

Portrayal of suicide in the media: 13 reasons why



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Abstract:

In this paper, I will be examining how the media portrays suicide, specifically of how the Netflix original series *13 Reasons Why* portrays teen suicide. By improving critiquing and analyzing skills throughout this course, I feel prepared to explore how Stuart Hall's techniques in Encoding/Decoding are integrated into this seemingly popular Netflix series. As a viewer, the main concern I would like to highlight in this paper is how this adaptation was done. Furthermore, the way it portrays suicidal thoughts and tendencies for young adults and how the series makes a poor attempt to make the show targets its viewers who are struggling. I would also like to discuss how it interpolates me and how this show has made me feel, being only a few years older than the students who are in this show. Additionally, I would like to go over the dominant reading of the series overall as well as the stereotyping of the victims of suicide. Finally, I have also found it necessary to introduce this paper with a brief summary of the show as a whole. While some may find that challenging, I find that it would be neglectful to only look at one season of the show instead of both.

Introduction:

This series begins only a few weeks after fellow Liberty High student, Hannah Baker, took her own life. While her family is still in shock and struck with grief, many students are feeling the effects of this tragedy as well. It is around this time that another student here, Clay Jensen, receives a strange package at his doorstep after school. Upon opening it he finds thirteen

cassette tapes, all numbered respectively and once he finds the means to listen, he is taken aback by what he hears:

Hey, it's Hannah. Hannah Baker. Don't adjust your...whatever device you're hearing this on. It's me, live and in stereo. No return engagements, no encore, and this time, absolutely no requests. Get a snack. Settle in. Because I'm about to tell you the story of my life. More specifically, why my life ended. And if you're listening to this tape...you're one of the reasons why (Netflix, 13 Reasons Why, Season 1, Episode 1).

He is also surprised to know that he is not the only one who is on the tapes, but learns he must listen to all to find his. He takes the rest of the season, listening to her story, following her steps in her final weeks of life. Clay hopes to take justice into his own hands as Hannah's case finally goes into trial, and toward the end, all who are on the tapes are called to court.

It is up to the students now to tell the truth and many are very hesitant as they fear they could get into serious trouble. It is student Tyler, who confesses about the bullying that happens at his school but ends up getting bullied even more for telling the truth. The season ends with student Tony giving Hannah's tapes to her parents, Tyler plotting some possible revenge, and Hannah's friend Alex shooting himself in the head. Moving forward, season two brings more of Hannah's story to life in court, revealing things about her that were not told in the first season. It also follows Alex's recovery and highlights Tyler's story as well.

The more Clay finds out about Hannah's life the more frustrated he gets, and not only that, in this whole season he is now haunted by an apparition of
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Hannah who he can communicate with. Hannah's family loses the case, accused rapist Bryce Walker gets taken in for his crimes involving both Hannah and her old friend Jessica, and the students are finally ready to move on. The season ends on a cliffhanger, as Tyler had returned from some time away, he was beaten and raped with a broom and leaves the season with nearly shooting up the school. Does this show really portray an example of teen suicide? Does it truly get into realistic detail of suicidal tendencies? How does this affect the worldwide audience? As a personal fan of the show, I want to see how others feel about the series overall, while I also go further into how I have responded to it.

Production:

Making its Season 1 premier worldwide on March 31, 2017, 13 Reasons Why has now become one of the world's most discussed streamed series. The film sites are in a variety of locations across California, locations include: Vallejo, San Rafael and, Mount Diablo (13 Reasons Why, IMDb). There are two seasons, the second one being released on May 18 of 2018 (Gill, 2018) and there are exactly thirteen episodes in each one. Companies that have helped in producing include July Moon Productions, Kicked to the Curb Productions, Anonymous Content, and Paramount Television (13 Reasons Why, IMDb).

It was Academy Award nominated, producer and writer, Brian Yorkey who originally proposed the adaptation and can be noted as one of many executive producers (Music Theater International). The remaining executive producers include: Selena Gomez, Steve Golin, Kristel Laiblin, Tom McCarthy, Michael Sugar, Mandy Teefey, Joy Gorman Wettels, and Diana Son. This

show's creative team expands far and wide with two producers, seven co-producers, two consulting producers, one supervising producer, and one associate producer (13 Reasons Why, IMDb). Past the creative team, one would be surprised to know how large the team is overall if you add in the cast and crew as well.

According to Google, the ratings gathered for this show are 8.1/10 on IMDb, 4/5 on common sense media, and a 52% on rotten tomatoes. While the show did have a pretty decent audience and following, the responses found when looking online are nowhere near positive. The show is mostly intended for teens to young adults, and in the article "What Teens Think of '13 Reasons why'" on Teen Vogue expresses the widespread concern in response to the contents of this show. Many parents, professionals in the fields of mental health and education are worried that this show is "glamorizing suicide and having the potential to cause a "suicide contagion" (Gross, 2017).

Once the second season premiered, the famous Netflix original series responded to this phenomenon with trigger warnings and resources for teens and young adults who either are having a hard time or know someone who is. The statement is as follows:

13 Reasons Why is a fictional series that tackles tough, real-world issues, taking a look at sexual assault, substance abuse, suicide, and more. By shedding light on these difficult topics, we hope our show can help viewers start a conversation. But if you are struggling with these issues yourself, this series may not be right for you, or you may want to watch it with a trusted adult. And if you ever feel you need someone to talk with, reach out to a

parent, a friend, a school counselor, or an adult you trust, call a local helpline, or go to [13ReasonsWhy.info](https://13reasonswhy.info). Because the minute you start talking about it, it gets easier. (13 Reasons Why, Season 2, Episode 1).

There has been some praise from adults on the raising of awareness, but still concern of going too far in depicting some of the conflict that should be prevented or fixed by doing so. This article starts off focusing on the adult response to the series, but then finally zooms in on the high-school student take on it. Surprisingly, many of these teens have similar responses to those of parents and other adults. There are a few quotes listed here and all come to a somewhat uniform answer, whether they have personal experience or not, this show can be dangerous to its audience. For one thing, it's graphic nature can trigger someone who has struggled before, but it also makes the idea of suicide "romantic" and "beautiful" (Gross, 2017).

Circulation:

As mentioned earlier, 13 Reasons Why made its first premier around the world on Netflix on March 31, 2017. Following that, season two was published to the public on May 18, 2018 also on Netflix for consumers to find worldwide. Netflix is the main streaming source for this series, but you can also purchase episodes of both seasons on Amazon. For those who are a little more "old-fashioned," you can expect to also find both seasons on DVD at stores like your local Target or online on Amazon.com. While DVD is slowly becoming less popular, perhaps having both seasons on this format may make it easier to re-watch your favorite episodes. This could be very

helpful, as sometimes Netflix has been known for removing old seasons and even old shows from their selection.

There does not appear to be exact details of when these DVDs were released, but appear to have been out since around the same time as each season was released. Two DVDs does seem like a fairly small collection of a series, especially for a show, but now that the main focus of the show, the death of Hannah, has been resolved many would agree two seasons could be enough. On the other hand, the second season ends on a little bit of a cliff hanger, as character Tyler has just been stopped from shooting up the school at their dance. In that case, not to worry, as it there seem to be many rumors of a possible Season Three coming out eventually. If the trend does follow, this part of the series will be released to the world on this platform and on DVD once the season has come to a close.

However, circulation of this Netflix original adaptation does not stop at streaming or DVD, there is also a soundtrack of all of the music featured in the episodes. Not only does Amazon stream episodes and sell the DVDs, they also sell the soundtrack with five of many songs available. Season one and two soundtracks can also be found on Spotify, a popular music streaming service. Something one might find interesting is that there are other playlists related to the show on this platform as well. There are podcasts like “Parents Guide to 13 Reasons Why,” and “13 Reasons Why// Recap Rewind,” on Spotify as well. Additionally, for the German-speaking audience there is a podcast discussing season two, “Tote Mädchen lügen nicht -Der Podcast.”

Critique:

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The Netflix original series, *13 Reasons Why* is focused around the death of Hannah and the events following it. However, it is not just a regular death, it was a suicide, a teen suicide, that is the real focus here. Netflix takes advantage of television, using it to give a visual to the story it is following. Meanwhile, this can give and has given rise to severe concern regarding the content of this show and how the creative team portrayed Hannah's story in each season. They have made it into a teen drama and have put a romantic spin on teen suicide (Gross, 2017). While it is important to bring issues like sexual assault, self-harm, alcoholism, drug abuse, and suicide to light, perhaps the way this show was produced was not the most beneficial way.

As of 2015, it was found in this study that well over 1, 300 children under thirteen years old have killed themselves since 1999 (Hanna, CNN). The article itself is titled "Suicides under age 13: One every 5 days," correlating to the numbers that were actually found in this study. Most kids seem to have done this due to relational or mental health issues, and it seems that more boys have taken their lives than girls, 75% to be more specific. While it is tragic that even children are attempting to leave this world so young, it seems that teen suicide is the most studied age group. "Adolescence is a stressful developmental period filled with major changes — body changes, changes in thoughts, and changes in feelings" (Stanford Children's Health). It is at this time that individuals tend to be put under more pressure and experience severe changes in how they respond to the world they live in. Around this age, it is now also time to start thinking about the future and becoming a successful adult, adding more stress to life (Stanford Children's Health). With so many changes in the body, the mind, in family, and

relationships, the young adult can begin to struggle in making decisions. For some, the weight of all of this is too much for them to solve on their own, making suicide seem like the only way out.

With this in mind, getting back to the show, the main character Hannah is a teen and falls into this area. When she had arrived as a transfer to Liberty High, she was an outsider, as everyone here seemed to already have a group of their own. Being that this was not Hannah's first move to a new town, this was a big change in her environment. On top of this, she was a junior in high school when she took her own life, one of the most critical years in high school as it is time to start thinking about college and what kind of career one would like to have in the future. In this sense, this show interpolates me as a consumer because I have also been in Hannah's shoes (Ott & Mack, 2014). However, what I mean by this is I was once a high school student, though I was not a transfer, it was still a new environment and a new time in my life. I say "was," because I am no longer in high school, but I have been out of it for only a few years, leaving memories of the experience still fresh in my mind.

I can recall how hard it was for me and talking about it with my friends, who were having this experience at the same time I was. As one grows up, the fear of high school is engraved in the mind, one doesn't even have to get to high school yet to know the terrors it may hold. For one thing, bullying is highly associated with high school and was made to be the main component of Hannah's decision to take her life. The mistake being made in the angle taken in this show is that Hannah's issues are reduced to a series of small, but terrible events. In addition, the creative team has shown the progression

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of each issue in a way that possibly many teens can relate to. In my eyes, making Hannah's story more relatable is a poor move and possibly a dangerous one in that, what stops a teen viewer from thinking that their life is like that or they have had a similar experience and suicide or self-harm is now a feasible answer to their problems? What stops a struggling teen from being triggered?

Of course, there is no law saying that people have to watch this show, but if a consumer has never read the book or taken into consideration looking at the previews, how are they to know they will not encounter something that will spark mental health issues? It is great that 13 Reasons Why made a statement at the beginning of each episode of season two, but why was this not a thought for season one? In our time it is crucial that television networks or streamed series do their research and find ways to bring things to light while preventing putting people in risk of harming themselves. Many parents and other adults, as mentioned earlier, have been concerned for a "suicide contagion," (Gross, 2017) and I would agree that is a valid concern.

The dominant readings (Ott & Mack, 2014) of this show are bullying, self-harm, sexual assault, and most notably, teen suicide, which is typically a very dark topic for discussion. I am sure that there were good intentions with creating this show and hope that it will spark conversation and assist people who are struggling or know someone who is. In this show, there is no escaping or working around the drama added in attempt to emphasize the dominant reading. While having a powerful reading in a television show is important and can bring the show great success, it won't always leave the best impression. For example, the creative team probably hoped that this <https://assignbuster.com/portrayal-of-suicide-in-the-media-13-reasons-why/>

series could possibly be another resource to prevent more suicide, but who's to say it will not inspire teens to take after Hannah Baker?

One more concept I would like to approach is stereotyping, which are reductions of someone's identity that boil them down to something more simple and additionally make that inherently a flaw. (Ott & Mack, 2014). To me, this show makes it look like bullying, or sexual assault are the only causes for someone to be suicidal. From what I have learned, or loosely understand, is that there are a wide variety of reasons for someone to become suicidal. This includes bullying and sexual assault, but what the show glazes over other mental health issues/disabilities. It also ignores the fact that any of these problems are known for possibly being hereditary. I know many people who have things like clinical depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety disorders, and more in their families.

It is unfortunate that I have not read the book, my point of view is primarily based off the show, but I would think that it is very different from the novel. Perhaps the approach taken in the book is better than putting it on screen and trying to make it another typical teen drama. There is a level of skill and professionalism I would expect that goes into writing a suicide story of a teenage girl or any teen in fact. I think it may be best that it stays in writing so that it can be appreciated in a better light. In a way, by putting it into a streamed, two-season series can put it at risk of offending or triggering someone dealing with mental health issues or suicidal tendencies.

Social Reproduction

The original Netflix series, *Thirteen Reasons Why*, is originally based on a novel written by Jay Asher, published by Razorbill originally in 2007 (Good Reads). The Netflix original series is an adaptation of the novel, and in a way transforms the story for viewers, even if they have not read the book. With a quick look on Instagram, it seems that there have been a variety of hashtags and fan pages made in response to this series. Within this search the fan pages are complete with pictures, clips and video edits as well. For hashtags, most seem to correlate to quotes, memes, cast, seasons, and many more posts that are somehow in connection with Season one, two, or both.

There also seems to be a lot of activity on Facebook with more fan pages, some blogs, community pages, and more. While searching for *13 Reasons Why* on Facebook, it also highlights posts made that have those key words or a tagged account. From all of this, and I am sure there must be more outlets used, there appears to be plenty of social reproduction of this television adaptation of what one could call a now classic novel. It also seems that several websites have created and released *13 Reasons Why* merchandise. Sites like Pinterest, Popbuzz, Seventeen, and many more just by a simple look into Google.

It is interesting, and perhaps ironic that there has been so much put out onto the internet like fan pages and merchandise because I have found so much backlash for the show. And while I can admire some aspects of this show, I would have to agree with much of the concern and negativity coming from other viewers of the series. Clearly, this show got a lot of attention and helped make some money for Netflix and websites that sell *13 Reasons Why* items, and it may seem like a waste. In the end, while there may be a poor

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reputation of the show, it really got people talking, but maybe not in the way the producers had hoped.

Conclusion:

While the book may be known to be brilliant, the Netflix adaptation does not seem to live up to the standards of a well-doe interpretation. While it is clear by it being listed worldwide on Netflix, and it hasn't been removed that it has some following, the amount of backlash is astounding. At first, unbiased, I was blind to how bad of an influence this show actually could be for audiences whether you are a teen, an adult, or especially a child too young to watch. There is a futile attempt to really create a show that appropriately and efficiently addresses suicide. Perhaps it is best left to the professionals in the field of mental health, as well as other trusted adults, family, and friends. People should not have to warn others who may be triggered not to watch it, before trailers were event released a message should have been sent out, rather than waiting until season two. It has been interesting to look at this series in this type of lense, I have noticed a lot more than I had when first watching the show on my own time months ago.

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