

CONVERSATIONS ON SUICIDE:

13 REASONS WHY

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by

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13 REASONS WHY

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DEDICATION

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ABSTRACT

The television series *13 Reasons Why*, released in March 2017, was followed by a wave of controversy over how it portrayed the suicide of its protagonist. Some critics thought that the show handled the suicide exceptionally well; others thought the overall premise and handling of the subject matter were irresponsible. The present study sought to examine the full spectrum of critiques of the show in order to determine whether they lined up with media guidelines for the portrayal of suicide, as well as to determine what dialectical tensions existed among the critiques.

This study found that there were some areas in which journalistic critique of *13 Reasons Why* did line up with media guidelines; however, there were far more instances in which journalists veered into territory that was distinct from what was mentioned within guidelines. Within this territory, there were several webs of dialectical tensions in which opposing arguments discussed similar concepts but drew differing conclusions. The primary areas of disagreement found in this study included ‘accurate and relatable portrayal-versus-romanticization’ of mental health issues, ‘suicide as necessary-versus-suicide as irresponsible,’ ‘actions have consequences-versus-outsourcing blame for Hannah’s suicide,’ and ‘suicide as preventable-versus-suicide as inevitable.’ Some of these opposing poles could have been balanced via better storytelling, whereas others point to more foundational issues with the show.

Keywords: *13 Reasons Why*, suicide, media guidelines, public health, journalism

Chapter 1: Introduction

“A genuinely open discussion of suicide must be a wide discussion — not just a medical or public health discussion, but a social, cultural, moral, political and even religious discussion.”¹

In the 19 days following the release of television show *13 Reasons Why*, suicide-related internet searches spiked, with as many as 1.5 million more searches than would reasonably be expected during that time period. While some of those searches were related to suicide prevention, the primary spike was in searches related to suicide ideation (i.e., thoughts and plans to commit suicide) (Ayers, Althouse, Leas, Dredze, & Allem, 2017). The spike might not have been a coincidence. It is possible that *13 Reasons Why* itself, in which suicide dominates the plot, inspired these new searches. As stated by Ayers et al. (2017), “Our analyses suggest *13 Reasons Why*, in its present form, has both increased suicide awareness while unintentionally increasing suicidal ideation” (1529). Supporting this argument, a study (Bridge et al., 2019) published in April 2019 found that in the month following the series release, suicide rates for teenagers ages 10-17 were 28.9 percent higher than would be expected for that time period. The study also posited that the series was associated with approximately 195 additional suicide deaths for this age group in 2017, though causality could not be proven (Bridge et al., 2019).

13 Reasons Why (Yorkey, 2017) is a Netflix original drama following the events surrounding the suicide of high school student Hannah Baker. Netflix does not release statistics about viewership of content on its platform, but attesting to the show’s popularity, Refinery29 (Demaria, 2017) reported that according to social media research firm Fizziology, *13 Reasons Why* was mentioned in 3.6 million tweets within the first week after it aired. By comparison, the Netflix show with the second-highest number of tweets within the first week of airing had 1.3

¹ (Fitzpatrick & Kerridge, 2013, p. 470)

million. Despite the show's popularity, it has also been met with concern. Research has shown that suicide ideation-related searches are positively correlated with suicide behavior (Gunn III & Lester, 2013; Yang, Tsai, Huang, & Peng, 2011), especially among young people under the age of 25 years (McCarthy, 2010). An effect called suicide contagion underlies the concern about suicide ideation-related internet searches. Suicide contagion is defined by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2014) as "exposure to suicide or suicidal behaviors within one's family, one's peer group, or through media reports of suicide [that] can result in an increase in suicide and suicidal behaviors" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015, para. 1). Prior research has demonstrated this effect following media reporting on suicide in several countries (Hagihara, Abe, Omagari, Motoi, & Nabeshima, 2014; Phillips, 1974; Pirkis & Blood, 2001a, 2001b; Schmidtke & Häfner, 1988).

Although similar ecological studies have been conducted on suicide contagion stemming from fictional depictions of suicide in the media (Insel & Gould, 2008; Pirkis & Blood, 2001b; Schmidtke & Häfner, 1988), the relationship between fictional media and actual suicides/attempts has not been demonstrated consistently enough to be considered causal (Blood & Pirkis, 2001; Insel & Gould, 2008).

The exact mechanism by which suicide contagion operates is unclear (Blood & Pirkis, 2001; Cheng, Li, Silenzio, & Caine, 2014; Mueller, 2017; Mueller & Abrutyn, 2015; Pirkis, 2009); however, research has been able to isolate certain characteristics within media representations of suicide that have a known impact on audience interpretations (Blood & Pirkis, 2001; Bohanna & Wang, 2012; Hagihara et al., 2014). For example, research has shown that when the motive for suicide is reported as a result of a single event or stressor, those reports open

the door for when suicide is seen as a plausible option and undermine the fact that suicide is complex and difficult choice (Mueller, 2017).

In order to mitigate suicide contagion, guidelines have been put forth by various national and international organizations on how to responsibly represent suicide in the media (Centers for Disease Control staff, 1994; World Health Organization & International Association for Suicide Prevention, 2008; Reporting on Suicide, 2011; Team Up, n.d.). These guidelines are recommendations for media professionals on how to frame suicide. Framing, as it pertains to media studies, is a way of representing a topic or concept by focusing on some aspects of the topic over others in order to shape the narrative. This in turn influences how people think about the topic (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). When the media frame suicide in certain ways, audiences might think about suicide in simpler and more favorable ways than if the media were to frame suicide in a different manner (Mueller, 2017). However, when media frames suicide in a responsible way by following suggested guidelines, suicide contagion can be mitigated (Bohanna & Wang, 2012; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2010; Niederkrotenthaler & Sonneck, 2007; Sonneck, Etzersdorfer, & Nagel-Kuess, 1994).

Goals of the Study

The problem with *13 Reasons Why* lies in its simultaneous popularity and potential for harm. Therefore, the aim of this study is to discern which aspects of the show journalists tout as beneficial for viewers and which aspects journalists deem dangerous. By doing this, I will be able to see how these arguments line up with suggested guidelines for media portrayals of suicide, which will open the door for further research into the guidelines themselves.

Reflexivity statement

It is important to disclose where I fit into this study as a researcher. I am a young woman who has suffered with mental illness throughout the course of my life. I have spent much of my adult life refining my ability to help and advocate for myself and others who are in chronic and acute mental health crises. Particularly, I worked as a crisis intervention specialist on and off over the course of three years, and as such my chief task was to answer suicide prevention phone calls made to national, state, and local hotlines.

Given these experiences, I was appalled at the way *13 Reasons Why* handled the topic of suicide, and my personal belief is that it is an irresponsible show. I expect many of my own concerns about the show's dangers will be reflected within journalistic critic. However, I do not believe it is enough to focus on and examine only the perceived negative aspects of the show, so I am committed to exploring the perceived potential benefits, as well. By doing a thorough analysis of both sides of this coin, I hope to be able to draw more nuanced and complete understanding of how journalists see the show functioning in society.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Suicide as a Leading Cause of Death

The CDC reports that across all age groups, suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the United States. For the age brackets 10-14, 15-24, and 25-34, though, suicide is the second leading cause of death (as cited by the National Institute of Mental Health, 2016, table 1).

Furthermore, the 2015 Youth Risk Behaviors Survey found that almost 9% of students in grades 9-12 reported making one or more suicide attempts in the 12 months preceding the survey (as cited by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2016, Suicide Attempts section, para. 4).

Portrayals of Suicide in the Media

Suicide can be triggered by a range of influential factors. The following study will examine journalist discourse about *13 Reasons Why* in light of the literature on the impacts on suicide of media representations of suicide. Much of this literature focuses on the concept of suicide contagion.

How concepts of contagion (might) work. Suicide contagion is not clearly understood or agreed upon within the research community (Blood & Pirkis, 2001; Cheng et al., 2014; Mueller, 2017; Mueller & Abrutyn, 2015; Pirkis, 2009). A qualitative synthesis of 340 records on the academic use of the word contagion in reference to suicide (Cheng et al., 2014) revealed that there was a complete lack of both consensus and depth within the discussion of ‘contagion’ as related to suicide, which has prevented a thorough understanding of the concept. However, various useful frameworks related to suicide in the media have been proffered.

Modeling. One potential mechanism for suicide contagion that has been discussed extensively is the concept of modeling (Blood & Pirkis, 2001; Insel & Gould, 2008; Mueller,

2017; Mueller & Abrutyn, 2015; Pirkis, 2009; Schmidtke & Häfner, 1988; Stack, 2005).

According to social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), a person's behavior is imitative of the behavior demonstrated by a "model"; a model is either a person who one sees as superior to oneself and looks up to (vertical modeling) or a person who one sees as similar to oneself and is therefore relatable (horizontal modeling). Therefore, based on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), suicide behavior following a media portrayal of suicide would be most common in those who either looked up to or identified with the person represented in the media portrayal.

Horizontal Modeling in Fictional Media. Once in 1981 and then again in 1982, a national television network in Germany broadcast a six-episode television film called *Death of a Student*, a show about a 19-year old male student who jumped in front of a train to kill himself (Schmidtke & Häfner, 1988). The entirety of the show was centered on the student's suicide, including the lead up to the suicide, the suicide itself, and the outcome of the suicide. Utilizing this as a 'natural ABABA design' experiment, Schmidke and Häfner (1988) aimed to add to the Werther effect hypothesis (Phillips, 1974), which focuses on suicide contagion as a result of publicized accounts of suicide, by demonstrating that imitative suicide due to a modeling effect is possible after fictional portrayals of suicide in the media.

In order to demonstrate the effects of modeling in *Death of a Student*, Schmidkte and Häfner (1988) determined the characteristics of the model to be young and male, and the modeled behavior to be jumping in front of a train. They then collected data from the German railway network on all suicides/attempts made during a specified period following the broadcasts. They found that the number of attempted and completed suicides via jumping in front of a train increased throughout and for a short time following the broadcasts. The most pronounced increase was among young males, providing support for both the concept that

fictional portrayals of suicide in the media can have an effect on suicide outcomes and that horizontal modeling is one way to understand these imitative suicides (Schmidtke & Häfner, 1988).

This study is particularly relevant to the present study because of the parallels between *Death of a Student* and *13 Reasons Why*. The structure of *Death of a Student* as described by the authors was quite similar to that of *13 Reasons Why*. Both shows depicted both the act and aftermath of the main character's suicide; they also both discussed the lead-up to the suicide as told by friends, family, teachers, and even the character who completed suicide.

Vertical modeling. A two-year study on the impacts of seven celebrity suicides in South Korea revealed that suicide rates went up following extensive media reporting on the suicides (Jang, Sung, Park, & Jeon, 2016). Jang et al. (2016) found that in particular, suicide rates among people who were similar to the celebrities in terms of age and gender went up, and the methods used in these cases were often the same as the method used by the celebrity. Additionally, the more popular a celebrity was, the more extreme the effect. Therefore, this study provided support for the idea that vertical modeling is another potential path to understanding suicide contagion.

Changing the context of suicide. Contextual change might be another underlying explanation for suicide contagion. This idea was explored in an in-depth case study on a community called Poplar Grove (a pseudonym used by the author of the study); Poplar Grove is a community with just one local high school that experienced the suicides of 15 current students or recent graduates between 2000 and the time the study was conducted (2014 – 2016) (Mueller, 2017). Mueller (2017) examined all local media articles regarding suicide in and around Poplar Grove. Additionally, she and a colleague conducted interviews and focus groups with 91 community members in order to understand the suicide problem. She found that the media

played a large role in the initial shaping of the conversation about the potential motive for the first two suicides — overwhelming general and academic pressure placed on youths in the community; Mueller (2017) also noted that discussing motives is a substantial violation of media guidelines. Overall, she found that framing suicide in a certain way can cause it to take on a socially constructed “meaning,” which is important because beliefs about suicide are a big factor in determining whether or not to attempt suicide. Similarly, stories about suicides and suicide attempts might also provide “scripts” from which people having problems or considering suicide can draw (Blood & Pirkis, 2001; Mueller & Abrutyn, 2015), especially when suicide is depicted as a viable solution to problems and/or a way to express those problems, rather than just a distant idea (Mueller, 2017; Mueller & Abrutyn, 2015).

Public health guideline effects on contagion. In order to encourage media outlets to frame suicide in responsible ways to help protect against suicide contagion, national and international organizations have come up with guidelines for media on how to portray suicide (Centers for Disease Control staff, 1994; World Health Organization & International Association for Suicide Prevention, 2008; Reporting on Suicide, 2011; Pirkis, 2009).

Several studies have looked at the use and outcomes of these media guidelines (Bohanna & Wang, 2012; Gould, Midle, Insel, & Kleinman, 2007; Hagihara et al., 2014; Mueller, 2017; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2010; Niederkrotenthaler & Sonneck, 2007; Pirkis, 2009; Stack, 2005), and many have found that the guidelines have not been implemented consistently or at all (Bohanna & Wang, 2012; Gould et al., 2007; Hagihara et al., 2014). However, when media guidelines have been implemented, they have been shown to be effective at mitigating suicide contagion following news reports of suicide (Bohanna & Wang, 2012; Niederkrotenthaler & Sonneck, 2007; Pirkis, 2009).

For example, the number of suicides in Austria began rapidly increasing in 1982, particularly suicides by jumping in front of trains in the Viennese subway system (Niederkröthaler & Sonneck, 2007). However, in mid-1987, Austria released media guidelines regarding how to report on suicides; additionally, the Viennese subway system issued a moratorium on all reports of subway suicides. Over the next five years, the number of headlines including the terms ‘suicide’ or ‘self-murder,’ which the guidelines strongly recommended against, dropped significantly as compared to the five years immediately prior to the introduction. Overall Austrian suicide rates correlated with the drop, as well. Even more specifically, a 75% drop in subway suicides occurred and was sustained, suggesting that media had a large impact on the use of the subway system as a means to complete suicide before the implementation of the guidelines (Niederkröthaler & Sonneck, 2007).

Research on media framing of suicide has not been entirely constrained to the analysis of guidelines. Stack (2005) did not focus specifically on guidelines, but rather on the presence of negative descriptions of suicide over positive descriptions of suicide within reporting. Negative descriptions (Stack, 2005) were those that included such information as suicide is wrong, the individual who completed suicide suffered a lot of pain while doing so, and there are resources to help those who are experiencing suicide ideation to find an alternative to suicide. Positive descriptions (Stack, 2005) were those that presented suicide in a sensationalized or glorified way, focused on the positive attributes of the individual who completed suicide, or provided a reason or justification for the suicide (e.g., job loss, divorce, etc.), as providing a reason for suicide legitimates it as a solution to one’s problems (Mueller, 2017; Mueller & Abrutyn, 2015). Stack (2005) found that stories with primarily negative definitions of suicide were 99% less likely to show an imitative suicide effect.

Another study (Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2010) examined suicide news articles for the presence of various characteristics that have been shown specifically to have an impact on suicide rates, as well as the presence of both helpful and harmful characteristics described by media guidelines. Niederkrotenthaler et al. (2010) collected all of the articles from the 11 largest Austrian newspapers spanning a six-month period and also examined suicide rates during that time period. They found that protective effects (suicide rate decreases) were associated with reports that followed the guidelines and had helpful characteristics. Similarly to Stack's (2005) finding that including resources for people who are experiencing suicide ideation in reports helps prevent suicide contagion, the primary helpful characteristic Niederkrotenthaler et al. (2010) found was newspapers' inclusion of reports about people who had previously experienced suicidal ideation and chose not to act on it, but rather to develop coping mechanisms, instead of reporting strictly on completed suicides. On the other hand, suicide rate increases were associated with media that contained more harmful characteristics, such as reporting a specific suicide method or multiple independent suicidal acts, referring to a "suicide epidemic," and using language that suggested dichotomous thinking (Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2010).

This sort of dose-response effect, whereby suicide rates are dependent more specifically on the *number* of guidelines that have or have not been observed in media representations or the amount of suicide coverage more generally (which is a guideline in and of itself), has been demonstrated in multiple studies (Hagihara et al., 2014; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2010; Niederkrotenthaler & Sonneck, 2007; Stack, 2005).

For example, when Hagihara et al. (2014) examined suicide attempts following reports of hydrogen sulfide suicides in Japan, they also examined for the presence in articles of several items that media guidelines had advised against — sex, age, profession, and home address of the

person who completed suicide; site of the suicidal act; reason for the suicide; and method used — and found that suicide rates increased as the number of violated suicide reporting guidelines increased, though they were not able to determine which specific guideline violations had the most powerful effect.

Guidelines for fictional media portrayals of suicide. Guidelines have also been put forth for fictional representations of suicide. Team Up is a collaborative effort of mental health professionals, entertainment media people, and journalists working together toward accurate depictions of mental health problems and destigmatization. The group put together a manual for the entertainment industry as a guide for how to depict mental illness, wellness, and recovery (See Appendix).

The primary categories under which Team Up’s recommendations (Team Up, n.d.) fall are: demonstrating that suicide is not an inevitable outcome; showing that anyone can be suicidal, regardless of race, class, religion, age, socioeconomic status, etc.; depicting evidence that suicide has consequences; and providing examples of how people can respond to signs of suicidal behavior or attempted suicide.

Team Up’s guidelines provide several suggestions for demonstrating that suicide is not inevitable. They recommend having suicidal characters who spend time deeply contemplating suicide over time, rather than characters who immediately jump to suicide as a quick solution, as this helps show that thoughts of suicide are not simple or easy, but instead very complex. Characters who have survived suicide attempts or recovered from suicidal acts can also be included in dramatic suicide plotlines, as can those who have sought help via therapy, support groups, medication and other routes to recovery. If substance abuse is part of a mental health or

suicide storyline, showing a complicated relationship between the substance abuse and mental health is highly recommended.

In order to demonstrate that anyone can be suicidal regardless of demographics, the guidelines suggest unmasking misconceptions about the “type” of person who might be struggling with depression or suicidal thoughts. For example, perhaps most characters in a story start out believing that a character who is in a seemingly happy relationship and has a lot of money can’t possibly want to kill herself, only to find out that she actually is experiencing those exact struggles. Another suggestion is to demonstrate the impact of stigma surrounding mental health, perhaps through its effects on suicidal characters’ behaviors, particularly help-seeking behaviors.

Consequences are another aspect of suicide the guidelines recommend including, though they are explicit in saying these consequences should not be glamorized or romanticized. While suicidal characters are contemplating their suicide, it is suggested they should be shown thinking about what effects their suicide might have on those around them. Additionally, feelings of guilt, shame, fear, PTSD responses and other negative emotional states for suicidal characters and those affected by a character’s suicide can be shown. In order to avoid glamorized post-suicide grief, the guidelines recommend that plotlines of suicidal characters show the people around them expressing their love and support *before* the suicidal character attempts suicide, rather than seeming to only care once the suicidal character is gone.

There are also many ways to depict characters recognizing and responding to signs of suicidal behavior or attempted suicide in others. First, though, the guidelines clarify that these signs are often very nuanced, including but not limited to suicidal characters: talking or writing about death or hurting or killing oneself; looking for a means to killing oneself; feeling hopeless

or trapped, feeling anxious or agitated, and experiencing uncontrollable anger; using more drugs and/or alcohol; withdrawing from loved ones and society in general; sleeping too much or too little; and exhibiting dramatic mood shifts. Suicide plotlines can also incorporate suicidal characters seeking help by talking about what they're going through in an honest way; furthermore, include experts or professionals in the show providing the characters with helpful advice. Finally, visual cues should be included that suicidal characters aren't alone, even if they feel like they are.

Dialectical Tensions Theory

Part of the controversy surrounding the release of season one of *13 Reasons Why* was that critics seemed unable to agree on whether the show's representation of suicide is a boon to opening up conversation about the difficult topic or a dangerous message to vulnerable viewers. These opposing viewpoints hone in on the same content, yet draw different conclusions.

Oppositional forces and expressions such as this exist alongside one another throughout all areas of social life. In order to examine people's seemingly conflicting expressions and opinions views of their own personal social relationships at work, Baxter (1990) developed relational dialectics theory. The dialectic perspective allows for a range of potentially competing relational factors and states within healthy relationships; it is a perspective that "challenges static representations of personal and social experience and seeks to uncover more of the fluid interplay of oppositional forces that inhabit social life" (Erbert & Alemán, 2008, p. 674). These forces exist at opposite ends of a spectrum, on what are referred to as "poles," and they will occasionally have moments in which one pole dominates over the other or vice versa; otherwise they are in either flux or equilibrium (Erbert & Alemán, 2008).

Not only are competing ideas able to exist at the same time with various levels of harmony, however, but the opposition between the two poles of any given dialectical tension is also what gives them unity (Erbert & Alemán, 2008). For example, in Erbert and Alemán's 2008 study "Taking the grand out of grandparent: Dialectical tensions in grandparent perceptions of surrogate parenting," the researchers examine the oppositional forces and feelings at play when grandparents end up raising their grandchildren as full- or part-time substitutes for the children's actual parents. The researchers completed semi-structured interviews with grandparents and then combed the interview data for nuanced contradictions within the grandparents' perceptions of their roles as surrogate parents. One of the categories of dialectical tension for grandparents was the general idea of connection vs. separation, which the researchers further broke down into relevant radiants of sentiment, including "responsibility-for vs. freedom-from."

Among other ways, the spectrum of responsibility-for and freedom-from was expressed in the dicotomy of grandparents' feeling responsible for making decisions that would help bolster and maintain the children's well-beings while also having to contend with either real or imagined input from the children's actual parents. This tension often left the grandparents feeling both free and not free in their decision-making processes. However, dialectical tensions theory posits that these feelings are in unison as much as they are in conflict — the remote parents' desire to discipline their children might reinforce the surrogate parents' (i.e., the grandparents') desire to give them leniency. The radiant of "responsibility-for vs. freedom-from" is also in conversation with other radiants, such as "desire vs. obligation" and "blessing vs. sacrifice"; each set of tensions plays off of and is affected by the other sets of tensions in any given situation (Erbert & Alemán, 2008).

Meaning, therefore, is gleaned from the give and take of themes that might initially seem to be in conflict with one another, and the purpose of dialectics theory is to determine what contradictions are salient and how they work together (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006). The entire web of tensions must be looked at in its totality and within its own particular context.

Research Questions

In order to determine what opposing tensions exist within the conversation surrounding the first season of *13 Reasons Why*, I propose the following questions:

RQ1: Does journalistic critique of *13 Reasons Why* align with suggested guidelines for covering suicide set by public health professionals?

RQ2: What dialectical tensions exist within journalistic critique of *13 Reasons Why*?

Chapter 3: Methods

In order to analyze if journalistic critique of *13 Reasons Why* aligned with suggested guidelines for covering suicide set by public health professionals and explore dialectical tensions about suicide in journalistic coverage of season one of Netflix's *13 Reasons Why*, I performed an in-depth, qualitative textual analysis of journalistic texts discussing the show. These texts were published in April 2017, the month following the release of the entire first season (March 31, 2017). This time frame not only allowed for immediate coverage following the release of the show, but also for the response to the show to play out over a short period of time. Google is the most popular search engine, and it has the largest catalog of web pages available (Gil, 2019); it also has high accuracy (Gil, 2019) and precision (Edosowman & Edosowman, 2010) of search results. So, to retrieve my texts, I completed a Google search using the phrase "13 reasons why" and the date range April 1, 2017-April 30, 2017. The search generated 15 pages of results, 144 results in total.

After the initial search, I did a preliminary read-through of the resultant texts and eliminated any that were solely about the plot, such as fan theories and speculations or recaps of the show, without further discussion. I also eliminated those that were for the sole purpose of comparing the show to Jay Asher's book *13 Reasons Why*, on which the show was based; however, if an article comparing the show with the book discussed larger implications of the show's depiction of suicide beyond just differing from the book, the article was included in my analysis. Articles about the actors themselves were also excluded from my analysis, as were public service announcements from mental health organizations. Any content that was not in prose form, such as YouTube videos or isolated comments on pages like Rotten Tomatoes or IMDb, were also excluded. I was left with 74 texts to examine for this analysis.

The texts that remained after this elimination process, including those that were reviews of the show, think pieces and discussions of implications, and news resulting from the show's release, were part of my analysis.

Organization and Analysis

I analyzed the resultant texts for conversations related to both the possible positive and possible negative consequences of the show using both deductive and inductive systems of open coding. Using both inductive and deductive frameworks allowed themes to emerge from the data via inductive analysis (Thomas, 2006) while also allowing me to consider themes related to Team Up's guidelines as part of the deductive analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

It is important to note that effective implementation of media guidelines for depicting suicide has been shown to depend on psychosocial experts working in tandem with media professionals to create and disseminate them (Bohanna & Wang, 2012; Niederkrotenthaler & Sonneck, 2007; Pirkis, 2009), as opposed to guidelines produced solely by mental health professionals without the input of the media professionals who will, ideally, be the ones to use them. Team Up's guidelines meet this criterion; additionally, its guidelines are research-based and actionable. All these factors made them appropriate bases for comparison within the context of this study.

I prepared the raw data by copying the texts into a word processor and adjusting them so that they all fit into the same format (Thomas, 2006). The last step I took before beginning my actual analysis was to create a codebook for the deductive portion of my analysis, which was based on Team Up's guidelines. In order to do this, I isolated several distinct categories of suggestions and gave each a label, a definition of what the code concerns, and a description of how to know when the theme is occurring in the text.

As I read through each text, I summarized and paraphrased each piece of relevant data in the margins to help me develop initial themes (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). After reading each text, I copied the summaries to a coding sheet to see if they fit into one of my predetermined codes; regardless of whether a summary fit into an existing code, I kept revisiting each one as I continued my analysis of the texts to see if patterns began to emerge. After transferring all the summaries of what appeared to be meaningful units of text to the coding sheet, I examined patterns in the material to see what new codes had emerged that were either separate from or expansions on the original ones (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

There are a couple important points to note in terms of how I coded these concept summaries. First, some concepts were initially part of one preliminary code, but enough additional aspects of the concept came up that warranted the concept becoming its own code (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Additionally, some concepts were placed into more than one code (Thomas, 2006).

Once I coded all the data, I condensed it into categories, or themes, which fell under higher-order headings in order to avoid redundancy and overlap (Thomas, 2006). This also allowed for a certain level of abstraction, which was necessary to create a system into which the themes could be placed (Elo & Kyngäs, 2007).

Finally, to answer my first research question, I compared them to Team Up's guidelines to see how they did or did not relate. To answer my second research question, I examined the system of categories for links and dialectical tensions.

By doing a textual analysis based on the criteria mentioned above, I was able to examine the ideological negotiation (Fürsich, 2009) going on regarding the show. A textual analysis allowed me to examine the range of reality these media were allowing for in their responses to

13 Reasons Why by condensing words into categories that I then examined in order to represent facts, make inferences, glean insight and create practical guides to action (Elo & Kyngäs, 2007).

By looking at the dialectical tensions in the conversations journalists had in the aftermath of the release of *13 Reasons Why*, I was able to discern what stood out as important factors in these types of narratives (i.e., those concerning sensitive public health topics) to those who consume and talk about them.

Chapter 4: Findings

Critiques Related to Guidelines

The first research question this study is concerned with is whether journalistic critique of *13 Reasons Why* aligned with suggested guidelines for covering suicide set by public health professionals. Some of the journalistic critique of *13 Reasons Why* explicitly mentioned sets of public health guidelines for covering suicide (which will be discussed more in-depth in a later section). For the most part, commentary on the show did not focus much on many of the concepts delineated within the Team Up guidelines I used for comparison for this study, but there are a few findings worth mentioning. It is important to note that most each of the findings in this section of the analysis ended up being broad yet nuanced enough to be expanded into more complex codes that be discussed more in-depth in later sections of this analysis.

One of the guidelines for suicide storylines is to show characters exhibiting warning signs. A few articles did briefly mention that Hannah Baker had demonstrated various signs for depression and suicide ideation, but for the most part, none of the articles included in this analysis went into much detail other than just stating that the warning signs did exist. There were two exceptions in which critics talked a bit more in-depth about what some of those warning signs were. One article mentioned the abrupt short haircut Hannah got just before killing herself, her social isolation and the loss of interest she expressed in things she used to enjoy (Sloan, 2017). Another article discussed the fact that Hannah went to see the school counselor, Mr. Porter, just before her suicide and was very explicitly in a desperate place — for example, by saying she felt empty inside and that she didn't care about anything anymore (Bacle, 2017).

Although discussion of warning signs was fairly limited beyond what I've just mentioned, Hannah's visit with Mr. Porter was also the subject of critique aligning with another

guideline, but rather than being a guideline the show abides by, it is one with which *13 Reasons Why* is in conflict. The Team Up guidelines (Team Up, n.d.) suggests showing experts or professionals talking about suicide in a helpful way or providing suicidal characters with helpful advice. However, several articles included in this study made the argument that Mr. Porter was about as unhelpful as he could possibly have been. Instead of providing additional resources for Hannah or talking through her feelings and experiences, Mr. Porter hands Hannah a box of tissues and essentially tells her to just get over it. It is interesting to note that while the guidelines would suggest this was a negative on the part of the show, there was not consensus among the articles on whether this plot point was positive or negative regarding what kind of message it sent to viewers. Several related arguments to this idea popped up in the research materials and will be discussed more in depth in the sections delineating the various dialectical tensions related to the second research question.

Also related to Hannah's lack of support from Mr. Porter is a Team Up guideline suggesting that narratives about suicide include information about people who were able to overcome suicide ideation or recover after suicide attempts with the help of therapy, medicine, support groups, or other strategies (Team Up, n.d.). Several articles made the argument that *13 Reasons Why* should have shown characters getting help. A quote from an article entitled "13 reasons why '13 Reasons Why' isn't getting it right" (Sandler, 2017) sums up this idea:

By presenting suicide as the only option in Hannah's situation (we know the ending from the beginning), *13 Reasons Why* doesn't tell the much more common story of people living with (struggling with, but living with) difficult emotions and experiences and figuring out, with support and help from others, how to survive. (para. 16)

In another article, “Why ‘13 Reasons Why’ made me furious and why I think you should be talking about it” (Marshall, 2017), the writer simply asks, “Couldn’t something so wildly popular have taken a little more time to show what could have been if things were done differently?” (para. 8).

The only other Team Up guideline that was alluded to at any length was the idea that one of the consequences of suicide is negative emotional states experienced by those who were connected in some way to the person who completed suicide. A few articles talked about how several characters suffered from guilt, among other things, after Hannah’s suicide. One article entitled “4 important lessons from ‘13 Reasons Why’” (Stone, 2017) went so far as to say that “Everyone. I want to repeat, everyone, has been affected by Hannah’s death” (para. 11). This is another example of a concept that ended up being much more complex than just sticking to the code from the guideline would allow, so this will also be expanded upon within the dialectical tensions section.

Dialectical Tensions Within Journalistic Critiques

Many critiques unrelated to the Team Up guidelines also popped up in the research materials, and there were several webs of dialectical tension among them. Each tension had a pole relating to perceived benefits of the show and a pole relating to perceived dangers. The broad categories these tensions fell under were: the show’s discussion and understanding of mental illness and suicide, its graphic depiction of Hannah’s suicide, the assignment of blame for Hannah’s death and whether the show presented her suicide as preventable or inevitable. Table 1 shows the primary tensions within each category.

Table 1		
<i>Dialectical tensions within journalistic critique of 13 Reasons Why's portrayal of suicide</i>		
<u>Category</u>	<u>Perceived benefit</u>	<u>Perceived danger</u>
Discussion and understanding of mental illness and suicide	Intimate and accurate portrayal of suicide	Hannah as an underdeveloped character
Depicting Hannah's suicide onscreen	Suicide scene as necessary	Suicide scene as irresponsible
Assigning blame for Hannah's death	Demonstrating that actions have consequences	Outsourcing blame for Hannah's suicide
Suicide as preventable or inevitable	Depicting suicide as preventable	Depicting suicide as inevitable

Discussion and understanding of mental illness and suicide. One area of discussion present in many of the articles related to *13 Reasons Why's* ability to open up discussion about and help break the stigma surrounding mental illness and suicide, as well as the level of competence and success with which the show did that. This idea is summed up by the dichotomy between statements posed by two different articles. In the first, a writer stated,

“13 Reasons Why” succeeds in telling a realistic story in a way that encourages the audience to play their part and challenge the beliefs, institutions and norms by learning the signs of depression, recognizing the impact of social pressures and holding oneself accountable for mistakes regardless of intention. (Sloan, 2017, para. 10)

Conversely, the article “‘13 Reasons Why’ is a hit, but suicide expert told Netflix not to release series” (Eisenstadt, 2017) quoted suicide prevention advocate Dan Reidenberg saying, “Although it's created a conversation about suicide, it's not the right conversation” (para. 15). Given that executive producer Selena Gomez and other writers and producers for the show have

stated over and over that the show was intense and graphic in order to shake viewers up enough to get them to start talking, this is an important distinction to explore.

Hannah's struggle as intimate and accurate vs. Hannah as an underdeveloped character. One general area of dialectical tension within the discussion of *13 Reasons Why's* handling of mental health is centered around the level of intimacy *13 Reasons Why* reaches with the subject matter.

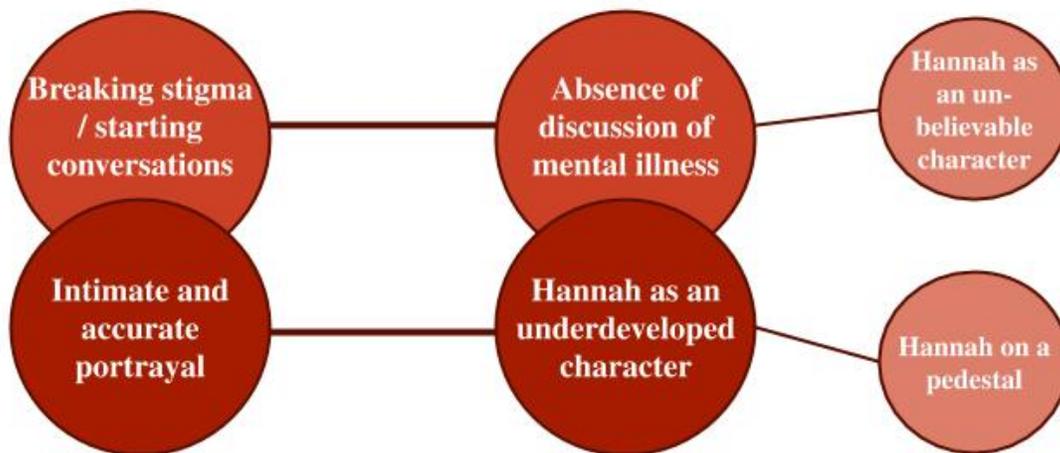


Figure 1. Dialectical tensions surrounding the intimate nature of *13 Reasons Why's* portrayal of mental illness.

Figure 1 shows that the primary tension was between an ‘accurate and relatable portrayal-versus-romanticization’ of mental health issues, with an offshoot discussion about Hannah being placed on a pedestal. However, the tension between ‘breaking stigma-versus-lack of mental health discussion’ is another radiant upon which this discussion plays out; this and the offshoot

concept of Hannah as an unbelievable character will be discussed more in depth in the section entitled “Absence of mental illness from the plot.”

Hannah’s struggle as intimate and accurate. On one hand, Hannah Baker’s struggle throughout the show was regarded by many to be the intimate, honest, real depiction of a person struggling with mental health issues that television has long needed, particularly because it did not shy away from any of the grittier aspects of what it’s like to grapple with depression and suicidal thoughts. One writer said, “Watching ‘13 Reasons Why’ can be painful, but it’s precisely the emotional intensity and realistic portrayal of traumatic events that makes the show worth the watch for those who aren’t so close to the subject matter” (Sloan, 2017, para. 9). This quote expresses the idea that the show provides an access point to understanding trauma and suicide, issues that are otherwise inaccessible to viewers who do not have personal experience with issues like the ones present in the show.

Some writers felt that even for people who are familiar with the emotions and situations Hannah experiences, *13 Reasons Why’s* intimacy with its tough subject matter is important because it is a story not often told in the media in such a relatable way. One writer said, “My colleagues too, are reporting that teens have been willing and eager to discuss this show with them because they state that it is ‘real’ and reminds them of what they have experienced” (Scarlet, 2017, para. 5). According to this line of thought, approaching these issues in such an open and relatable way gives viewers, especially young ones, an outlet for talking about their own experiences.

By providing a close look at the issues Hannah goes through — issues that might be glossed over too quickly in other programs or pop culture — these writers believe *13 Reasons Why* makes more space for discussion. This line of reasoning is exemplified in an article entitled

“13 Reasons Why should be required viewing” (Jones, 2017), in which the writer discussed how suicide is often something that occurs only as a subplot or sidebar in stories, but giving more thought and screen time to Hannah’s suicide was a way to make it less cliché, to speak more to “a glaring social epidemic” (para. 11). In this way, *13 Reasons Why* gives its viewers something deeper to contemplate, rather than using suicide as a plot line for a moment before immediately moving on. This concept is summed up well by the article “The ‘13 Reasons Why’ suicide: Is the graphic scene dangerous?” (Fallon, 2017) which said,

The series finally bucks the trend in television of using the horrific deaths of women, particularly young women, as exploitative plot devices. “Too many programs shy away from showing the consequences of the devastating things that are done to women...It was hard to witness Hannah’s death, but it...was a close study of the growth of one young woman’s physical and mental distress.” (para. 36-37)

Hannah as an underdeveloped character. On the other end of the spectrum, however, some journalists expressed concern that Hannah’s story was actually too wrapped up in her suicide. Several critics felt that Hannah was an underdeveloped character as a result of the show’s narrow focus on the circumstances of her death. In an article entitled “‘S-Town,’ ‘13 Reasons Why,’ and making art out of self-destruction” (Gilbert, 2017), one writer talked about how Hannah is defined almost entirely by her victimization and death, going on to say,

You never learn what kind of music she liked, or movies, or whether she liked to cook, or wanted to travel, or what subjects she was good at. The only piece of information that’s provided about her dreams comes as a plot point, when Hannah is encouraged to join a poetry group after stating that she might want to be a writer. (para. 16)

And in an article entitled “13 Reasons Why isn’t really about suicide” (Silman, 2017),

another critic asked,

Who was Hannah Baker before everything fell apart, and why did the particular cruelties of high school hit her with such irreparable force? ... We never really get a sense of what makes Hannah tick, or why she might be particularly vulnerable to the events that occur.

(para. 2-3)

By focusing so heavily on Hannah's suicide and the aftermath of that decision, these journalists argued, *13 Reasons Why* failed to paint a portrait of a fully fleshed out character, essentially reducing all her suffering to a story made to entertain. Rather than being a nuanced representation of Hannah's mental health, then, the show is simply a journey for viewers to be taken on without actually having to grapple with what is actually a very complex issue dealt with by complex people. Lending credence to this argument, the same critic wrote, "13 Reasons Why's high-wire framing device works to keep Hannah at arm's length rather than draw us into her inner world" (Silman, 2017, para. 2).

Hannah on a pedestal. Additionally, some critics believed the show placed Hannah on a pedestal after her death, elevating her to a mythical, mysterious figure whom no one was ever quite able to figure out. According to this argument, her death turned her into a figure whose main purpose was to be forever romanticized and wondered about. Quoting a critical review not included in this study, one writer said,

Grimm writes, "Baker — a character whom no one loved — dies, and suddenly, everyone is intrigued by her, paying attention to her, making her memorials, grieving for her, and devoting themselves to understanding her thoughts. Her enemies are guilt-stricken and hate themselves for pushing her over the edge. That's exactly what people who commit suicide want." (Molina, 2017, para. 10)

The argument made here is that representing the lead-up to and consequences of Hannah's suicide was not a way to open up conversation, but rather a way of making Hannah a martyr and turning death into a rallying cry.

Absence of mental illness from the plot. Another extension of debate over the show's intimate portrayal of Hannah's pain is over the fact that the concepts of mental illness or depression were never actually explicitly mentioned or discussed in the show. Although some critics thought the show implied strongly enough that Hannah was suffering from depression without having to state it directly, many felt that *13 Reasons Why* missed an opportunity to include more relevant and straightforward information. One such writer wrote, "The show does not discuss how and why mental illness contributes to suicidal ideation just as much as the social conditions of bullying, sexual assault and poor decision-making. This is one of the show's biggest failures" (Koehler, 2017, para. 15).

The same critic argued that "Hannah is suffering from depression disguised as quirky eccentricity" (Koehler, 2017, para. 15). Yet another said that viewers only saw Hannah reacting to her traumas without actually seeing how they affected her psychologically until the very end of the show, at which point Hannah was suddenly not fine, suddenly falling apart so completely that she became a "ticking time-bomb" (Watson, 2017, para. 20), despite the fact that she'd seemed relatively okay up until that point. According to these critics, the show simply did not do what it set out to do. As one stated,

People with mental illness are so frequently stigmatized and misunderstood — seen as bad, or wrong, or somehow defective.... While it's not the responsibility of a TV show to single-handedly undo stigma around mental illness, *13 Reasons* doesn't go as far as it could to let us empathize with Hannah. (Hoffman, 2017, para. 9)

This argument is in tension with the overarching argument that the show was meant to break stigma and start open conversations about mental illness.

Hannah as an unbelievable character. An offshoot argument of the primary dialectical tension was that Hannah was placed on a pedestal to be held up as a person she never was (and no one could ever be). Relatedly, extending from the tension between ‘breaking mental health stigma-versus-ignoring mental illness’ is the argument some critics made that said not only was Hannah not a fleshed out character, but also her response to trauma and suicide ideation was altogether unrealistic. This idea combines both inaccuracy and romanticization of mental illness. For example, one critic wrote,

I'd take that a step further and suggest the show romanticizes mental illness altogether. There's something Tumblr-esque about the way Hannah Baker spoke of depression on her suicide tapes—her every thought poignant, her poetry profound and prophetic for a 17-year-old. She rarely ever seemed as lost as people who struggle with mental health issues in real life often are. (Williams, 2017, para. 2-3)

Another talked about how the process that Hannah engaged in during the show was not reflective of what people most often experience when they are thinking about suicide. Quoting a blog post written by a doctor, the article stated,

“It is unrealistic for someone, especially a teenager in the midst of an emotional crisis, to construct an elaborate series of tapes all the while maintaining a sarcastic, witty, and glib tone towards people she blames for her decision to end her life.” (Sandler, 2017, para. 11)

These critics believe a real person would not have behaved so coherently, so poetically, even, in the face of such debilitating mental health issues.

Depicting Hannah’s suicide on screen. One of the most prominent areas of debate stemming from *13 Reasons Why* was the show creators’ decision to show on screen and in great detail the entirety of Hannah Baker’s suicide. The two poles on this spectrum of dialectical tension can be described as ‘suicide as necessary’ vs. ‘suicide as irresponsible.’

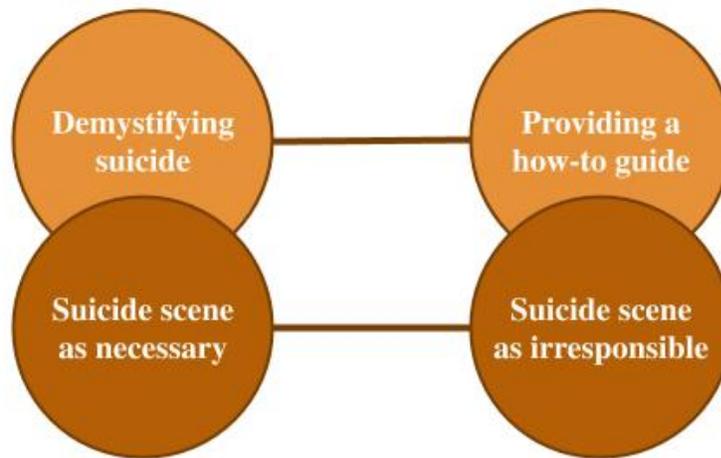


Figure 2. Dialectical tensions surrounding the responsibility of depicting suicide in *13 Reasons Why*.

This tension can be seen in Figure 2, which also shows the closely related radiant regarding what the function of Hannah’s suicide was in the show; this radiant can be described as ‘demystifying suicide-versus-providing a how-to guide’ and will be discussed in its own section.

The suicide scene was necessary. Many critics argued that seeing Hannah’s suicide was exactly what viewers needed in order to be dissuaded from believing suicide was an easy way out. These arguments often cited the writers and producers of the show, as well as the author of

the book from which *13 Reasons Why* was adapted, many of whom vehemently defended their decision to include the graphic suicide scene. In an article entitled “‘13 Reasons Why’ team explains why they showed Hannah’s death” (Bacle, 2017), creator Brian Yorkey was quoted saying, “We worked very hard not to be gratuitous, but we did want it to be painful to watch because we wanted it to be very clear that there is nothing, in any way, worthwhile about suicide” (para. 4). The idea behind this argument is that only by seeing the suicide itself could viewers truly understand that suicide is not a simple or even good solution to the type of pain that Hannah was feeling.

Critics also argued that showing the suicide was necessary in order to demonstrate exactly how much mental anguish Hannah was feeling. According to this line of thought, only someone who was absolutely desperate would put herself in the amount of physical pain viewers saw on screen in order to escape the emotional pain she felt. For example, one writer said in a piece entitled “7 thoughts about Netflix’s ‘13 Reasons Why’ (with spoilers)” (Sepinwall, 2017),

For Hannah to choose...that over trying to just get through another day, and another, and another, brings home how much pain she was in... She cuts her wrists, and it is agony, and she wails and screams and sobs... but she doesn’t stop. Terrible to watch, but wholly necessary. (para. 6)

Seeing Hannah cut her wrists also gave viewers a chance to empathize with her on another level, argued some critics, such as one who wrote in the article “‘13 Reasons Why’ is hard to watch and rightfully so” (Schwaller, 2017): “These horrific scenes are incredibly difficult to watch, and you want nothing more than to reach through the screen and knock the razor blade out of Hannah’s hand” (para. 12).

The suicide scene was irresponsible. Critics who believed that the viewers' exposure to Hannah's suicide was irresponsible primarily focused on both research and guidelines on representations of suicide in the media. For example, one critic talked about the fact that the whole reason recommendations exist in the first place is because numerous research studies have found that the way news media covers suicide can have a negative impact on public health; "when journalists discuss suicides in the news in particular ways, it can actually lead to a greater risk for suicides" (Miller, 2017, para. 5). One critic even went so far as to say,

Netflix has been completely unethical and irresponsible in putting this show on the air because it ignores decades-worth of research and public health policy on how we take care of teenagers in general, and how we take care of vulnerable teenagers. (Pawlowski, 2017, para. 9)

If Netflix and the *13 Reasons Why* team had respected research and professional opinion, these writers argue, the show would not have included Hannah's suicide, regardless of how good their intentions or how necessary they felt it was for the story they wanted to tell. The potential risks of doing so were too high to risk it.

Demystifying suicide vs. providing a how-to guide. The related tension from the dialectical tension between showing the suicide as necessary versus irresponsible is the tension between the whether having a detailed suicide scene was a way of demystifying suicide or if the scene could essentially be boiled down to a how-to guide for viewers wondering what it might actually entail to complete suicide. Both of these concepts are related to the step-by-step nature of Hannah's suicide scene, however, critics disagree on how exactly the scene should be interpreted.

Providing viewers with a how-to guide for suicide. Several critics took issue with how *13 Reasons Why* showed every move Hannah made to prepare for her suicide. One writer detailed each step, saying, “It shows her stealing razor blades from her parents pharmacy, wrapping up her affairs, running a bath, climbing into it fully clothed, and then cutting her wrists open in such explicit detail that it’s traumatic to watch” (Gilbert, 2017, para. 13). By going through and pointing out every detail, the writer was making the point that the portrayal could reasonably be read as a how-to guide.

Another critic compared *13 Reasons Why* to shows in the ’90s that “taught” young people how to binge and purge, even as they ostensibly tried to get viewers to understand just how bad bulimia was. What *13 Reasons Why* did was similar because it showed Hannah “slicing her wrists the ‘right’ way, going down instead of across” (Krentcil, 2017, para. 4). Even aside from the logistical details, one critic argued that showing Hannah’s suicide might simply be a template showing young people what to expect during a suicide attempt, should they decide they want to go through with one, and “that is a scary thing to show to 13-year-olds, right?” (Saraiya & Ryan, 2017, para. 14).

Making suicide less mysterious. One of the writers for *13 Reasons Why*, Nic Sheff (2017), however, wrote an article for *Vanity Fair* in defense of depicting the suicide. One of his primary arguments was that showing the suicide on screen would be a reality check for viewers. He said that demystifying the process of suicide was actually exactly what they were going for. Sheff (2017) wrote,

It seemed to me the perfect opportunity to show what an actual suicide really looks like—to dispel the myth of the quiet drifting off, and to make viewers face the reality of what happens when you jump from a burning building into something much, much worse. It

overwhelmingly seems to me that the most irresponsible thing we could've done would have been not to show the death at all.

In AA, they call it playing the tape: encouraging alcoholics to really think through in detail the exact sequence of events that will occur after relapse. It's the same thing with suicide. To play the tape through is to see the ultimate reality that suicide is not a relief at all—it's a screaming, agonizing, horror. (para. 17-18)

Furthermore, in an article entitled “Selena Gomez on ‘13 Reasons Why’ backlash over suicide depiction: ‘It’s going to come no matter what’” (Associated Press, 2017), a mental health professional who helped writers working on the show also weighed in on the question of what function Hannah’s suicide scene played. She said that not showing Hannah's suicide would be almost “coy and avoidant” (para. 18) and that medical studies aren't definitive about the risks of suicide contagion. She also pointed out that there are already graphic how-to guides online, which are easily accessible to any person who seeks them out. She said that saying the show might trigger suicide is “sort of naive” (para. 19).

This argument suggests that brushing past the act itself could ignite curiosity, which could be quenched easily by anyone child with access to the internet. By this logic, showing the suicide was actually a way to mitigate that response and protect viewers from thinking of suicide as anything but tragic.

Assigning blame for Hannah’s death. The overall premise of the show has also been called up for debate. An area of disagreement among critics sprung up around the general cause-and-effect narrative of the show, with dialectical tension existing between the ideas that ‘actions have consequences’ vs. ‘outsourcing blame for Hannah’s suicide.’

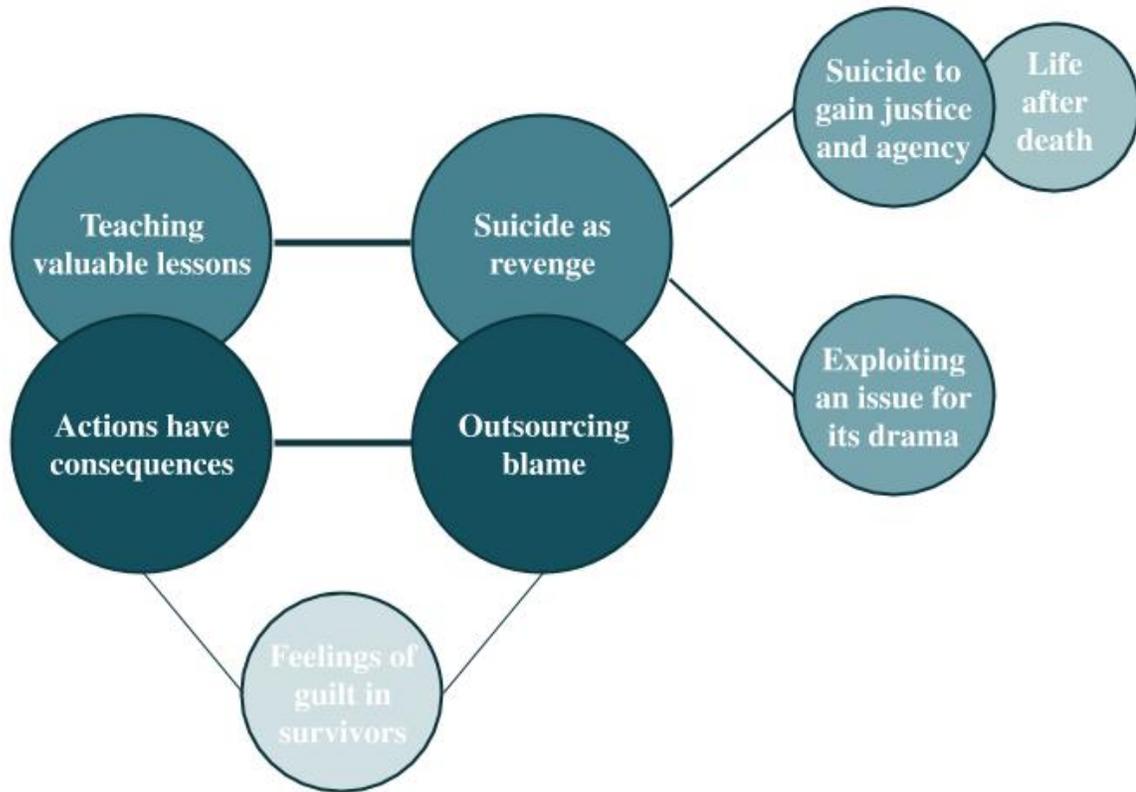


Figure 3. Dialectical tensions surrounding the cause-and-effect story arc of *13 Reasons Why*.

As can be seen in Figure 3, this particular web of tensions is quite complex. The related tension of ‘teaching valuable lessons-versus-suicide as revenge,’ as well as the concepts extending from it, will be discussed in their own section, followed by a note about how survivors’ guilt was discussed in both the show and the recommendations for representations of suicide.

Actions have consequences. Several articles said that *13 Reasons Why* did a good job demonstrating how seemingly unimportant and/or unspoken negative events in a person’s life can end up generating enough pain that the person decides to take their own life to escape it. For example, one writer said,

There was no big cause for Hannah Baker and I believe this is important. I despise the questions “What’s wrong?” and “What is your problem?” They have always been incredibly frustrating to me, as I am sure they are to many, especially those who struggle

with mental health. Sometimes (oftentimes) [sic] there is no specific reason why. It is the “seems” that appear small and unimportant that add up. This can be likened to rain. Each raindrop is so small yet, let it rain long enough, it will flood. (Stone, 2017, para. 8)

This argument suggests that the show made strides in helping viewers understand the path one might take toward an eventual suicide. As another critic put it, “...the show allows the viewer to observe situations which are likely to cause teens and young adults to consider suicide, such as sexual assault, rumors, exclusion, etc. (in short, everything Hannah Baker experiences)” (Scarlet, 2017, para. 4).

Although these writers argued that *13 Reasons Why* showed that suicide does not exist in isolation from life’s events, each “reason why” Hannah killed herself was focused on a specific person who committed a specific wrong against Hannah, meaning the deeper lesson of the show is that people’s actions toward one another have consequences. This idea is represented by another writer who said,

The purpose of the series is to make viewers aware of the consequences of their actions and to help stop tragedies, like teen suicide, from the source, so to speak. It targets not only the Hannah Bakers, but the Alex Standalls and the Justin Foleys of the world as well. (Porter, 2017, para. 8)

Alex Standall and Justin Foley are two characters included in Hannah’s thirteen reasons — characters whose actions, she claimed, were part of her decision to end her life. What the writer was arguing by saying the show targeted “the Alex Standalls and Justin Foleys of the world” was that the show might help people who intentionally cause harm to others take a long, hard look in the mirror and change their ways — thereby helping to prevent suicide. This idea will be discussed even more in-depth in the section about the show ‘teaching valuable lessons.’

Outsourcing blame for Hannah's death. Several critics opposed the argument in favor of the show placing blame on Alex and Justin and myriad other people in Hannah's life. These critics felt that naming everyone who did something to hurt Hannah was actually a way of removing all responsibility from Hannah for her own decision to end her life. One critic said,

Hannah makes and distributes the tapes to convince the 13 people of their culpability in her suicide. She and, eventually, the 13 people believe they in some way are each responsible for her death. But in truth, only one person controlled whether Hannah lived or died. No matter how horrible some of the things the others did, only one person had control over Hannah's future. The series advances the idea that blame for Hannah's self-inflicted death could be disseminated among many people when in fact only one person was responsible for her death: Hannah. (VanNoord, 2017, para. 9)

This argument suggests that the entire setup of the show, i.e., the thirteen tapes, misconstrues entirely what suicide is — a choice made by a single person. Rather than being a way to teach about consequences, then, *13 Reasons Why* was a way to make people think they have some (or even all) of the say in whether or not another person takes their own life. This idea was presented by another writer who took issue with a line at the end of the show saying, “We ALL killed Hannah Baker” as though it were a conclusion (Molina, 2017, para. 7). This writer quoted USA Today writer Jaclyn Grimm (not included in this study), saying,

The premise perpetuates the idea that there is always liability when someone commits suicide. There are no magic words or gestures that can make a suicidal person want to live. Teenagers should be aware of signs of depression and suicidal thoughts, but they shouldn't think their kindness can “fix” anyone. (Molina, 2017, para. 7)

Also in opposition to this type of cause-and-effect narrative is the thought that doling out blame in neat little parcels this way is a vast oversimplification of how the decision to end one's life works. For example, one critic talked about how some college students kill themselves within two weeks of a breakup but that it's almost always because of an underlying issue, not because of the breakup itself. Quoting an expert, the writer said, "That is precisely the other reason why we really try to shy away from saying that someone who died of suicide is the result of something someone did" (Rosenblatt, 2017, para. 10).

A major example of this oversimplification is the fact that *13 Reasons Why* uses bullying as a primary cause of Hannah's suicide. In an article entitled "Netflix's 13 Reasons Why is an irresponsible dramatisation of teenage suicide" (Shah, 2017), one writer talked about how bullying can certainly be a contributing factor towards suicidal thoughts and behavior but that "it is wrong to portray it as a direct cause – a lazy and unforgivable simplification of the infinitely more complex nature of mental illness" (para. 5).

These critics were arguing that having a numbered list of reasons made suicide seem like a decision that could be based on logic: "If this, then that." Yet in reality, they argued, the decision to kill oneself is convoluted and messy and has much more to do with internal processes, such as depression and brain chemistry, than the show let on. This argument is also related to the previously discussed argument that mental illness and depression are not represented or explicitly talked about in the show.

Teaching valuable lessons vs. suicide as a revenge fantasy. An offshoot of the 'actions have consequences' versus 'outsourcing blame for Hannah's suicide' dialectical tension is a radiant which has one pole suggesting that the show teaches characters (and by extension, viewers) valuable lessons about how to treat people opposing a counter pole suggesting that

Hannah's suicide tapes were actually a form of revenge. These poles are on either end of the spectrum regarding what the function of the suicide tapes Hannah left behind really was (See Figure 3).

Teaching valuable lessons. Many critics felt that by leaving behind tapes delineating how her peers' actions lead to her eventual death, Hannah was in effect teaching them how to be better people — such as with the previously discussed example talking about the “Alex Standalls and Justin Foleys of the world.” One article quoted the show's protagonist, Clay, saying, “It has to get better. The way we treat each other and look out for each other. It has to get better somehow” (Yorkey, 2017), a realization he had after having listened to the tapes. Under this framework of understanding, the show is designed to be full of what one critic called “teachable moments” (Saraiya & Ryan, 2017, para. 10). This sentiment is crystalized in an article entitled “Why Netflix's ‘13 Reasons Why’ is a must see” (Porter, 2017): “The point is to learn from your mistakes. But, in order to do that, you have to be exposed to your mistakes.” (para. 12)

An example of this occurred in an article that included an anecdote about a young girl watching and then discussing the show with her mother. The writer talked about how the young girl knew kids who had thought about suicide and how she and her mother had talked in depth about where and how to get help. The writer said that both the young girl and her mother thought the show offered helpful insights on suicide and promoted empathy in viewers (Henry, 2017).

Suicide as revenge. On the other end of the spectrum is the argument that Hannah's suicide and the tapes she left behind were nothing more than an extended revenge fantasy in which Hannah “bullies those that bullied her, setting off a chain of events that brings a reckoning to all that contributed to her suffering” (Watson, 2017, para. 13). Several critics in this line of

reasoning focused on the idea that Hannah was not an empathetic protagonist, but girl on a revenge mission. Supporting this belief, one critic wrote,

We see Hannah carefully debating who to include on the tapes, even physically creating the web that connects each person. She weaves a complex narrative, devises a method for getting the tapes out, and implements a failsafe measure to make sure they are listened to, not destroyed. Hannah had to be hoping for a specific outcome from her tapes; she was smart enough to know there would be repercussions. (Hoffman, 2017, para. 4)

This argument suggests that by making and distributing the tapes, Hannah was “not a victim so much as a manipulator” (Saraiya & Ryan, 2017, para. 4). If Hannah had been trying to get revenge, then in effect, the show was not wholesomely teaching viewers about treating one another better — regardless of whether or not that was its goal.

Also important to note is that even if the show’s goal was to provide valuable lessons about empathy and kindness, several experts were cited in articles saying that the show still likely did more harm than good. For example, in an article entitled “Why I won’t be finishing Netflix’s ‘13 Reasons Why’” (Yonker, 2017), a critic stated,

If there’s a risk that even a thousand, a hundred, ten or even just ONE young person could watch this show and glean from it that suicide is their only viable option for revenge and satisfaction, that is too many...I can’t fathom why we as a society could justify the potential risk of triggering our mentally ill young people into deeper depression, anxiety, and/or suicidal thoughts. (para. 15)

This argument suggests that whatever viewers might potentially “learn” from watching the show is not worth the risk to other viewers who might take a different lesson from the show — the

lesson that suicide is a good way to get revenge, as well as whatever else you might have wanted but could not figure out how to get while you were alive.

Suicide as a way to gain agency. Following this logic, several critics were concerned that the show presented suicide as a way, the only way, for Hannah to gain agency. One critic talked about how by killing herself, Hannah seemed to get the justice that she felt was elusive to her while she was alive (VanNoord, 2017). Another critic said,

13 Reasons Why reinforces...that your life is only as valuable as you think it is. You're as useful as your body is capable of being. And if you'd have more of an effect on others in death than in your life, then maybe death is a decent course of action. (Watson, 2017, para. 16)

Yet another went further to say that by tying Hannah's agency so closely to her death, the show made Hannah's choice to kill herself seem a lot deeper than it really was; it tried to make meaning out of what was actually just a tragedy (Krentcil, 2017).

Overall, these critics were arguing that the show turned Hannah's suicide into an option that seemed worth it, and in fact even necessary, in order to gain the self-efficacy and justice she did not have access to while alive.

Life-after-death narrative. Critics have also said that the way the show was set up, with Hannah living on through her tapes and gaining power after her death, minimized the finality of her suicide, as well as the permanence and emptiness that follows death. One critic argued,

Dead is dead, and as much as it may be hard to portray that on screen, 13 Reasons Why fails to end the last episode with closure. For teens who are battling mental health issues, witnessing the end of a life as easily as the show portrayed it could help desensitize kids to this very serious matter. (Curtis, 2017, para. 4)

Although this argument is most closely related to the dialectical tension over the function of Hannah's tapes in the show, it is also in conversation with other areas of tension, such as the debate over how the portrayal of Hannah's pain played out — whether it was intimate and honest or an irresponsible skirting around of actual discussion of mental health.

Exploiting suicide for its drama. Another subcategory of the revenge narrative argument worth discussing is the complaint many critics had that *13 Reasons Why* was a vessel to exploit a serious issue for its dramatic value. Of the narrative structure, one critic said, “We become captivated by the drama of the suicide rather than the actual suicide itself” (Curtis, 2017, para. 3). Expanding upon this idea, another said in an article entitled “13 reasons why I didn't like 13 Reasons Why” (Molina, 2017),

The show is structured to actually create and sustain anticipation of a tragic suicide scene. The suicide is the crux of the show, the highlight, the turning point from which all the cogs move, all the characters react — the moment from which all the story flows. 13 hours dedicated to the small part of Hannah's life that influenced her death making the suicide arguably the most important moment in the show. But suicide is not something to look forward to. Suicide is not exciting. (para. 3)

These arguments suggest Hannah's suicide and the tapes she left behind were merely a driving force for drama rather than an earnest exploration into the events and emotions that factored into Hannah's decision to take her life.

Several writers even said that despite the premise of the show, they didn't really consider *13 Reasons Why* to actually even be about suicide while watching it. For example, an article entitled “Netflix triggers online debate with a show about teen suicide, ‘13 Reasons Why’” (Rosman, 2017) quotes one viewer as saying,

“I didn’t anticipate this kind of a reaction,” Mr. Sanchez said. “We didn’t think of the show as about suicide. We thought of it as entertainment. Then I read an article about how the show didn’t do a good job making that clear and that it glorified things. Now I’m thinking about things a little differently.” (para. 13)

This quote supports the idea that the show exploited suicide for its drama, overshadowing the seriousness of the subject matter. Other critics talked about how the purpose of having Hannah speak from beyond the grave in such a painful and powerful way was nothing more than a mechanism to keep viewers tuned in (Saraiya & Ryan, 2017). Finally, in the same article, one of the critics suggested that there potentially could have been balance between making an entertaining and compelling show while also respecting the seriousness of the topic, but “‘13 Reasons Why’ got caught a little in the gap between responsibility to the story and responsibility to the issues” (Saraiya & Ryan, 2017, para. 22).

Feelings of guilt suffered by survivors. There is one final important factor to note regarding whether Hannah’s suicide was a way to teach lessons about consequence or a way to outsource blame and use suicide as form of revenge. This web of dialectical tensions is in close conversation with the media guideline (Team Up, n.d.) that suggests depicting the negative emotional states experienced by those who were connected in some way to the person who completed suicide, such as guilt, PTSD, shame, etc. On its face, the guideline falls closer to the pole proposing that *13 Reasons Why* was a valuable resource from which viewers were meant to glean insight. However, the purpose of the media guidelines is to mitigate the phenomena of copycat suicides or otherwise negative impacts on consumers’ mental and emotional health and well-being. Given that the opposite pole suggests that showing in-depth the negative

consequences of Hannah’s suicide for other characters is actually harmful, it seems as though the issue is with just how deeply negative reactions are delved into.

Additionally, although the guidelines do talk about showing the negative emotional states experienced by those who were connected in some way to the person who completed suicide, they also make clear that these reactions should not be glorified. Therefore, this is one area in which balance is most necessary.

Was Hannah’s suicide preventable or was it inevitable? Another dialectical tension within the critiques of *13 Reasons Why* was between whether the show presented the case that Hannah’s suicide could have been prevented with the right help or if it portrayed her death as the inevitable outcome of her circumstances.

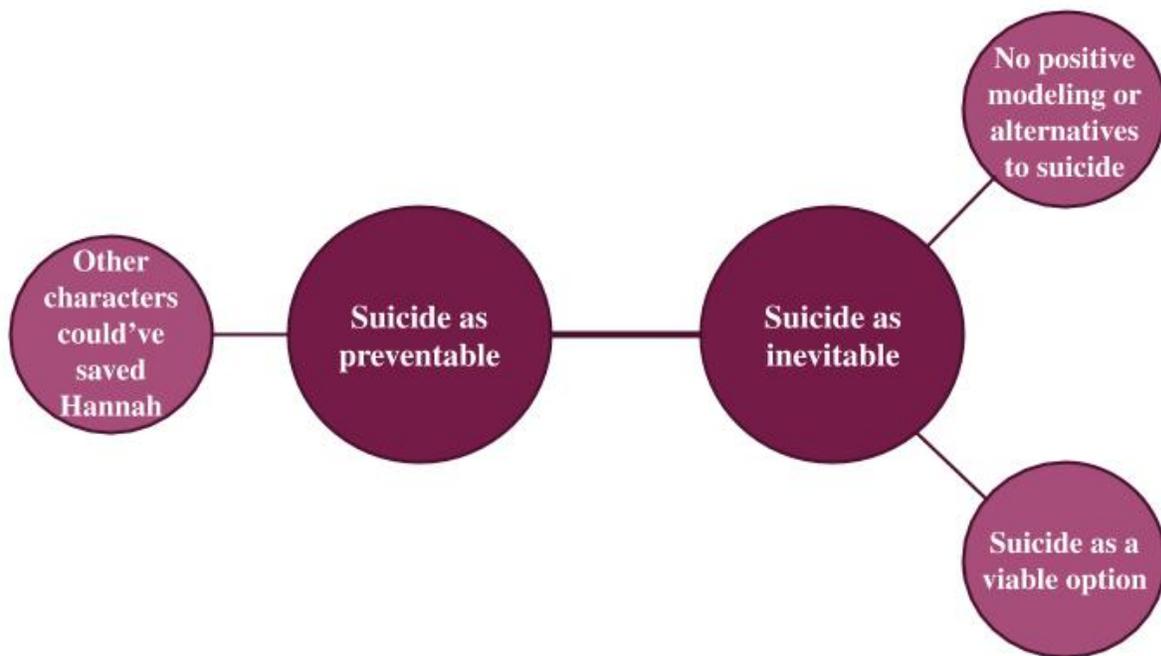


Figure 4. Dialectical tensions surrounding whether the suicide in *13 Reasons Why* was portrayed as preventable or inevitable.

As seen in Figure 4, this tension can be described as “suicide as preventable-versus-suicide as inevitable.’ This tension rests along the premise that characters and viewers are learning about the circumstances of Hannah’s downward spiral after her suicide has already happened.

Hannah’s suicide was preventable. Similar to the argument about teaching characters lessons about empathy, the argument that Hannah’s suicide was preventable suggests that the show teaches the lesson that Hannah could have survived had things been handled differently by herself and the people in her life. In an article entitled “‘13 Reasons Why’ is missing mental health resources & that’s a problem” (Truffaut-Wong, 2017), one critic said, “The entire series, and especially her plea for help from Mr. Porter, prove that Hannah's suicide could and should have been prevented. That's one of the main lessons of 13 Reasons Why: death by suicide is preventable” (para. 11). This was echoed by another writer, who said,

The show is, in the end, a reminder that suicide is preventable — but it requires attention and treatment. In order to make a change to the way we as a society approach issues such as mental health and sexual assault, ongoing dialogue and willingness to take action are essential. (Sloan, 2017, para. 11)

Essentially, these writers were proposing that although Hannah did die by suicide, *13 Reasons Why* made the case that there were other possible outcomes for her situation.

Other characters could have saved Hannah. A closely related offshoot of this pole is the specific idea that the other characters in the show could have saved Hannah from herself. Talking about a scene in which Hannah’s school counselor failed to help her, one critic said,

Mr. Porter’s role in this had been teased and teased for much of the season, leading me to wonder if he had abused her in some way. Instead, it turns out to be even crueler: he’s distracted and distant and cold and utterly fails to recognize how much help she needs,

and the way Alvarez shoots the early part of the scene so that it's just Hannah in close-up while Porter is a detached observer, really drove that home. (Sepinwall, 2017, para. 8)

This idea is also in close conversation with the previously discussed argument that *13 Reasons Why* was meant to teach Hannah's peers as well as viewers of the show lessons about kindness and empathy. Another writer exemplified this notion by talking about how if Hannah's peers had shown her love, admiration, and compassion when she was alive, she might not have decided to kill herself (Stone, 2017).

It is interesting to note that these critics were in favor of how *13 Reasons Why* showed Mr. Porter doing a bad job at counseling Hannah in order to prove the point that he (and the others in her life) could have saved her. This notion is in conflict with the Team Up guidelines (Team Up, n.d.), which suggest showing characters seeking professional help *and* incorporating another character, such as a doctor or other medical or psychiatric professional, giving expert advice. In this case, the person to give expert advice should have been Mr. Porter.

Hannah's suicide was inevitable. In tension with the idea that the show demonstrated that Hannah's suicide was preventable, some critics claimed that because viewers knew from the beginning that Hannah was going to die, her death was painted as an inevitable outcome that could not possibly have been circumvented. One critic referred to Hannah's suicide as "a fait accompli" (Koehler, 2017, para. 3), which means an accomplished fact. Another critic wondered, "Couldn't something so wildly popular have taken a little more time to show what could have been if things were done differently?" (Marshall, 2017, para. 8)

Essentially these writers were saying that Hannah's death was presented in the show as the only way things could've been; no different fate for Hannah was ever even hinted at. It was not made clear that it is possible for anyone to overcome what Hannah was going through. In the

article entitled “13 reasons why ‘13 Reasons Why’ isn’t getting it right” (Sandler, 2017), a writer said,

By presenting suicide as the only option in Hannah’s situation (we know the ending from the beginning), 13 Reasons Why doesn’t tell the much more common story of people living with (struggling with, but living with) difficult emotions and experiences and figuring out, with support and help from others, how to survive. (para. 15)

This argument is also directly related to the Team Up guidelines (Team Up, n.d.), which suggest showing suicide actually be prevented or suicide ideation overcome, not simply including hints that it might or could have been prevented.

No positive modeling or alternative to suicide. A major issue, according to several critics, was that viewers were given no framework to understand how Hannah’s suicide might have been prevented. One critic wrote,

There isn’t any one thing, but there are a lot of things that can help provide support for people with suicide risk. As MollyKate Cline writes in Teen Vogue, “the audience is shown what not to do without examples of what they actually should do.” Imagine if all of the 13 Reasons Why viewers got to see an adult doing a good job of supporting a teen in crisis, or another teen saying, “I’m here for you and will go with you to get help.”

(Sandler, 2017, para. 8)

The idea here is that even if the show was trying to posit that suicide can be prevented, it offered no suggestions as far as how to do so. Another critic asked, “How do you present an issue-based narrative without any positive modeling at all? Why are suicide and self-harming the only things this show presents as solutions for teenage troubles?” (Koehler, 2017, para. 7). The writer went on to say that everyone in the show was either neglectful or outright unkind and that “we can talk

all day and all night about what not to do, and it isn't productive. We need to start modeling what TO do. Promoting honesty and open communication is a good way to start" (Koehler, 2017, para. 7).

By this logic, failing to present resources for characters or positive modeling meant that Hannah and the viewers watching her struggle were left with the understanding that suicide was the only way for Hannah to escape her pain, critics argued. For example,

The message that comes out again and again in the 13 episodes is that when you are a teenager and you feel hopeless, suicide is the solution. That's a terrible message for all teenagers, but particularly for those who are vulnerable. (Pawlowski, 2017, para. 12)

Presented with no alternatives, Hannah took the only possible way she could find to get out, which was a dangerously inaccurate way to tell the story to young people who might not understand that there were, in fact, other options for Hannah. Many critics talked even more specifically about the danger of the messages *13 Reasons Why* sent to teenagers; this will be discussed more in-depth in the upcoming section entitled "Effect on vulnerable viewers."

Suicide as a viable option. Closely tied to the concept of suicide being the only solution is the argument several critics made that by delineating all the reasons Hannah killed herself, *13 Reasons Why* normalized suicide as a reasonable choice for someone to make in the face similar circumstances. In an article entitled "The dangerous message of '13 Reasons Why'" (Watson, 2017), one critic wrote, "'Hannah made her choice,' the characters tell each other robotically, unconvincingly. In the audience's view, Hannah's choice is made out to be perfectly legitimate" (para. 12).

This argument is saying that despite the show's ideal that viewers learn lessons about empathy, what viewers are actually learning is that suicide is an acceptable solution to their

problems. This also ties into the argument about the show's cause-and-effect narrative about consequences.

Effect on Vulnerable Viewers

There were also several areas of concern brought up by critics that do not fit exactly into any dialectical tensions but are relevant to the web of tensions and conversation surrounding *13 Reasons Why* as a whole; these arguments all concerned how the show affected its audience on a broader level.

Narrative of hopelessness. Several critics argued that in general the show did not do a good job of imbuing hope into the narrative. Talking about her own personal experience watching the show, one critic said,

As a woman who has long battled depression and suicidal ideation, the show's well-intentioned message about mental illness, bullying and sexism was not shocking but rather reaffirming of the dangerous ideals that have often left me feeling hopeless and alone. When I finished the show, I found myself drowning once again in toxic, dangerous thoughts. (Sloan, 2017, para. 2)

Another succinctly said, "13 Reasons Why is bad because it tells an important truth, but only part of it. It takes us to a terrible place, and leaves us there" (Watson, 2017, para. 7). These critics were saying that because the show deals with such dark subject matter, it should have found a way to leave viewers with something more positive to hang onto at the end, rather than leaving them steeped in the message that Hannah killed herself because no one in her life was able or willing to help her.

Even those who might not feel hopeless for their own situation might be left feeling like there is nothing they could possibly do to help anyone else. One writer argued that the show left

adult viewers fearing for teenagers' lives, fearing that a teacher or school counselor might say or do something that points their child or someone they know in the direction of suicide. This writer said that such fear shuts people down, and inspiring hope would have been a better and more effective way to prevent suicide (Sandler, 2017).

Lack of resources for viewers. This sense of hopelessness was exacerbated by what many critics thought to be a dearth of resources *13 Reasons Why* provided for vulnerable viewers, i.e., those most likely to be negatively impacted by the show's dark content. Several noted that there were trigger warnings on a few episodes, but the level of resources needed to balance out the triggering content simply wasn't there. For example, one critic talked about how even though Netflix did produce an accompanying special that talked somewhat in-depth about how to handle suicide ideation, viewers were not clued in well enough to its existence and might not otherwise think to seek out balancing content to help themselves (Truffaut-Wong, 2017).

There was also a website with information on how to get help, but again, many critics felt that these outlets were not obvious enough to make the difference they needed to make. The same critic said,

That's one of the main lessons of *13 Reasons Why*: death by suicide is preventable. This is why not immediately providing a teenage audience with any tools to grapple with the issues depicted seems counterintuitive to the very point of the show. (Truffaut-Wong, 2017, para. 11)

By not highlighting these resources more heavily, they argue, the show negated its own lessons and minimized its potential positive impact.

Binge-watching. What also worried critics was that the show was released all at once. This fear arose from the fact that people often binge-watch television shows Netflix, which

means that anyone who views the show runs the risk of getting too much too fast. Citing information from experts on the topic, one writer said, “Alongi and Schwartz said because of the way media is binge-watched, it is more dangerous than when the story was released as a book” (Rosenblatt, 2017, para. 24).

Others went on to argue that this is a particularly dangerous set-up for young people watching the show because they are less likely to be capable of adequately processing the messages on their own, without the help of someone older who might have more perspective or insight: “Authorities are concerned that emotionally-disturbed young people are binge-watching the show, with no feedback or perspective from adults” (Reeve, 2017, para. 7). Furthermore, one article pointed out that “the accessibility of the show on Netflix, which can be watched by kids on their laptops or iPhone and streamed all in one sitting, is also raising flags for school administrators and mental health professionals” (Kindelan, 2017, para. 10).

In fact, several made the argument that the show actually encouraged binge-watching, such as one critic who said,

The mysterious nature of the series -- the viewer follows teenager Clay Jensen as he listens to each tape, uncovering bit by bit the story behind Hannah's decision to end her life -- may make it tempting to watch all 13 episodes in one fell swoop. (Marcus, 2017, para. 8)

Another thought that this type of narrative setup was intentionally meant to leave viewers “feeling that they desperately need to know what happens next,” rather than being able to “watch the horrible story unfold at their own pace” (Koehler, 2017, para. 6). This also ties in with the previously discussed argument by several critics that the show exploited a serious issue for its drama and ability to entice viewers to keep watching.

Susceptible audience. All of these concerns are underscored by the fact that *13 Reasons Why* is about high school students, so its primary audience likely consists of teenagers and even younger children. Several critics pointed out concerns about why showing this type of content to young people could be highly problematic.

Separating fiction from reality. First, young people are not as adept as older people at separating fiction from reality, which is what one writer argued in the article “Does Netflix’s ‘13 Reasons Why’ glorify suicide? These experts say ‘yes’” (Rosenblatt, 2017):

Like Schwartz, she said children won’t always be able to distinguish what is a plot device and what is reality. “I cringed when I watched the school counselor [scene],” Alongi said. “As a mental health professional and someone who works with kids, it’s cringe-inducing, but it was scripted that way and kids need to know that.” (para. 14)

Seeing Hannah trying to reach out for help but failing to receive it could discourage young viewers from reaching out for help themselves, critics said, because they might think their efforts will play out the same way Hannah’s did.

In fact, young viewers might think that all the events of the show are how things play out in real life after a person completes suicide. One critic wrote, “‘Hannah’s story is fictional, tragic, and not the norm,’ she says. And unfortunately, teens might not recognize that by watching it” (Miller, 2017, para. 10). The same critic, relaying several of the previously discussed concepts, said,

Teenagers are especially susceptible to seeing suicide depicted in such a way, and taking dangerous and inaccurate lessons from it—such as that suicide is a viable coping mechanism when you feel hopeless or in despair; that it’s a glamorous way to get the attention you’ve been seeking (by never being forgotten) or the revenge you’ve been

dreaming of (by getting back at people who've wronged you); and that parents and guidance counselors are inept, out of touch, and unable to help you when you're in trouble. (Miller, 2017, para. 13)

Believing these messages could change the choices a vulnerable viewer might otherwise make. For example, several critics talked about how the scene with Mr. Porter could discourage viewers from seeking help because they believe that all school counselors will fail them the way Mr. Porter failed Hannah.

Reflecting a deeper aspect of this concern, many critics worried viewers might relate too closely to Hannah for comfort. One writer talked about how kids were saying things such as, “The series portrayed my life” (Eisenstadt, 2017, para. 13), which is problematic because if kids feel like Hannah’s life is the same as their lives, suicide could look all the more like a viable option or glamorous solution to solving their problems. This is also related to several of the previously related dialectical tensions.

Additionally, critics felt that if the story comes across as reality, then young people might also think that they will get the same things Hannah seemed to get by killing herself, such as “sympathy, deep regret, guilt, and ultimately -- love” (Mckitrick, 2017, para. 20).

Furthermore, this critic went on to argue that by keeping Hannah alive via flashbacks, the show made it seem like she was able to actually experience or benefit from her post-suicide love (Mckitrick, 2017). This argument suggests that young viewers who are not able to grasp the permanence and finality of death, and who also overly identify with Hannah, might think that they will somehow be able to experience the same type of love she was given after death. The reality, of course, is that Hannah did not feel any of the effects of her suicide, but a young person might not be able to make that distinction so clearly, these critics argued.

Actual effects mentioned in articles. Several articles included in this study also included real-life accounts and discussion about the way the show had affected kids who had seen it. In one first-person account, a woman had watched the show with her teenage son, who himself had overcome suicide ideation in the past. The woman talked about how the show affected his understanding of mental illness and a person's ability to overcome it. Relaying a conversation between the two of them, she said,

“Well mom, I think at that point there really was no turning back. Her life was over and she would have never been able to have a happy life again. Too much had happened.”

I asked my son, “But what if her mom had walked in before it was too late? What if they got her to the hospital and got her help, and she got to share her story without killing herself?”

He answered, “She would have felt like that was just another thing she failed. It wouldn't have helped her.”

My son — my beautiful son who has spent the last three years telling friends to reach out for help if they are feeling suicidal, and who has used his own story to let kids know that even if they think it won't get better, it can — was momentarily turned fatalist by one very addicting narrative of suicide-as-revenge. (Oluo, 2017, para. 15-18)

She was arguing that even a kid who had some understanding of the fluidity of mental health was convinced otherwise by the show, convinced that suicide was the best and only option for a person in Hannah's situation.

Another writer talked about a conversation with a therapist, who said that one of her clients had watched the show and then come into a therapy session and described her symptoms in a very different way than she had before. This interaction caused the therapist to wonder

“whether *13 Reasons Why* gave her new language to use to describe her experience, curiosity about how the series may have validated or invalidated her own experience, and curiosity about how her depression and suicidal ideation may or may not have shifted in the absence of watching the series.” (Sandler, para. 9)

This anecdote is not explicitly positive or negative, however, it does highlight that the show had a significant impact on how the young girl in the story understood her own experience of mental health issues.

Another writer spoke with the campus clinical director for an “acute residential and partial hospitalization program for teens with mental health issues” (Teitell, 2017, para. 5). The writer said that the director’s program regularly gets referrals from emergency service teams and that following the show, the accompanying notes often said that the child who was contemplating or who had attempted suicide referenced *13 Reasons Why* as something they could relate to (Teitell, 2017). This could suggest that young viewers were affected in the negative ways previously mentioned in this section. Alternately (or perhaps additionally), it could mean that the show provided viewers with language to express themselves that they didn’t have before.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

Significance

The first research question was regarding whether journalist critique aligned with public health guidelines for Journalistic critique did not align very closely with the Team Up guidelines used for comparison within this study. There were several critics who referenced various sets of guidelines, though, with the implication that *13 Reasons Why* should have followed them. It is too late for the show to go back and adhere to guidelines, but this finding does provide insight into the role of journalists when it comes to responding to irresponsible art. Artists are under no legal obligation to accurately reflect public health issues, but it then becomes the role of journalists to draw the lines between storytelling that is merely entertaining and storytelling that has the audience's best interests in mind. Given that the show was often painted as an intervention both by creators and some critics, this is an especially important distinction to make. In light of the research on increased suicide rates following the show's release (Bridge et al., 2019), it seems that journalists who held *13 Reasons Why* to the fire were totally justified in their criticisms.

Furthermore, sets of guidelines for media portrayals of suicide often suggest avoiding the romanticization of suicide. However, thus far, romanticization has not been well-operationalized. The aims of this study were by no means to provide a working definition of romanticization. Still, the web of tensions within journalistic critique of how *13 Reasons Why* portrayed Hannah's suicide might provide valuable insight into what it means to viewers to romanticize suicide. This is another area in which journalists are able to judge art in light of public health rather than simply what makes for a good or compelling story — something creators themselves might not be willing to do.

The second research question focused on delineating the dialectical tensions about the show within journalistic critique. There were four main areas of tension: intimate portrayal vs. lack of character development, suicide as necessary vs. irresponsible, teaching lessons about actions having consequences vs. outsourcing blame and suicide as revenge, suicide as preventable vs. inevitable. The opposing poles of these tensions reflected the dichotomy between the show being heralded as an intervention or denigrated as, at best, irresponsible art. The nature of these arguments pose several areas of discussion and exploration.

Within the first month following the show's release, journalists were not able to agree on whether or not the show raised awareness or if instead it merely added to the glorification of suicide. The tension between showing an intimate and accurate portrayal of the problem versus creating a character who was nothing more than a suicide victim gets at the heart of this problem.

On one hand, in order to talk deeply about an issue, it is important that people are able to understand and grasp the full extent of it in some way, and by taking viewers into the depths of Hannah's despair, the show was giving those who are not familiar with suicide and suicide ideation a glimpse into a reality they are not typically privy to. Furthermore, even those who are familiar with what Hannah experienced, some journalists argued, seemed to have been given the opportunity to talk about their own experiences after seeing them on the show. Both these suggest discussion was opened up and stigma broken (in a small way) by the show.

Yet others argued that by diving so deep into Hannah's downward spiral, Hannah ended up being defined by her suicide. As a result, she lacked depth, which begs the question: Is a flat character really the one who is able to open up all the nuances of what suicide and suicide ideation entail?

Within this dialectical tension, balancing the two poles is a matter of storytelling. If the creators of *13 Reasons Why* had fleshed out characters and made them real (rather than plot device), the two poles could have been in balance even while the show took a deep-dive into Hannah's downfall. Neither pole necessarily needs to dominate the other in this situation.

The critique that mental health was not fleshed out enough still must be accounted for, as several journalists were bothered by the complete lack of direct discussion about mental illness. This could have been fixed fairly simply by adding in throughlines that referenced the depression facet of Hannah's spiral. There was also the argument that Hannah did not behave logically for someone about to commit suicide. By gaining a more concrete awareness of what her mental health would have likely actually looked like under the given circumstances, the creators could have painted her as a more realistic character. Had they done that, there would be no longer be the dialectical tension between whether or not the show broke stigma or actually potentially exacerbated it by refusing to call mental illness by name. When talking about research and guidelines on media representations of suicide, one critic summed up this concept perfectly: "It's possible to find a balance between trying to inform the public and publishing gratuitous portrayals of suicide. The producers of *13 Reasons Why* perhaps weren't familiar with this research, or maybe thought their artistic license trumped it" (Ruiz, 2017, para. 10-11).

The second area of dialectical tension was a more foundational question about whether it was necessary to depict Hannah's actual suicide scene or if it was irresponsible. Because this area of debate is over whether or not the scene should have been included in the first place rather than over how it was portrayed, the poles cannot really be balanced. They are too diametrically opposed. It is important to note here that only one side of the argument reflects any sort of literature on the topic, and that is the pole that suggests showing the suicide scene was

irresponsible, almost like a how-to guide for viewers who might want to kill themselves. The literature suggests that including information in the media about specific suicide acts is dangerous because it can increase the likelihood that people will be inspired by or attempt those methods (Sonneck et al., 1994), and various sets of recommendations suggest that under no circumstances should suicide be shown on screen.

However, it would perhaps have been possible to distill bits of information from the other pole, the one that suggests showing the suicide was necessary to demonstrate the depth of Hannah's pain and demystify suicide, into concepts that could have been worked with and synthesized into something more reflective of the literature and media guidelines. As a primary example of this, one of the writers for the show explicitly said the reasoning behind including the suicide scene was to dispel any notion that suicide is peaceful or calm or easy to complete; it is possible that creators of suicide plotlines could take the notion of avoiding minimization of the mental, emotional and physical pain of suicide and translate those concepts in a way that does not involve actually showing the act of suicide on screen. It would not be a way to balance the dialectical tension of demystifying suicide versus going against literature and guidelines, but rather a way of blending demystification with a responsible, guideline- and literature-driven portrayal of suicide.

The most complex dialectical tension in this analysis was the debate over the form and function of the cause-and-effect narrative arc of the show. This tension is a fundamental questioning of the storyline itself. The primary oppositional poles are teaching that actions have consequences versus outsourcing blame for what was ultimately one person's decision to end her own life. There is no easy way to balance these poles because in order to teach that 'actions have

consequences' — in this case, the consequence was death — it is almost necessary to do some amount of outsourcing the blame for Hannah's suicide.

However, a deeper, more nuanced focus on Hannah's mental health could have helped to combat the blame outsourcing to some extent — which ties back into the idea of breaking stigma versus romanticizing Hannah as a character as well as the story of her demise. One of the offshoots of this tension was the idea of suicide as revenge; also related was the argument that the show exploited suicide for its dramatic value. These offshoots tie into the proposed solution that mental health be explored more deeply and as a more intentional aspect of the plot. Had there been a better focus on Hannah's mental health, an undeniably less sexy aspect of the plot, perhaps it would not seem like the show was using suicide as a way to pull in audience members who otherwise are not interested in grappling with the mental health issues underlying the entire show. The tension of showing suicide as revenge also leads into the idea that the show made death seem less permanent than it actually is. Although not in direct opposition to any other pole, this concept is still worth noting as a concern with the very premise of the show.

Interestingly, the concept of feelings of guilt suffered by survivors came up within this tension and was connected to both poles. As previously stated, the Team Up guidelines (Team Up, n.d.) suggest showing feelings of guilt or depression suffered by those the suicide victim left behind — with the goal of mitigating the copycat suicide effect. Therefore, the idea that the show extensively demonstrated the devastation left in the wake of Hannah's suicide falls into line with the idea that the show taught valuable lessons. However, showing that amount of grief, such a blown up response to Hannah's death, might also teach that suicide is the best way to gain both agency and adoration. Because the show framed Hannah's suicide and the thirteen tapes as her

solution to simultaneously express and put an end to her problems, she was depicted as being able to construct the meaning of her life from beyond the grave.

All of this is also affected by horizontal modeling, which, as discussed in the literature, is when a viewer relates and identifies with a character, promoting copycat suicide effects. One way of balancing these two effects could be to show grief in a more limited way to lessen the sense that Hannah's death was a way to get the wheels of justice turning; however, this, too, would require a reimagined plot.

This question about what lessons and messages the show sent to viewers leads into the final dialectical tension regarding whether the show made clear that Hannah's suicide could have been prevented (what it supposedly set out to do) or if it actually demonstrated the antithesis, that suicide cannot be prevented. Again, this is where a more nuanced understanding of mental health crises and responses could have been a great balancing factor between the two poles. The creators' hope was to show where Hannah's peers failed her — for viewers to see those failings and know that those are the areas in which they could have been better. For example, Mr. Porter did a poor job of helping Hannah. Viewers, theoretically, are supposed to learn about how to be a good listener from this scene; they are supposed to see Mr. Porter's lack of listening skills and think about how he could have done better and saved her. Many critics argued instead, though, that showing him floundering sent the message that not even trained professionals know how to respond to a suicidal person.

As previously discussed, guidelines suggest including someone who actually knows how to effectively help, someone who actually demonstrates a positive response to Hannah's crisis; instead, the show creators expected viewers to extrapolate that positive response their own. Worth noting also is that previously discussed concept that the show operates under the

framework that the main character has already committed suicide, which some argued meant that the suicide itself was depicted as inevitable, rather than being depicted more similarly to suicide ideation — i.e., something that resources exist to address. Including those resources would have been one way to balance this tension (though, admittedly, not a way to reverse the argument about Hannah’s suicide being inevitable).

This idea is summed up well by the following quote by Dr. Christine Moutier, chief medical officer for the American Foundation of Suicide Prevention:

“We believe strongly that the issue of suicide is really important to raise the volume on,” says Moutier, who hasn’t seen the Netflix series. “So it’s not that portrayals are all bad — it’s the way that it’s done and that it needs to be with a prevention message and a message of hope, something that can inspire others to work through life’s struggles whether they’re way upstream from actually being in a crisis or even when it’s at the moment of suicidal crisis.” (Bacle, 2017, para. 10)

Also worth noting in this tension was the offshoot that several critics felt the show implied suicide was a viable option. Although not specifically mentioned in the set of guidelines used for this study, literature suggests that providing “reasons why” at all is a way of justifying suicide as an option to overcome those reasons or of providing a script that others might follow (Mueller, 2017) — which is concerning given that the content of the show is essentially an itemized list of all Hannah’s justifications for completing suicide. This is also a foundational issue with the show, one that cannot be easily balanced while the premise of the show remains as is.

Finally, the concerns about the show’s negative effects on viewers are not unfounded. The narrative of hopelessness, lack of resources for vulnerable viewers and susceptible audience

of teenagers are enough to spark worry, especially when considering the literature on the dose-response effect, which states that the higher number of guidelines that have not been observed in media representations, the more likely there is to be increased suicide rates due to the representations (Hagihara et al., 2014; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2010; Niederkrotenthaler & Sonneck, 2007; Stack, 2005). It is logical to connect this to the bingeability of the show and worry that the more exposure to these ideas in a brief period of time, the more dangerous they are likely to be.

Limitations

One limitation to this research is the fact that Google does not populate all of the results for any given search. Rather, it uses an algorithm to call up page results based on factors that change over time, such as how long a page has existed and how many times it has been linked to. Given this algorithm, it is almost certain that there were articles relevant to this study that were not included because they did not come up in the Google search. Despite the search not being totally exhaustive, however, by the end of my analysis, no new concepts were coming up, which suggests that the search was likely comprehensive enough to answer the research questions in full.

Directions for Future Research

This analysis looked at journalistic critique of the show *13 Reasons Why*. A logical next research step would be to analyze the responses of the viewers most likely to be impacted by the show — the teenagers and younger children who are thought to make up a large portion of the show's viewership. How did the target audience take in *13 Reasons Why*? Were the praises and/or concerns about the show bore out in the ways journalists anticipated they might be in the month following its release?

Finally, in-depth analyses could also be done both on how exactly the creators of the show came to their decisions about how to depict Hannah's suicide, as well as on how suicide experts and professionals believe the show might potentially have impacted its viewers. Each of these types of analyses could provide deeper, more nuanced explanations than the sound bites found over the course of this study, and all of these research directions have the potential to provide more insight into the validity of the arguments laid out by the journalists included in the present study, which in turn could have an effect on how guidelines and content creation might be adapted in the future.

Final Thoughts

Many people saw value in *13 Reasons Why*. Many also saw the potential for danger. There are guidelines in place to mitigate such danger, but they do not necessarily capture the potential valuable aspects of media representations of suicide.

In an article in which Variety TV critics discussed the show (Saraiya & Ryan, 2017), one critic posed the following:

I know that there are those who think it glamorized suicide....Here's my question, though: When can we talk about the things that drive teenagers (or anyone, for that matter) toward suicidal thoughts? I think the show makes the space for those discussions, which I think is valuable. I truly respect and understand the reservations some people have about the show, but I think there are a lot of young people in psychological pain, engaging in self-harm and falling into addictions and depression. I would bet this show is driving a lot of conversations about those topics. Maybe it's causing people to open up to their friends and family about their feelings of isolation and despair. (para. 9)

There must be a way to talk about suicide and its aftermath in a way that is safe for readers and viewers while still retaining whatever entertainment value is driving the story. It matters how the media frame delicate topics in order to start conversations and inform the public without doing further harm to those who are vulnerable — in this case, people who are already at risk of committing suicide. The Bridge et al. (2019) study that found increased suicide rates said it well:

Media and entertainment professionals understandably value freedom of expression and might equate responsible messaging with censorship, as much still remains to be learned about suicide contagion and how media might best contribute to suicide prevention efforts. Nevertheless, study findings should encourage dialogue and reflection within the entertainment industry about balancing creative license and the medical dictum ‘primum non nocere’ - ‘first do no harm’. (para. 17)

So, after analyzing the initial month’s discussion surrounding the show, I think the better question is: How can we talk about the issues teenagers face while simultaneously respecting and protecting those who are in danger of receiving harmful messages about what suicide is and does?

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Appendix

Recommendation	Ways of enacting recommendation
<p>Demonstrate that suicide is not inevitable</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have suicidal characters contemplate suicide deeply over time rather than jump to it as an immediate solution. • Include characters who have survived suicide attempts or overcome suicidal ideation via therapy, support groups, medication, or other recovery strategies. • If substance abuse is part of the plot, show a complicated relationship between it and mental health.
<p>Show that anyone can be suicidal, regardless of race, class, religion, age, socioeconomic status, etc.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unmask misconceptions about the “type” of person who might be struggling with depression or suicidal thoughts. • Demonstrate the impact of stigma surrounding mental health.
<p>Depict evidence that suicide has consequences</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show characters thinking about the effect their suicides might have on those around them. • Feelings of guilt, shame, fear, PTSD responses and other negative emotional states for suicidal characters and those affected by a character’s suicide can be shown. • Show the people around the suicidal character expressing their love and support <i>before</i> the character attempts suicide. • Avoid glamorizing and romanticizing grief and other consequences.

<p>Provide examples of how people can recognize or respond to signs of suicidal or attempted suicide</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Show nuanced warning signs such as: suicidal characters talking or writing about death or hurting or killing themselves; looking for a means to killing oneself; feeling hopeless or trapped, feeling anxious or agitated, and experiencing uncontrollable anger; using more drugs and/or alcohol; withdrawing from loved ones and society in general; sleeping too much or too little; or exhibiting dramatic mood shifts.• Incorporate suicidal characters seeking help by talking about what they're going through in an honest way.• Include experts or professionals in the show providing the suicidal characters with helpful advice.• Give visual cues that suicidal characters aren't alone, even if they feel like they are.
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