

Exploring the Reasons

An emergent analysis of *Thirteen Reasons Why* and media

by

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## ABSTRACT

Suicidality, understood as the risk of suicide with intent or the idea of suicide, has been increasingly prevalent in our country, yet the topic of suicidality is one that is often spoken in hushed tones and behind closed doors (Pam, 2013). While suicide statistics trend upwards, there is a growing need to understand representations of suicidality, particularly within media (Centers for Disease Control, 2017). This thesis looks to explore the representations of suicidality in media, specifically Netflix's original series, *Thirteen Reasons Why*. Data collection for this thesis will be collected from online social media forums dedicated to the show in the form of episode discussions reflecting on each episode in the season. Through an emergent, grounded analysis, this paper will address current representations of suicidality within *Thirteen Reasons Why* as well as identify common themes found in online social media forums. This research established common themes of resilience-enhancing, community building, and individuals feeling at-risk or triggered by representations of suicidality in *Thirteen Reasons Why* as found throughout the online social media forums.

## DEDICATIONS

To my Nana and Papa for continued support and compassion throughout every endeavor.

To my parents for their support and motivation over the years.

To my close friends who have spent countless hours cheering me on, holding me together, and validating my work.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	Page
1 INTRODUCTION .....	1
Relevance and Justification of Research.....	2
Methodology .....	4
Chapter Outlines .....	6
2 LITERATURE REVIEW .....	9
Historical Background.....	9
Expert Representations of Suicidality .....	10
Expert Representations of Suicidality in <i>Thirteen Reasons Why</i> .....	12
Theorizing Expert Representations as Resilience-Enhancing.....	18
3 METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS .....	20
Data Collection .....	20
Content Analysis .....	21
RQ1 .....	25
Episode One.....	26
Episode Thirteen.....	28
RQ 2 .....	32
Episode One.....	34
Episode Thirteen.....	44
4 DISCUSSION .....	54

CHAPTER	Page
5 CONCLUSION .....	61
Significant Findings.....	62
Limitations and Future Research .....	64
REFERENCES .....	66
APPENDIX	
A [SEASON ONE EPISODE ONE – TAPE 1 SIDE A] .....	69
B [SEASON ONE EPISODE THIRTEEN – TAPE 7 SIDE A] .....	72

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Suicidality, meaning the risk of suicide with intent or the idea of suicide (Pam, 2013), has been increasingly prevalent in our country. Extending research into relationships across social media content, media usage, and users' mental health, this thesis will investigate the potential social impact and discourse of suicidality articulated in the Netflix original series, *Thirteen Reasons Why*, which was inspired by Jay Asher's 2007 novel of the same name. Netflix's *Thirteen Reasons Why* aired March 31st, 2017. This study entails a thematic analysis of key episodic moments and themes through the first season of Netflix's show. I will also look at representational practices around critical plot points in the first season detailing key episodic moments within the episodes and exploring how these moments are received and interpreted in a Reddit social media forum and by experts in the published reactions to the series.

This research will work to expand the current knowledge of suicidality representations presented in media and investigate how discourse is created surrounding these representations of suicidality in online social media discussion.

My research questions are the following:

**RQ1: How did the first season of *Thirteen Reasons Why* represent suicidality?**

**RQ2: How did fans on Reddit in the “r/13ReasonsWhy” episode discussion forums represent suicidality as portrayed in the first season of *Thirteen Reasons Why*?**

I will contextualize my research within my literature review to provide a foundation for my methodology and framework.

### **Relevance and Justification of Research**

*The New York Times* bestseller *Thirteen Reasons Why* written by Jay Asher (2007) portrays the story of a high school girl, Hannah Baker, struggling with suicidality who utilizes cassette tapes distributed to specific classmates to identify those who she recognized as a reason why she died by suicide. In 2017, Netflix adapted Asher's book into an original series and depicted Hannah's story on screen. This show sparked debates soon after release due to graphic depictions of self-harm and suicide within a show that had been marketed to adolescents. Soon after the release, parents, educators, and professionals alike questioned the impact of the series' representations of suicidality on viewers. Rosa et al. (2019) studied the influence of media portrayals of suicide, specifically *Thirteen Reasons Why*, to investigate any changes in moods, suicidal ideation, or behavior in adolescents who view the show. Through the use of online questionnaires, Rosa et. al. collected data regarding sociodemographic information, mood, and instances of suicidality (2019). In their research, Rosa et al. noted that there was an overwhelming number of individuals within the study that reported negative changes in their mood after watching the show.

Suicide sits among the top leading causes of death in the United States alongside heart disease, cancer, and diabetes (CDC, 2017). While there has been an upward trend in suicide statistics over the past decade (CDC, 2017), the topic of suicide is still relatively taboo and often viewed as stigmatized and one to avoid. Understanding the increase in



the incidents of suicide requires overcoming this taboo by detailed research addressing the multi-dimensionality of suicide drivers across biological, psychological, interpersonal, and cultural systems. Contemporary research tends to emphasize biological and psychological drivers rather than social-cultural ones. However, some studies have addressed relationships between social environments and medias messages and suicidality. For example, a study by Bercedo Sanz et al. (2005) showed a longitudinal increase in media usage and consumption by adolescents and the impacts that just consumption alone has on their mental health and well-being. The role of media representations in shaping perceptions about suicide has been understudied.

The popularity of *Thirteen Reasons Why* and the potential for it to shape adolescent attitudes about suicidality warrants understanding the potential implications of the show's representations. A study published by Marengo et al. (2018) looked at the relationship of what they define as "highly-visual social media" and internalizing symptoms of body image issues. While Marengo et al. (2018) acknowledges the importance of discussing the topic of suicidality and mental health with adolescents, they also bring light to how harmful information can be without proper education, support, or understanding of the material. Research is needed to not only observe the perceived effects these types of media have on viewers, but also to gain further insight on how viewers collectively communicate and share information from these types of media.

The stigmatization of suicidality and mental health as a whole has been an ongoing trend over the decades. Through a study that measured people's opinions on suicidality to gauge any stigmatization, Rozatkar (2014) found a startling 68.2 percent of

responses in their study were charted as having an attitude of stigmatization of suicidality. Rozatkar (2014) recognizes and addresses the impact and negative risks associated with having a high percentage of individuals' responses indicating stigmatization towards suicidality. This impacts the work needed to be done by researchers, psychologists, and epidemiologists to counteract the stigmatization. Expanding research on the representations of suicidality within media allows us to not only effectively communicate how viewers perceive representations of suicidality in media but to establish best practices in producing media with responsible representations of suicidality.

### **Methodology**

*Thirteen Reasons Why* is a Netflix original series that was created with inspiration from the novel by Jay Asher (2007). The show is accessible to those with a paid account on the streaming service Netflix. In this study, I conducted a selective content analysis on the first season of *Thirteen Reasons Why* focusing on key episodic moments and events that are examples of suicidality. From the data collected, I examined representational practices to understand how suicide is defined and enacted in the show. I also collected data from an online social-media Reddit forum to understand how the show's representation of suicidality is perceived, as represented in discussant comments and how viewers interact with each other regarding the discourse on the show.

The show is rated as TV-MA; as defined by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) this indicates that this show should not be viewed by viewers under the age of 16 and is intended for mature audiences only. Rating the show as TV-MA

indicates that the show contains foul language, graphic violence, graphic sexual activity, or any combination of these. Apart from the rating put forward by MPAA, Netflix also later included an additional content warning on the landing page for the series. When clicked on, the content warning states, “This series contains scenes that viewers may find disturbing, including graphic depictions of sexual assault, substance abuse, and suicide” (Netflix, 2017). Netflix also provides an additional source if viewers feel that they may be or become at risk from viewing the show; however, the source provided is a direct link to a site purely related to *Thirteen Reasons Why* rather than providing a national resource for suicide prevention or call line. It is important to note that the final episode of *Thirteen Reasons Why* was removed and reuploaded with an alternate ending where Hannah still dies by suicide, however, the scene depicting her taking her life is cut out. It pans from Hannah looking in the mirror to Clay telling the counselor she died alone. The choice to remove the ending was made 2 years after the release of the first season, with direction given from the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP).

Finally, I collected and analyzed comments found within the Reddit thread, r/13ReasonsWhy, which is a thread dedicated to the show *Thirteen Reasons Why*. I collected data from the episode discussions within the forum on January 6th, 2020. I manually extracted comments, replies, and any images from the episode discussions found in the subreddit (r/13ReasonsWhy). I conducted a thematic analysis of data collected from this Reddit forum episode discussions. Utilizing Buzzanell’s theory of resilience, my analysis is grounded through the five communicative processes of enhancing resilience. These processes include: crafting normalcy, affirming identity

anchors, maintaining and using communication networks, putting alternative logics to work, and legitimizing negative feelings while foregrounding productive actions. All episode discussion threads have been previously archived by the content creator/administrator of the thread, meaning there were no additional comments added after data collection. Utilizing selective content analysis, I narrowed data collection to the episode discussions for "Chapter One" and "Chapter Thirteen", the first and final episode in season one. All users and comments on the thread are accessible to the public, and all contributors to the thread are at least 18 years of age as it is a site requirement for posting. During my manual extraction, I did not pull any timestamps or any other identifying factors to ensure users' anonymity. The first and last episode discussions on the subreddit had the highest user interaction out of the first season as determined by the number of comments on each thread. Extracting comments from the first and last episode discussions in the season allowed me to analyze potential changes or shifts in discourse and engagement throughout the episode discussion forums. Data collection for these two discussions allowed me to focus on the discourse of the thematic events during each episode.

### **Chapter Outlines**

The introductory chapter of this thesis project outlines the research, addresses the research questions being presented, details the theoretical framework being used, justifications for research, and the importance of examining interactions and reactions to *Thirteen Reasons Why*.

In Chapter Two, I develop the context for this study. I further positioned my study as an extension of current and past research on the topic of suicidality and media research. I reviewed research on suicidality produced by academic and mental health professionals in this chapter.

Chapter Three explains how the data in this study were collected, recorded, and analyzed. I manually extracted the comments from the "r/13ReasonsWhy" forum on Reddit in the episode discussions for the first and last episode of season one. I examine and provide an explanation of what discourse is currently being produced on this topic and how it impacted data and data collection. Additionally, in this chapter, I share my data analysis and explicate the results, as well as develop and define their importance concerning this study. This chapter further expands on the discourse in relation to my data analysis. I also utilized this chapter and results to define the importance of the study along with how my results will impact further studies. Being a survivor of suicide, it establishes my authority to speak on the topic due to lived experience.

The fourth chapter discussed the results of my analysis of my research questions. Additionally, this chapter connects my results to the content within the literature review, further grounding results, and justification for the study. This chapter also contains the meaning of my analysis and how and why they are important to future representations of suicidality within media.

The final chapter summarizes the research questions and goals of the research, correlations, and findings in the literature review, the methodology used in the study, and

key findings through data analysis. This chapter ends with summarizing the thesis overall, limitations of the research, and where future research can be explored.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The aim of this literature review is to provide a background on suicidality through historical and current research on representations of suicidality. First, this chapter will demonstrate the historical background of suicidality and societal stigmatization. Further, this chapter will discuss expert representations of suicidality within academic and professional research. Previous research about expert representations of suicidality will be discussed alongside expert representations of suicidality within the show *Thirteen Reasons Why*. Finally, I will theorize expert representations of suicidality as resilience-enhancing. This chapter will address the literature necessary to ground the research questions and drive the analysis in Chapter Three.

#### **Historical Background**

Historically, the act of suicide or dying by self-injury has been paired with religious and moral stigmatizations. Religion classifies dying by suicide as a cardinal or mortal sin, a serious error of judgment, a gravely wrong moral action (Saunders, 2003). In the United Kingdom, prior to the passing of the Suicide Act 1961, it was not only a crime to die by suicide, but those who attempted and failed were prosecuted and often imprisoned for their actions (2017). Suicide has been decriminalized in western countries however the stigmatization has stuck around. These stigmas are further explored in Dante's *The Divine Comedy* where Alighieri states that self-murder is considered an extreme crime, then goes on to explain that the punishments should fit the crime, with punishment in this context meaning being sent to hell (1935). Having been heavily

scrutinized, seen as immoral, sinful, and criminal, suicidality was further stigmatized. Research conducted by Hovens and van Der Ploeg (2011) reported those dying by suicide did not show a history of receiving psychiatric care. Hovens and van Der Ploeg (2011) studied the impact of societal stigma in relation to effective suicide prevention and saw that most people were not seeking professional help with suicidality due to societal stigmatization of suicide. Hovens and van Der Ploeg stressed the importance of taking measures to attract those struggling with suicidality towards resources for assistance (2011). In addition, it would aide in lessening the social stigma surrounding suicidality. By recognizing the effects of stigmatization, it allows for correcting and addressing the issue at hand to make suicide prevention resources accessible and effective

### **Expert Representations of Suicidality**

While suicidality and suicides have been present throughout history, it is startling to learn that the first suicide prevention center within the United States did not open until 1958 in Los Angeles, California (Office of the Surgeon General, US, 2012). This prevention center was made possible through a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) and became the first clinically-based program utilized to prevent and study suicide in the US. From the establishment of the prevention center, further advancements in prevention measures became available with the center expanding to 24-hour coverage for their hotline in 1963. With suicide rates continuing to rise across the nation, research was expanded to show a need for prevention in survivors of suicide. Survivors of suicide include those who have lost a loved one to suicide or survived their own suicidality. In 1981, the L.A. prevention center began Survivors after Suicide (SAS)



as bereavement support for survivors of suicide. While prevention centers began to open across the country, suicidality and suicides continued to be one of the leading causes of death in the United States.

The rate of suicidality and suicides have had an upward trend in the past few decades. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) (2019) presents findings in a measured 16-year period, the suicide rate showed a 31 percent increase. With suicide being a leading cause of death within the United States, it is important to define the components of suicidality to provide a better understanding of the content being discussed. NIMH (2019) provided definitions for suicide, suicide attempt, and suicidal ideation to better educate on the public health concern at hand:

- Suicide is defined as death caused by self-directed injurious behavior with intent to die as a result of the behavior.
- A suicide attempt is a non-fatal, self-directed, potentially injurious behavior with intent to die as a result of the behavior. A suicide attempt might not result in injury.
- Suicidal ideation refers to thinking about, considering, or planning suicide.

It is vital to not only be aware of the terminology involved in suicidality, but also common disparities within the suicide statistics being presented. One of the first organizations dedicated to suicide prevention was Suicide Awareness Voices of Education (SAVE), since beginning operation under the guidelines published in the Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent Suicide in 1999, they have been a source for

awareness, education, and suicide statistics. SAVE details disparities in gender, age, sexual orientation, and gender identity characteristic of suicide statistics reported by national organizations (2020). Gender disparities include the finding that suicide among males constitutes 79 percent of all suicides within the United States, while females experience higher rates of depression, suicidal thoughts, and suicide attempts than men (SAVE, 2020). SAVE reports the prevalence of suicidality within young adults aged 18-29, however, suicide is reported as the 4th fourth leading cause of death for adults aged 18-65 (2020). In the United States alone, someone dies by suicide approximately every 12 minutes (SAVE, 2020).

### **Expert Representations of Suicidality in *Thirteen Reasons Why***

The choice to show representations of suicidality on television shows has been made by many and is not a one-off scenario unique to Netflix's *Thirteen Reasons Why*. The popular Canadian teen show, *Degrassi*, portrayed the suicide of one of their characters in 2012, in a similar high school setting as depicted in *Thirteen Reasons Why* (Barckert and Williams, 2013). The character, Campbell Saunders, had been represented on the show as being depressed, lonely, and struggling with mental illness and self-harm prior to his suicide. Within the episode, the producers chose to not show the act or scene of suicide, but instead depicted the death by suicide through foreshadowing. *Degrassi*, over the course of its airing, touched on many sensitive topics such as suicidality, mental illness, domestic violence, and sexual assault. At the end of all episodes with sensitive material, cast members were shown at the end of the episode providing national help resources pertaining to the specific material in the episode.

With producers and writers making the choice to include representations of suicidality within their shows, it is important to open up a discourse on how these representations may potentially have a negative influence on those who interact with the media. A study conducted by Hawton and Williams (2002) addressed the impact of media representations of suicidality, specifically when the method of suicide is shown in detail. *Thirteen Reasons Why* chose to show the scene in which Hannah dies by suicide in grave detail from the emotion on her face to the razor meeting her skin. Additionally, Hawton and Williams concluded that representations of suicidality are often oversimplified when portrayed in media, “attributing the act to single factors such as financial disasters, broken relationships, or failure in examinations. The most common factor leading to suicide, mental illness, is often overlooked” (2002). *Thirteen Reasons Why*’s target demographic is younger and more susceptible to media influence, creating a problem of how to address accurate, safe representations of suicidality within media. With this problem becoming increasingly prevalent with media representations of suicidality, Hawton and Williams recommended a more influential approach to representations of suicidality in media (2002).

While no direct harm is intended in the creative choice to portray media representations of suicidality, mass-media and suicide have been studied for decades for their influence and causal relationship. Etzersdorfer and Sonneck (1998) studied the causality of mass-media reporting during the opening of the subway system in Vienna in 1978 and suicide rates. Individuals were utilizing the new railway as a means to die by suicide by hopping onto the tracks when a train came by. They were reported through

mass-media as most tragedies are. When researchers saw a stark increase in suicide rates they took to mass-media to establish media guidelines on the reporting of suicides and established the Austrian Association for Suicide Prevention (AASP). Within a period of five years, Etzersdorfer and Sonneck noted a 75 percent decrease in railway-related suicides after the AASP's choice to abstain from reporting incidents of suicide on the railway (1998). Whether media is curated to show true incidents of suicidality or portray representations of suicidality it is vital to be cognizant of the potential implications and influences of the media being produced.

*Thirteen Reasons Why* stands out from many young adult shows not only as an on-screen adaptation of Jay Asher's novel (2007) but as a show that's entirety is based around suicidality. With suicide rates at an all-time high and growing, it is vital to understand the potential impact of media representations of suicidality. A study by Mueller (2019) addressed how shows such as *Thirteen Reasons Why* elicits suicidality through media representation, but may prove beneficial for some. Mueller mentioned the initial concerns raised by scholars were those of the show encouraging suicide and the impact it may have on vulnerable viewers and the importance for further studies to measure if the problematic material does indeed pose a risk. A general concern found throughout expert representations of suicidality is how such representations often overlook mental illness as a reason for suicidality because they focus on a single traumatic event as the cause. As mentioned in research by Mueller, "censoring mental health topics may do more harm than good" (2019). The producer's choice to not address the growing mental health concerns as a factor for suicidality is viewed as potentially

dangerous and could indeed carry a risk for vulnerable viewers. While suicidality can occur from traumatic events, it is defined by NIMH (2019) as thinking about, considering, or planning suicide. This exhibits that suicidality is often times the result of several components in one's life rather than one, life-altering event. The show's basis is surrounded by Hannah planning and creating thirteen reasons why she dies by suicide on cassette tapes, indicating her death by suicide was planned and considered prior to the event. With the target demographic being young adults, there is a larger question of how this impacts adolescents' mental health specifically.

A study conducted by Rosa et al. (2019) researched the perceived mental health impact of representations of suicidality in media shown to adolescents. Throughout the study, Rosa et al. found evidence of an increase in suicide-related internet searching not long after the show's initial airing. Another stark finding by Rosa et al. is, after conducting data analysis on online questionnaires, over 23 percent of users reported having a worsened mood after watching *Thirteen Reasons Why* (2019). It is important to note that those who reported a worsened mood after watching the series, had previously reported feelings of sadness before watching. Rosa et al. also addressed the ease of access to viewing the show and, additionally, the ability to binge-watch the material as a potential concern that should be addressed due to the portrayal of suicidality within the show. Research showing an increase in negative mental health changes after watching *Thirteen Reasons Why* calls for further expansion on media best practices and viewing guidelines.

Having established the target demographic and vulnerability of the audience for *Thirteen Reasons Why* it is pertinent to explore how the media is being interpreted and consumed. Knox, Burkhart, and Cromly (2013) explored the effects on engaged parenting about the intake of violent or sensitive media with their children. From their research, they showed improvements in the psychological health and well-being of the children that had been engaged by a parent regarding sensitive, more volatile media. Additionally, it was found that through the use of engaged parenting that there were lower rates of psychological and physically aggressive behavior with children who had previously shown aggressive behavior. Gatekeeping the media adolescents engage with allows the conversation to be guided and shaped appropriately rather than adolescents viewing representations of suicidality without proper control or education. This form of gatekeeping is also noted in research conducted by Baume, Cantor, and Rolfe (1997) in the context of interactive comments on suicidality on the internet. Looking closely at the interaction that takes place online through information sharing, Baume, Cantor, and Rolfe recognized the role and potential influence of users sharing their suicidality online where vulnerable users may come across or engage with it (1997). Furthermore, they addressed case examples of suicidality that were shared to educate on how they may potentially influence vulnerable viewers and adolescents through the representations of suicidality. While there is no true “safe space” on the internet, through gatekeeping conducted by producers and creators of media, it can protect viewers from potentially volatile media such as *Thirteen Reasons Why*.

Through a grant from The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), Bridge et al. (2019) conducted a press release addressing the noted increase in suicide rates in the month (April 2017) following the release of the show. With a 28.9 percent increase in youth suicide rates (ages 10-17), Bridge et al. and NIMH (2019) reported it as the highest recorded number of deaths by suicide in a month within the five-year period examined in the study. The study calls for further use of best practices when engaging with volatile topics such as suicidality, Bridge et al. (2019) states, “the results of this study should raise awareness that young people are particularly vulnerable to the media”. The Education Development Center Inc. (2020) created national recommendations for depicting suicide through partnership with Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to convey best practices when depicting suicide in media. The national recommendations for depicting suicide include:

- Convey that suicide is complex and often caused by a range of factors, rather than by a single event.
- Show that help is available.
- Portray characters with suicidal thoughts who do not go on to die by suicide.
- Portray everyday characters who can be a lifeline.
- Avoid showing or describing the details about suicide methods.
- Consult with suicide prevention messaging experts and people with personal experience
- Depict the grieving and healing process of people who lose someone to suicide.
- Use non-judgmental language.

Through implementation of the best practices noted above, it allows vulnerable viewers to engage with media representations and portrayals of suicidality safely and with limited risk involved.

### **Theorizing Expert Representations as Resilience-Enhancing**

Suicidality, as portrayed and represented in *Thirteen Reasons Why*, demonstrates one form of response to adversity. Hannah Baker is depicted as having struggled with traumatic events such as sexual assault and rape, resulting in her dying by suicide in the final episode of the first season. The show has the ability to encourage negative responses to adversity, such as those depicted in Hannah's story. However, it also holds the ability to enhance resilient responses to adversity. Resiliency is one's ability to recover and adapt from trauma, allowing one to "bounce back" after being faced with adversity. Through on-screen character relationships and community engagement on Reddit forums, *Thirteen Reasons Why* holds the ability to enhance one's resiliency through comment engagement on online episode discussion forums.

Buzzanell (2010) developed communicative processes involved in the development, sustainability, and enhancement of resilience. These processes include: crafting normalcy, affirming identity anchors, maintaining and using communication networks, putting alternative logics to work, and downplaying negative feelings while foregrounding positive emotions (Buzzanell, 2010). Communicative processes to enhance resiliency are seen in various communication channels and platforms. Users engaging in online episode discussions on Reddit about *Thirteen Reasons Why* are exposed to commenters sharing their own personal adversities as well as contribute to discourse on



the adversities represented in the show. In line with Buzzanell's theory and process of downplaying negative feelings while foregrounding positive emotions, Zautra and Hall (2014) define optimism as a core principle of resilience. Optimism is used to aide one in expecting a positive outcome after an event, and also is used by individuals and communities to focus on hope through a time of resilience. This process allows the ability to reframe adversities and trauma, allowing individuals to find a silver lining from the situation. As observed in the online episode discussion Reddit forums, commenters engage in the act of sharing information about their adversities in addition to expressing positive outlooks and enhancing resilience through thread engagement.

*Thirteen Reasons Why* stimulates discourse found in Buzzanell's theory associated with resilience and resilience-enhancing. Through displays of negative reactions to adversity as portrayed in the show, *Thirteen Reasons Why* allows viewers and those engaging in online episode discussion forums to reframe and put alternative logics to work. Buzzanell (2010) draws on the use of seeking and maintaining supportive networks, this can be seen in Reddit users engaging in discussion of their personal adversities in relation to representations of suicidality on *Thirteen Reasons Why*. In addition, *Thirteen Reasons Why* prompts viewers to engage in communicative process through the creation of controversial material that spark debate and discourse.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS

This chapter will analyze the data collected to gain a better understanding of the themes presented throughout the data and further expand patterns of communication that are present in the data. To best provide a basis to the data being collected and analyzed the following research questions being addressed were:

**RQ1: How did the first season of *Thirteen Reasons Why* represent suicidality?**

**RQ2: How did fans on Reddit in the “r/13ReasonsWhy” episode discussion forums represent suicidality as portrayed in the first season of *Thirteen Reasons Why*?**

The analysis completed was composed of results from my emergent thematic analysis, content analysis, and several passes of coding for each data stream. These results aim to not only address my research question, but provide further discussion relevant to the topic of suicidality as a whole.

#### **Data Collection**

Data collection involved two separate data streams, each adapted to specific research questions. To address RQ1 concerning representational practices, I narrowed data collection and content analysis to the first and last episodes of *Thirteen Reasons Why* in the first season. This data stream consists of all representations of suicidality portrayed throughout the first and last episodes of season one. The preliminary content analysis of representations of suicidality across the show aimed to identify key episodic moments

and visual depictions of suicidality. These instances were coded as episodic moments of suicidality. The coding was timestamped for the moment that each representation was shown on the episode and recorded for further analysis. A content analysis was conducted on key episodic moments to gather any themes present throughout the show's representations of suicidality.

The second data stream collected to address RQ2 targeted the Reddit forum r/13ReasonsWhy created on October 30th, 2015. Data collection from this forum was conducted on January 6th, 2020. This specific forum was selected due to containing distinct threads for an episode discussion for each episode within the series. These episode discussions are moderated by a set group of administrators to monitor and remove any spoilers, rude and abusive language, and otherwise inappropriate comments added to the thread. The manual extraction consisted of expanding all sub-threads within the episode discussion forum and exporting the entirety of the discussion into a PDF document. In ensuring the anonymity of commenters, all direct quotes from the forum will be referenced as “User A, User B, etc.”. I conducted an emergent thematic analysis of the episode discussion threads for the first and last episode in the first season of *Thirteen Reasons Why*.

### **Content Analysis**

*Thirteen Reasons Why* was adapted to the screen from Jay Asher’s bestselling novel (2007) by creator and producer, Brian Yorkey, in March 2017 on the streaming platform Netflix. Set in an American high school, the series follows the lives of Clay Jensen and Hannah Baker. Clay’s focus, as portrayed in the show, is uncovering the story left behind

by Hannah as she depicted it through the recording and delivering of cassette tapes. Two months after the show aired, *The New York Times* reported that superintendents and school counselors across the country were notifying parents of concerns with the show potentially glorifying suicide (Louis, 2017). Reports continued of mental health experts raising the concern that the show distributed too many inaccurate and potentially dangerous representations of suicidality (Louis, 2017). This began to draw attention on how representations of suicidality are received by viewers and the potential risks involved.

Through my analysis I focused on the first and final episode of season one in *Thirteen Reasons Why* to gather instances of suicidality from the beginning and end of the first season. The first episode in the first season of *Thirteen Reasons Why* opens on the school mourning the death of Hannah Baker, a student, who viewers learn quickly dies by suicide within the show. Cassette tapes enter the show early to depict the thirteen reasons why Hannah died by suicide. Clay Jensen, the main character within the series, finds the box of seven cassette tapes on his doorstep and begins to listen to Hannah's recordings. This episode is positioned in present-tense as any reference made to Hannah is that she is already deceased and not currently attending the high school. Within the episode there are flashbacks to when Hannah is portrayed as living, however depictions of Hannah living are often intertwined with representations of suicidality and Hannah expressing her reasons for dying by suicide. The episode closes on Hannah speaking cryptically, "Most of you probably had no idea what you were doing, but you will soon find out."

The final episode in the first season of *Thirteen Reasons Why* opens on a black screen with text stating, “The following episode contains scenes that some viewers may find disturbing and/or may not be suitable for younger audiences, including graphic depictions of violence and suicide. Viewer discretion is advised.”. Opening on Hannah in her bedroom, viewers see Hannah in clear distress as she struggles to record and complete packaging up the tapes. This episode included the use of overlapping dialogue and scenes within Mr. Porter’s office, the high school counselor. With representations of Hannah being past-tense in the show’s context, the scene goes from past to present-tense several times throughout the episode. Additionally, this episode shows Hannah delivering the box of cassette tapes to the post office then proceed to her parent’s pharmacy where she is shown stealing a pack of razor blades. Within Mr. Porter’s office, Hannah discloses her sexual assault and rape from another student at school and states she wants her life to stop. Hannah is met with victim-blaming language from Mr. Porter, stating that if she does not press charges or disclose the boy’s name, she has one option, to move on. Hannah expresses her concern of if she chose to disclose the name it will lead to further unwanted attention and the fear that they assailant may not be reprimanded. Without disclosing the boy’s name, Hannah leads on that it was a senior at their school and she wants to never see him again Mr. Porter follows up with stating the boy is a senior and that he will be gone in a few months, and if Hannah chooses to not confront him she is left to live with it and move in. This conversation leads to Hannah leaving the counselor’s office in tears, without resolution or understanding of the trauma incurred. Mr. Porter choses to stay and answer the ringing phone that he continuously ignored in their meeting

and does not go after Hannah, or alert anyone to her concerning behavior or accusations. While Hannah is leaving the school and what viewers learn as her final words on the tape, she states, “I think I have made myself very clear, that no one is coming forward to stop me. Some of you cared, none of you cared enough. And neither did I. And I’m sorry. So, this is the end of tape thirteen. There’s nothing more to say.”. The episode reaches a climax as Hannah is portrayed in her bathroom, dying by suicide. The episode closes on Clay Jensen driving off with mutual friends of Hannah, friend’s that were also on the thirteen recordings left by Hannah, questioning what to do from here.

In addition to the representations of suicidality portrayed in the first and final episode of season one of *Thirteen Reasons Why*, it is vital to understand the intention behind the show’s creation. Brian Yorkey, Producer and Creator of *Thirteen Reasons Why*, addressed his intention and hopes for the show, providing a background to his decision and goals in portraying the book onscreen. Recognizing that suicidality is a strong reality for many young people, Yorkey expressed his desire to be truthful in his storytelling:

The result isn't always easy to watch, but we hope and believe honors the experience of the many, many young people (and their parents) who face these issues. It was important for us not to look away from the most difficult moments, not to artfully elide our storytelling to suggest what had happened without having to look it in the eye. We wanted to be clear-eyed and honest. To do otherwise — to look away before it got hard to watch, to imply or aestheticize crucial events, to make it easy and safe for the viewer, would be to do a grave disservice to a story that is neither easy nor safe.

Yorkey acknowledges his choice to utilize highly-visual media to depict accurate representations of suicidality rather than allow the visual act of storytelling guide viewers to the ending (Rota, 2017).

The show's entirety is based around the concept of Hannah planning and creating thirteen reasons why she dies by suicide on cassette tapes, explaining to her classmates how they were involved in her death. This indicates her death by suicide was planned and considered prior to the event taking place. While suicidality can occur from traumatic events, such as the traumatic sexual assault Hannah experiences, it is defined by NIMH (2019) as thinking about, considering, or planning suicide. Through omission of underlying mental illnesses or additional factors in the show, it inaccurately portrays suicidality, glorifying the process involved in her death without highlighting the cause of such process.

### **RQ1**

*Thirteen Reasons Why* was aired March 31st, 2017, quickly gaining attention as many viewers had been exposed to the work from the original novel by Jay Asher (2007). I watched the first and last episodes from season one and coded any key episodic moments and representations of suicidality portrayed throughout the episodes. For purposes of this study, any utterance of suicide, suicidal ideation, reference to self-harm or dangerous behavior, and mention of those who have died by suicide were coded as representations of suicidality. These moments were coded with what was happening on-screen and tied to the time stamp within the episode that the representation happened.

Throughout the media content analysis conducted on the first and last episode of season one, several common themes were found in the representations of suicidality.

### **Episode One**

Within the first episode, Tape 1 Side A, I coded 16 different key episodic moments within the episode that represented suicidality or reference to portrayals of suicidality in the show. The first episode contains several themes that I have observed through my analysis. The first theme concerns the setting and lighting of the scenes in a series of tableaux in which there was a direct representation of suicidality. The second theme is the use of narrative style shots depicted through the use of cassette tapes. The final theme throughout the first episode was the use of foreshadowing of Hannah's death without directly stating she died by suicide.

Throughout this first episode, it was apparent that the series transitions back and forth from before Hannah dies by suicide, and after she has passed away. Stylistic choices such as changes in lighting not only help differentiate in the period of the scene but on the mood of the event. This theme was depicted in several key episodic moments within the first season. In the opening scene, the camera pans to what the viewer learns is Hannah's locker and see it decorated with photos, candles, flowers, and "we miss you" notes. The scene opens with students taking photos and crying in front of a memorial made at Hannah's locker. The floor is strewn with candles, stuffed animals, and flowers, commemorating the loss of a fellow student. This additionally highlights the display of remembrance for Hannah, posing suicidality as glorified or desirable. Throughout this scene the lighting is cool-toned and colors appear muted, the characters in the scene are



talking about Hannah's death in the past tense and are currently attending school after she had died by suicide. This specific lighting choice added a more somber tone to the scene, intensifying any representations of suicidality. After the opening scene, the lighting becomes warm-toned, bright, almost as if there is a soft blur to the scenery. Characters are placed in the past and Hannah is depicted as still living and interacting with the other characters during these brighter scenes. While this choice may seem insignificant, it adds depth to each scene by guiding the overall emotion and tone of each scene in addition to the representations of suicidality.

In addition to the use of lighting and colors, the second theme throughout the first episode was the use of narrative in the scenes where cassette tapes are being recorded or being listened to. Asher (2007) and the show producers utilized the use of cassette tapes for Hannah to explain her thirteen reasons why she died by suicide. Throughout the first episode, we begin to see Hannah record the tapes to be sent around the affected individuals however each scene is narrated by Hannah herself rather than dialogue between her and another character. When the tapes are being listened to by other characters in the show, Hannah is narrating the scene and what they are seeing or doing is influenced by what she is explaining. In one scene while Clay is riding his bike and listening to a cassette Hannah references that she referred to herself in the present tense and that she can no longer do that since she is passed. Soon after her narration Clay crashes his bike into a car and cuts his forehead. The narration continues to the final cut scene of the episode where Hannah leaves on an eerie statement:

*“Most of you probably had no idea what you were doing, but you will soon find out.”*

The final theme that was found in the first episode was the indirect speech surrounding Hannah's death. While we can infer from foreshadowing and learned from the trailer of the series, we know that Hannah dies by suicide. When the episode begins, they show Hannah's parents being shown around the school and ending at her locker. Her locker has been decorated to serve as a school memorial in the time following her death. Two scenes within the first episode show both Clay and Tony talking to adult family members and how they ask about an email that was sent out by the school. No adults or students develop the details within the email, rather they are met with Tony's dad brushing it aside and stating never to do something like that to them- his father and mother. Whereas Clay's mother dives deeper and attempts to get Clay to talk about Hannah's death and asks if he needs someone to talk to. Clay dismisses his mother by stating he is fine and that everyone is just acting weird. The entire first episode is portrayed in the few days after Hannah's death and there is a somber tone throughout each scene. Without even mentioning suicide or details of Hannah's death, the season is set up for Hannah's tapes to be heard, and her story to be further developed.

### **Episode Thirteen**

Within the last episode, Tape 7 Side A, I coded 35 different key episodic moments within the episode that represented suicidality or referenced to portrayals of suicidality in the show. The final episode of the season brought forward several themes through my analysis of the representations of suicidality. The first theme found in the last episode is the role of cassette tapes as a vehicle for narration and direction of the scenes. A second theme found was the use of overlapping scenes to further dramatize the events

taking place. The final theme I found through my analysis was the use of intense imagery in scenes where representations of suicidality were most prevalent.

In the final episode, the use of cassette tapes that has been prevalent through the entirety of the series is exacerbated when Hannah is shown actually recording what viewers learn to be the final tape. Through the final episode, the cassette tapes are placed as a focal point of every scene. From being the spark of a partnership between Clay and Tony to being addressed during the depositions, the cassettes carried the narration throughout the episode. As seen within the first episode, in the final episode the cassettes were utilized to act as the narrator for unveiling what was discussed on the tapes. The opening scene of the episode begins with Hannah speaking via cassette tape, “I’m giving it one more last try”. Hannah is shown creating a number list then labeling the corresponding tapes, marking them with blue nail polish.

*“And for a minute, just a minute, I felt like maybe I could beat this. I decided to give life one more chance, but this time I was asking for help. Because I know I can’t do it alone”.*

The second theme is concerning the use of overlapping present and past tense scenes to increase dramatization of the events. In one of the closing scenes in the final episode, Clay’s and Hannah’s counselor appointments with Mr. Porter were shown simultaneously to further dramatize the intensity of Hannah’s final tape recording and of Clay providing Mr. Porter with the completed tapes. Similar stylistic touches such as the use of warm and cool-toned lighting were present when switching from past-tense with Hannah in warm-toned lighting and back to Clay in present-tense with cool-toned lighting. The choice to overlap both conversations with the school counselor was

significant to portray the energy leading up to Hannah's death and to also portray the intensity prior to Clay giving the final hand-off of the tapes to Mr. Porter. This scene also utilized past and present tense shots to cut together Clay and Hannah finishing each other sentences as well as Clay providing narration to Hannah's actions being portrayed on the screen. While Clay mentions to Mr. Porter that he let her walk away, that they all let her walk away, in present-tense we see Hannah in past-tense walking out of school, returning her work uniform, and dropping off the box of tapes before heading home. The imagery in the scenes not only amplify the messages being spoken, but also the depiction of Hannah dying by suicide.

The final theme addresses the use of intense imagery and composition in scenes where representations of suicidality were prevalent. Within this episode, viewers are subjected to watching Hannah steal a pack of razor blades from her parent's pharmacy and later use those razors to die by suicide in her home in the bathtub. The show utilized Hannah being filmed from the perspective of her looking at herself in the mirror and tears slowly falling down her face. Moving from the mirror, we see Hannah lower herself into the filled tub, fully clothed, with the water still running and razor blade in hand. The choice to leave Hannah fully clothed in this scene can be seen as an intense form of suicidality, as she had planned for someone to come upon her after she dies. The camera locks eyes with Hannah as they depict her cutting her left wrist. After audible crying and pain is shown, they depict her cutting her right wrist, with the camera panning to her wrists with each movement. We then are shown Hannah beginning to hyperventilate and leaning her head back to lower herself further into the tub. They finally show Hannah's

breathing slow as she loses consciousness and the bath water tinted with blood begins to flow out of the tub. Panning the camera back to Clay with the counselor, he states that she died alone. The scene further intensifies when Hannah's mother notices the water running out of the closed bathroom door and hears the water still running. Calling for Hannah and asking why the water was left running, she enters to find Hannah unconscious, bleeding, and slipping lower into the bathtub. The creators chose to show both of the reactions of Hannah's parents finding her to not only signify the realization of Hannah's passing but also the shock that is felt and shown.

Hannah's mother enters the bathroom and lets out a small "oh" when her eyes are met with the bathtub scene. In shock, her mother begins to lift Hannah out of the tub from under arms and speaks reassuringly to Hannah that it will be okay, that it's okay, she'll be okay. While we can infer that Hannah's mother is aware of the severity of the situation, the choice to represent her as taken over by shock further intensifies the emotions in the scene. Her mother acts calmly and carefully as she assesses the situation and reassures Hannah, staying level-headed and collected while still trying to get help as fast as possible. While trying to lift Hannah out of the tub, her mother calls for Hannah's dad. When her father enters the bathroom, Hannah's situation grows even more emotional as her father breaks into tears. While also met with the shock of what took place in the bathroom, her father responds in sheer panic and despair rather than the collectedness of her mother. He begins to visibly sob and cry out in pain at the image he is faced with. Hannah's mother urges her husband to call 911 and tell them to hurry as she continues to hold Hannah's body, her father coming to assist in carrying her out of

the tub. The scene closes with both of Hannah's parents holding her body half out of the tub.

Both the first and last episodes within the first season of *Thirteen Reasons Why* depicted many representations of suicidality and are outlined in the appendix of this research. Ranging from stylistic approaches and choices made during production to emphasize past or present-tense, to the blatant portrayal of Hannah dying by suicide in the tub, *Thirteen Reasons Why* encapsulated suicidality and mental illness throughout the season. The choice to utilize visual depiction of Hannah dying by suicide was bold and provided the beginning of discourse surrounding whether or not viewers found this to be appropriate to show or too traumatizing and triggering to keep in. With a total of 51 separate representations of suicidality in these two episodes alone, it provided plenty of content to be further discussed.

## **RQ2**

From the Reddit forum “r/13ReasonsWhy” created on March 31st, 2017, I conducted an emergent thematic analysis on the episode discussions for Season one episodes; Tape 1, Side A, and Tape 7, Side A - the first and last episodes of season one. *Thirteen Reasons Why* aired March 31st, 2017 on Netflix. The full season was accessible for viewing for all North American Netflix users. The forum chosen for analysis is currently a closed thread, this means that no one, apart from site administrators, may edit, add, or delete from the thread. Selecting the first episode discussion allowed me to gather a baseline understanding of the reason why viewers chose to watch the show and their initial thoughts. For the data collected I conducted three levels of data analysis, beginning

with an emergent thematic analysis. I then conducted several passes through the data to code the comments, the first pass of data was to code in terms of negative and positive reactions and feelings regarding the show. I then did a pass through the comments for mention of personal connection. When coding for mention of personal connection, I observed any comments that explicitly stated that the commentator had a personal struggle with suicidality or had witnessed suicidality from by a friend or loved one. Following the pass for personal connection, I coded the comments for any commenters mentioning being older than school age. The final pass of coding that I completed was to identify the number of users that mentioned feeling “triggered” or at-risk due to watching the show, or experienced those feelings whilst watching the show. For this study, any comment that directly stated the user felt triggered or at-risk, or used verbiage stating there had been a negative shift in the mental state was recorded. In this discussion, less than one percent of users reported such instances or feelings.

These passes through the data allowed me to further analyze why viewers were watching the show and identify any relationships to the show mentioned by the commenters. In the process of my emergent content analysis, I also notated all comments relevant to the episode discussion, as often times sub-threads would go off on unrelated tangents. Reddit moderators for these discussions often would mark comments for deletion that included mention of spoilers in the season or overtly vulgar and inappropriate language. In line with Buzzanell’s theory of resilience, the themes that emerged from this analysis support her communicative processes to enhancing and sustaining resiliency.

## Episode One

Beginning with my emergent content analysis, I recorded that of the 285 comments in the episode discussion, only 47 percent of comments were relevant to discussing suicidality throughout the show. To identify comments as relevant or irrelevant, I looked for any mention of suicidality or thoughts on how the show was presented. The irrelevant comments consisted of deleted comments by forum administrators as well as non-show related tangents that transpired throughout the forum. Through my first pass of coding, I established that 19 percent of the relevant comments were recorded as positive about the show. The commenters engaging in discourse throughout this episode discussion, who of which were in favor of the show, delivered praise for it bringing light to the topic of suicidality and mental illness as a whole. One commenter stated, “Teens. Parents of teens. Educators. People who have teens in their family, schools, community, town... this is a show for anyone who interacts with teens on a daily basis, not just teens themselves. “.

In the same pass of coding, I established that in this discussion forum 18 percent of the relevant comments were recorded as being negative about the show. Many users that expressed negativity about the show brought up concerns of the show potentially influencing or harming teens that view the show. As one commenter stated:

My friend's daughter tried to commit suicide with pills after watching this season. I didn't like the first episode but continued to watch anyway just to figure out how it could possibly made her think this is an appropriate solution. She even



asked her dad for a cassette recorder. Didn't anyone think of the effect it could have on young minds? Any 16+ rating hints for parental control? FML.

Additional comments that expressed their distaste for the show focused on their distaste for the choice of actors, language used in the show, and how they overall felt that it was either unrealistic or realistic to the point of posing a concern for those who view the show. While the episode discussions are for the Netflix original series, many commenters reference their experience in parallel to having previously read the novel by Jay Asher (2007). Another commenter stated:

From my perspective as a 20yo who read the book when I was like 13-14 years old, it's kind of the most adult take that they could make out of the book they drew the material from...

Edit: Also, don't watch this with your 13-14yo; the gore is terrible and a little scarring.

While Reddit does not provide any user demographic information explicitly, users mention their age, profession, and first-hand experience throughout the discussion.

Through an additional pass of coding, I discovered that 20 percent of commenters mentioned being above school age. For purposes of this study, any mention of past-tense language accompanied by the reference of high school was recorded as above school age along with those explicitly stating their age. Although the novel by Jay Asher and the Netflix series is geared more towards the young adult (YA) demographic, 20 percent of commenters stated they are older than school age and many had children of their own.

This discussion indicated a large number of parents were viewing this show and partaking in the forum.

Throughout the process of coding comments from the episode discussion, I was able to observe the overall emotional reactions of those commenting and how their emotions drove their comments and user interactions along with any common themes throughout the discussion. After my final passes of coding, I identified three distinct themes throughout the episode discussion. Theme one is the role of parental involvement in children's viewing the show as expressed across comments in the forum, theme two is the display of community building and shared resilience through engagement in the episode discussions, and theme three is the expressed distaste from commenters with a negative reaction of the show.

The first theme throughout the forums is the role of parent involvement, or lack thereof, in children viewing the show as expressed across comments in the forum. For example, a commenter expressed their encouragement for YA watching the show, but stressing the importance of ensuring the YA that may watch the show, watching it with their parents or after their parents view the show:

Our local school district is encouraging families not to watch (they didn't explicitly say "don't watch," but the tone was very much there), but the teen charity I work with is very much telling people "your teens are talking about this at school, the school even admits that... do you want them watching it alone, or do you want to watch it, too, so you can see what they're consuming and how they may be feeling?" The series has too many important topics to just brush

away-- it's definitely a useful teaching moment, and I wish more adults were receptive to the story it's telling.

This stresses the idea of monitoring what media children are allowed to watch.

Throughout this first episode discussion, many commenters engaged in back and forth conversations with one another. This indicates that these discussions are being built and expanded and users are engaging with each other rather than just stating their feelings and moving on. Through the use of engaging via direct replying publicly to each other throughout the thread, users not only were expanding on the discourse being created but forming a community and shared resilience. Buzzanell (2010) identifies this communicative process as maintaining and using communication networks. These conversations, while related to the show, go into more subtle detail on how the show represents suicidality and how the users perceive and communicate their thoughts on the representations of suicidality in the show. A common form of engagement found throughout these discussions are those of encouragement. While these profiles contain no identifying information and the majority of users are commenting under a pseudonym, the users on this particular discussion engaged in compassion towards one another. Many users add to the discussion by relating the show to their personal connection to the show and suicidality, whether this is a known struggle of a loved one or a personal struggle.

Commenters stated:

User A: My friend's daughter tried to commit suicide with pills after watching this season. I didn't like the first episode but continued to watch anyway just to figure out how it could possibly made her think this is an appropriate solution. She even

asked her dad for a cassette recorder. Didn't anyone think of the effect it could have on young minds? Any 16+ rating hints for parental control? FML.

User B: It's rated 17+ on Netflix, Im sorry that happened. Just as it was with Hannah, there are many teenagers who do not know how to deal with traumatic experiences.

User A: Thanks for the response. Can't sleep and just read this post.

The sub-thread above indicates one instance within the forums of reframing the adversity discussed through downplaying the negative feelings and providing light to the situation. This is seen as contributing to resilience-enhancing discourse, as discussed by Buzzanell in the form downplaying negative feelings while foregrounding positive emotions.

With community building and resilience-enhancing being a common theme throughout the discussion many users acknowledged each other's struggles and mentioned being proud and grateful that the users are still here with us, rather than having died by suicide as portrayed in the show. Regardless of the user's initial view of the show, whenever a mention of a personal struggle is communicated, the comments are overwhelmingly encouraging and positive. Throughout the displays of compassion, one user, in addition to sending condolences to another commenter due to their personal loss from suicide, explains several different perspectives to consider regarding suicide. The user mentions how the show can have both a positive and negative impact on one's interpretation of suicide, depending on their current views. With the stigmatization of suicidality, the show runs the risk of further stigmatizing and criminalizing suicide through its representation. However, this user also mentions, depending on the viewer's

personal interpretation, that it may bring light to an otherwise, closeted, and stigmatized topic and force viewers to further educate themselves on suicide. This shows the importance of organic conversations regarding suicidality, these forums are voluntary and the users posting are choosing to engage in discourse on suicidality and the show as a whole. Whereas this topic is often not surfaced in general media, apart from reporting's of those who die by suicide, this forum allows users to interact and form relationships while discussing an often-taboo topic:

I'm truly sorry that you lost your brother to suicide. You're probably tired of hearing that and it probably doesn't mean much coming from an anonymous Redditor, but given the other comments you're seeing here, I want to let you know that you're not entirely alone in your grief. I've... also written a bunch of words below this trying to explain some other perspectives on suicide. Feel free to stop reading here if you're not in the mood for that. I believe a lot of the animosity towards people who have committed suicide comes from a fear that suicidal thoughts can become too relatable. Many depressed and suicidal people see suicide as morally repugnant and latching on to the self-hatred associated with desiring death can be a (inadvisable) coping mechanism. I don't have statistics or research to point to on the subject, but it's a pattern that can be seen in r/suicidewatch posts and in my own experience. From another angle, the impact that suicide has on those still alive can be devastating. I don't know your situation, but in some cases those closest to the deceased are also emotionally vulnerable at the time of death and suicide can have a profoundly negative effect on them. It's

natural for these people to be angry at the person who put them in that position, but anger at someone who died by suicide is complicated by shame and guilt. Whether or not this guilt inducing is an intended effect of suicide (I believe it almost never is, though I find it plausible that it could be in bullying cases) it's rightfully seen as a terrible thing to do to someone. People sometimes try and abstract away the reality of suicide by viewing it as a philosophical struggle. Is it ethical to kill yourself if you're in enough pain despite the pain this would cause others? The problem with this framing is that it requires a level of detachment that is not possible when your own life and assumes a level of rationality that you won't have if you're in a position where the answer will matter to you. That's why believing that suicide is evil sometimes doesn't ultimately stop people from attempting it. When stressors overwhelm coping mechanisms, something must give. Finally, many people are willing to demonize the deceased if it helps the living cope. If assigning blame to the dead prevents their living family and friends from taking on that burden, it's understandable that some would choose to do that. Blame is infinitely divisible and no quantity of it can bring back what's lost. However, I think you're obviously right in saying that this tactic feeds the stigma of suicide. I strongly believe that sometimes the best thing you can do for everyone else is to selfishly tend to your own emotional needs, whatever they may be.

While these episode discussions are anonymous, this further shows the relationships formed throughout the forum as well as the enhancing of resilience through an online community in addition to the communicative processes discussed by Buzzanell (2010).

Those who stress their distaste for the show often provide much more detail as to why they are against the show altogether or specific themes and events within the show. One commenter described the show as portraying survivor's guilt more so than portraying the struggle of suicidality:

I don't think we're really supposed to empathize with Hannah in the first episode. We know next to nothing about Hannah initially and our point of view is anchored firmly on her classmate as he deals with the aftermath of her death. There's no way that choice of perspective is intended to make Hannah a sympathetic figure; it's practically a horror film plot with her as the antagonist. My feeling after the first episode was that the show's more about the experience of struggling with survivor's guilt than it is about the experience of someone struggling with suicidal ideation. It's jarring if you expect to be able to empathize with Hannah, because her actions are literally inexplicable from what little we know and also tinged with a vindictiveness that makes it difficult to even want to understand her. However, people who know someone who died by suicide don't have the luxury of that emotional distance and are compelled to search for understanding even if that understanding is hurtful and even if they deeply resent the suicide victim for what they've done. Should Hannah have made the tapes and killed herself? No. But she did and that's where we start. ...I will, however, admit

that I did get annoyed at some of the kids' behaviour and almost nothing about this show is representative of my high school experience. Anyway, I'm only a few episodes in, and I still have very mixed feelings about a lot of things (and I also wished they'd just get the hell on with it instead of dragging it out into a full Netflix season, I mean seriously just listen to the tapes, goddamn), but I think it's a lot more palatable if you don't see Hannah as the protagonist.

This thread goes into further detail on debating whether the intended purpose of the show is to empathize with Hannah, who dies by suicide or empathize more with those impacted by her passing. This brings forward a concerning theme of users regarding suicide as an act of selfishness, rather than death by mental illness. Many of these users also add to the discussion by mentioning they had endured similar experiences as Hannah and turned out fine or never experienced suicidality. This begs the question of if today's school-age youth accepting their trauma due to societal pressure to not display suicidality?

Commenters mention the importance of watching the show, but from a perspective of not being in favor of the show as a whole. They mention taking from the show, the importance of being aware of the “ripple effect” that happens within a school when a student dies by suicide. This commenter mentioned the show utilizing suicide as a vehicle to understanding her death rather than utilizing the impact of suicide as a vehicle:

Yes, but a big part of why it's so important that you watch this as a young adult and not a teen is so that you have the life experience and perspective to see that she is irrational. That she's a bit of a bitch, that she is kind of entitled, that she ultimately made the decision to kill herself and she made another fucked up



decision to guilt trip everybody else with a collection of tapes. Instead of watching the series as you should be understanding of Hannah, watch it as an observer of what happens when a girl commits suicide because of shitty things occurring, a need for attention and a massive guilt trip of everyone involved. The total fucking devastation it causes to the school community and how it ripples outward. Don't watch it to sympathize with Hannah, that's just a vehicle.

While this show was set in the United States and originally aired for North America, the show later became streamed globally. Users commented on how the show either mirrored their high school experience, or how it was vastly different and unrelatable. Some users even posed the idea that this show, being portrayed in an American school system, may have a different reaction and interpretation for those who are viewing the series from outside of North America:

User C: Funny thing that for people that aren't from the US, that's the impression we have of you, on how you behave at highschool and college.

User D: how is the experience portrayed differently abroad? (2017)

One's high school experience is greatly influenced by economic and cultural influences. In many countries, the term "high school" is not used or is represented differently than in the United States. This creative choice, while inherently subtle, may transcribe into influencing one's interpretation of the United States education system, regarding high school.

### **Episode Thirteen**

For the final episode discussion, I first began with my emergent analysis of the discussion and found that of the 1,271 comments on the forum, only 39 percent were coded as relevant to discussing representations of suicidality. I identified comments as relevant or irrelevant by first looking for mention of the show, how they thought the show was presented, and looking for further mentioning of the representations of suicidality within the show. The irrelevant comments mainly consisted of deleted comments by moderators or forum administrators as well as unrelated comments not pertaining to the show. In addition to identifying relevant comments throughout the episode discussion, I established that of relevant comments, unlike the first episode discussion, not many commenters made reference to their thoughts on the show as a positive or negative experience. Less than 1 percent of relevant comments were coded as positive and negative, making it difficult to establish a clear standpoint on how commenters viewed the representations within the show. While there was a minute amount of data surrounding negative or positive emotions discussed the show, one commenter did express their thoughts on how it was represented:

I think this show has an important message to share. I think they made a mistake showing the suicide itself though. Shame on you Netflix, there is a line on what you can and should show and it was crossed here.

As the commenter above expressed, Netflix's choice to show the act of Hannah dying by suicide struck a chord with many of the commenters. Another comment directed at

Netflix itself questions the intent behind depicting representations of suicidality in the show:

Maybe, but the author really is and was just trying to spread the message of suicide awareness. It's a huge leading cause of death in many age groups, not just teens. And moving away from the actual 13 reasons why may undermine the message, centering toward entertainment only instead of educational also. But I would like to see more, the characters are just too deep for me not to.

Throughout the discussion, commenters refer back to the original novel by Jay Asher (2007) and comparatively look at how the show added in additional representations of suicidality that were not present in the book. This emerged through my initial analysis and is present in the common themes found throughout the episode discussion.

A theme that was produced from my emergent analysis was the overwhelming dislike for the actions done by the school counselor in the show, Mr. Porter. Of comments that were related directly to Mr. Porter, 25 percent were in favor of his actions and how he reacted to Hannah, while 75 percent were against and spoke negatively about his actions and inactions with Hannah. I then conducted several passes of analysis to code the data. From this, I established that 11 percent of commenters made mention of a personal connection to suicidality and 21 percent made mention of feeling triggered or at-risk from the show. After my emergent analysis and coding, I established three common themes throughout the final episode discussion. The first theme is that commenters felt triggered or at-risk due to watching the show, the second theme addresses the discourse on a personal connection, community building, and resilience-enhancing, and the third

and final theme being the discourse surrounding the school counselor Mr. Porter and his role as a mandatory reporter.

The final episode discussion for season one of *Thirteen Reasons Why* was the most engaged in forum for the season with over 1000 comments added during the span of the forum being open. The first theme that emerged through the final discussion after my analysis was the mention of being triggered or at-risk due to watching the show. Many users mention how the graphic scene shown that depicts suicide made them have thoughts back to their personal struggle or became triggered due to the explicit scenes. One of the most discussed scenes was the scene where Hannah is shown dying by suicide in her bathroom after cutting her wrists. The show depicts the act of Hannah obtaining the razors she uses from her parent's pharmacy to the scene in the bathroom that shook viewers to the core. One commenter stated:

Never has a series impacted me so deeply. Hannah's suicide scene was something I never thought I'd see on a show, and certainly not something I expected them to show. Then to show her parents finding her...I don't think there's a word for exactly how I felt. This show devastated me. I was completely broken apart by the finale. Roughly a year ago, I very nearly killed myself. I had it all planned out, disgustingly similar to Hannah. I wrote different notes for different people, made the plan to buy a gun, pick a spot in the country, tape a map of where I would be on my bedroom door, drive out there and shoot myself. I came so close I went looking around at gun stores, thinking which one I could afford that would do the job. I saw a lot of myself in Hannah, and even more terrifying, a eerily similar

depiction of what I almost did. Watching her fill the tub, get in and...watching that paralyzed me. I just couldn't move. Watching her gasp for air as the blood drained from her arms completely destroyed me. It was almost like I was watching myself. This show was good, very good, but I'll never watch it again.

Through the sharing of personal connection to the representations of suicidality within the show, it allowed commenters to engage with one another and share and enhance resilience. As the commenter above mentioned, they had an emotional as well as a physical response to the scenes depicted in this episode. Many commenters shared similar experiences where they made mention of having an additional physical reaction to what they were watching along with the emotional reaction. One commenter says, "The warning did say it would show suicide but wow when I actually saw it I could barely watch. I actually had to close my eyes or look away." While another refers to the stronger feelings the scene caused, "I almost threw up while I was watching it it was so graphic." These commenters not only tied in their personal connections through their own struggles of suicidality but also depict how the display of someone actively dying by suicide caused a physical reaction from the overwhelming emotional reaction they experienced. With almost a quarter of commenters within the episode discussion stating that they felt that they had been triggered or became at risk because of this show, it brings to light an alarming number of viewers that were negatively impacted by the show and needs to be further explored.

Within the theme of feeling at-risk or triggered from the show, commenters continued to go into detail on how the show impacted them from such a short but

traumatizing scene but also brought forward the idea of how the scene was beneficial to them in some way. A commenter stated:

In all honesty, I am scared of blood, so the scene where Hannah commits suicide I had to look away. Even though I was looking away, I still heard Hannah in so much pain. This prompted me to never EVER commit suicide, even if life seemed to not be on my side.

While this commenter's message can be viewed as positive and opening one's eyes to the reality and pain of suicide, we are still able to observe the immense impact that the depiction of suicide has on its viewers. Viewers made mention of feeling frozen, nauseous, and unable to continue watching the scene. Through the sharing of one's feelings and triggers throughout the episode discussions, a second theme emerged through my analysis. The second theme found throughout these episode discussions was the community and resilience-enhancing that took place within the discourse around the show. Commenters not only began to share how the key events in the show affected them but also related and shared personal connections to suicidality.

In the final episode discussion, 11 percent of commenters made mention of having a personal connection to suicidality, either through their personal struggle or the struggle of a loved one. Many users shared their personal stories, experiences, and struggles with suicidality. An emergent theme that was found alongside those sharing their stories was how these comments were met with compassion and relief that they were still here and did not die by suicide. One commenter provided insight into how the show related to personal experiences:

Commenter E: When Hanna's suicide scene was shown, I felt like I could physically feel it.. 4 years ago now I was planning on leaving, and the night I broke down and reached out to a friend who took me to the hospital the next day..where I checked myself in and had to make a tough call to my mom, explaining my situation. Watching the scene of the reaction of Hannah's parents made me so fucking humble I'm still here.

Commenter F: I'm so glad you didn't.

This thread emphasizes the community within the forum and how they only contributed to community-building discourse but also sharing and enhancing resilience. As discussed in Buzzanell's communicative processes, commenters engaged in maintaining and utilizing communication networks to enhance their resiliency Another example of this is shown when a commenter placed themselves in Hannah's shoes:

Commenter G: I think this show hits home for a lot of people and that only makes the suicide scene that much more powerful. It hit home for me because that could just as easily been me. I was bullied relentlessly in grade school. I felt like giving up plenty of times and have been hospitalized for depression. (I'm doing a lot better these days.) But that's also the point of the show, I think: Hannah Baker could have been anyone... and that's why we need to, as Clay so wisely says at the end, "be better with each other".

Commenter H: I totally agree with you. And it's good to hear you're doing better now.

While commenters continuously engaged in creating threads throughout each discussion, there was a unique and large number of commenters specifically engaging in caring for others as a community throughout this episode discussion.

Continuing with the theme of commenters sharing their connection to the representations of suicidality throughout the show, commenters began to expand further on community-building discourse as the discussion grew. These commenters engaged in back and forth discourse through the use of creating a thread within the episode discussion:

Commenter I: It is so important to heed the trigger warnings on the last episode. I wish I had of. I have crawled out of self harm but the suicide scene has sent me spiraling backwards and I'm only just hanging on to the good work I have done of stopping.

Commenter J: I know this is a month old now, but I hope you are doing okay, and the backwards spiral as stopped. Talk to someone if you need help, feel free to send me a message if you want.

Commenter I: Thankyou so much <3

Commenter K: Hey, another late watcher here, I hope you are doing okay let me know if you ever need to speak to someone

Commenter I: Thankyou so much. It means the world <3

Not only did users share their words of encouragement to the original commenter, but further engaged in outreach, inviting the commenter to reach out to them directly if they needed someone to talk to. Organic threads of compassion, community building, and



resilience-enhancing happen throughout the episode discussion, specifically becoming prevalent when users begin sharing their personal connections to the representations of suicidality portrayed throughout the show.

The final theme that was found through analysis was the large amount of discourse surrounding the school counselor in the series, Mr. Porter. As mentioned previously, 75 percent of all comments that referred to Mr. Porter believed he not only acted poorly in providing resources or help to Hannah but that he was also negligent in his role as a mandatory reporter. The Department of Human Services (DHS) defines a mandatory reporter as professionals or professional's delegate identified by law who must make a report, specifically when engaged in fields such as social services, law enforcement, and education (n.d.). As a school counselor, Mr. Porter falls under the jurisdiction of being a mandatory reporter. In the final episode of Season one, Hannah meets with Mr. Porter in her office and signs obvious signs of suicidality. Hannah makes mention of not wanting to be alive, is visibly distant and avoiding eye contact with Mr. Porter. Hannah then begins to disclose the sexual assault that she suffered at a party from one of the seniors at her high school in which Mr. Porter lets Hannah know he will be graduating in a few months and her problem will be gone. This interaction, in particular, did not sit well with commenters, one stated:

I mentioned this in another thread, but what bothered me most was Mr. Porter's reaction. His insistence on having all the details about the rape. If a student even hints about rape, you go to the police immediately and let them sort out the details. School employees, especially counselors are mandated reporters. If they

hear or notice anything remotely suspicious they have to notify the police. Failing to report even the slightest sign can land you in jail with a hefty fine. His responses to Hannah goes 1000% against the mandatory reporter training all school employees receive every year. It just really got to me, even the most incompetent person wouldn't miss a sign that big.

As the commenter above mentioned, Mr. Porter was largely discussed in the context of the lack of care or effort he put in being a school counselor or ensuring Hannah received proper help for the issues she brought to his attention. This theme in particular was largely discussed throughout the entirety of the episode discussion and commenters often created discourse in the form of threads trailing off from original comments. While there were commenters both in favor and against Mr. Porter, the 75 percent of commenters against his actions, or lack thereof, commenters still continued the discourse on representations of suicidality within the show.

While many different commenters engaged in these forums, the themes that came forward throughout both episode discussions were cohesive across the platform. From both my emergent and content analysis, the results show us that the representations of suicidality within the first and last episode of season one of *Thirteen Reasons Why* greatly influenced discourse on Reddit. These forums varied in praise and distaste for the show but had an overwhelming commonality of being emotionally impacted by the representations of suicidality in the show and being able to relate the show to personal connections with suicidality. From this analysis, we can conclude that the choice to include key episodic moments such as depicting Hannah dying by suicide greatly

influenced discourse on Reddit episode discussions as well as emotionally impacting its viewers to the point of physical reactions. We can also see the role of community-building and resilience-enhancing across this platform to engage in compassionate outreach through shared discourse.

## CHAPTER 4

### DISCUSSION

Within this thesis, I have explored literature surrounding suicidality in American culture, medical, and historical representations of suicidality. Additional literature explored consisted of academic and professional researchers' representations of suicidality within *Thirteen Reasons Why* and media. The literature looks at the portrayal of representations of suicidality within media to give further insight on how these portrayals are impacting viewers. Through this discussion, I will review my data analysis, as well themes found from the data analysis, further supporting those themes through related literature. Through returning to the original research questions, this chapter will evaluate the questions in relation to the results of my data analysis and the themes that emerged.

The first research question concerns representations of suicidality as portrayed in *Thirteen Reasons Why*. Within my content analysis of the first and last episodes of the first season several themes emerged. The themes present were the use of stylistic choices of setting and lighting of scenes, specifically in those portraying representations of suicidality. The choice to utilize narration was also prevalent in scenes depicting representations of suicidality, specifically through the use of cassette tapes. An additional theme that was presented was the use of overlapping specific scenes and dialogue to further dramatize the events happening on screen. The increased dramatization amplified the representations of suicidality, leading up to scenes overlapping until viewers are faced with the scene of Hannah dying by suicide in her bathtub.

Within the first and last episode of the first season of *Thirteen Reasons Why*, there were a total of 51 coded episodic moments that represented suicidality or referenced to portrayals of suicidality in the show. These episodic moments ranged from mention of suicidality to the act of Hannah dying by suicide in the final episode. The show demonstrated accurate representations of suicidality through Hannah's behavior throughout the show; however, it missed the mark in ensuring viewers were met with trigger warnings and additional resources after the potentially triggering material was shown. As seen in Barckert and Williams' (2013) Canadian teen show, *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, the producers and writers chose to omit scenes depicting blatant suicidality. Instead, the creators supplied comments from the cast at the end of the potentially triggering scenes offering words of support, advocacy, and resources to get further information or assistance. This method allowed viewers to be given resources if they were feeling or experiencing any suicidality or other negative emotions after viewing the show. Additionally, it held authority as the message was delivered by members of the cast. In contrast, producers and writers of *Thirteen Reasons Why* made the decision to depict suicidality, such as the self-harm scenes in the final episode of season one.

Hawton and Williams (2002) discussed the impact of media representations of suicidality and stressed the concern of depicting the specific method of suicide used, especially when portrayed in great detail as it was in the bathtub scene in *Thirteen Reasons Why*. While there were 51 coded episodic moments of representations of suicidality within the first and last episode of season one, *Thirteen Reasons Why* glossed

over the reality of mental illness being a potential factor in Hannah's suicidality. As Hawton and Williams (2002) concluded, the common factor of mental illness leading to suicide being oversimplified poses a problematic issue of showing volatile material to a vulnerable demographic. In the instance of *Thirteen Reasons Why*, the producers simplified her reasoning for suicidality through omission of developing her issues further and focused on the glorification of the process of suicidality by only portraying representations of suicidality related to traumatic events in the show.

The second research question concerns how commenters in the Reddit forum "r/13ReasonsWhy" represent suicidality through episode discussions portrayed in the first seasons of *Thirteen Reasons Why*. Through my content analysis, several themes emerged through *Thirteen Reasons Why* episode discussions on the social-media platform Reddit on how commenters engaged in discourse on representations of suicidality as portrayed in the show. Prevalent in both episode discussions was the theme of community and resilience-enhancing through discourse on the representations of suicidality. Users utilized the episode discussion space to talk about their personal connection to suicide, any potentially triggering material within the season, and to spread words of encouragement for those who disclosed being triggered or at-risk due to the representations of suicidality.

Utilizing the communicative processes in Buzzanell's theory of resilience, there are several processes that are apparent in the themes that emerged from my analysis. Buzzanell brings forward five communicative processes that can be utilized to enhance resilience: crafting normalcy, affirming identity anchors, maintaining and using

communication networks, putting alternative logics to work, and downplaying negative feelings while foregrounding positive emotions. One process that is shown through the emergent themes in my analysis was the maintaining and using of communication networks. This is seen through user engagement in the Reddit episode discussion forums where additional resilience-enhancing discourse is stimulated. Within the episode discussions, users are seen applying Buzzanell's process of downplaying negative feelings while foregrounding positive emotions. Users engaged with one another through back-and-forth commenting on sub threads, providing understanding and outlook for the future of the user experiencing the shared adversity.

An additional theme that was present throughout both episode discussions was the question of whether this show should be targeted and shown to a younger audience. A study by Rosa et al. (2019) concluded that there is a perceived risk for negative mental health impacts from showing representations of suicidality in media to adolescents. Additionally, their study addressed the added concern of having the ability to binge-watch potentially harmful media. Through my analysis I found that 21 percent of commenters made mention of feeling triggered or at-risk from watching the final episode of *Thirteen Reasons Why*. Many users shared explicit details from their own personal struggles after witnessing the volatile representations of suicidality within *Thirteen Reasons Why*. Baume, Cantor, and Rolfe's (1997) study recognized the role of online interaction in sharing experiences of suicidality as a form of educating others through engaging in online discussions. However, Baume, Cantor, and Rolfe's (1997) address the

larger concern of vulnerable viewers engaging in such discussions and potentially being influenced.

One important question brought up throughout this analysis is the choice made by the creators to portray suicidality in a certain way and how it may be portrayed or responded to differently abroad. As seen in the study conducted by Etzersdorfer and Sonneck (1998), when Austria was met with rising suicide rates after implementation of their new railway system, they immediately jumped into action to see how they could address the growing issue. Through the creation of AASP, Austria began to change media reporting guidelines and provide education and training to those creating potentially influential media. In Canada, we can look at their approach through the show *Degrassi: The Next Generation* and their choice to provide resources at the end of each episode (Barckert and Williams, 2013). Creators of *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, Barckert and Williams, ensured that if any potentially influential material was presented in an episode that a member of the cast would come back at the end to not only speak about what viewers just saw, but additionally following up with national hotlines and online resources. Utilizing the Education Development Center's (2020) established best practices when creating media that depicts portrayals of suicidality, it would be beneficial to urge these best practices to become standard operating procedure within the creation of volatile media. Additionally, providing current and accurate resources after scenes that depict suicidality should be recommended as a best practice. As exhibited in *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, having the cast members of the show come back after potentially



triggering scenes to provide help and resources can be beneficial to ensuring viewer safety.

Within the Reddit episode forums, the theme of overwhelming dislike for Mr. Porter, the high school counselor portrayed in *Thirteen Reasons Why*, emerged in the final discussion. The growing concern from commenters was the lack of support from Mr. Porter, as well as the concern that he was negligent in his role as a mandatory reporter. While 75 percent of commenters were in disagreement of his actions and handling of Hannah's situation, there is the potential for this representation to become a teaching moment. Through reframing the downfalls noted in the episode discussions of Mr. Porter, we can utilize his actions, or lack thereof, to provide a critique to improve the situation. Commenters brought forward suggestions of how his actions could be changed or represented differently in the show that would portray him as less negative and negligent in his role.

In line with Buzzanell's theory, there are additional resilience enhancing processes that should be included in the creation of best practices for depicting media with representations of suicidality. For content creators, it would be beneficial to portray representations of suicidality realistically, in addition to foregrounding optimism and reframing of the adversity. This allows viewers to comprehend and confront their adversities while also ensuring they are optimistic in the outcome of the adversity, supporting Zautra's outlook on optimism and resiliency (2009). Those who engage in online episode discussions where adversities may be shared, such as the r/13ReasonsWhy forum, should work to encourage members to feel comfortable sharing their own

adversities, positively reframing through resiliency processes as addressed by Buzzanell (2010). Using the best practices as outlined by the Education Development Center Inc. (2020) and their partnership with SAMHSA, it would be beneficial to include communicative processes that enhance and encourage resiliency in the creation of media that depicts suicidality.

The emergent themes and findings of my data analysis are largely supported by existing research found in the literature review as well as provides insight for further research to be conducted. The literature also brought forth additional insight and findings on the results that came forward from my analysis, looking closely at the themes that emerged through the analysis of the specific Reddit forum, r/13ReasonsWhy. Lastly, the analysis from the commenters in combination with the existing literature emphasized the importance for monitoring and further guidelines being set in place to ensure safe viewing for viewers and accurate representations of suicidality. Additionally, incorporation of current and new best practices in depicting representations of suicidality on media needs to be an active role in the creation of such media. While my analysis findings and existing literature both support further guidelines and precautions be taken when producing, distributing, and viewing media representations of suicidality, it is established that such media can be beneficial, if done so safely.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

With suicide rates continuing to rise and media representations of suicide becoming more prevalent there is a growing need to understand the causality of media representations of suicidality. This thesis explored academic and media representations of suicide, as well as social media discourse on how viewers of the show communicated their thoughts on the representations of suicidality within *Thirteen Reasons Why*. Additionally, this thesis aimed to bring attention to how media not only represents suicidality but how viewers are impacted by these representations and how they shape discourse on suicidality. A review of the research questions that guided this thesis will be conducted to conclude my research:

**RQ1: How did the first season of *Thirteen Reasons Why* represent suicidality?**

**RQ2: How did fans on Reddit in the “r/13ReasonsWhy” episode discussion forums represent suicidality as portrayed in the first season of *Thirteen Reasons Why*?**

Existing literature and research on suicidality as well as representations of suicidality within media establish the need for further regulation and guidelines when making the choice to include portrayals of media representations of suicidality. Historically, we have seen the criminalization of mental illness and suicide and the continued stigmatization surrounding suicidality. While suicide prevention and mental health resources have become more widely accessible, there are historical influences on stigmatization that

have led to a lack of research on health impacts of showing volatile media, especially potentially harmful material, such as the representations within *Thirteen Reasons Why*.

### **Significant Findings**

Within my analysis of the representations of suicidality within the first season of *Thirteen Reasons Why* I established several themes. For the first episode analysis, these themes entailed the stylistic choices of setting and lighting of scenes where representations of suicidality were present. The themes included the use of narration via cassette tapes and the use of foreshadowing the death by suicide portrayed in the show. These themes allowed me to expand on distinct choices by the producers and writers of the show to outline how they are purposeful stylistic choices made to emphasize the representations of suicidality. Through the use of narration and foreshadowing, the representations of suicidality were not only over-exaggerated to provide foreshadowing, but to also direct attention to the premise of the show with Hannah dying by suicide. In the final episode analysis, the common themes present were further use of cassette tapes as a vehicle to narrate and direct the scenes, the use of overlapping scenes and dialogue to dramatize the onscreen events, and the use of intense imagery in scenes where representations of suicidality were most prevalent. These themes provide additional insight to the construction of imagery and dramatization utilized to represent portrayals of suicidality within the show. From the choice to overlap present and past-tense conversations in the same counselor's office, to the decision to show the act of Hannah dying by suicide in her bathroom, these themes provide vital information in the

understanding of comments on r/13ReasonsWhy Reddit forum regarding the first season of the show.

Additionally, through analysis of comments from the Reddit forum r/13ReasonsWhy, I established several common themes throughout the episode discussions. Within the episode discussion for the first episode of *Thirteen Reasons Why* three themes were present through analysis. Theme one was surrounding the role of parental involvement in children's viewing the show as expressed across comments in the forum, theme two concerns the display of community building and resilience-enhancing through engagement in the episode discussions, and theme three addressed the expressed distaste from commenters with a negative reaction of the show. These themes emerged through several passes of coding and analysis of the episode discussion, demonstrating the discourse representations of suicidality within the first episode of season one of *Thirteen Reasons Why*. Within the final episode discussion several themes emerged that varied from those seen within the first episode discussion. The first theme that emerged through the final discussion after my analysis was the mention of being triggered or at-risk due to watching the show. Many users provided detailed posts and replies about their own personal struggles and the struggles they were forced to address again due to the triggering material present in the final episode. As seen within the first episode discussion, there was a continued theme of community and resilience-enhancing present within the discourse around the show. From sharing personal stories to words of encouragement, the commenters demonstrated the use of community through the Reddit forums. The final and most prevalent theme presented in the final episode discussion was

the overwhelming dislike for the actions of Mr. Porter, the school counselor depicted in the show. Many commenters were met with similar expressions of concern that as a mandatory reporter he not only was seen as failing to adhere to his responsibilities, but also failed Hannah in preventing her death. These themes brought forward heated and passionate comments, many of which were stated to be coming from a place of personal experience and connection.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The aim of my method of data collection and research was to be inclusive and effective however, some limitations have been noted that may impact the research and leave room for further studies to be done. The first limitation noted would be the demographic group being looked at and how there are individuals that are being excluded from it. Netflix is a paid service. This means it is not widely accessible to all and limits those who contribute to the discourse on the show itself. Additionally, not all viewers have access to a computer or platform to engage in discourse and operate the site. Additionally, with the commenters in my data being anonymous I cannot confirm demographics, gender, religious affiliations, or other identifying information that may have influenced my research findings. This also leads to a potential sampling error, potentially effecting the representativeness of key communities in my research.

A further limitation of this study is the overall sample size. The sample size that was chosen only allowed for analysis of discussions for the first and last episode of the first season rather than a comprehensive analysis of the whole first season. Having a smaller, less comprehensive sample size may lead to sampling error or a lack of

representativeness. Future research should look at the season comprehensively and look at similar media, such as shows depicted to vulnerable, younger audiences, on a larger scale. Additional research would also allow the opportunity to look at shows that may be marketed to different target audiences or on different platforms, to explore and better understand any representations of suicidality. In addition, with the growing popularity of streaming services such as Netflix additional research should look in the direction of how these platforms regulate and vet these shows before release. Research should continue to grow in the field of mental health and media to understand how the two intersect and the discourse surrounding it.

*“It has to get better. The way we treat each other and look out for each other. It has to get better somehow.”*

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APPENDIX A

SEASON ONE EPISODE ONE – TAPE 1 SIDE A

:30-1:10 Camera pans on the memorial of Hannah on locker (photos, we miss you notes, etc.).

: 1:35-1:40 two girls take photos in front of the memorial locker

: 2:50- 3:12 teacher speaking to students about warning signs of suicidality, student remarks that they are tired of hearing and being reminded of it

: 4:10- 4:30 counselor shows Hannah's parents her decorated locker and explains that the students did that

: 6:38-7:00 Courtney hugs clay saying she is there for him in a time like this (referencing Hannah's death). "Somethings just don't have simple explanations"- Courtney

: 10:10-11:10 Clay comes home to a package on his doorstep, begins opening the package to find a box of cassette tapes

: 11:30- 12:17 Clay speaks to his father and his father asks how he is doing as Clay is just stating everyone is acting weird.

: 12:38- 13:13 Clay plays the first tape and hears Hannah's voice as she begins to discuss the tapes and states that if you are hearing these tapes that you had a role in her death

: 14:00-14:25 Clay's mother asks if he needs to talk about Hannah's death

: 17:53- 18:15 Tony's dad asks about an email sent out to all parents about Hannah's death, asked if she left a note. Turns to Tony and says if he ever does "something like that" that he will kill him dead.

: 18:44- 20:15 Clay begins listening to the first tape where Hannah explains the instructions of the tapes and how they work. Clay is riding his bike at night while

listening and runs his bike into a parked car trying to avoid getting hit by a car, injures his head but otherwise unharmed.

: 21:03- 21:18 Hannah says “Do what I say, nothing more, nothing less. You’re being watched”

: 23:10- 23:21 Clay begins riding his bike to the destination described by Hannah on the tape

: 38:50- 39:00 Hannah- “Hannah Baker is a slut, oops did you catch that? I just said Hannah Baker *is*. Can't say that anymore.”

: 43:45- 44:25 Bryce takes Justin’s phone and mass sends an image of him and Hannah hooking up to the entire school, students start all receiving the image text during class (image shown is an upskirt photo of Hannah).

: 48:45-49:00 “Most of you probably had no idea what you were doing, but you will soon find out”- Hannah

APPENDIX B

SEASON ONE EPISODE THIRTEEN – TAPE 7 SIDE A

:08-:16 Black screen with text: The following episode contains scenes that some viewers may find disturbing and/or may not be suitable for younger audiences, including graphic depictions of violence and suicide. Viewer discretion is advised.

:40-:45 Hannah is speaking on the tape, saying she is giving it one more last try.

: 3:10-3:15 Hannah has tear stains/mascara on her eyes, is writing down names for the tapes, and has scribbled out on her notebook.

: 4:10- 4:16 Hannah is decorating the tapes and states: And for a minute, just a minute, I felt like maybe I could beat this. I decided to give life one more chance, but this time I was asking for help. Because I know I can't do it alone".

: 4:50-4:54 Hannah is seen taking a package of razor blades from her parent's pharmacy.

: 8:20-8:27 Clay plays Tony the "14th" tape, a recording of Bryce admitting to raping Hannah.

: 14:12- 14:40 Kay states that if she hadn't moved away and not let Hannah date Justin that she would still be alive today.

: 19:35- 22:00 Hannah goes to see the school counselor, tells him she feels lost and empty, that she doesn't feel anything or care anymore. He asks what she doesn't care about, she states anything, school, herself, people, parents. States she isn't who her parents need her to be. States she is a problem. Counselor asks how she is a problem, Hannah states she doesn't know- is interrupted by the counselor's phone ringing. He asks if she cares about her friends. Hannah states, what friends? Counselor insists she has friends, list names, Hannah states they are not her friends. States that Clay hates her when the counselor mentions his name.

: 22:10- 23:00 Clay goes to speak to the counselor about Hannah, feels that he had a role in that choice. The counselor states that Hannah made that choice, we cannot ever figure out. Clay poses the question, what if we did know?

: 23:10-24:50 Hannah gets up to leave after looking in her bag at the final tapes and razors she took from her parent's pharmacy. Counselor asks: When you leave this office, how would you like things to be different for Hannah? She states: I don't know, I'm not sure what I'm expecting. Hannah begins crying and states she needs everything to stop. People, life. The counselor pushes tissues.

: 24:51- 25:46 Cuts back to Clay with the counselor, pushes tissues to Clay. Counselor mentions that we should not blame ourselves. Clay: I think that's bullshit, I think we should blame ourselves. We can do better. Counselor states that we can try and do better but that we are imperfect people and we love imperfectly. Clay questions how the counselor lives with it, and he states he has to and just does. "You can know all the signs and missing and still come up missing something". Clay presses further and asks what he will do when the next kid plans on killing himself. Counselor asks Clay if he wants to hurt himself and Clay states, he almost threw himself off a cliff the other night. The counselor states that he is glad that he didn't. Clay states that the counselor may not feel that way in a minute, mentioning that Hannah came to see him (counselor) on the day she died. Cuts back to Hannah.

: 25:47-27:25 Hannah, still crying, says she doesn't know why she said she wants life to stop, apologizes for wording it that way. Counselor asks how she got here (to this point). Hannah says one thing on top of another. Counselor presses for specific details. Hannah



mentions that he must know about the rumors about her. Explains how last year she was put on a list (best of/worst of) and she was updated a week ago. Cuts to Clay.

: 27:26- 27:53 Clay confronts the counselor about knowing Hannah wanted to kill herself and not reporting that to anyone.

: 27:54- 30:35 Back to Hannah, the counselor asks if anything happened at the party.

Hannah says yes, questions if the counselor actually wants to talk about this. Counselor asks if anything happened that she regrets or is embarrassed by and she agrees to both.

States she did not make a decision. The counselor assumes she made a decision and is now regretting it. Hannah gets frustrated, the counselor answers and immediately hangs

up the phone to get it to stop ringing. Counselor asks if she was forced into doing

something with anyone and she replies that she thinks so. Hannah is avoiding contact and the counselor is stumbling over his words. The counselor suggests that maybe she gave

consent then changed her mind, this visibly upsets Hannah. States she does not want the

police or her parents involved. Does not disclose the boy's name when asked. Then he

asks if she tells the counselor the name if he can promise her that he will go to jail and

never see him again. Counselor says he cannot promise that. Promises to do everything in his power to keep her safe.

: 30:39- 31:00 Back to Clay, states the counselor needs a name. Clay goes on to say

Bryce Walker raped Hannah. Counselor gets a confused look on his face.

: 31:01-31:30 Counselor states that if she doesn't want to give his name, or press charges, she has one option, to move on. States he is a senior and he will be gone in a few months.

Hannah looks shocked at the counselor's response. Responds with "Are you fucking kidding me?".

: 31:31- 32:04 Back to Clay, counselor states it is a big accusation to say someone raped someone, Clay informs the counselor that he has his confession on tape. Counselor asks to stop the conversation but Clay continues to ask if the counselor would like to know what happened to Hannah the day she left his office.

: 32:05- 33:18 Counselor tells Hannah that he believes her, but if she won't confront him that her only choice is to move on. Hannah thanks the counselor and leaves. The counselor lets Hannah know he can assist with other resources but Hannah says she knows what to do, to let it go, and leaves the office. With Clay narrating Hannah's scene, she waits for the counselor to come out of his office, waiting for him to stop her. Clay informs the counselor of this. Hannah speaks softly into her bag (into a tape that was recording throughout the meeting) and states he's not coming. He's staying in his office.

: 33:25- 34:01 Hannah talking to her tape in her backpack, walking out of the school, empty hallway. States, "I think I have made myself very clear, that no one is coming forward to stop me. Some of you cared, none of you cared enough. And neither did I. And I'm sorry. So, this is the end of tape 13. There's nothing more to say."

: 34:32- 35:20 Clay speaking over Hannah coming home and organizing the tapes in a box, stating he (counselor) let her walk away, we all let her walk away. She walked out of school, went home, and put some things in order. She returned her uniform at the theatre where I worked with her. She didn't say anything. She dropped it on the counter and walked away. She dropped a package off with a friend and another to the post office.

:35:40- 36:34 Clay states: Then she went back home, put on some old clothes, she went into the bathroom, filled the tub, opened the box of razor blades she took from her parent's store that morning, she got into the tub, still with her clothes on, and slit her wrists, and bled to death.

(Clay is narrating while Hannah carries out what he is saying)

: 36:36- 38:00 Camera focuses on Hannah's face, crying silently, while fully clothed in her full bathtub, water still running. Hannah is holding one razor blade in her hand, breathing deeply, slices her left wrist, audible crying, and pain as she moves to do the same on her right wrist. She begins hyperventilating, leaning her head back, and lowering into the water. Breathing slows, and she loses consciousness. Water flows over the end of the tub, tinted with blood.

: 38:01- 38:04 Pans back to Clay, he states to the counselor that she died alone.

: 38:05- 39:00 Hannah's mom is calling for her, makes a comment about water running under the closed bathroom door. She opens the bathroom door and quietly and slowly crawls to Hannah in the tub and begins to carry her out of the tub, talking to her as if she will be ok. Hannah is unconscious in the tub; water is stained bright red. Hannah's mom calls for Andy (dad) and he rushes in and begins gasping/screaming for Hannah.

Hannah's mom is holding her out of the tub, reassuring her husband and Hannah that it's okay, she'll be okay. Yells for her husband to call 911 and tell them to hurry. She continues to hold Hannah.

: 39:01- 42:15 Clay tells the counselor he could have stopped that, that himself, could've stopped it. A lot of people could have. But no one did. The counselor begins to silently

cry, avoiding eye contact with Clay. States that it is powerful and painful. He couldn't imagine what she was feeling in her last few days. States, if Hannah wanted to kill herself. I couldn't have stopped her. No one could have stopped her. Counselors stated that we had no way of knowing what was in her mind, what she was thinking. Clay states there is a way and pulls out the box of tapes Hannah made. Places them towards the counselor, stating that before she died, Hannah recorded 13 reasons why she killed herself. And you're number 13. And everyone that comes before knows what you did and didn't do. They always will. And they will know what they did. You're the last person to get the tapes. And Hannah didn't leave any instructions on what to do after you so you get to decide. And I added tape 14, which I hope will help you make that decision. The counselor asks how Clay got these tapes, Clay states that he is number 11. Clay goes to leave the office, turns back, and says to the counselor, it has to get better. The way we treat each other, and look out for each other. It has to get better somehow. Exits the counselor's office.

: 44:16- 44:40 Tyler is seen in his bedroom with weapons, guns, and other dangerous equipment laid across his desk as he rustles around in a large chest. His mother calls for him and knocks on the door. He is putting explosives and weapons back away into the chest.

: 45:40- 46:50 Tony walks into the Baker's pharmacy, apologizes to her parents, and says that Hannah asked him to keep secrets for her. He shares with her parents a USB drive, with 14 audio files. Instructs them to listen to them and that if they need the original tapes, he can provide those too. Just asks them to listen to them. States he never wanted

this to happen to Hannah and hopes that giving the files to them helps make sure it never happens to anyone again. Tony leaves.

: 47:25- 49:10 In Tyler's taped deposition, he states that people spoke unkindly to Hannah all the time at school. Those guys would call her a slut and say that she's easy, stuff along those lines. Stated he has pictures of Hannah. Mentions that there are tapes that Hannah recorded that spoke about what had happened to her. Tyler discloses that he believes Clay was the last person to have the tapes.

: 51:10- 51:20 Deposition officer asks Jessica if she knows about tapes, pauses a moment, and says no.

: 51:30- 53:10 Bryce and Justin are talking, Bryce asks how Clay knew about what he had done, Justin states that Hannah recorded tapes before she passed about what everyone did to her. Let's Bryce know that Jessica was in the room hiding the night he raped Hannah. Bryce asks who has the tapes, Justin says he doesn't know. Bryce scoffs and says who is going to believe a dead girl? Justin turns and walks away, Bryce calls out to him, asking if he knows the real story. What's true. Justin says he does now, and that he will not be seeing Bryce around.

: 53:40- 54:15 Jessica's dad comes in and asks if she is okay because she doesn't look fine. Jessica begins crying, says that she needs to tell him that something happened to her. Begins sobbing.

: 54:20- 55:08 Pans to Tyler in a dark room looking at photos of all people on the tapes, panning slowly at each person.

: 55:10- 55:50 Counselor plays tape 13 in stereo, hears Hannah begin talking. "One last try. I'm giving life one last try." Is interrupted by being told another student shot himself last night and is in critical condition. The counselor stands there, shocked.

: 55:53- Hannah's mom puts in the USB that Tony gave them and opens the first file and you begin to hear Hannah introduce herself.

: 56:26- 57:45 Tony is driving and asks, so what do we do from here? Clay is in the car and responds, I guess we will find out. They ride in the car to radio music as the show pans to credits.