Guerrero, M., & Establés, M. J. (2019). Ciberactivismo fan lesbiano: Acciones de protesta no violenta frente a las representaciones heteronormativas de personajes LGBTQ en televisión [Lesbian fan cyberactivism: Non-violent protest actions against

heteronormative representations of LGBTQ characters on television]. In A. Iranzo & A. Farné (Eds.), *Comunicación para el cambio social: Propuestas para la acción* [Communication for social change: Proposals for action] (pp. 137–157). Tirant lo Blanch.

Vir, J., Hall, K., & Foye, R. (2018). *Representation and portrayal of audiences on BBC television.* Kantar Media. https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0016/124252/kantar-bbc-qualitative-research.pdf

About the Authors

Maria-Jose Masanet is a Serra Húnter lecturer at the Faculty of Information and Audiovisual Media at the University of Barcelona. She is the principal investigator of the projects Transmedia Gender & LGBTI+ Literacy (2021–2024), Youth Street Groups & Media Representations (2020–2022), and Gender Perspective in Information and Media Studies (2020-2021). Her topics of interest are media literacy, gender and LGBTI+ perspectives, young people, and popular media culture. She has published her work in *Information, Communication & Society*, *New Media & Society*, and *Learning, Media & Technology*.

Rafael Ventura is core faculty at the UPF Barcelona School of Management. He is currently participating in the research projects LGBTIQ+ Representation in Spanish Serial Fiction and Effectiveness in Reducing Prejudice Due to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (2020–2023) and Mobile Dating Communication in Spain and the Transformation of Affective-Sexual Relationships (2019–2021). His main topics of interest lie within LGBTI/queer media studies. He has published his work in *Journal of Homosexuality*, *Text & Talk*, *Masculinities & Social Change*, among others.

Eduard Ballesté has a PhD in social anthropology (University of Lleida, Department of Geography and Sociology, 2017). He is a postdoctoral fellow working on the ERC advanced grant TRANSGANG project. His fields of interest include social and political movements, international cooperation, social inequality and segregation, globalization, political anthropology, youth groups, activism, and politics. He has published his work in *Social Analysis* and *Revista Española de Sociología*. He has recently published the book *Del Procés a la Revolta* (2020).