

CONTAGIOUS SUICIDE: HOW 13 REASONS WHY WENT TOO FAR

Thesis by Ashley Smith

David Deifell

COMM499: Communication Capstone

May 2019

Abstract

This research analyzes the harmful content of the first season of *13 Reasons Why* which shifted it from a socially responsible artifact to a glorified suicide narrative. It is estimated that nearly thirteen percent of teen suicides alone are attributed to patterns of contagion. So, there is a high demand for socially responsible media production and coverage of such issues. *13 Reasons Why* (2017), now approaching its 3rd season, is a Netflix original series which creator's saw as just that: a socially responsible text which could educate teens and parents about the risks of suicide. However, with a recent study finding correlation between the release of this series and a spike in adolescent suicide rates, further analysis is necessary to discover what within the series has triggered this copycat behavior. This ideological criticism makes an effort to analyze the harmful myths and ideologies which have been cultivated by the series, ultimately reigning detrimental for public health. From justifying suicide as a means for post-mortem revenge and presenting it in a normalized manner, while also shying away from the benefits of seeking help, *13 Reasons Why* projects many harmful ideologies, myths and triggering content among its viewers, raising irresponsible dialogue about teen suicide.

INTRODUCTION

There has been a steady rise in the national suicide rate over recent decades, making suicide now one of the leading causes of death among young people and accounting for more than 1 in 6 deaths (O'Brien, 2017). Research has found a positive correlation between suicidal media depictions and the threats of suicidal behavior in those at risk for suicide, especially among adolescents and young adults. This research has gone even further in identifying how televised portrayals of suicide have triggered a rise in copycat suicides, which are committed and attempted suicides that mimic the content depicted by the original suicide on television and in other media (Gould, 2003). It is estimated that around 13 percent of teen suicides are attributed to this pattern of contagion, and due to this, there is a high demand for socially conscious and responsible media production and coverage of mental health issues (Heron, 2018).

In the realm of alleged socially responsible texts falls the Netflix original series, *13 Reasons Why* (*13RW*). Based on a novel by Jay Asher of the same title, the series has received criticism for its legitimizing of the graphic suicide of a teenage girl. In the first season, viewers are introduced to 17-year-old Hannah Baker, who was faced with everyday issues of teenage girls in high school: boys, body image, and disagreements between friends. After following the thirteen tapes which were addressed to her at-one-time acquaintances, explaining the “13 reasons why” they were to blame for her death, Hannah’s suicide is revealed in full graphic and detailed glory without missing a blinking moment.

In its context, Netflix proposed *13RW* would be a turning point in suicide awareness education (Netflix Media Center). Following this first season’ release, a

lot of interest and conversation was generated, including debate over consequences on public health (NCH, 2019). For some viewers, there was hope that the story would create awareness and prevent suicide (Monroe, 2017), while others saw the series as a glamorization of the victim and her suicide in a way which instead promotes it (Sueskind, 2017).

A recent study found that during the month following the series' release, suicide rates were at the highest among 10 to 17-year-olds (NCH, 2019), and based on the alleged purpose of this series, this calls into question why adolescent suicide rate were rising instead of declining. The answer to this question likely lies in the dialogue the series is actually creating through its content. The first season of *13RW* contained little mention of how to seek help regarding trauma, and its lack of sensitivity towards mental health issues was further supplemented by its overall triggering nature that becomes evident towards the later episodes. That said, provocative content is depicted throughout each episode, from graphic scenes of suicide and sexual assault to numerous counts of drug use, and due to the nature of Netflix's streaming platform, viewers are likely consuming this triggering content at excessive rates. With this heavy exposure to such content, it is important to note here that it took until the launch of the second season for *13RW* creators to add one PSA and to the beginning of the first season, as one wasn't originally present, and also included disclaimers before each episode of season two (Bruner, 2018).

There is a right way to cover suicide in the media which helps an audience rather than harms it, so did a series that is proposed to have a socially responsible agenda cause such negative consequences for public health? This paper will argue that Netflix not only missed its opportunity to promote positive discussion about one of

the country's leading causes of death, but their methods of attempting to do so were irresponsible. In order to make this argument, I will address the scholarly literature related to Cultivation Theory, the Werther and Papageno effects, media contagion, and media guidelines for preventing suicide in relation to *13RW*. Then we will turn to reported cases of viewers which attempted or committed suicide following the release of the series, as well as a critical content analysis of the narrative. This analysis will identify the ideologies and myths cultivated by the series, which may have created the negative consequences of its circulation.

Literature Review

Cultivation Theory

Many theories study how the media effects society; however, one of the more prominent is George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory. Cultivation Theory has been important in explaining the effects of television viewing, and ultimately suggests that television can be dangerous, not only in its ability to shape a public's viewpoints, but by shaping conceptions of social reality (Mosharafa, 2015). Gerbner was particularly concerned with media violence, but others have extended his theory to issues beyond that (Gerbner, 1989). This theory also proposes that the more time people are exposed to the behaviors and narratives in the television world, the more likely they are to believe reality aligns with the messages relayed by television, therefore shaping their overall behaviors (Gerbner, 1989).

Although not all television viewing is harmful when the programs aim to be socially responsible and live up to that obligation by promoting positive behaviors, many adverse effects on health can also occur. In order to test this claim, an

empirical study was conducted to test whether television-free individuals and those who followed the American Academy of Pediatrics' recommended two hours of viewing time presented more positive psychological health when compared to those who watched television more frequently (Hammermeister et al., 2005). What they found was that people with moderate to low television viewing habits tend to have higher psychological health and more positive social interactions than those who watch television more than the recommended time.

The problem is, however, with the technological developments that the media landscape has experienced, as mentioned before, the way the public is consuming media has changed as well. More people are falling into the category of "heavy users" who consume 4-24 hours of television daily, far above the recommended viewing time (Gerbner, 1989). On the one hand, the media landscape is fragmented; there are more options available for viewers to control the content of the media they consume (ie. violence or suicidal depictions). However, with "binge watching" making its way into the television viewing experience, viewers are losing the control they have over the amount of exposure of such content.

Binge watching, or "marathon viewing" has become increasingly popular over the last decade with the rise of streaming sites like Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime, a habit which lends itself to extreme and devoted spurts of watching television programs (Sung et al., 2018). Binge-watching is said to occur while watching two or more episodes of a television show in one sitting, and according to Gerbner, this behavior automatically places them at the minimum viewing of a "medium user", which is 3 hours a day (Stoldt, 2016). Netflix is known for dropping full seasons of programs at a time, one of those being *13 Reasons Why*, and adding

the platforms binge-watch-encouraging sub-categories and auto-play feature on top of the mix, this can become even more problematic. Binge-watching alone is already linked to unhealthy levels of attachment and mental health issues (Wheeler, 2015), according to some of the early research of this trend. This was confirmed by a recent study, which found a positive relationship between depression and loneliness and binge-watching behaviors (Sung et al., 2018). But adding the dramatic narrative of a show like *13RW* into this mix, the audience is drawn further into such viewing behavior and encouraged to indulge in excessive levels of exposure to the controversial content.

While it is beyond the scope of this research to analyze the viewers' motivation behind such excessive indulgence and resonance with the narrative through rhetorical theory;, Kenneth Burke's theory of Dramatism does hold significance here. This theory would work to explain the force causing "heavy users" to identify with Hannah Baker's experiences as well as their scapegoating of the series, both which Burke would see as motivators for their actions (Griffin, 2018). But looking at the motivation for this behavior through a more critical lens, Cultivation theory would suggest this series-binging, which Netflix encourages, is what cultivates these audience members views of reality, ultimately impacting their behaviors.

But Gerbner's take on the cultivation of myths and ideologies among the television audience is more quantitative, which is important in analyzing the frequency of triggering content within television. However, the approach I am taking is more qualitative and analytical in identifying which ideologies and beliefs *13RW* instilled in

viewers, likely through their binge-watching behavior, which are probable motivators for copycat behavior.

The Werther Effect vs. Papageno Effect

Outside of the realm of television, Cultivation theory proves that the influences the media has on the public are embedded within the various content it presents. There are two theories regarding copycat suicides which reflect how content can play an important role in explaining the contagious behavior: The Werther Effect and the Papageno Effect (Sisask, 2012). The ‘Werther Effect’ comes from the narrative of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* from 1772, where the main character commits suicide for love. According to Sisask, this is one of the earliest known associations between depictions of suicidal narratives and suicide rates, which explains how the absence of protective measures and guidelines can trigger suicidal behavior. In contrast, the ‘Papageno Effect’ refers to Mozart’s opera *The Magic Flute* from 1791, where a young man in love becomes suicidal, but copes well due to his friends’ intervention.

Research is available regarding the “Werther Effect” and the negative implications and increased suicide rates following irresponsible media depictions of suicides (Niederkrötenhaler, 2010). However, there is little research conducted that explains media coverage of suicide which has resulted in a positive, adverse effect and a decrease in suicide rates. Although it is outside the scope of this project to pursue positive suicide narratives, the existence of the Papageno effect demonstrates that suicide can be represented in the media without deadly consequences. That being said, the choices of media writers and producers matter. The possibility of socially

responsible choices for storytelling and media representation brings us back to the question as to what within *13RW* caused this adverse effect. With that, it's important to take a critical approach towards discovering the attitudes about suicide and seeking help that are likely projected onto the audience, ultimately reinforcing beliefs and ideologies that reign detrimental to public health.

Media Contagion and *13 Reasons Why*

Since the formulation of Gerbner's Cultivation Theory in the 1960's, it is important to recognize that the field of mass communication and its media landscape has evolved, with the addition of cable, the internet, satellite, social media, and online streaming. The media environment has become fragmented, but regardless of these changes, this theory has held the test of time in explaining the long-term effects of television on viewers (Mosharafa, 2015). The idea of media contagion is the heightened likelihood of media-publicized behaviors to be duplicated by their audience. (Gould, 2013). Along with cultivation theory, media contagion is often is often linked to copycat violence and crimes publicized in the news (Romer et al., 2006); however, studies have revealed evidence which shows that suicide rates have followed the same pattern. Researchers Madelynn Gould, Patrick Jamison, and Daniel Romer use the term "contagious" to describe the the clusters or epidemics of suicides that appear related to depictions of suicides in the media (2003). In their research, they review depictions of suicide in news coverage, as well as the fictional dramatization of the act, and compare these artifacts' effects on suicide rates over time. What they found was that these suicidal depictions have had the greatest effects on the younger audiences.

The existence of these suicide clusters among audience members are what other researchers have used to study the link between media depictions of suicide within news coverage, dramatic fiction, and other forms of media, which will be explained below. Although my research will consist of analyzing suicide depictions within a fictional narrative, it's important to note that there are additional sources of suicidal contagion, emphasizing the pathological strength that television has on viewers. Throughout history, there has been a significant rise in suicide rates following some mainstream media coverage of celebrity suicides, and researchers have questioned whether the exposure to such stimuli causes the cluster of suicides. A study was conducted by Daniel Romer, Patrick Jamieson, and Kathleen Jamieson examines the relationship between news coverage of suicide in varying news sources and the frequency of deaths-by-suicide during a 4-month period in 1993 (2006). After studying the theory among 3 different age groups, the researchers concluded that suicide contagion is likely the cause of such suicide clusters following news coverage of suicides. Going further into this idea, knowing that suicides do appear to cluster, researchers have claimed that imitation may play a role into this trend (Joiner, 2003). For example, there was a notable increase in suicides rates following the suicide of American actress and model Marilyn Monroe, as well as that of American comedian and actor Freddie Prinze. After the suicide of musician Kurt Cobain, suicide rates did not appear to increase, although calls to crisis lines did. Studies have shown that this phenomenon does not only occur in America (Gould, 2013). In other countries including Austria, Germany, Australia, and Japan, there have been reports of significant increases in suicide rates followed by coverage of suicide stories in the mass media.

But media contagion does not just follow real-life events, but rather actions taken by fictional characters as well, as seen in the way adolescents followed the actions taken by Hannah Baker in *13 Reasons Why*. An outbreak of copycat suicides follows the release of the Netflix original series *13RW*, and considering this series is approaching its third season, this calls for scrutiny. This series follows a story of high schooler Hannah Baker's plan for revenge that unfolds following her suicide (Wartella, 2018). After the release of the first season, word quickly began to circulate that hospitalizations for suicide attempts among adolescents, similar to the demographic of Hannah Baker, were rising. Not only did they copy the act, but they also copied the method, many of the victims choosing to leave revenge tapes behind. While many researchers have proven that suicide contagion has in fact occurred surrounding the release of *13 Reasons Why* and other media-driven suicide narratives, they often fail to cover the content of these suicidal depictions in the media which have led to adverse effects. This content will be further analyzed in the analysis portion of the paper identify the content within *13 Reasons Why* that may have triggered copycat suicides.

Whether viewers followed through with the act or not, studies do show that the series triggered some sort of response. A study published in the JAMA Internal Medicine shows that less than a month following the series' release, a significant rise in suicide-related internet searches occurred (Ayers, 2017). This includes a 26 percent rise in searches for "how to commit suicide." Simultaneously, suicide prevention-related searches also increased by 21 percent. While this does show an increase in suicide awareness, the series unintentionally increasing suicidal ideation as well, as evident from these search results.

World Health Organization Guidelines

Seeing as *13RW* became a trigger among many viewers, it's important to note that there are guidelines proposed by the World Health Organization for media producers to prevent suicide (WHO, 2017). Of the twelve guidelines provided, the following are those applicable to fictional media artifacts:

1. Provide accurate information about where to seek help
2. Educate the public about the facts of suicide prevention, without spreading myths
3. Report stories of how to cope with life stressors or suicidal thoughts, and how to get help
4. Do not place stories about suicide prominently and do not unduly repeat such stories
5. Do not use language which sensationalizes or normalizes suicide, or presents it as a constructive solution to problems
6. Do not explicitly describe the method used
7. Do not provide details about the site/location
8. Do not use photographs, video footage, or social media links

These guidelines are important in analyzing the dialogue that *13RW* creates about suicide, mental health, and seeking help, especially considering that the series did not prevent suicide, but rather generate more among its audience. Through my analysis of the first season alone, it is evident that majority of these guidelines, if not all of them, were ignored by the creators of *13RW*, likely the result in imitative behavior.

Ultimately, my goal in conducting this research is to the expose Netflix and the creators of *13 Reasons Why* for its irresponsibility in the way the brought forward such controversial ideologies through the narrative. This literature review suggests that while

some media artifacts do create positive awareness and a significant reduction in suicide rates, other media reports and dramatic interpretations of suicide take an irresponsible route and provoke suicidal behaviors. Something about the story and depictions in *13RW* distorted its intention of suicide awareness to a glorified suicide fantasy, which triggered copycat behavior.

Methodology

I first examined a handful of suicide cases which have occurred in the last 2 years (2017-2019), reportedly linked to the release of *13RW*. As observed by Madelyn Gould in her research about suicide contagion, adolescents, those struggling with mental health, and those who can identify with the experiences or qualities of the featured person are those most at risk and vulnerable to imitative suicidal behavior (2003). Because of this, I wanted to analyze the victims whose deaths or methods of attempt are allegedly linked to the series for any evidence of identification, such as age, life experiences, or other factors that may have contributed to their behavior.

Additionally, the content of the narrative itself plays a significant role in the beliefs and views about suicide, mental health, and methods of getting help that the audience takes away from the series. Seeing as though these views resulted in negative consequences for many viewers, I decided to follow Foss' method of ideological criticism through my content analysis. Foss argues that this method is useful in uncovering the overall intent of an artifact (Foss, 1996), which is important here because the intent appears to be dissociated from the message which was received by the audience. This method allows me to identify the beliefs and ideologies created by the narrative while determining the source for the reactions of those who were triggered by the series.

Collected Cases of Copycat Suicides in Response to 13 Reasons Why

I collected a sample of 8 cases of media-reported copycat suicides from the last two years (2017-2019), specifically those which had an alleged link to *13 Reasons Why* (Fox news; Grigley; Joyce; Leo; Mojica; Salo; Staff). For each case, I took note of both the ages and genders of the victims, looking out for any similarities between each victim, or between the victims and the “protagonist” of the series, Hannah Baker. I also paid attention to any details of the victims’ suicide attempt or death which may indicate an association between their behaviors and the narrative of the series, such as any artifacts left behind, the methods followed, any reference to the series itself, or possible life situations which the victim may have identified with in Hannah Baker’s experience.

As seen in Table 1, the victims of the cases collected all fell between the ages 13 and 16, except for one. This is significant information as these victims fall within the age range of “adolescence”, one of the vulnerable categories of those most susceptible to influence and copycat behavior. Majority of these victims are also

Table 1 Details of Media-Reported Cases of Victims' *13 Reasons Why* Immitation

Victim	Age	Gender	Details of Suicide Linked to <i>13 Reasons Why</i>			
			Artifacts Left Behind	Method	Series Reference	Identification With Hannah
Victim 1	15	F			X	X
Victim 2	23	M	X			X
Victim 3	15-18*	M	X	X	X	
Victim 4	15	F		X	X	
Victim 5	13	F			X	X
Victim 6	14	F	X			
Victim 7	15	F			X	X
Victim 8	15	F			X	X

* Victim 3's age was not identified in the report, however it was reported he was attending high school at the time of his attempt

female, as is the main character of the series; however, this evidence shows that males are not immune to influence by exposure to suicidal narratives. The specific details of each victims' case, however, are what indicated further analysis was necessary in identifying the ideologies passed on to these viewers that drove them to imitate the acts of Hannah Baker. Victims 2, 3, and 7 all left artifacts behind addressed to those they wished to blame for their suicide, victim 2 leaving behind tapes and a map of who of who they should go to, exactly as it was executed in *13RW*.

Victims 3 and 4 also showed signs of mimicking the method by which Hannah Baker committed suicide in a scene within episode 13, the infamous scene which will be significant in making my argument about the irresponsibility of the creators later. Victim 3 was reported to have self-harmed by cutting his wrists, and victim 4 not only took a blade to her wrists, but also did so in a filled bathtub while allegedly texting her friends "its not quick enough... it's not like 13 Reasons." Similar to victim 4, majority of the victims in these cases all referenced *13RW* in some way related to the artifacts they left behind or in conversation with mental health officials and witnesses prior to their death.

Notable details of the victims' life experiences prior to their imitative behavior include two counts of reported bullying and shaming, two counts of reported heartbreak, one report of family issues, two reports of struggling with school, and 3 report of not receiving viable help from mental health authorities, all themes which are prevalent throughout the narrative of *13RW*. This does not necessarily indicate that identifying with these life experiences caused the victims to copy Hannah Bakers behavior. It does however point to a potential correlation

between these life experiences and the ideologies projected by *13RW*: suicide as frequent and justified option, suicide as revenge, seeking help as a failed mechanism, and mental health as an irrelevant factor. Although there are several other cases of suicidal behavior linked to *13RW*, this sample highlights some of the patterns and connections between the victims and the controversial narrative.

That said, there is one consistent detail across every one of these cases: All guardians and witnesses to the victims' suicide attempt or death by suicide reported that the victims had watched or been exposed to *13 Reason Why* prior to their imitative behavior.

Analysis

Moving forward to further identify the key contributors of suicide clusters which sparked around *13RW*, my analysis criticizes the ongoing ideologies and beliefs that may be projected onto the audience of the television series. If Netflix's claim that the series is a socially responsible artifact to "open up dialogue among parents, teens, schools, and mental health advocates" (Fox News) about mental health is true, the ideologies created by such dialogue should mirror that. However, this is not the case, as there are three prevalent themes I observed throughout the first season which hone the potential for negative consequences: suicide is a frequent and justified option, as well as a means for revenge, and seeking help is failed mechanism. What I found was that these myths formed by the content are counter to the guidelines for media coverage to decrease the risk of copycat suicides. In taking a closer look at some of myths and beliefs that these ideologies

might create, it becomes more evident the “dialogue” *13 Reasons Why* is creating is detrimental to public health and irresponsible in and of itself.

Discussion of Suicide: Post-Mortem Revenge

As a show covering the painful suicide narrative of a fictional character, Hannah Baker, Netflix had the opportunity to promote other alternative routes for coping and handling the stressors that Hannah Baker experiences; however, in analyzing the dialogue and themes within the series, Netflix appears to promote the contrary. I aimed to identify the primary message or ideologies about suicide that may have penetrated the beliefs of vulnerable audience members and motivated their imitative behavior, specifically those messages which may “spread myths.” Considering the narrative revolves around Hannah Baker’s “13 Reasons Why”, this series may elicit the idea that suicide is a surefire way of getting revenge on those who harmed her. There are multiple circumstances throughout the season which contribute to this belief.

Within the first few minutes of the series’ pilot episode, viewers are given this revenge premise from Hannah’s opening dialogue of Tape 1 Side A: “If you’re listening to this, you’re one of the reasons why.” This line is an immediate gateway into the belief that Hannah committed suicide for the sake of getting back at those who harmed her, those who were her “13 Reasons Why.” Each of these thirteen reasons are linked to a specific supporting character throughout the series, and it’s noted that the tapes addressed to them were created to make sure they knew “exactly what they did [and would] never forget.”

This revenge-suicide ideology becomes a primary focus of the series from beginning to end as viewers witness the buildup of damage inflicted upon the twelve recipients' lives as a result of discovering their tapes. The threat of the tapes and the severity of the potential repercussions are also emphasized multiple times, as everyone's lives would "only get worse" if the tapes were not passed on, glorifying the most-mortem justice. But Clay Jenson, the series other main character and Hannah's love interest, is often depicted carrying out acts harmful revenge that Hannah wished to achieve after her death. Seeing as though Hannah still had an outlet to get revenge upon many of the tapes' recipients, this may suppress the severity of suicide and create the belief that there is still life after death, and the myth that someone will carry out the revenge post suicide.

Discussion of Suicide: Normalized Response to Trauma

But suicide isn't just presented as a means for revenge. Referring back to the guidelines for preventing suicide, it is suggested that media depictions of suicide do not "use language which sensationalizes or normalizes suicide or presents it as a constructive solution for problems" (WHO, 2017). As viewers follow Hannah through the experiences leading up to what eventually triggered her suicide, they create the impression that Hannah did so because she couldn't handle her everyday stresses of life. My observation here isn't made to delegitimize some of the struggles Hannah Baker experienced throughout the series, as the little things add up; however, Netflix's approach to making that statement is what created the basis for the harmful ideology that suicide is a justifiable last resort, and one can only be relieved of their trauma when they are dead.

There are numerous scenes within the narrative which seem speak of suicide in a justified or normalized manner, or as a commonly utilized solution. Outside of suicidal ideation and behavior itself, suicide is spoken about in a casual, almost mocking manner. A minor character of the series makes the statement, “it’s a good song, if you want to kill yourself” (*13RW*, “Tape 2: Side A”), in reference to “Gloomy Sunday”, or the “Hungarian Suicide Song” which is another artistic artifact that has allegedly triggered people to commit suicide while listening (Stack et al., 2008). The series has enough triggering content which will be explained in the next section of this paper, and I question how necessary it was to include reference to a song which is known to have triggered suicides, especially towards a vulnerable audience.

In addition to some of the casual mentions of suicide, the narrative of *13RW* expresses it as a constructive solution for multiple scenarios, especially those which are common not only in the world of *13RW*, but likely among the everyday struggles of teen and adolescent audience members. For example, there are multiple cases in which Hannah is bullied for rumors that spread around the school, covered in “Tape 1: Side A” and “Tape 2: Side A.” This idea of bullying as a reason for committing suicide appeared to resonate with some of the victims of suicide contagion that resulted from the series, as three of the cases from Table 1 reported bullying linked to the victims’ behavior. Family struggles also became another motivator for Hannah’s suicidal behavior, another life situation identified within the cases collected. Later in the series, Hannah expresses that “sometimes the future doesn’t unfold the way you think it will” after a scene of her parents fighting,

expressing that this is the reason why she started making the suicide tapes (*13RW*: “Tape 4: Side B”). This scene might express to those who feel hopeless or uncertain about their future the belief that suicide is an answer.

But suicidal behavior and ideations become almost a normal response to trauma within the world of *13 Reasons why*, beyond just Hannah’s acts. Clay Jenson expressed feelings of wanting to die following Hannah’s suicide (*13RW*, “Tape 4: Side B”), and is later seen standing on the edge of a cliff because he can’t live with himself after hearing his tape and wanted “let go” of everything that happened (*13RW*, “Tape 6: Side A”). Justin Foley and Alex Standall, both recipients of Hannah’s tapes, also threaten to take their lives at different points in the first season. We come back around to the myth created by the series that suicide is a means for revenge, as Justin, the subject of both “Tape 1: Side A” and “Tape 5: Side A”, expresses that he wanted to jump off a building or shoot himself because of the damage inflicted on him from Hannah’s tapes (*13RW*: “Tape 7: Side A”). Alex, the subject of “Tape 2: Side A”, not only attempts to drown himself early in the season (*13RW*: “Tape 2, Side A”), but he also does try to commit suicide by shooting himself because he can’t live with guilt he experienced from Hannah’s 13 tapes. From the numerous times suicide is mentioned as an option to escape trauma, *13RW* not only normalizes suicide, but likely projects this belief of suicide as a justifiable escape route on some of its audience members as well.

Seeking Help is Not an Option within *13RW*

It’s key for media artifacts with a socially responsible agenda regarding mental health to emphasize the value of seeking help. The World Health

Organization again proposes that the media “provide accurate information about where to seek help” for mental health ailments (2017). When this recommendation isn’t followed, television viewers might glean from the narrative the false belief that mental health professionals and others that they may reach out to, will not only fail to help, but make also matters worse. Throughout the first season of *13 Reasons Why*, not once are Hannah’s efforts to seek help depicted in a positive manner, thus opening up the dialogue for mental health services as ineffective and discourages help seeking as an option.

In episode three, the principle of Hannah’s high school is seen talking to Mr. Porter, the school counselor, to whom he implies that the time and resources the school dedicated to her were a waste and things would have been different if they “would have just known she needed help before” (*13RW*, “Tape 2: Side A”). It is revealed later in the series, however, that she did reach out to Porter multiple times through which her future plans were shunned due to her struggling in school, and she was later victim blamed for her assault. Hannah is not the only character who is victim blamed by Porter; however, as Tyler, one of Hannah’s “reasons”, asked what he was “doing that provokes [the bullying]” which he was experiencing (*13RW*: Tape 3: Side A). Both of these scenarios give a negative view of mental health professionals as resource.

In episode 7, the idea of seeking help from peers and teachers is also framed in a negative light. Hannah writes an anonymous letter to her class on a napkin, reading “what if the only way not to feel bad is to not feel anything at all, forever.” Instead of her call for help getting followed up with positive intervention, which

would depict her efforts in a positive manner, no further efforts to discover the author were taken, nor did anyone take the note seriously. This is evident when other characters claimed, “whoever wrote this is just looking for attention” and “maybe its just a joke” (13RW, “Tape 7: Side A”). This creates the belief among viewers that even reaching out to those within a closer circle serves little purpose, potentially discouraging them from seeking help at all.

Now while some of these messages about seeking help can mirror some aspects of reality, I do recognize that there is a lot of pressure on mental health professionals to know how to intervene. But creators made the deliberate decision to only reflect mental health officials, peers, and guardians as unviable resources.

Rule No. 6

But content ideologies aside, as mentioned numerous times before, there are guidelines proposed by the World Health Organization about how to properly depict suicide in the media as a way to prevent suicide. One of the most crucial guidelines which looking at 13RW as an artifact is guideline 6: coverage of suicide should not go into detail on the methods used by the deceased (WHO, 2017). For example, the artifact can suggest an overdose, but not what pills and how many were taken. This is to prevent copycat suicides, giving vulnerable people instructions on how to kill themselves. Here is where I bring up the most talked about and infamous scene from the series: “Tape 7, Side A.”

Before I get into the analytical details of this episode, it’s important to note the deliberate decisions made by the creators of the series. As noted prior, the narrative of

this Netflix original is based on that of Jay Asher's novel by of the same title. In in the book, Hannah overdosed on pills. In the Netflix series however, Brian Yorkey, the series' writer, took the artistic liberty to not only change the method to a more "ugly and damaging" process (Fox News), but drew it out across a three-minute scene. The creators themselves had the option to imply that she cut her wrists, as advised by the WHO, but they took it upon themselves to not only verbalize the step-by-step instruction leading up to Hannah's death, but provide viewers an up-close visualization act itself, completely uncensored.

Prior to her death, viewers are presented step by step instructions of the preparations Hannah took prior to her death, from the time she went home and put the tapes in order and sent them out, right up to when she grabbed the razor blades from her parents' store, "got into the tub, slit her wrists, and bled to death" (13RW, "Tape 7: Side A"). Verbalizing the process would quite frankly be enough to give someone the instruction on how to follow suit. But the creators took this scene a step further, providing viewers a graphic and uncensored 3-minute scene of Hannah cutting her wrists wide open and bleeding out in a bathtub, even going as far as zooming in on the blade as it penetrates her skin. This scene quite possibly shows viewers exactly how follow suit simply by logging into Netflix, as it did for victim 4 from Table 1, the 13-year-old girl who copied the exact method as it was shown in this episode.

Discussion

As viewers had been driven to take their own lives by the negative ideologies and triggering nature of the series' content as noted above, one might assume that Netflix

would respond to the fact that their series hasn't produced the dialogue they allegedly proposed. But Netflix seemed to brush off these effects in a public statement to the families whose children fell victim to this series:

“Our hearts go out to these families during this difficult time. We have heard from many viewers that ‘13 Reasons Why’ has opened up a dialogue [...] around the intense themes and difficult topics of the show.”

Despite the copycat behaviors triggered by the series, Netflix appears to put priority of the profit they have continued to make from the series over those who continue to fall victim to its content. Granted, the series may get people talking about suicide, but clearly not all of this dialogue is positive, especially around the scene which was intended to depict suicide as “ugly and damaging”. Ugly and damaging, yes. But triggering, also yes. Not many viewers who are considering suicide, nor those who have been affected by suicide would find this scene very helpful, especially considering the case of the 16 year-old-girl who was struggling with depression and committed suicide just days after watching the series. With all of the cases of copycat suicide which are related to the series, this artifact's messages regarding suicide provide dangerous triggers for those who are struggling and looking for a way out.

Although the primary focus of this research is to expose the ideologies *13RW* creates regarding suicide, mental health, and seeking help, there are numerous other patterns of destructive behaviors that the series appeared to normalize through repeated attention. Even when the narrative wasn't discussing suicide as an option, multiple characters are depicted taking part in numerous other harmful and dangerous behaviors as a means for coping. These behaviors included underaged drinking, recreational drug use, skipping school, and reckless driving and outdoor activities. In “Tape 6: Side A”,

Skye Miller, a reoccurring character who doesn't appear on the tapes, doesn't justify suicide, but rather self-harming behaviors. She makes the statement to Clay that self-harm is "what you do instead of killing yourself [because] suicide is for the weak."

While the scope of this research was to expose these themes and ideologies of the first season alone, it's still important to mention some of the content touched on in the second season, which will likely roll into the upcoming third season. As season two deviated away from depicting suicide as viable coping mechanism, the creators still utilized their season for a new graphic and uncensored statement. The series touched on sexual assault quite a few times in the first season, but at the end of season two, Tyler, the bullied tape recipient, is not only brutally beaten in the high school bathroom, but soon becomes victim of a very graphic and dramatized scene of sexual assault (*13RW*: "Bye"). The narrative seems to put emphasis on this assault as a means for the attacker, another student, to get revenge on Tyler for his acts throughout the season. Making things more problematic, Tyler is later shown at the end of the episode plotting a school shooting to get his own revenge. Based on my analysis of *13RW*'s discussion of suicide and its existing cultivating effects of suicide ideologies, the decision to emphasize a school shooting in an identical manner has a strong possibility of sparking a cluster of copycat shooters if not shown in a responsible manner.

Conclusion: The Future of *13 Reasons*

In conclusion, it's evident that *13 Reasons Why* has caused detrimental effects on public health, triggering copycat suicides since its release in 2017. In addition to real-life cases of victims references the series in justification for their copycat behavior, as well as

resonating with some of the life experiences of the series' characters, *13RW* appears to project many harmful ideologies and myths about suicide and seeking help because of its irresponsible dialogue. The series not only portrays suicide as a normalized and sensationalized response to trauma as well as a means for achieving post-mortem revenge. The narrative also appears to cast a negative light on any attempt of seeking help, which can be problematic for those who should seek help. If this artifact was created to be socially responsible in provoking important dialogue about suicide and mental health, this needs to be done so responsibly by following the guidelines proposed by the World Health Organization for preventing suicide. The creators of *13RW* have ignored these guidelines indefinitely.

While the creators' intentions are unknown to us, it's not likely that they intended to cause their viewers the harm which resulted. But what the creators do know is the nature of their content and the effects it is having on the viewers. With the dramatic style of the narrative and the platform through which the series is streamed, viewers are encouraged to get sucked into the narrative in ways which can be detrimental to their health. Netflix only tried to mitigate the triggering content of their series with with disclaimers, but due to the cultivating effects of the series, those disclaimers have no power over the impending ideologies it projects. As the third season is set to release at the end of May 2019, talk has started to rise again about the risks of youth exposure to this narrative (NCH, 2019). But looking forward, I question if these same results of contagious suicide clusters would occur if the series were to be distributed with viewing restriction. Due to the fact that medium and light users have lower levels of cultivation than heavy users, Gerbner would likely argue otherwise. Perhaps moving forward,

Netflix should release the show on a week to week instead of all at once, and after its initial 13 week airing, it should only allow for one episode to be watched a week at a time through its software controls, if possible. This might minimize the effects of copycat suicide that are occurring as a result of the cultivating effects of heavy 13RW viewership and binge-watching, reducing the excessive exposure to such triggering content.

By all means, suicide and mental health are topics which need to be talked about. And it's clear *13RW* has stimulated conversation. But this series has still generated a cluster of suicides among vulnerable adolescent, and one death because of this series is one too many. Suicide is a serious issue that needs to be covered responsibly within the media in order to prevent vulnerable audience members from following in the footsteps of the deceased. There is a right way to cover this topic without glorifying it, but thus far, Netflix has failed.

Works Cited

- Ayers, John W., Benjamin M. Althouse, Eric C. Leas, Mark Dredze, and Jon-Patrick Allem. "Internet Searches Following the Release of 13 Reasons Why." *JAMA Intern Med*, vol. 177, no. 10, 2017, pp. 1527-1529.
- Bruner, Raisa. "Netflix Addresses Controversy Before 13 Reasons Why Season 2." *Time*, Time, 16 May 2018, time.com/5278376/13-reasons-why-season-two-netflix/.
- Fox News. "Families Blame '13 Reasons Why' for 2 Teens' Suicides." *Fox News*, FOX News Network, June 2017, www.foxnews.com/health/families-blame-13-reasons-why-for-2-teens-suicides.
- Foss, Sonja. "Ideological criticism." *Rhetorical criticism: Exploration and practice* 3 (1996): 239-52.
- Gerbner, George, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, Nancy Signorielli. "Living with Television: The Dynamics of the Cultivation Process" Hillsdale, *NJPerspectives on Media Effects* (1986).
- Gould, Madelyn, Patrick Jamieson, and Daniel Romer. "Media Contagion and Suicide Among the Young." *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 46, no. 9, May 2003, p. 1269.
- Gould, Madelyn, Sylvan Wallenstein, and Lucy Davidson. "Suicide Clusters: A Critical Review." *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, vol. 19, pp. 17-29.
- Griffin, Em, et al. *A First Look at Communication Theory*. Tenth ed., McGraw-Hill Education, 2018.
- Grigley, Amber. "Family of Teen Who Committed '13 Reasons Why' Copycat Suicide Urges Netflix to Cancel Show." *WBMA*, Apr. 2018,

abc3340.com/news/local/family-of-teen-who-committed-13-reasons-why-copycat-suicide-wants-netflix-to-cancel-show.

Haim, Mario, Florian Arendt, Sebastian Scherr. "Abyss or Shelter? On the Relevance of Web Search Engines' Search Results When People Google for Suicide." *Health Communication*, vol. 32, no. 2, Feb. 2017, pp. 253–258.

Hammermeister, Jon, Barbara Brock, David Winterstein, Randy Page. "Life Without TV? Cultivation Theory and Psychosocial Health Characteristics of Television-Free Individuals and Their Television-Viewing Counterparts." *Health Communication*, vol. 17, no. 3, June 2005, pp. 253–264.

Heron, Melonie. Deaths: Final Data for 2016. *National Vital Statistics Report*, Vol. 67, No. 5, Jul. 2018. http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr65/nvsr65_02.pdf.

Joiner, Thomas E. "Contagion of Suicidal Symptoms as a Function of Assortative Relating and Shared Relationship Stress in College Roommates." *Journal of Adolescence*, Vol.24, No. 4, Aug. 2003, pp. 495-504.

Joyce, Kathleen. "Peruvian Man Mimics '13 Reasons Why,' Leaves behind Tapes after Suicide." *Fox News*, FOX News Network, June 2017, www.foxnews.com/entertainment/peruvian-man-mimics-13-reasons-why-leaves-behind-tapes-after-suicide.

Institute of Medicine and National Research Council. 2013. *Contagion of Violence: Workshop Summary*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

Inside Edition Staff. "Florida Mom Blames '13 Reasons Why' for Daughter's Suicide Attempt on Mother's Day." *Inside Edition*, Inside Edition, 24 May 2018,

www.insideedition.com/florida-mom-blames-13-reasons-why-daughters-suicide-attempt-mothers-day-43604.

Leo, Ben. "Girl, 13, Hangs Herself after Prank Linked to Suicide Show 13 Reasons Why." *The Sun*, The Sun, 15 May 2018, www.thesun.co.uk/news/5761450/girl-suicide-netflix-13-reasons-why/.

Mojica, Adrian. "Student's Lawsuit after Suicide Attempt: 'They Need to Know My Thirteen Reasons Why'." *WZTV*, Jan 2019, fox17.com/news/nation-world/students-lawsuit-after-suicide-attempt-they-need-to-know-my-thirteen-reasons-why.

Monroe, Jamison. "Why Everyone Should Watch '13 Reasons Why.'" *Mindbodygreen*, Mindbodygreen, 8 Apr. 2017, www.mindbodygreen.com/0-29752/why-everyone-should-watch-13-reasons-why.html.

Mosharafa, Emam. "All You Need to Know About: The Cultivation Theory." *Global Journal of Human-Social Science*, Vol. 24, No. 8, 2015.

"Netflix Study Reveals If You Want to Feel Closer to Your Teen, Watch Their Shows." *Netflix Media Center*, media.netflix.com/en/press-releases/netflix-study-reveals-if-you-want-to-feel-closer-to-your-teen-watch-their-shows.

Niederkrotenthaler, Thomas, Martin Voracek, Arno Herberth, Benedikt Till, Markus Strauss, Elmar Etzersdorfer, Brigitte Eisenwort and Gernot Sonneck. "Role of Media Reports in Completed and Prevented Suicide." *British Journal of Psychiatry*. Sep. 2010, pp. 234–243.

O'Brien, Kimberly, John R. Knight, and Sion Harris. 2017. "A Call for Social Responsibility and Suicide Risk Screening, Prevention, and Early

- Intervention Following the Release of the Netflix Series 13 Reasons Why.”
JAMA Internal Medicine. 177. 10.1001/jamainternmed.2017.3388.
- Romer, Daniel, Patrick Jamieson, Kathleen Jamieson. “Are News Reports of Suicide Contagious? A Stringent Test in Six U.S. Cities. *Journal of Communication*, vol. 56, no. 2, June 2006, pp. 253–270.
- Salo, Jackie. “Mom Blames Teacher Promoting '13 Reasons Why' for Son's Suicide Attempt.” *New York Post*, New York Post, 22 May 2017,
 nypost.com/2017/05/22/mom-blames-teacher-promoting-13-reasons-why-for-sons-suicide-attempt/.
- Sisask, Merike, and Airi Värnik. “Media Roles in Suicide Prevention: A Systematic Review.” *MDPI*, Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute, 4 Jan. 2012,
 www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/9/1/123/htm.
- Stack, Steven, David Lester, and Karolina Krysznska. “Gloomy Sunday: Did the ‘Hungarian Suicide Song’ Really Create a Suicide Epidemic?” *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying*, vol. 56, no. 4, 2008, pp. 349–358., doi:10.2190/om.56.4.c.
- Stoldt, Ryan G. *The Behavioral Effects of the Binge-Watching Mediamorphosis*. Diss. Wichita State University, 2016.
- Sueskind, Barrie. “How '13 Reasons Why' Hurts: The Danger of Glamorizing Teen Suicide.” *GoodTherapy.org Therapy Blog*, 24 July 2017,
 www.goodtherapy.org/blog/how-13-reasons-why-hurts-danger-of-glamorizing-teen-suicide-0725174.
- “Suicide Rates Spike Nationally Among Youth After ‘13 Reasons Why’ Release.”
Nationwide Children's Hospital,

www.nationwidechildrens.org/newsroom/news-releases/2019/04/13-reasons-why-study.

Sung, Yoon Hi, Eun Yeon Kang, and Wei-Na Lee. "Why Do We Indulge? Exploring Motivations for Binge Watching." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, vol. 62, no. 3, Sept. 2018, pp. 408–426

Wartella, Ellen, Drew P. Cingel, and Alexis R. Lauricella. "Controversy Sells, but What about Science? Press Coverage of 13 Reasons Why." *Journal of Children & Media*, vol. 12, no. 3, Aug. 2018, pp. 368–372.

Wheeler, Katherine S. "The relationships between television viewing behaviors, attachment, loneliness, depression, and psychological well-being." (2015).

World Health Organization (WHO). Preventing Suicide. A Resource for Media Professionals. WHO, 2017.

Yorkey, Brian. "13 Reasons Why." *13 Reasons Why*, Netflix, 31 Mar. 2017.