

# Suicide from Media Portrayals and Reality: Analysis of Netflix's Serial *13 Reasons Why*

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## ABSTRACT

The release of *13 Reasons Why* on Netflix has led to controversy regarding its influence on teen audience, which is this series' major target audience. Due to teenagers' susceptibility about environment, and their relatively fragile mental stability, this subject – media and teenager's well-being -- worth noticing. Several literature reviews of previous studies illustrate the main arguments in this field that media's portrayal about suicide affect adolescent's perception about suicide more or less. More detailed examination -- including discussion about this series' vivid portrayal of major teenager issues in reality, how the portrayals influence particular population regarding the descriptive scenarios and language, theories behind the reasoning -- about this specific series help to further explain the reasoning behind the arguments. A collection of audience's criticism is included as figures in this study. A noticeable critique is the suspicion of romanticizing suicide behavior. However, possible professional interventions like providing alternative solutions and actively guiding of consultation might help alleviating this concern Also, the impact of new media, especially social media, where completely has protocol that respects freedom creation, should be taken into consideration, considering the difficulty for parental surveillance and control of online negative contents. Teenager's mental health status is among major issues in modern society, media's influence could be an effective perspective to cope with this concern.

**Keywords:** *teenager mental health, teenager suicide, media, social media*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In 2017, Netflix released season 1 of *13 Reasons Why*. Its plot expands around the investigation of a high school girl – Hannah Baker's suicide. Each episode is a tape she left that tells why people are responsible for her death. However, some experts have decried this series, saying that it is irresponsible about illustrating suicide [1]. Among all viewers, female accounts for 65% of them, and 75% of the total viewers are consist of people under age 34 [2]. According to several media coverages, the biggest controversy of this series is carried out by the public accusation of its explicit visualization and portrays of suicide scene of Hanna Baker, the protagonist [3]. Vulnerable adolescents could be triggered by the display of suicide methods from the show, and cause suicide contagion [4].

This study aims to investigate possible correlations between media portrayal and teenagers' suicide behaviors. In fact, suicide related discussions in media portrayal have been a timelessly sensitive topic. Due to the prevalence of media, this study is significant for the

exploration of media's influence on teenager's mental health, which has been paid close attention to in the global scale. According to CDC, suicide is the second leading cause of death for people age between 10 to 34 [5]. Authorities, scholars, and common public concern about this possible issue since teenagers are considered to be relatively susceptible to environment.

The subject "media" in this article mainly refers to two forms of medias, whose effect on teenagers will be discussed separately later. Media industry has gone through drastic changes in past decades, and functions distinctively in the society. Now, two most major medias are TV/movies, and social media. There is long-lasting debate about the relationship between negative behaviors shown in televisions and teenagers' actual negative behaviors. A study uses meta-analysis and find a positive and significant correlation between violence in televisions and aggressive behaviors [6]. The prevalence of modern form of social medias begins with Facebook, which was established in 2004, very contemporary. Roughly comparing the communication process in these

two forms of medias, movies and televisions are single side, while social medias include interactions.

Social media era enters in the last decade. According to the data from Pew Research Center, social media consumption skyrockets in the past decade, and around 90% of 18-29 age respondents use at least one social media platform by 2019 [7]. The same controversy around televisions might also applies to social media, especially in this digital age. Moreover, the use of social media is harder to track, thus making it nearly impossible for parents to surveillance.

Next part will include reviews of previous literatures about media influence on teenagers' suicide.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Hong et al. have conducted general research about the effect of 13 Reasons Why to teenagers [8]. The participants are 87 pairs of parents and teenagers in the U.S. Researchers investigated the viewing patterns of participants, as well as some suicide-related behaviors after watching this series. According to the survey results, most of participants who have watched the series watched it alone (84%), and few of them discussed with their parents about it (34%). Over half of the respondents think watching it will increase risk of suicides, and many of them identified themselves with characters in this series. This is the first study that examine the effect of 13 Reasons Why for teenagers' suicide inclination. A particular reveal in this study is that audience's identification with lead characters in this series could relate to its suicide-related effect. However, this study has a relatively limited population sample regarding regions, ethnicities, etc.

In research conducted by Niederkrotenthaler et al., the researchers examine the possible correlation between 13 Reasons Why and the suicide rate among U.S teenagers [9]. By extracting suicide rate data of 10-19 years old U.S teenagers who have identification with the protagonist of the series between 1999 to 2017, researchers find a pattern that the suicide rate of teenagers drastically increased. Though they couldn't directly prove the causal relationship between the series and the data, they made reasonable prediction due to the prevalence of this series on the internet, as well as that suicide rate of other age group (non-target audience of this series) didn't change obviously. Thus, researchers firmly believe that media has certain level of intervention regarding teenagers' suicide intentions.

Since this series was not only a hit in the U.S., but was trendy worldwide, a group of researchers analyzed Canadian newspaper's reports about this series. They did a qualitative analysis of the reports on newspaper in order to examine their attitude toward 13 Reasons Why. Most reports responsibly link the suicide in the series to a wider social problem and include quotes from experts [10]. The

data also shows that majority of journalists in Canadian newspaper suggest that this series is helpful in terms of promoting mental health care among teenagers, though some of them argues the risk of explicit discussion about suicide.

Many fictional portrayals about suicide in medias are glorified and romanticized, just like some critic's comment 13 Reasons Why. According to Perkis et al.'s literature reviews, many related studies display a rise in suicide rate after distribution of some movies with suicide scenes, such as Gould and Shaffer [11]. 13 Reasons Why may not be an exception. However, some studies also support that some portrayals about suicide can positively prevent suicide behavior, since they describe the pain the family and friends would go through. It is helpful to examine how do people who see the risk in portrayals of suicide in medias interpret these scenes in order to provide more effective interventions. Also, this information will help to distinguish under what situation might suicide portrayals causing negative influence.

Not only do fictional media influence teenagers, but news report may also trigger suicide [12]. Cheng et al. find that there is an increase in suicide rate in 4-week period after media report about a celebrity's suicide after control other variables, such as socio-economic status. And most of this increase is within people under 35 years old. Researchers attribute this phenomenon to media's reporting style that glorifies this behavior, leading people to copy this behavior.

Studies mentioned above aim to analyze the correlation between teenager suicide rate and traditional media. In fact, new medias, such as social media, might also make impact on this rate. Twenge et al.'s research illustrates the pattern that screen activities link to depressive symptoms and suicide behavior [13]. More than half of adolescents use social medias, thus the relationship between social media use and suicide rate is amongst the most crucial information. Data from this study shows that social media interactions indeed increase suicide rate, but the increase is more obvious for adolescents who have less in-person social interactions.

Collectively, multiple previous studies show the link between media use (including both traditional media and new media) and teenager suicide issues, so it's hard to deny the drawbacks of medias on adolescents' mental health. However, most studies firmly believe that this connection can be intervened from other aspects. It is important to learn this influence in order to develop effective measures to prevent the negative influence on teenagers' mental health of medias.

## **3. SUICIDE AND TV SERIALS**

In this part, what realistic issues is reflected in this particular series, how audience perceive this series, why

it leads to debate about the impact on teenagers’ mental health, and ways to prevent negative influence will be discussed. Also, to clarify, this article only discusses the most controversial season of this series – season 1.

### 3.1. The Plot of 13 Reasons Why

The setting of *13 Reasons Why* is an American high school, and Hannah Baker, who commits suicide, is a junior student. The main plot is to reconstruct several pieces of Hannah’s life and relationships with others, examining every culprit leads to her decision of ending her life unexpectedly. Thus, many issues are illustrated in it, including rape, bully, victim blaming, sexual harassment, etc. Though it seems to be exaggerated that all problems are happening on one person, this series makes a successful display of assortment of the realistic issues among teenagers.

According to data from RAINN, standing for Rape, Abuse, Incest & National Network, younger people are at highest risk of sexual violence (54%), and adolescent girls are among the highest risk of experiencing sexual violence than other population (82% of juvenile victims) [14]. In *13 Reasons Why*, Hannah witnessed rape of her friend at a party, and experienced same tragedy. Actually, raping is a serious problem among high school students, especially for female students [15]. A school-based survey result shows that 78% of female participants deem rape as a major problem [16]. Teenagers are vulnerable population that their self-protection awareness and ability is weak, thus letting others taking advantageous. A strong offender might stimulate adolescents’ fear, oppressing them to keep silent and stop resisting. And this experience brings serious PTSD that one third of female victims report trauma [17]. This issue directly causes teen pregnancy as well. Thus, sexual violence reflected in this series is severe among teenagers.

Another phenomenon portrayed in *13 Reasons Why* is bullying. Hannah has gone through bullying that her peers spreading rumors about her on the internet. They also verbal sexual harasses her, making judgement about her “ass”. Bullying is a crucial issue in school that 20% of students reported being the target of bully and 41% of them think the bully will happen again [18]. And bullying happens in many forms, including humiliating, harassing, insulting, teasing, etc. [19]. Though students with obvious difference with others are more fragile, the target of bully is often chosen without certain reasons, thus being bullied might make these victims self-doubting. Similar to sexual violence, there is a high chance that bully victims will be haunted by PTSD [20]. Except for accusing bullies, this series also implicitly questions the bystanders who don’t stand out to advocate victims. In a sense, bystanders facilitate bullies’ behaviors by indulging them. However, it is reasonable that bystanders are afraid of being the next target of bully. Normally, adults in school have little access or little awareness to

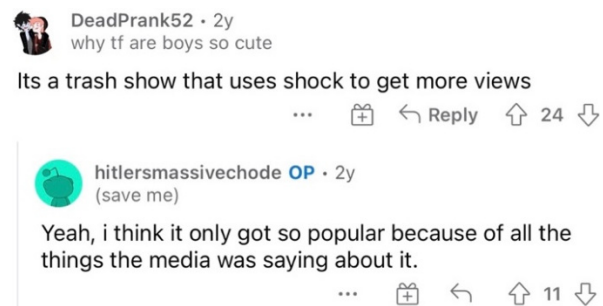
bully among students since victims might be threatened to keep silent. Hence, bullying is rampant. Hannah is a representation of typical teen victims in high school.

This series also mentions victim blaming in the scene when Hannah meets her school counsellor, and counsellor asks accusatory questions like “Did you say not?”. After this meeting, Hannah commits suicide. Victim blaming is common phenomenon in many clinical interviews regarding sexual violence crimes that victims are considered to be responsible for their sufferings [21]. This issue is not only for teenagers, but also for all the innocent victims.

### 3.2. Teenager suicide in reality

Though the motivation of this series may be galvanizing the public’s emphasis on teenager mental health and suicide prevention, opposite outcomes can emerge. On social medias, many users seem to be unsatisfied with the efforts *13 Reasons Why* made. This section will discuss several possible causes for the controversy on its relationship with teenager suicide.

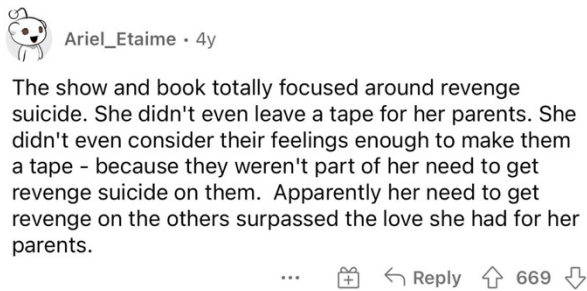
First of all, as discussed in previous section, many victims of sexual violence and bullying might develop PTSD. Disregarding the level of PTSD, imaginary exposure that is similar to traumatized memories might stimulate patients and cause mental breakdown [22]. The explicit scenes of bullying and rape might remind upsetting situations for victims of similar incidents. Particularly for sexual assaults victims, imaginal exposure of traumatized memory might retraumatize them and increase their sufferings even in an imaginal treatment setting [23]. Thus, this series have the chance of hurting audience with similar experience and break their mental health.



**Figure 1** (audience questioning the intention of the show)

In this series, Hannah’s suicidal behavior is portrayed simply because of being bullied that her peers humiliate her, etc. Though the intention, which is to pay more attention to bullying, is good, this attribution might be irresponsible for audience. This direct connection could even be detrimental. Suicide prevention experts suggest that people should talk about suicide as a behavior frequently due to “multiple causes, often including

mental illness, such as depression, instead of easily blame on a person or a single event” [1]. This suggestion is reasonable regarding the effort to prevent suicide among teenagers. Simple causal relationship that is embedded in a popular teen series might convince its young audience to believe it, and even act upon it. This series fails to describe a more thorough situation around Hannah’s suicide: maybe her psychological status is chaos, etc. Unfortunately, if they suffer from similar experience, there is a chance that they choose to relieve in the same way. Many critics call Hannah’s suicide “revenge suicide” that her intention is to gain appropriate attention and apologies from others, and that’s very inappropriate for people who have depression.

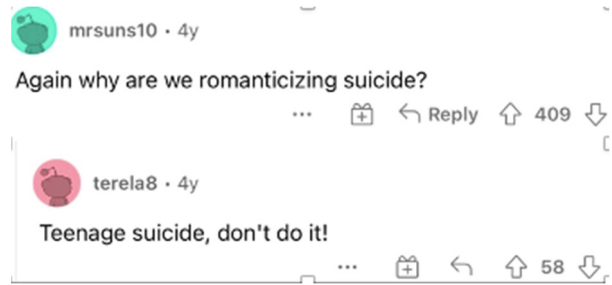


**Figure 2** (audience’s criticism about the inappropriate portrayals of suicide)



**Figure 3** (audience’s criticism about the negative impression on people with depression)

This type of irresponsible portrayals of suicide has often been accused of glamorizing suicide, which minimizes the negative influence of suicide and promotes this behavior in a way. Rather than provide solutions to bullying, rape, mental problems, this series chooses to present an extreme behavior, leading to villain’s guilty, which is the wanted outcome. The boundary between glamorization of suicide and positive prevention of suicide could be blur, especially in this series which tries to condemn other types of violence. Thus, teenager audience may expect the same effect by behaving the same since this series’ examination of causes for teenager suicide is relatively shallow.



**Figure 4** (audience questioning the romanticize of suicide in this show)

When suicide is publicized in an inappropriate form, “suicide contagion” is highly possible [1]. Studies have shown that some emotions are highly contagious, and teenagers are especially sensitive [24]. The increasing suicide rate associates with *The Sorrows of Young Werther* already proves the possibility of suicide contagion among adolescents. Another study shows that level of suicide contagion is highest among teenagers between 15-19, compared to other age groups [25]. Once audience align with the value conveyed by *13 Reasons Why* that suicide is a glorious behavior when facing issues, they might cluster and act on impulse.

All the reasons above are largely reasonable because of Social Identity Theory. Social identity theory explains how people define and categorize themselves into different social groups, according to different criteria. And a social group is a group of individuals who have shared social identity or categorized themselves in the same category [26]. In this case, young high school audience are likely to identify themselves with protagonists, as well as the suicide girl Hannah. Once he/she notices his/her social group, they probably incline to connect with the group by adopting some new cognitions. The process of seeking belongingness in particular groups is intergroup categorization. According to the social identity theory, members within the group have a biased attitude toward others in this group [26]. Thus, I think that the audience who are in high school are more likely to be influenced by this series that they think Hannah made her best choice to defend herself. And according to the research of Rodriguez, Litt, Neighbors, and Lewis [27], the behaviors arising within group members have a certain influence on the other members to initiate these behaviors. That explains experts’ concern about suicide contagion links to *13 Reasons Why*.

Due to these considerations, *13 Reasons Why* provokes huge debates in the public. Media press, experts, and general audience complain about its portrayals about suicide. This series might be a great start of conversations about suicide prevention, but it unable to deliver positive solutions to vulnerable teens who are at the margin of mental issues.

However, it is possible to make some alteration and achieve its intended goal. To start with, directors should

deal with scenes that might trigger impulsive behaviors or traumatized memory carefully. It is rather unsuitable to scare teen audience by visualizing the detailed brutal scene of suicide. By doing so, the public might become nauseated about series, instead of realizing the negative facets of committing suicide. Also, this description of suicide method as well as suicide site is unwise [28]. For vulnerable populations, it might prompt them to copy this behavior.

According to WHO's guide for medias about preventing suicide, avoid presenting suicide as the solution to problems is necessary [28]. Thus, the framing in this series could be modified in a more beneficial way, presenting viable alternatives. A positive instruction on conversation with parents, adults, friends, or experts might be a better way when facing problems. Though this sounds a little mild, but it brings better outcome than ending one's life. In this series, Hannah never tells her parents or friends about her suicide intentions.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

In previous parts, several detailed information particularly for 13 Reasons Why is examined. And its possible connection with teenager suicide rate is explained. Despite the influence of the media contents to teenager audience is already significant, the prevalence of new media might facilitate this influence. "New media" here refers to medias that increase online connections among individuals, such as social medias, blog, texting applications, etc.

This series is popular within teenagers. Its page generates 4.6 million likes on Facebook, and its group has 59k followers. Thus, social media is a salient way of publicizing for 13 Reasons Why. Teenagers discussing about this series, as well as some reflections on social media may also stimulates suicide contagion. As discussed before, teenagers clustering behaviors are highly possible [24]. If they post sentimental comments with negative attitude, tragedy can happen. And the prevalence of social media makes the influence more fluid.

This concern not only lies in 13 Reasons Why, but also installed in the feature of social media. There are previous studies display the suspicious correlation between exposure of internet and teenager self-harm behaviors and suicide ideations [29]. However, clearer evidence of causality needs future research since it's hard to track the content consumption on social media.

One challenge of suicide intervention regarding internet exposure is parental surveillance, which is key protective action for teenager suicide prevention. Parents sometimes ignore their children's' social media consumption, including the online contents or interactions with others, thus putting their kids at risk [30]. For example, cyberbullying is one intractable issue

among teenagers [31]. Hence, social medias are frequently linked with issues that violate teenager health.

Another main issue is the possible lack of content control on social media. In 2013, there was a famous "Blue Whale Challenge" on the internet including a series of weird challenges that threats mental health condition. It diffused via link on social media. This challenge causes untraceable depression for its participants, who are mostly teenagers [32].

Though social media increases the risk of suicide ideation among teenagers, it is useful to identify individuals at risk [29]. By examining key words, monitoring individual post, with the integration of high technology like AI, social media makes its contribution to suicide prevention.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

With the popularity of Netflix's teen series – 13 Reasons Why, the connection between media portrayals of suicide and the actual teenager's suicide rate is debated among media platforms and expertise institutions. This controversy lasts for decades, and it becomes more complicated since the coming of new medias, especially social media. Multiple previous researches support the correlation between media and teenager's suicide. It is reasonable to make this inference considering the possible triggering elements in the series, as well as the inappropriate description about suicide to cause suicide contagion, backing by the social identity theory. New medias' function in this issue might also exists. However, further research on causality is needed.

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