CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview of the research background, including the research problem statement, research objectives, significance, scope, limitations, and definitions of key terms.

A.1 Background of the Research

In many Western countries, as well as in other global cultures, it is commonly accepted by society for heterosexual men to be significantly older than their female partners. Relationships of this kind often escape societal scrutiny. Conversely, when the woman is the older partner, the relationship tends to attract public attention and criticism. Historically, such dynamics have often been perceived negatively, with women in these relationships facing harsh societal judgment (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2011). Interestingly, while individuals may be open to age-gap relationships in their personal lives, they often disapprove of similar dynamics in others' relationships (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2008).

McKenzie (2021) provides a comprehensive overview of age-dissimilar couplings from 1996 to 2021, highlighting how cultural views, power dynamics, and life stages influence perceptions of such relationships. This provides an important means of exploring the changing and varied norms and realities of relationships. Patterns of age dissimilarities vary substantially across different

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age groups, social positions, sexualities, and cultural contexts. Scholarship suggests that average age differences have declined, but with a simultaneous increase in older woman couplings and partnerships with substantial differences. An example of a literary work that exemplifies the age-gap relationship through its narrative is the film *The Idea of You*. *The Idea of You* is an American romantic drama comedy produced by Welle Entertainment and released in 2024, exemplifying this phenomenon. This film, directed by Michael Showalter, starred Anne Hathaway as Solène Marchand and Nicholas Galitzine as Hayes Campbell. *The Idea of You* is an adaptation of *The Idea of You*, a novel by Robinne Lee. The storyline revolves around an older woman in a romantic relationship with a member of the boy band August Moon. The primary source of controversy is not merely the romantic involvement with a boy band member, but the notable age difference.

Despite growing visibility of age-gap relationships in the media, especially among celebrities, widespread societal acceptance remains elusive. While well-known figures like Madonna and Demi Moore have drawn attention to such relationships, their experiences are often treated as exceptions rather than signs of shifting norms (Addison, 2010). This reinforces the idea that older women dating younger men is acceptable only when fame, power, or wealth is involved. In contrast, ordinary women in similar relationships face harsher judgment and social exclusion. The media tends to portray these women as desperate or

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predatory, reducing their relationships to stereotypes and ignoring the genuine emotional connections they may share with their younger partners (Holt, 2022). This double standard reflects deeply ingrained cultural expectations that uphold male dominance and youthfulness as desirable, while punishing women who step outside of these narrow roles.

The marriage between Nurhidayah and her husband Nurcholis, who are 13 years apart in age, highlights the ongoing societal reaction to age-gap relationships. Although their marriage was based on mutual love and respect and lasted for almost 20 years, it often faced ridicule and negative assumptions, such as the assumption that Nurhidayah was Nurcholis' mother (Zamzami, 2025). These responses demonstrate the deeply rooted patriarchal norm that men should be older and more dominant in relationships. Policing and moral judgment arise when these expectations are challenged, especially in public forums such as social media. Critics often express discomfort with women in perceived senior roles, questioning the man's masculinity or implying emotional imbalance. Despite this public criticism, Nurcholis defends his marriage, stating that his wife is a gift from God and that their relationship is grounded in honesty and peace. Their story breaks away from rigid social conventions, illustrating that commitment and emotional connection matter more than age.

Furthermore, the persistence of the cultural script where “men should be older” in heterosexual relationships reflects what sociologists call gendered age

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norms. These social expectations align youth with female desirability and authority with male age (Telloian, 2024). When women reverse this script, even slightly, they risk being labeled as transgressive. In real life, this results in social pressure, family disapproval, and even strained mental well-being. This reflects Foucault's theory of sexuality, in which he explains that modern societies use discourse—not just law or force—to regulate what forms of love, desire, and bodies are considered "normal" or "deviant" (Foucault, 1978). Age-gap relationships with older women challenge the discursive boundaries of acceptable sexuality and, in doing so, threaten existing power structures rooted in gender and age.

Nevertheless, relationships like that of Holland Taylor and Sarah Paulson present a counter-narrative. Their enduring partnership defies heteronormative and age-based expectations, showing that emotional connection and mutual respect can transcend social norms (Holt, 2022). However, even they are not immune to public commentary or mockery, suggesting that such relationships, while possible, still struggle for complete cultural legitimacy. The visibility of these couples is essential in challenging societal double standards and creating space for broader conversations about love, age, and autonomy. However, true acceptance will only emerge when everyday, non-celebrity relationships are afforded the same dignity, respect, and complexity in public discourse.Some studies link age-gap relationships to the Oedipus complex. For instance,

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Mohammed Ahmed Abou Adel (2023) conducted research titled "The Oedipus Complex in Fiction." This study aims to know The Bookseller's Notebooks intersects with The Hunchback of Notre Dame and Oedipus Rex. The study's findings suggest that researchers undertake more comparative studies of intertextuality between non-local literary works. Then, Niccolai and Swauger (2021) conducted a study titled "Minding the (Age) Gap: The Identity and Emotion Work of Men and Women in Age-Discrepant Romantic Relationships." This study used a chain sampling technique to recruit participants and collected data through 20 in-depth interviews with men and women who had experienced relationships with a 10-year or more age gap between partners. Their findings suggest that individuals employ specific strategies to manage societal judgment, often navigating complex power dynamics and inequalities.

The research above, which discusses the age-gap relationship and the bias against women, inspired this study to explore the age-gap relationship and the stigma surrounding women who love younger men, as seen in *The Idea of You*. This research focused on the social stigma portrayed in the movie through the main character and how the main character struggles to break that stigma towards the issue of an age-gap relationship. This research is worth analyzing because the researcher sought to understand how women struggle to survive and fight for their love despite the negative societal stigma.

The study employs Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis theory, Michel Foucault's theory of sexuality, and elements of cinematography to analyze the film. Freud's theory helps uncover psychological underpinnings, Foucault's theory contextualizes sexuality as a social construct, and cinematography reveals visual storytelling techniques that reinforce or challenge these themes.

A.2 Problems of the Research

Based on the background of the research, the problems of the research are as follows:

1. How is the negative stigma surrounding the age-gap relationships portrayed in *The Idea of You*?
2. How does the main character struggle to challenge the societal stigma towards age-gap relationships?

A.3 Objectives of the Research

Based on the statement of the problem of the research, the objectives of the research are as follows:

1. To identify and analyze how *The Idea of You* portrays negative stigma toward age-gap relationships.
2. To explain how the main character resists and challenges societal stigma against her relationship.

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A.4 Significance of the Research

This research offers both theoretical and practical contributions:

Theoretically, this research aims to enhance our understanding of Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalysis theory and Foucault's theory of sexuality, particularly in the context of age-gap relationships. The fact that the age-gap relationship is still relevant to discuss.

Practically, this research encourages a more open and empathetic view of relationships that deviate from traditional norms, helping reduce stigma and promoting inclusivity in romantic narratives. This research expects that people will no longer think that age-disparate relationships between older women and younger men are a sin or a sexual abnormality, but that they are normal. This research also aims to contribute to future researchers at Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto, particularly those in the Faculty of Cultural Sciences and Communication, who are interested in analyzing the age-gap relationship in relation to societal stigma.

A.5 Limitation of the Research

This study focuses solely on the portrayal of the main character's struggle against societal stigma toward age-gap relationships, using *The Idea of You* as the primary object of analysis, with the support of Freud's and Foucault's theories, as well as cinematographic elements.

A.6 Definition of Key Terms

There are some key terms for understanding this study:

1. Oedipus complex

The term Oedipus complex was indeed named after the Greek mythical figure Oedipus, who was the son of King Laius and Queen Jocasta of Thebes and finally killed his father and married his mother unconsciously, which, according to the belief of the writer and people of that time, was designed by fate (Safra cited in Ahmed, 2012).

2. Age-gap Relationship

An age-gap relationship is a loving relationship between an older individual and a considerably younger one, characterized by a significant age difference (Chesnokova & Peer, 2021).

3. *The Idea of You*

The Idea of You is an adaptation of the novel *The Idea of You*, written by Robinne Lee. *The Idea of You* is an American romantic comedy movie about a 40-year-old woman who enters a romantic relationship with a much younger man, challenging societal expectations.

A.7 Organization of the Research

The organization of the research consist of five chapters:

1. Chapter I introduces the background, research problems, objectives, significance, limitations, key terms, and structure of the research. This chapter outlines the researcher's work goal.
2. Chapter II presents the theoretical framework and a review of relevant literature. In this section, the researcher outlines the theory applied in this research.
3. Chapter III describes the research design, data sources, data collection methods, and analysis procedures. It describes the procedures and methods for gathering data, as well as the steps for analyzing it.
4. Chapter IV provides the data analysis and interpretation based on the theories.
5. Chapter V concludes the findings and offers suggestions for future research.