



AALBORG UNIVERSITET

Master's Thesis

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# Compelling Characters

An analysis and discussion of the Netflix series *13 Reasons Why* in relation to character engagement and the depiction of suicide

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Helene Knudsen

Advisor: Brian Russell Graham



**Keywords:** 13 Reasons Why, Suicide, media, influence, culture, character engagement

**Warning:** Be aware that the assignment contains a graphic picture of suicide

# Abstract

The following thesis seeks to examine how the popular, original Netflix TV-series called *13 Reasons Why* ensures character engagement. The project was conducted using Gary Solomon's work within the field of cinematherapy while exploring the potential benefits of the series and its therapeutic value. Moreover, this thesis also incorporates the cognitivist approach by Jason Mittell when creating a formal analysis of the main characters, named Clay Jensen and Hannah Baker. The analysis showed that most viewers likely experience feelings of engagement and not necessarily identification towards the characters. Finally, a discussion is offered regarding the potential helpful and harmful effects of the graphic and highly criticised suicide scene presented in season one, as well as implications for future research in terms of the medial responsibility. A more nuanced discussion is offered regarding the depiction of suicide in the media since the press seems to focus on the negative results while linking the show directly to suicide ideation. However, this paper proves that the series also provide many positive, hopeful messages and mainly influences vulnerable, sensitive adolescents who should only watch it with a trusted adult.

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# Introduction

For decades, popular press has called the role of media in the lives of young people into question (Wartella et al. 368). Additionally, evidence suggests that the media can influence attitudes and beliefs to various social issues and this influence is especially strong for mental health issues, particularly suicide (Carmichael & Whitley 1). Suicide is a complex, tragic human act which cause immense pain and remains a serious public health issue across the world (Carmichael & Whitley 2). Furthermore, suicide will always be a puzzling and interesting phenomenon which has been widely discussed in the academic community and it seems a cultural trend has emerged where contemporary films (and TV series) focus on pathological protagonists and the question then becomes: why are we so fascinated with these characters?

Rather than avoiding what is undeniably a painful and sensitive subject, it is important we all started talking about it. This was the argument when the streaming service Netflix launched a new controversial series in 2017 revolving around teenage suicide called *13 Reason Why*. The series not only attracted a wide viewership but also started a national conversation about suicide (Carmichael & Whitley 2) alongside the shocking deaths of celebrities such as designer Kate Spade and Chef Anthony Bourdain in 2018.

The series is one of the most popular and controversial TV-shows at the moment, which means it is, probably, successful in creating compelling characters that appeal to a lot of people in terms of television storytelling. Therefore, it would be relevant and interesting to examine **how a show such as *13 Reasons Why* ensures character engagement, leading to a discussion of whether the show romanticises suicide and the role of medial presentation in this context.** This paper aims to investigate the vital role of characters as a specific narrative element because they have become the focus point of Post-network TV-shows. *13 Reasons Why* is ultimately about characters, in terms of the changes they go through, the relationships they form with each other and the way they impact the audience, but what is it that makes them compelling? Which formal devices are used in order to create these characters? This is examined by identifying the role aesthetics play within cultural studies. Moreover, it becomes important to examine how the viewers respond to the characters emotionally, which leads me to make use of cognitive theory.

When investigating the impact, the media has on young people's lives, there is a lot of supporting empirical evidence such as work on media violence. However, it would be interesting to examine whether this is the case regarding media contagion and suicide since no clear picture has emerged with data being inconsistent. Depictions of suicide can be found in all kinds of popular

culture such as art, poetry, literature, movies and TV-series. Nonetheless, the media can play a powerful role in educating the public about suicide (Gould et al. 1277). The link between suicidal behaviour and media contagion is often discussed and while it is important for the media to raise awareness about suicide it is equally important they do so without creating a contagious effect: but is that the case when it comes to this popular series? The aim is to assess whether current evidence can support concerns that fictional media increases risk of suicide contagion.

The press coverage of *13 Reasons Why* has been accused of being hyperbolic and it seems that controversy revolving the series sells, but what about science? (Wartella et al. 368). The society for the Prevention of Teen suicide released a statement claiming “Unfortunately, the media tends to glamorise and sensationalise suicide” as well as The National Association of School Psychologists saying “we do not recommend that vulnerable youth, especially those who have any degree of suicide ideation, watch this series. Its powerful storytelling may lead impressionable viewers to romanticise the choices made by the characters and/ or develop revenge fantasies” (Ferguson 1). However, in order for the public to understand the full scope of the research findings on viewing *13 Reasons Why*, the press must be willing to present both the negative and positive results (Wartella et al. 371). This may not always be the case and therefore this paper seeks to include a range of different results in order to provide a more nuanced debate for future research and contribute to a deeper understanding of suicide imitation.

We live in a visual culture where many cultural issues are expressed in visual forms. Based on this it can be argued that visual works provide indices of complex social processes and express contemporary culture. Within American society, suicide has been a recurring cultural and social concern explored extensively in various literary and artistic forms and has evolved into a serious societal epidemic by the end of the 20th century (Honkasalo & Tuominen 2). The intellectual understandings of suicide have been dominated by individual centered explanations. Furthermore, an increasing emphasis has been placed on the search for genetic markers of suicidality. However, it seems the debate should incorporate the art world as well since it can contribute with important analyses of artistic representation of suicide (Stacker & Bowman 5). The paper is a contribution to the larger culture surrounding the representation of suicide since most research of suicide in popular culture has been conducted in terms of literature and film. Although critics have begun discussing the impact of *13 Reasons Why*, no one has yet conducted an in-depth analysis of its characters. Other depictions of suicide can be found in popular movies such as *Dead Poets Society* (1989), *Romeo & Juliet* (1996), *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), *Girl Interrupted* (1999), and the latest remake

of *A Star Is Born* (2018), however none of them has sparked the same controversy as *13 Reasons Why*. In relation to these movies, *13 Reasons Why* is important to investigate because it differs with its highly graphic portrayal of suicide.

The message that various individual and social problems contribute to suicide (Stacker & Bowman 245) is reinforced by films such as *The Virgin Suicides* and *Girl Interrupted* alongside *13 Reasons Why*. What this suggest, then, is that patterns of motives for suicide in American movies represents a neglected source of knowledge on the causes of suicide (Stacker & Bowman 3/4) which can contribute to important discussion. However, the cinema often constructs a cultural image of suicide that is different from that provided by psychiatric research. This is because many people will find such representations too depressing. Audiences may prefer portrayals of suicide to be more heroic or as an end to the lives of villains. This way serious in-depth stories regarding suicide may apt to fail at the box office (Stacker & Bowman 53). However, this is not the case with *13 Reasons Why* which has become extremely successful despite a tragic suicide depiction.

In comparison the suicide scenes in *Romeo and Juliet* as well as *13 Reasons Why* both feature characters with tragic downfalls who believe that death is preferable to life (Rozett 152). In terms of a star is born, it seems the movie is dealing with some of the same issues surrounding suicide imitation which *13 Reasons Why* has been accused of. Critics argue that while the suicide occurs of screen the implicit act might still have a devastating focus. A suicide warning was added to the movie in New Zealand following its release since reports say that viewers were triggered by the scene in which the main character Jackson Maine hangs himself (Gavin). However, the movie *Dead poets Society* is mentioned by scholars Danny Wedding and Ryan M. Niemiec as they explore the clinical use of films in psychotherapy. Perhaps *13 Reasons Why* can also act as a catalyst and a springboard in therapy, potentially encouraging clients to openly talk about topics they would otherwise feel uncomfortable discussing (211).

Moreover, the series generated a debate about why and how we depict suicide in the media. This is an important topic to address because according to The World Health Organisation nearly a million people across the world commit suicide every year and approximately ten million attempt to do so. Even though treatments for mental health issues have never been more available, suicide is still a leading cause of death world-wide. Suicide is a global phenomenon and about 2% of an estimated total of 90 million deaths can be classified as self-inflicted and intentional. Furthermore what is troubling is that a worldwide tendency points toward an increase in the incidence of suicide which is found mostly among women and the elderly population (Honkasalo & Tuominen 2).

Rising suicide rates are unfortunate, and the criticism surrounding the series demonstrates the importance of studying suicide contagion in order to uncover whether television shows can influence suicide rates and to prevent this from happening in the future. Suicide in relation to the media has become an even more important issue since the rise of internet and social media. This is the case regarding a young girl in the U.K named Molly Russel who recently killed herself after being exposed to graphic images of self-harm and suicide on social media sites such as Instagram and Pinterest. Her parents believe these sites are to blame for her death and the controversy surrounding her death has forced Instagram to develop sensitivity screens in order to hide these images as an attempt to protect young people who use these sites (Hern).

## Summary of the series

*13 Reasons Why* is a popular, fictional Netflix series created by Brian Yorkey which is based upon the bestselling novel by Jay Asher. The series tackles tough, real-world issues such as suicide, rape, bullying etc. The first season was released on March 31, 2017 and was the third most popular show on the platform across 32 countries in 2017 (Carmichael & Whitley 2). This resulted in the release of the second season on May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2018 and later on the show has officially been renewed for a third season which is said to premiere on June 28<sup>th</sup> in 2019.

The first season revolves around a girl named Hannah Baker who experiences a number of stress factors such as bullying, rape, slut-shaming etc. which tragically lead her to take her own life a few weeks earlier. The premise of the show deals with the trauma following a suicide since Hannah is already dead from the beginning and therefore provides insight on her situation through a range of flashbacks and scenes from the present, to uncover what happened to her as the reasons are given posthumously. Hannah's suicide came as a surprise and left many unanswered questions but prior to her death she recorded thirteen cassette tapes explaining the reasons why she ended her life. Hannah dedicated each tape to a person who she believed were partially responsible. One of the recipients is a teenage boy named Clay Jensen who begins listening to the tapes while trying to uncover what happened to his classmate (and crush) Hannah Baker. Through Hannah and Clay's dual narratives, the series

Season two takes place five months after the suicide and deals with the aftermath of Hannah's death and the characters complicated journeys towards healing and recovery. In addition, Hannah's parents have filed a lawsuit against Liberty High school, which she attended, based on alleging negligence and suddenly everyone becomes involved in the battle. Unfortunately, someone wants to keep the truth surrounding Hannah's death concealed but a series of menacing polaroids lead Clay and his classmates to uncover a dark secret ("Talk to Someone").



# Methodology

This section will reveal the methodological ways in which the problem formulation was answered. The selected material for the analysis is a widely popular but highly criticised fictional Netflix Series called *13 Reasons Why*. Since the global circulation of American series has made this programme eminently popular and influential around the world, it has become one of the most heavily debated media fictional depictions in recent times (Arendt et al. 1). The series deals with many themes such as bullying, slutshaming, mental health issues, sexual assault, substance abuse etc. but was chosen based on its engaging characters and graphic depiction of suicide. The kind of materials used varies from numerous scenes from the show to theories regarding character engagement and the therapeutic value of movies as well as online - and academic articles.

Since characters such as Clay and Hannah were chosen for this project, others that would be fascinating to explore further in relation to the chosen theory were excluded from the project - e.g. Skye and Alex. Picking only some of the characters meant that the analysis could be more detailed, as opposed to if it were to consist of several characters from the show. It is important to remember that characters within works such as *13 Reasons Why* are not connected to psychiatry, psychology or any other clinical condition; instead they propose a cultural model for behavior. This project utilizes all two seasons of the series, because doing otherwise would mean leaving out a lot of important scenes, but it was also important not to limit the analytical depth.

The project was conducted using Gary Solomon's work within the field of cinematherapy and Jason Mittell's cognitivist approach to focus on the formal aspects of media alongside issues of broader cultural forces (Mittell 5). The intention behind this project was to examine how the TV-show *13 Reasons Why* ensures character engagement which naturally led to a definition of concepts such as recognition, shipping, alignment and allegiance. This theory was chosen to uncover the way aesthetic expressions are experienced and appeal to our senses. The paper can be viewed as an attempt to engage with television's formal dimensions in relation to a broader approach to television as a cultural phenomenon, where form is always in dialogue with cultural contexts (Mittell 4).

The paper strives to offer an analysis, focused on characters, not divorced from issues of context and culture, examining how the series impacts society by including a discussion of whether it glorifies suicide (Mittell 4). This is done because the series has been accused of increasing the risk of suicide. However, most research on suicide imitation has been conducted in terms of nonfiction material and therefore it would be interesting to examine if this notion applies to fictional stories as well based on the controversy surrounding the series (Mittell 9).

The cognitive poetic approach employed by Jason Mittell in his book *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (2015), which was chosen as one of the ways to explore the engagement with the characters, does not exclude other theoretical models or methods (119). The approach can, however, be involved into a subfield where cognitive poetics may give us a better understanding regarding the cultural facets of television (Mittell 164). What this suggests, then, is that the aesthetic forms might help us to more fully understand cultural formations. This notion is supported by Professor Rita Felski in an essay called “the role of aesthetics in cultural studies” where she wonders whether anyone can “sit through a Hollywood blockbuster that is orchestrated and marketed around the spectacular nature of its special effects and still believe that popular culture is primarily about content” (33-34)?

Not to mention, many popular forms rely on a “sophisticated manipulation of stylistic conventions” which cannot be ignored. Focusing on works once dismissed as aesthetically unworthy, cultural critics has now challenged the opposition between formally sophisticated high art and content-driven mass culture (Felski 33) because there are some interesting convergences between cultural studies and contemporary aesthetic theory (Felski 34). In addition cultural critics do not believe that art is autonomous. They see it as embedded in the world rather than as transcending the world (Felski 34). In that sense, it seems a close reading of the characters and their formal attributions is an essential part of the project but should be conducted alongside a discussion of the series impact on society.

The theory provided by Mittell can be used to define the relationship between television characters and its audience. According to Mittell we can only understand the poetics of television storytelling within its specific context, which differentiates from other media. A poetic approach can be quite similar to narratology as developed by literary scholars, but Mittell prefers labelling it poetics in order to distance himself from the structuralist and strictly textual model often found in narratology (5). Where a film must often end its narrative within the span of a few hours, the serial is not detained to such restriction. Instead it offers continual and intricate storylines that are everchanging over the span of many seasons. Although keeping up with the characters can be difficult at times they may become more enjoyable. Therefore, Mittell was chosen based on a theory that has been developed for the purpose of analysing television series, over others developed for the purpose of analysing film and literature (119). This was done because viewers of serial television engage with an ongoing dynamic system and not a fixed text like most films (Mittell 132). However most of the theory does seem to focus on film analysis, such as the one developed by Gary

Solomon, but in this case, it can be adapted to television series until further research appears in the future.

Solomon's work within the field of cinematherapy, is reviewed as a tool and technique in therapy, counseling, and coaching to help individuals become aware of and cope with real-life problems (Vallarelli et al. 91). Solomon believes that movies can help us overcome life's problems and therefore this paper argues that this might also be the case with the tv- series *13 Reasons Why*. This theory was chosen in order to focus on the therapeutic value of *13 Reasons Why* and discuss whether it facilitates a better understanding of issues such as suicide.

The cognitive poetics can account for how viewers engage with texts and how these aesthetics elements may be experienced but has been known to make universalized, fixed assumptions about viewers and ignoring the cultural context (13). The approach is best suited when it comes to answering limited questions regarding a viewer's mental activity and emotional engagement (205). This is an important notion to keep in mind, otherwise one could start to only make universalised assumptions about viewers and forget that each viewer may react differently. This is something many experts may forget when expressing concerns regarding suicide contagion, but this will be elaborated later on.

It seems poetics can lead to more nuanced understandings of broader social issues, such as suicide, that often concern cultural scholars. The focus of the analysis and discussion is understanding the way television tells stories but unlike Mittell also to examine the cultural impact and interpretation of those stories (Mittell 5). Mittell's theory only explores the changes in television storytelling and cultural practices within the television industry but texts cannot be fully understood unless they are read in a cultural specificity.

By incorporating a discussion of suicide in the media and suicidal behaviour in western culture and society, the paper can demonstrate what visual culture, such as television shows, can tell us about the world we live in. Instead we can develop a more complementary set of theoretical tools by combining what we know about cultural contexts alongside the mechanics of mental engagement (Mittell 205). Although the cognitivist approach sees the human being as a biological creature, whose recognition of the world is controlled by basic evolutionary neurocognitive functions, and cultural studies sees the human being as historically and socially situated it does not mean that the two approaches cannot be combined (Zunshine 6). In this case both approaches can be used to answer the research question by examining it from different angles, and therefore complement each other. This means that the paper uses an interdisciplinary field which studies the relationship

between the evolved human brain and the particular interpretations carried out by particular cultures (Zunshine 8). In other words it focuses on analysing art and aesthetics as well as the role they play in culture.

According to Lisa Zunshine both the academic and public interest in cognitive science has exploded in the last two decades (1). Even though Zunshine attempts to represent the rapidly growing interdisciplinary field of cognitive approaches to literature, this notion can also be applied to visual culture. In that sense the approach presents new interpretations resulting from applying insights from cognitive science to cultural representations. The crucial theoretical assumption is that the contemporary sciences of the mind “open new venues for investigating the role of universally shared features of human cognition in historically specific forms of cultural production” (Zunshine 2).

The human mind in its numerous complex environments has been the object of study of literary critics for longer than it has been the object of study for cognitive scientists (Zunshine 5) and the attempt to integrate the science of the evolved brain with cultural interpretations was met with resistance and confusion but nonetheless can prove to be fairly rewarding (Zunshine 7). Hopefully one day cognitive approaches are no longer excluded from cultural studies since “the concept of human culture becomes meaningless once we try to extract the human brain from it” (Zunshine 8).

Much of the research conducted on suicidality can be found within the natural sciences which tend to focus on biological, neurological or biochemical markers. This is done trying to develop medication that can be used to treat the chemical imbalance in the head which may cause suicidal behaviour. This may contribute to an increased focus on biological research at the cost of cultural research which is just as important. In other words, it seems the epidemic of depression and suicide in the western world is not always caused by our brains but largely by problems in the way we live – which is what *13 Reasons Why* is trying to convey.

According to Colucci, Erminia et al. we must never forget that suicidality is a complex, multifactorial phenomenon and that the road to suicide differs across cultural groups and the individuals within these groups – which makes a cultural perspective crucial in suicide research and prevention. Furthermore the scholars state that suicide should never be reduced to a “simplistic biological condition” that can easily be treated with medication. Instead we need to keep in mind that people are more than mechanical machines, responding automatically to biological stimuli but complex, reflecting and meaning-seeking individuals (4-5). Furthermore, it is important to consider

the cultural complexities and recognise the importance of environmental factors when investigating suicide (Colucci, Erminia et al. 10).

## Complex Characters

According to Mittell, television serial storytelling can be defined as a “narrative world populated by a consistent set of characters who experience a chain of events over time” (Mittell 10). It seems expectations for how viewers watch television, producers create stories and series are distributed have all shifted leading to a new narrative mode of television storytelling which Mittell terms *Complex TV* (3). This new mode of storytelling began developing in the late 1990s as an alternative to the conventional forms that have typified most American television and continues to grow throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Mittell 17).

Watching serial television is a long-term process, stretching over time which might explain why audiences tend to embrace complex programs such as *13 Reasons Why* in much more passionate and committed terms than they do most conventional television – which is proven by the large amount of controversy revolving the series that will be discussed later on. This particular mode of television storytelling encourages audiences to become more actively engaged while offering a range of pleasures (Mittell 35). One of the strategies employed by serial television is constructing ongoing characters to create engaging storyworlds (Mittell 10).

Furthermore, it seems that by creating compelling characters, engaging scenarios and storylines will follow as well. However academic analyses of storytelling have focused far less on issues of character than on other narrative elements which is why an analysis of character engagement seems justified. In addition, this oversight is especially true for moving- image media such as film and television, where characters tend to be “wrapped up into conventions of performance and stardom, rather than analysed as a specific narrative element” (Mittell 2015: 118). Character engagement is crucial to television serials, since the narrative is much longer than in films, and calls for characters compelling to make viewers return. Based on the previous statement, this section aims to explore the vital role of characters in serialised, complex television by considering how viewers engage with the characters as well as determine why the audience sympathises with them (Mittell 118).

## Recognition

Drawing on the notions regarding character engagement determined by Murray Smith, Jason Mittell describes *recognition* in serial television, i.e. a show like *13 Reasons Why*, as “viewers differentiating roles within a program’s ongoing ensemble, where characters are put in the fluid categories of primary characters, secondary supporting characters, and background extras” (123). The tier a character belongs to is quite significant, because depending on whether the character is a primary one, as opposed to a background extra, it will function in a different way (Mittell 123). An example of this could be the main characters Hannah and Clay who viewers spend the most time with as opposed to minor characters such as Tyler Down or Marcus Cole.

Another part of recognition is the expectations viewers have regarding characters. The knowledge viewers have about the conventional safety of the core set of characters and the basic precepts of serial storytelling in a series creates the expectation of character safety (Mittell 123). These expectations help shape the viewer’s narrative experiences and this way a serial can struggle to create dramatic stakes in the face of viewers’ knowledge that the fictional facing lead character is highly unlikely to come to pass (Mittell 124). Most viewers will likely assume that the main characters will be a part of the series until the end and function as a stable foundation and therefore it is quite exceptional when they depart a series because we do not expect them to die or leave the show in any other way (Mittell 123). However *13 Reasons Why* is a rather unusual series and tries to counter such expectations because one of the main characters, named Hannah, is dead from the beginning and she is therefore only featured through the use of flashback.

This might cause us to wonder why television series place such weight on the stability and safety of core characters. In terms of industrial incentives, actors are used to promote the series while serving as its public face and are also contractually committed to the show at a fixed salary. Creatively most programs are defined by their core characters and their relationships that replacing them becomes a challenge without losing the fans along the way. According to Mittell, serialised dramas might be based on a high concept or complex plot but argues for the fact that it is the character ensemble that hooks in viewers (Mittell 126). In terms of *13 Reasons Why* it has been confirmed that Katherine Langford, the actress who plays Hannah Baker, will not be returning in the third season of the series. Moreover it is interesting how Hannah’s departure will affect viewers later on and whether the series succeeds in creating new compelling characters to replace her since one of the primary ways that viewers engage with serials is to develop long-term relationships with characters. However given that Hannah has been dead since the beginning, it seems her story had to

come to an end.

Character safety is an extrinsic norm in contemporary serials, because it is one of the ways they draw on genre and stylistic conventions as opposed to intrinsic norms which are unique to the serial itself (Mittell 74). The notion of recognition is interesting to examine in a show such as *13 Reasons Why* to see how it plays with character expectations to create suspension. It is the core cast of characters we spend the most time with and bond with by imagining relationship between them. Therefore it would also be interesting to look at shipping as a way to ensure viewing pleasure.

## Shipping

Television's character consistency is one of the primary ways in which the viewers engage with a series in order to develop long-term relationship with characters often leading to what is called parasocial relationships which will be elaborated later on (Mittell 127). A common thing for viewers to do is to imagine relationships between either themselves and the characters in a series, or between characters within the fictional frame itself (Mittell 128). This form of viewing pleasure is often referred to as *shipping*, and it emerged because viewers started to root for romance between characters in a TV-show, as they became engaged with the characters along the way.

“*Relationshiping*” is an investment that some fans might enjoy, and sometimes there are shipping names for a particular couple when viewers come together on forums to discuss their favourite ones (Mittell 128). However, viewers also care about characters beyond romance. Viewing pleasure can also be achieved if viewers are rooting for a specific character to fail or succeed e.g. if a character survives a near unsurvivable scenario, or they are reunited with their loved ones. All this suggests that the engagement between fans and characters is a central part of any TV-series (Mittell 128).

Viewing pleasure is an important aspect of *13 Reasons Why*, because, like in most other shows, characters and their relationships is constantly the centre of attention. A quick example could be the expiring romance between Clay and Hannah. The two of them find comfort in each other, which then leaves the audience to speculate whether they will become romantically involved further on. Eventually, the two of them do get together, but not before the viewers have the chance to “ship” them. Shipping is one of the ways viewers might become invested in characters in terms of romance, but it would also be interesting to focus on alignment, as this can help explain the connections the viewers feel with all characters and not just in terms of their relationships (Mittell 129).

## Alignment

One of the major components of character engagement is *Alignment* and can, combined with the other components, attempt to answer why some viewers may sympathise with the protagonist Hannah. Mittell describes alignment as the connections the viewers feel with the characters both within the storyworld and parasocially outside it, since this is one of the ways a series manages what we know about and experience with certain characters. The notion of alignment consists of two elements called *attachment* and *access*: the first one being where we follow the experiences of certain characters and the second one being the access we gain to their subjective interior states of emotion, thought processes and morality. It is likely that some viewers will relate to Hannah's story and what she is going through, however this might not be the case for everyone watching the show. In a long serial, such as *13 Reasons Why*, attachment is a crucial variable since our connection to particular characters can shift from episode to episode. Moreover, individual episodes might restrict attachment to a single character (Mittell 129) and is particularly important for serials, since spending time with characters encourages parasocial connections which can extend through hypothetical and paratextual engagement outside the moments of watching (Mittell 130).

Both access and attachment are technical strategies that deepen our experiences with a range of characters. The level of access may vary from character to character. However, if we gain access to a character's inner thoughts, it is sometimes done through the use of voiceover, but this is a convention rarely employed by television. Instead viewers gain access to a character's subjective thoughts through the accumulation of exterior markers such as their appearance, actions and dialogue presented within the narrative discourse (Mittell 130). Nonetheless it seems *13 Reasons Why* is a rather special show when it comes to this aspect, because viewers sometimes have access to Hannah's (and other characters') interior thoughts. In season one Hannah narrates the story through the use of voiceover from her tapes, and while doing so she presents the viewers with her thoughts and reasoning. Later on, in season two the narrator changes and shifts between a range of different characters to provide a new perspective on the events featured in the first season. This way interiority in *13 Reasons Why* is not a restricted area of access. However, According to Mittell, just because we are inside Hannah's (or other characters') head with a great degree of subjective access, the process of narrative comprehension always posits hypotheses about what a character is both thinking and feeling, even when the storytelling seems to portray a character's interiority (131-132). This way narration plays an essential part in terms of guiding the viewers response. It can either avert the viewer from engaging in a character by withholding information about him/her, as well as



encourage engagement by emphasising certain aspects of a character to make him/her more favourable than others.

Usually the characters that provide the most interesting interior states are the ones that viewers spend the most time with and become the most invested in. However, it is important to keep in mind that alignment towards a given character can change throughout a series. Through the long term investment with characters in a series, viewers' knowledge and experiences with them increase over time and allows for us to consider our own relationship with them. Whether we find them likeable or sympathetic is based on whether we become aligned with them (Mittell 132). However, our understanding of their beliefs can also be examined when looking at the allegiance we might experience towards them.

## **Allegiance**

*Allegiance* is, like alignment, another way of engaging with characters Mittell derives from Murray Smith and is described as: "The moral evaluation of aligned characters such that we find ourselves sympathetic to their beliefs and ethics and thus emotionally invested in their stories" (134). The audience become invested in the different characters, and even though some of them may commit a number of atrocities at some point, viewers often understand this when they become aware of the character's reasons why. An example of this could be the tapes produced by Hannah prior to her suicide possibly evoking a response of sympathy.

When examining the notion of allegiance, it is often done when grappling with character changes. Among other things, Mittell wonders whether characters themselves change over the course of a series. While it may seem that a pleasure of serial narratives is watching characters grow and develop over time, it seems most television characters are more stable and consistent rather than changeable entities. This is not to suggest that characters do not experience major life events, traumas and conflicts that impact who they are. But even in the face of such life- changing events, television characters are mostly stable figures, accumulating narrative experiences rather than changing from them (Mittell 133).

When examining stability and change in terms of characters, one would have to look for indications of shifting allegiances. Shifting allegiances are motivated by transformations within a character's exterior actions and interior thoughts. Since interiority is a restricted area of access, we must sometimes derive characters' morality and beliefs on the basis of exterior markers, including their appearance, behaviours and interactions such as how other characters act and talk toward them. According to Mittell we can only access interiority through exterior markers and therefore

shifts in character allegiance must be manifested externally (Mittell 134). Complex, multifaceted characters must have their interior states confirmed by a number of different exterior markers, and typically overt actions speak louder than dialogue to indicate a character's true subjective state (Mittell 134 - 135).

It is important to note, however, that the exterior markers are susceptible to change, and when they change it often indicates a revised attitude or belief system (Mittell 134). These changes are, however, often only midlevel shifts rather than high-level transformations of core morality and ethics that would prompt a change in our allegiances, meaning that the character is not fundamentally changed.

Although characters rarely shift significantly, our understanding of them often does and this change of a somewhat different narrative order is referred to by Mittell as *character elaboration*, which he uses to distinguish between elaborated and developed characters. This particular model of change, inspired by Roberta Pearson, gradually reveals aspects of a character over time so that these facets feel new to the audience. *13 Reasons Why's* flashback structure reveals elements of a character's backstory while casting new light on their present actions and filling in crucial backstory information. This is a strategy employed by different programs such as *How I Met Your Mother* to *Orange Is The New Black* since elaborating more about a character's backstory can make a static figure seem more dynamic which creates the illusion of character change (Mittell 136). This is one of the ways the show succeeds in making Hannah an important main character within the show even though she is dead from the beginning.

Shifts in allegiance are rare but there are instances when we do see characters change. One common model of change is *character growth*. According to Mittell this model evokes the process of maturation "in which a character becomes more realised and fleshed out over time". It seems such arcs are most common with young characters since their physical and emotional maturation fulfils a coming of age narrative. This framework often succeeds well because viewers know from the start that young characters are not fully formed and therefore we expect the ongoing story to portray them transitioning out of youthful tumult into more stable adulthood (Mittell 137).

This maturation process may also be found within another recurrent character arc referred to as *character education*. Even though Mittell says it happens when "a mature adult learns a key life lesson over the course of a series and ends up a changed person" (138), it can be argued that this type of education also appears within the younger characters of the show such as Clay- who has trouble dealing with Hannah's suicide but later tries to learn from it by reaching out to a former

friend. Although Mittell examines growth and change within the characters it seems *13 Reasons Why* can inspire the same within the audience – causing the paper to integrate cinematherapy which will be elaborated below.

## **Traumatic Narratives and The Healing Power of Movies**

In relation to character engagement this paper also incorporates the book *Reel Therapy: How Movies Inspire You to Overcome Life's Problems* (2001), by America's leading cinematherapist Dr. Gary Solomon, which focus on movies that allow us to confront and deal with traumas and traumatic narratives. Even though the book refers to different films, the theory can be adapted and used in terms of TV-series as well until further research appears. This book was chosen since the series *13 Reasons Why* deal with the trauma surrounding suicide and therefore it can be used to display what viewers might learn from watching the show – and why it has proven to be both important and transformative.

Cinematherapy can be seen as an extension of bibliotherapy, whereby the client is assigned reading material which reveals characters dealing with similar conflicts and issues, in an effort to help the client better understand and cope with difficulties (Vallarelli et al. 94). Cinematherapy can be described as a therapeutic technique which functions as a form of self- help therapy for mental health issues and is highly acknowledged by Solomon – who was the first to write about the use of movies as therapy (Solomon 26). Solomon was surprised to discover that there was no academic research conducted regarding the therapeutic value of movies which is why he began his own (23). Since then other scholars, such as Mette Hjort who examined *The Feel- Good Film* and the *Psychological Benefits of Genre* in order to find a connection between this and our health, has begun to acknowledge this effect.

Solomon believes that “the answer to most of life's problems can be found in the movies” (17) which is why he incorporates a range of specific movies for viewers to watch to help them deal with life's emotional problems (Solomon 15). What this suggests, then, is that movies are more than entertainment. They are “the stories of our lives and the healing messages that guide us through life's journey” (Solomon14). In consonance with this statement it seems traumatic narratives, such as the one presented in *13 Reasons Why*, can have healing powers while offering an emotional escape.

A major reason that popular movies are becoming a tool in therapy is their typically

universal appeal (Vallarelli et al. 93). Even though viewers watch the movies individually, it still requires corporation from a therapist (Solomon 37). In using this process, the practitioner selects a movie as homework for the client between sessions in order to examine their response and reaction to the movie - and later used as a stimulus for discussion in therapy (24-25). By discussing the movie, clients can reframe issues and explore alternative solutions to problems, guided by meaningful processing with the therapist (Vallarelli et al. 94). When Solomon's clients watch the movies, it should be in the safety and privacy of their own home, with no disturbances, and not in a movie theatre since the goal is not to be entertained. When trying to experience the healing or therapeutic journey it is important that people are comfortable in a silent, safe and familiar setting. While watching the movie, they should also keep a journal of their emotions and reflect on their feelings since it becomes a useful tool when working through problems and issues in the future (25).

Solomon believes he can help people understand more about themselves by making them watch movies. Due to this he started asking people to watch certain movies that related to their particular problem and found that viewers gained a lot from seeing themselves in the characters in the movies (22-23). In other words, when it comes to cinematherapy, movies are used to familiarise clients with emotional problems they might have difficulty identifying in themselves but can locate more easily in film characters (Vallarelli et al. 93). Solomon states that his clients would suddenly begin to open up and start talking about the problems which they had not dealt with before. For the first time his felt that their feelings were being validated and were no longer embarrassed by what they were feeling which, according to Solomon, is an important part of the recovery process (22-23).

In addition, cinematherapy gives the client permission to talk about a particular issue, by providing validation that others have been through similar experiences and emotions. As such, the movie characters can reframe problems, and model healthy problem-solving behaviours that clients may implement in their own lives (Vallarelli et al. 94). Watching characters in a film becomes a form of vicarious learning for the viewer whereby the viewer models the characters behaviour (Vallarelli et al. 95). Ultimately the movies present an opportunity for change, by revealing issues in a nonthreatening way within the safety of distance (Vallarelli et al. 93).

When viewers watch the movies described by Solomon he asks them to look for similarities between what they are seeing in the movie and the events in their own life (25). However, one might wonder whether viewers that do not necessarily deal with the same emotional

problems presented in the movie might still gain something from watching them. Perhaps they can serve as an insight into particular problems and provide a better understanding of these issues that other people we know might deal with. Each of the movies not only gives viewers insight about the individual challenges of those with the problem, it also gives us all “great wisdom about those who must try to live their lives with people who are challenged” (Solomon 38). This is also the case in *13 Reasons Why* as we not only gain insight into Hannah’s personal problems but also how her suicide affects everyone around her. In this way movies are an excellent tool for reaching out and helping other people see behaviours they previously could not open their minds and eyes to (Solomon 40).

When viewers watch movies or series they become invested in the characters, as they engage with them by learning about their personal problems and sharing their emotions. What this suggests, then, is that viewers tend to empathise with the characters. In using this approach, characters and scenarios can serve as triggers for reflection and discussion (Vallarelli et al. 91). One of the ways Solomon has found to help his clients out of denial is to use what the movie industry refers to as *Suspense of Disbelief*. What this means is that the movie becomes so real in its representation that the viewer forgets he or she is watching a work of fiction - which is what makes the healing stories extremely powerful. This concept is important to Solomon because if he can get people to suspend their disbelief and accept the story or characters as real-life situations, he can help them see themselves through the movie they are watching (26). Each of the movies can, for many people, secure some emotional attachment to the characters in order to help them deal with their own problems and issues (Solomon 27).

Furthermore, Solomon states that many people questioned some of the movies he has chosen for his book because of the negative or dark endings (28). *13 Reasons Why* has received similar criticism based on its graphic suicide scene which ended season one. However, according to Solomon, we should not shy away from endings that are not positive or happy because we can learn what to do by seeing the wrong way to do things (28). By watching characters behave in a certain way, Solomon believes the audience can learn from their mistakes which he refers to as *Paradoxical healing* and *Healing by Proxy* (29). In other words, watching movies provide the clients with a powerful means of observational learning with opportunities to choose among different attitudes and behaviours (Vallarelli et al. 94). This might also be the case in *13 Reasons Why* and it can be discussed whether the show makes us reflect on how we treat one another.

Even though Solomon’s concept regarding the therapeutic value of movies seems rather

accessible, the solution to our problems might not always be this simple. Perhaps not all viewers will empathise with the protagonist Hannah and the story she presents on the tapes, but this will be elaborated and discussed later on.

## Analysis

This section of the paper focuses on analyzing the main characters Hannah Baker and Clay Jensen by using the previous described theories. The characters whom we are connected to and invested in are typically the ones we spend the most time with (Mittell 132). Therefore, these characters were an apparent choice when it comes to examining character engagement and character progression in this show. The analysis has been divided into two parts, based on the division presented earlier in the theory section. The first part will analyse the characters by using their names as subcategories and including examples from several episodes using the terms provided by Mittell simultaneously since they are connected. Moving on, the next part will use the theory produced by Solomon to analyse quotes and scenes in order to focal the positive messages within the series.

### Hannah Baker

The terms provided by Mittell are useful when categorizing the characters and examining how fictional narratives create emotional responses among its viewers. The concept of recognition explains how we distinguish one character from another, separate main characters from subordinating characters and understand changes in character's appearance over the course of a story. *13 Reasons Why* plays with character expectations since main characters tend not to die or depart in a show. Hannah is, predominantly, made present in the show through a range of personal data, in form of tapes, which she recorded prior to her death but also through flashbacks and other characters memories of her. The series begins by playing Hannah's voice from the tapes, while we see her locker at school decorated indicating that she is already dead. Furthermore, Clay sees her standing in the hall looking at him when she suddenly fades away and disappears (S1:E1 / 01:21-02:36).

The tapes have a specific purpose because they function as a source of contact and are presented to us with the use of voiceover. In that way Hannah's identity is created through the tapes. Hannah is somehow near with tapes combined with the various flashbacks in the show but also far because we already know that she is dead. Her decision to spend a great deal of time recording the tapes makes it clear to the viewer that she was not acting on an impulse: "This was

not a spur of the moment decision” (S1:E1 /20:42). She is one of the main characters in season one but in season two her role changes. Hannah begins to appear as a ghost and a figment of clay’s imagination while the trial regarding her death begins. What this means is that her character is no longer the narrator since her story was told on the tapes in season one and season two focuses on the recovery and healing process of her friends and family by showing the events from their perspective.

This makes viewers consider to what extent the tapes function as a form of truth contributing to a discussion of whether Hannah can be considered an unreliable narrator. She needed to tell her story for people to believe her and this way the tapes serve as an ambiguous presence of truth, sometimes questioned because Hannah could have made everything up. This is emphasised by several characters such as Courtney saying “Hannah’s truth is not my truth” (S1:E12 / 28:22) and Jessica, a girl Hannah refers to as her former friend, who tells Clay “We weren’t friends[..] You can’t believe anything that she says[..] She’s the one who ended our friendship and she knew it. She’s a liar” (S1:E2 / 39:12 – 39:33).

The concept of alignment can be used to figure out why viewers respond positively to some characters and negatively to others. Our alignment towards Hannah is influenced by the subjective access viewers are given to her. The time spent with Hannah engenders our sympathy and compassion for her as the audience start to see things from her perspective when she becomes more and more depressed. “There’s so much wrong in the world. There’s so much hurt. I couldn’t take knowing I’d made it worse and I couldn’t take knowing it would never get any better” (S1:E10 / 43:59 – 44:15).

Since the narrative portrays Hannah as a victim who suffers several misfortunes it can be argued that the audience is on her side because viewers get an understanding as to why she decided to make the tragic decision to end her life. In a flashback of Hannah and Clay working together at the movie theater, Clay mentions that he will be spending the summer with his grandparents causing Hannah to say “what am I supposed to do all summer without you?[..] you’re the only friend I have left” (S2:E7 /10:01 – 12:00), displaying the loneliness she experienced prior to her suicide

Since we get access to Hannah’s story told from her point of view on the tapes, viewers understand how sad, unhappy and depressed she had become and why she felt no one cared about her with statements such as “I just needed to be alone. This was starting to be more than I could live with” (S1:E10 / 24:11- 24:19). Hannah is in a great deal of pain which is expressed with the use of voice over from the tape she dedicated to Zach: “I wrote you a letter. I poured my heart out opening

up about personal things I hadn't had the courage to admit to anyone: How hard life was getting...How lonely I felt... (S1:E7 / 25:37 - 25:55). Later she confesses to writing an anonymous note for communications class saying, "what if the only not to feel bad is to stop feeling anything at all, forever?". Therefore, it becomes evident that Hannah is struggling and tortured emotionally leaving her feeling isolated and alone. As the note is read aloud and discussed she looks at Zach who knows she wrote it but avoids her causing Hannah to wonder why he chose to ignore her (S1:E7 / 37:13 – 38:38). These are some of the scenes where the access to Hannah's thoughts and private moments through her narration, alongside a growing attachment, ensures the possibility for alignment as the sympathy for her arises. What this suggests, is that the elicited sympathy causes the injustice Hannah experiences to facilitate a positive attitude in her favor.

Despite Hannah's immoral decision to end her life by suicide, she is still portrayed as a character with a certain amount of moral rightness. As she is given a ride home from a party by a girl named Sheri, they accidentally knock down a stop sign. Sheri is determined to pretend as if nothing happened, eventually fleeing the scene, but Hannah wants to take responsibility for the accident by calling the police: "Sheri! When you do something wrong, you can't just ignore it" (S1:E10 / 10:08). By giving the audience access to Hannah's more admirable qualities the show may succeed in facilitating character engagement.

Furthermore, the spectators learn that Hannah's life had been difficult. She recently moved to a new school, lost her best friend, gained a reputation for being a slut and was raped by a boy named Bryce. However even though some viewers could feel sympathetic towards Hannah's feelings of despair, they might wonder why she did not fight harder e.g. by reaching out to her parents. In other words, there are moments where her behaviour provokes a conflicted moral allegiance. This is also the case among some of the other characters such as Justin stating "she's a crazy drama queen who killed herself for attention" (S1:E9 / 45:57). What this suggests, is that not all viewers will identify and sympathise with Hannah. On the contrary, one might argue that the viewer is somewhat manipulated by the narrative to both align, and experience allegiance towards Hannah, which becomes further apparent, in the previously mentioned, scenes where she is depicted as a victim of bullying, slut-shaming, rape etc.

Mittell states that the characters the viewers spend the most time with and thus become the most invested in, provide the most interesting interior states (132). This may be the case in a scene taking place at a party where Clay and Hannah engage in a kiss for the first time. With the use of voice-over from one of the tapes, Hannah talks about how happy she felt and the future she



imagined between them is shown to the audience - “At that moment everything was perfect and for the first time in a long time I could imagine a future where I was happy”. They get into bed while continuing to kiss and it seems they are about to have sex. “I wanted you to do everything you were doing so I don’t know why my mind took me everywhere else and I thought of every other guy and they all became you”. During this moment Hannah cannot forget the betrayal she received from other guys causing her to become angry at Clay, while yelling at him to leave her alone (S1:E11 / 35:39 – 38:38). From a moral viewpoint, Hannah’s behavior seems reprehensible, but the audience has access to her thoughts and reasons for acting this way as the flashback is shown. This way the notion of alignment, which establishes a degree of intimacy with Hannah, answers why some viewers may sympathise with her in this situation despite her despicable behaviour towards Clay.

The changes to Hannah’s physical appearance which are always visible to the viewers also facilitate and symbolize a change in her attitude. She decides to cut her hair shorter a few days before committing suicide saying, “I needed a change. I needed to be someone new[...] I wasn’t going to be invisible anymore. I was going to start brand new” [...] you can’t change other people but you can change yourself” (S1:E9 / 01:56 - 03:14). At work Clay attempts to invite Hannah to a party. Although she initially says no, the next scene shows her outside the party looking at Clay through the window with her voice-over saying “I thought maybe starting over didn’t have to mean cutting myself off completely. Maybe I’d been hanging with the wrong people. Maybe I could start over with the right person” (S1:E9 / 15:02 – 15:30). Despite the difficult events in Hannah’s life, she alters her appearance as a sign of empowerment since she attempts to change emotionally: “I’m giving life one last try” (S1:E13 / 00:42). This is one of the recognizable ways her internal thoughts are manifested externally. However. Unlike other series, *13 Reasons Why* focuses on the trauma surrounding Hannah’s suicide by including her thoughts and feelings from the cassette tapes. This provides insight into her deteriorating mental state by exploring how Hannah manages her pain and adverse emotions. Perhaps the drastic change to her hair may also be concerning and could be considered a warning sign for her suicide (Leary).

Moreover, attachment is a crucial variable, when creating alignment, since our connection with characters can shift from episode to episode. The attachment some viewers may experience with Hannah could be because she is a fascinating character and she inspires viewers to become engaged with her despite the fact that she chose to kill herself. The draw some viewers feel does not override Hannah’s hideous choice but stems from her intriguing immoral action. This is because the audience finds it fascinating to imagine experiences in serials that they lack the opportunity to

experience in reality. The fictional bubble will allow viewers to witness actions and traumas which they are safe from in the real world (Mittell 145). As a result, much of our engagement will stem from our interest in reading Hannah's mind. By subjecting Hannah to several painful situations, the series awakens piety within the audience.

Both access and attachment are technical strategies that deepen our experiences with Hannah. It becomes clear that Hannah blames the people she mentions on the tapes for her suicide as she states "see, I can guarantee that one of the reasons that you're still listening is that you really want to know: who are the others? Who else is responsible for my death?" (S1:E2 / 06:23 – 06:36). Due to our alignment with Hannah, some viewers may find her worthier of our allegiance than the more distanced characters. This way her suicide and misbehavior become more motivated and redeemable than that of less sympathetic characters such as Courtney (Mittell 143-144). However, the alignment towards Hannah can change throughout the series because whether we find her likeable or sympathetic is based on whether we become aligned with her. After viewing the effect, the tapes have on other characters, such as Clay, some spectators might not find themselves relating to Hannah. Clay slowly becomes more and more unstable e.g. by hallucinating Hannah lying on the floor of a basketball game in a pool of her own blood, before storming out (S1:E7 / 28:23 -29:08). Perhaps leaving the tapes could be considered a cruel and vindictive act of revenge thus portraying Hannah as a repellent character. Although Hannah becomes less sympathetic than in the beginning of the show, some viewers remain engaged with her due to the alignment and allegiance they may experience whereas others may change their attitudes towards her. This way Hannah continues to surprise and intrigue the viewers causing us to consider whether she changes as a character.

By proposing different models of character change Mittell does not suggest that television's dominant approach to characterization is flawed by overemphasizing stability. The desire for stable characters with consistent traits and personalities is a major draw for serial storytelling, as we want to feel connected to such characters (Mittell 141). Some viewers might be quite disappointed if Hannah changed fundamentally since fans tend to complain when a character's actions seem unmotivated and inconsistent. This is a critique that speaks to the need for character stability (Mittell 141-142). Hannah may not change much, but viewers attitudes towards her may, as she becomes more elaborated with revelations about her backstory through flashbacks, as well as the shifting ways that other characters talk about her. On most series we watch rather stable characters interacting to form dynamic relationships, with such interactions providing the dramatic hook for change and development that might be lacking within the interior stability of characters themselves

(Mittell 137). This illusion of change is provided by Clay who breaks down after the reveal of the relationship between Hannah and Zach. Throughout season two, he struggles with the realization of not knowing Hannah as well as he thought he did, perhaps leaving some viewers with the same feeling.

In season one we know very little about Hannah outside the tapes – as she is limited to the ‘presence’ of the tapes. However, in season two we get access to other sides of Hannah as the show provides us with new flashbacks and new narrators. The show experiments with the use of interiority since each episode is told from a different character’s point of view. This level of subjectivity and new form forces viewers to watch some of the same situations from several point of views which makes us feel as if we experience new sides of Hannah. A character such as Hannah does not undergo a significant shift; it is instead the viewer’s understanding of her that shifts. This is related to the notion which Mittell refers to as character elaboration. Since Hannah is dead from the beginning of the show, it limits her possibilities to undergo changes as a character. Instead Hannah elaborates as the serial form gradually reveals aspects of her over time so that these facets feel new to the audience. Hannah is constructed in such a way that the viewers become emotionally engaged with her transformation, although perhaps finding it difficult to continue feeling sympathetic towards her.

*13 Reasons Why*’s flashback structure, and moments of recounting which intertwine past and present narratives, harnesses the power of character elaboration as each episode expose crucial elements of Hannah’s backstory that cast new light on her actions. Since we measure character change on the basis of our own allegiance towards Hannah, elaborating more about her backstory can make her static figure seem more dynamic so that our own shifting knowledge and attitudes create the illusion of character change (Mittell 136).

This perspectival illusion of change is not unique to viewers, but commonly seen within the relationship between characters themselves, as the most fluid dynamic of television characters is the way they interact with one another (Mittell 136). This is the case with Hannah and her surprising summer fling with a boy named Zach Dempsey. After Clay learns about Hannah and Zach’s summer relationship, he begins to question everything wondering whether he even knew her at all. Since season two proved that there was more to Hannah Baker than what she chose to reveal on the tapes, the new perspectives create a more flawed, complex and sometimes unsympathetic character whom the viewers might find interesting. On the tape she dedicated to Zach in season one, she only mentions how he hurt her, but later in season two we experience the events from Zach’s

point of view, showing us that he in fact apologized to her afterwards. What this suggest, is that this shift in narration from Hannah to her classmates between season one and two is what marks the change the audience experience.

Another example of this change can be experienced during the trial. Hannah had recently transferred to Liberty High prior to her death and it is revealed that she was part of a clique at her former school where she viciously bullied another girl named Sarah, who testifies against her (S2:E10 / 09:36 – 11:25). Initially this creates a surprising and less sympathetic view of Hannah since she blamed her classmates for bullying her on the tapes she left behind which eventually lead to her suicide. Since the bullying by Hannah was not mentioned before and viewers get access to this side of her at the end of season two, the change functions as a notion of character elaboration – as it was also part of her before.

However, later, in a flashback of a conversation between Hannah and her friend Tony, she admitted taking part in the bullying but states she regretted it “I know you think I’m this sweet nice girl, but I was an asshole to someone at my old school. I was trying to fit in with these girls, and they were ganging up on her and I thought better to be one of them than to be her[.] I wish I could take it all back” (S2:E10 / 43:05 – 43:41). As the viewers also get access to the thoughts and reasoning behind Hannah’s bullying, it could reestablish the alignment they might experience towards her. Despite Hannah’s immoral actions viewers tend not to judge characters we are aligned with as harshly as other.

According to Mittell viewers imagine relationships between the characters in a series (2015: 128) and this is also the case regarding Hannah. During season one the audience learn that Hannah had a crush on a boy named Justin Foley, who eventually became her first kiss, but the season offers the most shipping potential between her and Clay - which will be explored further in the next section. However, one of Hannah’s major ships occurs in season two, where viewers are surprised to learn about a secret romantic (and sexual) relationship between her and Zach Dempsey. This became surprising because viewers were not given access to the relationship in season one since Hannah decided not to mention it on the tape she dedicated to him. Some fans were outraged after the relationship was exposed because they had been shipping Hannah and Clay for a long time. However, others became obsessed with the new love story and showed their support by using the ship name and hashtag #Zannah to show their support (Rodriguez). This way on-screen relationships guide viewers how to feel towards a character (Mittell 144) thus creating a more sympathetic view of Hannah.

The opportunity for shipping arises when we are given access to their relationship as it becomes more intimate and personal. This is the case when Zach is shown opening up about his father's death to Hannah during a walk they share along the harbour. He confides in her about his feelings as the camera zooms in while depicting the two holding hands in a loving way and later on share their first kiss (S2:E6 / 19:49 – 23:22). The relationship evolves as they lose their virginity to one another and the show also provides the audience with several scenes of the two spending the entire summer sitting at the docks, eating ice-cream, reading books etc. some of which can be seen in image 1 and 2 below, in order to enhance the shipping opportunities between them (S2:E6 / 28:53 – 29:40).



Image 1: Zach and Hannah sitting at the docks together (S2:E6)



Image 2: Zach and Hannah engage in their first kiss (S2:E6 / 34:31)

## Clay Jensen

Viewers are acquainted with Clay for the first time in the pilot episode while deciding whether he is worthy of engagement. Clay is portrayed as a somewhat socially awkward person but also proven to be caring, intelligent and brutally honest. He is a good friend to those around him and often depicted as a decent person. Clay is devastated by Hannah's death and when given her tapes, he becomes horrified upon learning of the reasons why she killed herself. In season two Hannah begins to appear to Clay as a ghost and it seems his inability to accept her death and move on is contributing to his hallucinations.

Since Clay is the main character, it stands to reason that he demands a significant investment of time from the viewers. One of the devices that ensures this investment is alignment. While

following Clay and his adventures we start to develop a closer connection with him. As the series progresses viewers experience some of Clay's vulnerable and emotional sides. When the concept of alignment becomes successful, the viewer puts themselves in his situation, imagining the emotions Clay might be going through. The more insight viewers gain into Clay's motivations, opinions and moral orientation, the more interest we take in him. The viewer is often reminded of the moral rightness of Clay's character thus re-establishing him as the protagonist. This encourages engagement and sympathetic attachment since emphasising certain aspects makes him more favourable than other characters such as the antagonist and rapist named Bryce. By creating a highly unsympathetic and ethically questionable character, such as the Bryce, he functions as a way to enhance Clay's more admirable qualities.

Based on Clay's actions and the access to his thoughts through dialogue, some viewers may become attached to him thus resulting in alignment. Clay appreciates those who feel remorse for their actions towards Hannah such as Sheri when she takes responsibility for the car accident she caused which she threatened Hannah to keep quiet about. However, he is strongly disgusted by the majority of people on the tapes who attempted to hide Bryce's crimes - such as the rape of both Jessica and Hannah. Although others on Hannah's tapes attempt to intimidate Clay into keeping quiet, he refuses to give up showing his determination.

Throughout most of the show Clay has trouble opening up to the adults in his life, such as his parents, about the distress he experiences after receiving Hannah's tapes. Furthermore, he never tells his parents that the tapes exist or that he had recently received them. During a conversation with his mother he states "Look, I told you, mom, I didn't really know her" (S1:E5 / 55:32). However, in the next scene viewers experience Clay crying alone in the shower, showing the audience that he is in fact highly affected by Hannah's suicide (S1:E5 / 55:52 – 56:35). This scene induces intimacy and establishes a feeling of closeness by the access given to one of Clay's private moments. Ultimately, it helps promote a sympathetic attitude towards him based on feelings of affection.

Clay's guarded nature affects not only his relationship with his parents but also with his girlfriend. In season two Clay and Skye are kissing as he suddenly pictures Hannah instead causing him to fall. Although it is obvious that Clay is distraught, he convinces Skye that nothing is wrong. (S2:E1 / 51:29 – 52:13). In this cases Clay's overt actions speak louder than dialogue to indicate his subjective state. Therefore, we assume he is in denial regarding his true emotional state where it is only a matter of time before he experiences an emotional outburst due to the pressure he is

experiencing. In the end Clay's difficulties surrounding Hannah's suicide lead us to sympathize with his vulnerability and frustrations. What this suggests, is that the guilt Clay experiences, also functions to enhance his allegiance.

The series uses different aspects of characterization to structure the emotional responses. One of the ways viewers get access to Clay's thoughts and feelings is through his interaction with other characters. At the end of season one he breaks down in front of his mom saying "I lied. I did know Hannah Baker. We worked together all the time at the Crestmont. We had classes together. She was my friend. And I miss her... really fucking bad. I didn't know how empty it would feel. There's this big part of the world that's gone and everyone else just keeps moving forward. The worst part is there's nothing I can do. I can't save her. I can't bring her back. I'm completely fucking useless (S1:E9 / 36:16 – 38:15). This scene proves that Clay is both impulsive and emotional. Perhaps some viewers take enjoyment from this outburst where he finally opens up about his feelings.

The audience also get access to some of Clay's qualities through the tape Hannah made of him. The subjective access endorses the viewer to evaluate a Clay's moral concepts when Hannah makes it clear that he is not one of the reasons why she killed herself. He was the only one she cared about and only wanted him to be on the tapes because he is a part of her story. "Clay, Helmet (Hannah's nickname for him), your name does not belong on this list. But you need to be here if I'm going to tell my story. If I'm going to explain why I did what I did. Because you aren't every other guy. You're different. You're good and kind and decent. And I didn't deserve to be with someone like you" (S1:E11 / 38:57 – 40:01). This description of him enhances his redeeming qualities causing some viewers to experience allegiance towards him.

Moreover, one night, Sheri gave Hannah a ride home from a party but unwillingly drove into a stop sign which was knocked down. It was revealed this action caused a car accident which killed another student at their school named Jeff - who Clay was tutoring. Unfortunately, Jeff's parents believe Jeff himself caused the accident by driving home drunk, but Clay learns from Hannah's tapes that this was not the case. Afterwards he tries to convince Sheri to tell Jeff's parents the truth by saying "You have to tell them now[...] because every day hurts [...] Everyday they live not knowing the truth" (S1:10 / 35:03 – 36:24). This scene indicates that Clay has a high sense of morality and situations like this make him more likeable.

Our sustained allegiance towards Clay indicates that the shifts in his behaviour along the way can only be considered midlevel, rather than high-level. Despite his faults Clay possesses other condoning qualities such as his brutal honesty. It seems he is still motivated by his noble ethics and

consistent beliefs to uncover the truth behind Hannah's suicide and seek justice, even if his actions and attitudes vary from time to time. This reinforces our allegiance with him because we can sympathise with his moral as viewers mostly tend to judge characters by what they do (Mittell 135). Although Clay is often portrayed as a decent person he also makes some questionable decisions at times. This complexity is depicted when he chooses to punish a student named Tyler Down, for stalking and sharing photos of Hannah and Courtney kissing, by spreading a naked photo of him as revenge (S1:E4 / 53:09: 54:48). This immoral action is unlike Clay's quiet, nerdy and awkward character and shows his indifference towards bullying others for the sake of justice leaving the viewer shocked by his cold heartedness. Nonetheless it makes Clay less sympathetic since the audience knows that Tyler is also a victim of bullying and we see him alone while crying in his room afterwards. In this case it can be discussed whether the justice could have been achieved without harming others. However, based on the alleged alignment and allegiance towards Clay, perhaps some viewers are not worried about his moral decline since they can relate to his sense of justice.

The viewers gain access to Clay's subjective, interior thoughts through exterior markers such as his appearance, actions and dialogue. At one point, Clay blames Hannah for going to the "the clubhouse" which is a place where baseball players from the high school would party and abuse girls. While looking at photos of other girls who were abused, he says, "That's the thing I don't get. Why are these girls getting themselves into these situations in the first place?". However, this notion is challenged by Sheri who says "Clay, you don't know what was happening in this photo and you don't know what happened after. Girls don't get themselves into bad situations. Guys make the situations bad. You don't know what that feels like, to be a girl in that room" (S2:E10 / 48:42 – 49:30). By making such a problematic comment and insinuating that the girls are at fault when being raped, the scene creates a more callous and unsympathetic view of Clay as a character.

However, by becoming invested with Clay, we tend not to judge him as harshly as other characters. Despite Clay's moral decline and some questionable decisions it seems the viewer's judgement is affected by their involvement and engagement with him. Perhaps it could be argued that the audience find Clay's atrocious actions more justifiable based on the insight provided into his character and pleasing qualities. Nevertheless, the scenes only suggest where the prospect for allegiance can ensue since the level of engagement is based on the viewers subjective experiences.

It is important to keep in mind that alignment not necessarily ensures allegiance towards characters. As established above, some viewers are aligned with Clay, but it could also be argued



that we are aligned with Bryce as well. The audience is also given access to his interior thoughts, through the episode he narrates in the second season, but are not likely to experience allegiance towards him because we do not find ourselves sympathetic towards his ethics and beliefs. Instead the allegiance towards Clay and his fascinating appeal, intrigues the viewer to hypothesise as to what he will do next, how he will react, or what he is thinking.

One model of change, which Mittell refers to as character growth, is most common with young characters, such as Clay, a 17-year-old teenager. He is evoking the process of maturation while dealing with the aftermath of Hannah's suicide causing him to become more realized and fleshed out over time. In that way his emotional maturation fulfils a coming of age narrative. This framework succeeds particularly well because viewers know from the beginning that young characters are not fully formed, and the audience may expect the ongoing story to display them transitioning out of youthful tumult into more stable adulthood (Mittell 137).

The shifting allegiances forces us to consider whether Clay changes during the course of the show. Through various flashbacks, he is presented as a passive person and due to his introverted character, known to not attend parties. Also, later on, we realise that Clay was in love with Hannah but never had the courage to express his feelings for her as he usually avoids confrontation. However, it seems people underestimated him because after Hannah's death, he begins confronting the people she mentioned on her tapes. Also, Zach (Hannah's fling) has been putting polaroids of Bryce raping girls in Clay's locker in order for him to seek justice - since Zach believes Clay is braver than him by saying "I'm a fucking coward! And you're not". During their encounter at the clubhouse they are both upset with Zach stating "you can't take shots at the top and expect to not get hit back" which Clay replies with "I'm not afraid" as they both stare intensely into each other eyes (S2:E10 / 35:01 – 36:10). Perhaps some viewers desire to experience Clay succeed, causing them to take enjoyment from this scene as he comes closer to revealing the truth about the rapes.

All the obstacles he faces after Hannah's death is what forms him as a character since they make him more rebellious and courageous. It is unexpected how the tapes affect Clay's personality and behaviour and there are several scenes where he finally gives in to his emotions while showing the viewers a different side to himself that is angrier and more expressive. One of his breaking points is at the end of season two, where he steals a gun from Tyler while showing up at Bryce's house with the intention of shooting him but instead points the gun at himself as he imagines Hannah standing in front of him citing the tape where she described the rape (S2:E11/ 52:09 – 54:23). The scene is highly emotional thus portraying the frustration Clay experiences in his fight

for justice. This change in his behavior may also provide a deeper insight into his personality and subjectivity, thus generating opportunities for allegiance. When the object of our sympathy, such as Clay, experiences problems it causes reactions of distress. However, when he succeeds in improving his situation and grows as a character it can lead to feelings of satisfaction.

Although the pleasure of serial narrative stems from watching characters develop over time, it seems most television characters are stable and consistent rather than changeable entities. This is not to suggest that the major trauma surrounding Hannah's suicide does not affect Clay and impacts who he is, but in the face of such life-changing events, television characters are mostly stable figures, accumulating narrative experiences rather than changing from them. In other words, Clay does grow and mature as a character but never fundamentally changes. Viewers measure character change in terms of allegiance towards Clay which means it is the shifting knowledge and attitude within the viewer that creates the illusion of character development. This is done by giving us access to both his admirable and detestable qualities along the way causing shifting allegiances. Therefore, it may be more accurate to conclude that Clay elaborates rather than develops as a character and although viewers were not given access to these facets of his personality before, it does not mean they were not a part of him. His character elaboration then functions as a surprise given the initial impression of him as a presumably harmless person.

As previously mentioned, Clay struggles when experiencing a range of intense emotions as a result of the tapes. However, at the end of the second season, it seems he decides to let Hannah go while moving on thus becoming more mature. Clay's emotional journey resulting in character growth can be found in a scene taking place at the Spring Fling. Everyone embraces on the dancefloor when Clay and Hannah's song "the night we met" is playing which they danced to together before she died at the Winter Formal. Instead of screaming or running away, Clay is crying finally showing his emotions and leaning on his friends for support (S2:E13 / 55:40 – 58:03).

After Hannah's story has been told in season one, Clay not only grows as a character but becomes more educated. Although Mittell says it happens when "a mature adult learns a key life lesson over the course of a series and ends up a changed person" (138), it can be argued that this is also the case with Clay. After realizing he was unable to save Hannah he tries to learn from his mistakes by reaching out to his former friend, Skye. During season two they engage in a relationship and in a scene where they are about to have sex for the first time, he realizes that Skye has been cutting herself again. Rather than ignoring it or shying away from it, which he has done in the past when it comes to Hannah, he becomes upset saying "I will do whatever I have to do. I will

text you every hour” (S2: E1 / 04:53 – 06:20). By stating that she should have called him instead, it shows he truly cares about her. Later on, he also stops Tyler, a fellow student who had been sexually assaulted at school, from using an assault rifle to shoot his classmates at a school dance (S2:13 / 1:02:40 – 1:06:40) thus portraying a growing strength in Clay's character (Arendt et al. 8). In the end the audience witness Clay as he changes for the positive: He becomes more confident and some viewers will likely justify his otherwise questionable actions. Even though the attachment towards Clay subsequently changes by including the perspective and subjective access of other characters, the viewers remain aligned with Clay, and his goals in his search for justice and willingness to provide changes within his attitude.

In terms of Clay and shipping there are several girls’ viewers imagine him getting involved with such as Sheri and Skye but most importantly Hannah. Season one focuses on the romance between Clay and Hannah but this changes at the end causing a new relationship to emerge between Clay and Skye in season two. Shipping, as a form of viewing pleasure, is an important aspect of *13 Reasons Why* when it comes to the romance between Clay and Hannah. From the beginning, the series attempts to ship the two by focusing on the growing chemistry between them. During a flashback to when Hannah was alive, viewers learn that Clay had a crush on her as the two have gotten to know one another by working together at a movie theatre called the Crestmont where she trained him (S1:E1 / 27:55 – 28:46).



Image 3: Hannah and Clay working together (S1:E1/44:01)



Image 4: The imagined relationship between Hannah and Clay (S1:E11/18:05)

The two of them find comfort in each other, leaving the audience to speculate whether they will become romantically involved further on. This notion is enhanced with several scenes where

Hannah describes the relationship she wanted with Clay but never had the chance to have. Her dream is accompanied by a visual image of the two showing their love publicly at school, which is displayed in image 4 above. In this case the visual representation enhances the shipping opportunities for Hannah and Clay as viewers experience them together, rather than only imagining the relationship. Eventually, they finally share a kiss, which is depicted in the image below, but not before the viewers have the chance to “ship” them. The winter formal (school dance) provides some of the most important shipping scenes between Hannah and Clay (a visual illustration is showed in image 1 below). The dance presents viewers with an emotional scene where they engage in a slow dance while gazing into each other’s eyes which is depicted in image 6 below (S1:E5 / 32:28 – 34:13). Later on, Clay imagines the slow and passionate kiss between the two he wishes would have happened at the dance but unfortunately, Hannah left before it could happen (S1:E5 / 48:44 – 49:04). The audience learns that both Clay and Hannah were secretly in love with each other, but neither of them acted on their feelings until they kissed once a party (which is seen below in image 5). Afterwards Clay regrets not professing his love for Hannah when she was alive. One of the reasons why viewers may ship Hannah and Clay intensely is because of the access the audience get to Clay’s thoughts. His reaction to her suicide, and the various flashback, shows that he truly cares for her in contrast to other guys who hurt her such as Marcus.

In this case the romance between the main characters turn into a tragic love story, since Hannah’s suicide cannot be reversed. Although viewers are aware that Hannah is dead, it can be argued that this notion is sometimes forgotten when the shipping moments succeed in eliciting engaging characters. Although the audience mostly experience the love Clay have towards her, there are scenes indicating Hannah had feelings for him as well. During Hannah’s voiceover from a tape describing dollar valentine (an event at school where student could pay to receive a list of their true soulmates) viewers also experience a flashback of her filling out a list describing what she was looking for in a partner. Afterwards Hannah’s turns her head looking at Clay, as their eyes meet across the room, while saying “as I filled mine out I realized I was actually describing a certain someone” (S1:E6 / 01:29 - 02:31).

Shipping then influences the show and is a formal device used to create engaging characters for the audience as they can both discuss and root for their favorite couple. The shipping becomes successful when viewers root for the romance between Clay and Hannah even though she is dead. Nonetheless it seems to be appealing for the audience to root for love between them as it generates a

lot of passion among some viewers which can create a solid fan base for the show.



Image 5: Clay and Hannah share their first kiss (S1:E11 /18:45)



Image 6: Clay and Hannah in a romantic embrace at the Winter formal dance (S1:E5/ 24:41)

## Cinematherapy

According to Solomon's argument regarding cinematherapy, a series such as *13 Reasons Why* is said to have positive and healing powers. This part of the analysis seeks to incorporate the important, powerful and potentially life changing messages this series may offer – while including various examples of scenes featuring Hannah and Clay where this notion is evident.

When examining *13 Reasons Why* from a cinematherapeutic point of view it seems the series can provide a range of positive messages for viewers to learn from despite its massive criticism. One of the main intentions behind producing the show was to raise suicide awareness and perhaps it can reduce the risk of suicide for young adults. The positive effect of the show is supported by Dan Romer, a research director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania. He states that the show's second season provides a reassuring ending for Clay by focusing on his response to Hannah's suicide. Although he struggles with pain and grief at first, he progresses to a stronger place by the end of the season which sends a hopeful message to viewers watching the show. Even though viewers might be plagued by thoughts of suicide and guilt the series show that people are able to move past it (Pattani).

Clay begins being haunted by Hannah as a ghost which provide an opportunity for

conversations between the two since he remains traumatized by Hannah's suicide. During a heated talk between them in his bedroom he is emotional and angry causing him to yell "This is your fucking fault, Hannah. This mess started with you. I put out the tapes and that was stupid, but you made them. You fucked up people's lives!" [...] "You killed yourself and you didn't fucking care! or you never would have done it!" which Hannah replies with "I was hurting and I didn't think about who I might hurt" (S2:E8 / 52:35 - 52:59).

As season two progresses with testimonies the suspension arises. Some of the major themes in this season is the process of healing and road to recovery. Clay was beginning this process in season one which he continues in season two. It seems Hannah appears as a ghost for a reason and functions as an important part of his recovery since many of the conversations attempt to answer some of the questions tearing Clay apart. Perhaps others who have lost someone might also find themselves imagining the person the same way Hannah appears as a product of Clay's imagination while desperately searching for the motives and reasons behind the suicide.

Furthermore, Romer states "we've learned that there are some young people who can see positive things in a story like this". His study found that people who watched the show to the end were more likely to express an interest in helping a suicidal person. Romer concludes that viewers "came away with a greater understanding of how harmful it can be for people to mistreat each other". Netflix made a similar claim in 2018, saying the show opened up the public conversation around difficult issues, such as suicide, and fostered empathy (Pattani).

What this shows us is that coverage about people who overcome a suicidal crisis can be helpful. This show is an example of how art imitates life. As a result of watching *13 Reasons Why*, the healing stories within the show can help viewers on their road to recovery. They might find themselves inspired to reach out to someone they fear is suffering from suicidal thoughts. This is the case regarding Clay in Season one. Even though he struggles to accept Hannah's death and knows that there is nothing he can do to help her, he realises that there might be someone else in his life he can prevent from doing the same. While walking along the hall of his high school he decides to reach out to Skye - his former friend and future girlfriend in season two - by asking her if she wants to hang out with him some time. He even has the courage to tell her that he is not fine and asks whether that is alright (S1:E13 / 43:00 - 44:09). This might hopefully encourage viewers to be more honest about their true feelings to one another in the future.

At first it might seem like the plot is focused on the terrible, tragic suicide but the story is also filled with positive messages and tries to increase awareness about the devastating impact of

not taking action. The scene, when Hannah visits her counsellor Mr. Porter, on the day of her suicide to talk about the rape she recently experienced, is accused of mocking the role of the counsellor suggesting that adults are incapable of listening to the youth at risk (Jacobsen). However, it can also be argued that the scene teaches us some important life lessons by showing us the wrong way to do things (Solomon 28). This notion is related to the previously mentioned term Paradoxical healing presented by Solomon (29). It is difficult not to become irritated with Mr. Porter and the way he responds to Hannah. However, by watching Mr. Porter's behaviour it seems viewers can learn from his mistake when dealing with a suicidal individual such as Hannah. Perhaps if he had taken her more seriously she would have stayed and opened up to him. Most importantly the series challenges the notion that suicide is rooted solely within the individual.

Unfortunately, Mr. Porter was unable to see that Hannah was in an immediate crisis. "I just want it to stop... everything, life..." Hannah says, through tears but leaves his office before they have the chance to have a longer conversation that could have made all the difference. Therefore, she missed the opportunity to talk about what had happened to her (S1:E13 / 19:36 – 32:57). In this particular scene it is difficult to blame either Mr. Porter or Hannah, since they both make mistakes. Later on, Mr. Porter reflects upon their conversation and the things he would have said instead such as "you have so much life to live and you're gonna get through this. I'm gonna help you" (S2:E9 / 34:42). With the use of voice over he also states that "Hannah told me she was struggling but she didn't specifically mention suicide. If she had said those words, of course I would have taken action" (S2: E9 / 04:09).

This notion is supported by the writer of the book, Jay Asher, who states that Hannah is an imperfect person that pushes people away who we know would have been there for her and that she could have been more open. Moreover, he finishes by saying that Hannah did not do everything she could and that she should have done more - which she did not have the strength for (Beyond the reasons / 9:52). This is further emphasised with a voiceover from Hannah's mother stating "how can you fix something if you don't know it's broken? Hannah didn't tell us" (S2:E8 / 52:04). This way Hannah may leave the audience feeling frustrated with her lack of action.

Positively, after Mr. Porter discovers the part he played in Hannah's suicide by listening to the tapes, he becomes more interested in helping the students to prevent future suicides after realizing he could have done more. His intentions become clear in a heartfelt moment during his testimony in court where he breaks down crying while turning to Hannah's mother saying "I was just trying to do the right thing. I was following protocol. The protocol probably needs to change.

Mr.'s Baker I didn't mean to let your daughter down" (S2:E9 / 35:39 - 36:32). Ultimately, Mr. Porter represents the changes which are needed in terms of guidance counsellors (as well as teachers) and the training they receive – but also generally in society. Hopefully this character will encourage a conversation about suicide prevention methods around schools and faculties all over the world.

Perhaps the series has become successful because many adolescents find it relatable since it creates a reality of hopelessness that many suicidal victims might go through - whether we like it or not. Unfortunately, there are many suicidal individuals, such as Hannah, that does not reach out for help when they need it. This might be why the series tries to make us reflect upon the way we treat one another and encourages people to be kinder. This notion is supported several times by Clay. When asked by the opposing attorney in court whether he was responsible for Hannah's death he says "yes, I am. I let her down" (S2:E7 / 14:04). During a scene where he gives new students a tour of the high school, he becomes emotionally outraged. While listening to the tapes, Clay cannot obtain his anger anymore because he blames many of the students and believe they drove her to suicide by stating "why did she do it? Because the kids here treated her like shit! But no one wants to admit it". Afterwards he ends up screaming "everyone is just so nice until they drive you to kill yourself" (S1:E7 / 49:55 – 51:21).

Clay also engaged in several emotional conversations with Mr. Porter in his office. The powerful and painful scenes portray the guilt they both experience. Clay confides in him by saying "I wanted to talk about Hannah Baker. She pushed me away. I was thinking about how hurt I was, and I didn't even for a minute stop to think that she was hurting too". However, according to Mr. Porter, if Hannah wanted to end her life there was nothing anyone could have done to stop her while stating "Clay whatever happened to Hannah, between you and her, with other kids, she made that choice to take her own life". This leaves Clay frustrated continuing to say "But why? Why did she make that choice"? Mr. Porter emphasises that while it is important to reflect upon our actions after a suicide, people should not feel responsible (S1:E13 / 22:19 – 23:11).

This is one of the most important scenes since it challenges viewers and sparks a conversation about suicide prevention: C: "I think we should blame ourselves. I think we all could do better". P: "We can try to love each other better, but we're imperfect people. You know, we love imperfectly. We don't always get it right". C: "How can you just live with that? I mean, you're a counselor" P: "I have to live with it. You can know all the signs and understand the issues, and still come up missing something". C: "That's not good enough. What about the next kid who wants to kill himself"?



(S1:E13 / 24:45 – 25:21).

Clay confronts Mr. Porter because he wants to honour Hannah's wishes (since she wanted everyone to listen to the tapes) but also to inspire change by saying "You let her walk away. We all let her walk away" (S1:E13 / 34:33). Everyone on the tapes knew Hannah was hurting but did nothing to help her. This may teach the audience not to walk away from someone they know is struggling. Instead people should be doing something to relieve the hurt.

At the end of their conversation where Clay delivers the tapes to Mr. Porter, he conveys one of the show's most important and positive messages by saying "It has to get better. The way we treat each other and look out for each other. It has to get better somehow" (S1:E13 / 41:52 – 42:20). This is further emphasized by a powerful statement presented by Hannah on a tape: "no one knows what's going on in another person's life, and you never know how what you do will affect someone else" (S1:E7 / 45:54 – 46:03). This remark teaches viewers that every word and action can have a tremendous impact on someone. Hopefully the messages will inspire the audience to treat other people in their lives better in the future.

The previous conversation portrays a recurring, relatable theme within the show: understanding the motives behind the voluntary death of a peer. For Clay, the desire to spend more time with Hannah, reflects the desire to get to the bottom of why she committed suicide, i.e. he has an unfulfilled epistemological desire. It seems the same can be said for Hannah's mother stating "I have to know why. I need to know why" (S1:E4 / 09:12). Similar questions may torment people who have lost someone to suicide. As humans we try to understand the world that we live in order to survive. Understanding ourselves as human beings is one of the fundamentals of the human situation. It can be argued that our desire for knowledge is an epistemological instinct (Thorner 73). Furthermore "the desire for knowledge of the truth is elementary and necessary for mental health" (Thorner 79). The characters within the show have the same basic human need which may be a reason to explain their unfulfilled epistemological desire for knowledge in terms of Hannah's death. The desire for knowledge then becomes a search for truth. It seems humans have a need within them to try and understand why someone would kill themselves and why people treat each other the way they do. Perhaps the same desire for knowledge can be transferred to the audience at least to some extent.

The series is catering to a need created by fiction. In Hannah's case her suicide came as a surprise and left her friends and family with many unanswered questions – perhaps people in real life also have a hard time moving on after losing someone to suicide. If someone we know is suffering

from suicidal thoughts, or we, ourselves, have lost someone to suicide, the show offers an insight into what it is like dealing with these issues. During a conversation with Jessica at Monet's (Coffee shop) Clay states "I don't understand any of this [...] I guess I always thought: how much does all that high school stuff really matter? [...] we're only here for four years" which Jessica answers by saying "if you live that long" (S1:E2 / 39:43 – 40:01). This is one of many important conversations among the characters which will hopefully encourage the audience to realise that although some problems may seem small to them, they can affect someone else.

The show is both raw and honest since it does not shy away from the uncomfortable, graphic scenes, making it real and important. It reminds its audience that suicide should never be an option, but unfortunately still happens. This notion can be supported by a quote from Hannah's mother stating "We don't always get second chances to help people. To be there. In the right way. To love them" (S2:E8 / 40:51).

Ultimately, when someone kills themselves we tend to search for the reasons why and therefore the series displays that there are many, complicated reasons why someone chooses to kill themselves. During Hannah's conversation with Mr. Porter in his office on the day of her suicide, he asks her "so what happened Hannah? How did you get here?" and Hannah replies by saying "one thing on top of another" (S1:E13 / 25:50 – 26:18). What this suggests, is that countless factors contributed to Hannah's suicide some of which we may never know. What this suggests, then, is that issues surrounding the portrayal of suicide are complex and cannot (or should not) be simplified. This is further emphasised in a scene after Hannah's parents, Andy and Olivia, testify in court. They impose in a heated argument causing Andy to say "I believed that the school, the bullies, that monster (Bryce who raped Hannah) were responsible for our losing Hannah, but we're in this too" (S2:E8 / 35:48).

Season two focuses on the trial Hannah's parents have against her highschool and their search for justice. The trial functions as a framing device for the entire season which forces viewers to consider who is responsible for Hannah's death. This notion was also explored in season one during a conversation between Clay and Courtney (a girl Hannah mentions on the tapes) while they visited Hannah's grave at the cemetery. Courtney begins by saying "this was Hannah's choice. this isn't on anyone but her" causing Clay to become upset and answer "no it's on every person who talked shit about her and every guy who fucked her over and it's on you because she thought you were a friend" (S1:E5 / 41:32 – 41:43).

Moreover, individuals struggling with suicidal thoughts might also find themselves relating

to Hannah, who unfortunately was too consumed by her own pain to realise the damage her suicide could cause. This correlates to the notion presented by Solomon who states that viewers gain a lot from seeing themselves in the characters in the movies (22-23). In other words, the show may open a window into the thoughts and actions of those in a suicidal state, which could elicit compassion and a desire to help those who are suicidal (Arendt et al. 2). This is the case during a flashback to the morning after Clay, Hannah and some of their friends experimented with drugs. Hannah manages to express some of her dark, suicidal thoughts while they are all sitting together drinking coffee. As the camera begins zooming in on Hannah's sad and teary face she is saying "what's the point of anything? [...] do you ever think, I can't do it anymore? Like, I wanna die? [...] like everything's black (S2:E7 / 46:35 – 47:27)? Furthermore, on one of her tapes she states "the kind of lonely I'm talking about is when you feel you've got nothing left. Nothing and no one. Like you're drowning and no one will throw you a line" (S1:E7 / 04:27 - 04:44).

As the tapes progress, Hannah's depressive thoughts are worsened with statements such as "It seemed like no matter what I did, I kept letting people down. I started thinking how everyone's lives would be better without me. And what does that feel like? It feels like nothing. Like a deep endless always blank nothing" (S1:E12 / 33:44 – 34:15). Her situation may create a suspension of disbelief which means that the blur between fiction and reality makes the series becomes so real in its representation that the viewer forgets he or she is watching a work of fiction. This concept is important to Solomon and the work of cinematherapy because if this succeeds, viewers may accept the story or characters as real-life situations which they can see themselves through (2001: 26).

Sadly, Hannah was convinced that she did not have any friends and that no one cared about her. After a failed attempt to express her feelings to Mr. Porter (the guidance counsellor) she finishes the last tape by saying "Some of you cared. But none of you cared enough" (S1:E13 – 33:30) and unfortunately goes home and kills herself. Another powerful message is provided by Tony during his conversation with a frustrated Clay: "she took her own life. That was her choice. But you, me, everyone on these tapes, we all let her down. We didn't let her know that she had another choice" (S1:E10 / 46:48 – 47:01). Hopefully this will encourage the audience to be more aware of deteriorating mental states among their family and friends which could lead to suicide. Perhaps the show will make it easier to confront someone we fear is suffering from suicidal thoughts by reducing stigma surrounding suicide.

During his testimony at the trial, Clay becomes emotional when thinking about said event while stating that "summer gets away from you, and stuff happens [...] I didn't think I was that

important. And you always think that you'll have plenty of time (S2:E7 /10:01 – 12:00). Even though Hannah's story may be over the series displays how actions can have consequences and reminds those who are suffering from suicidal thoughts that there are always people willing to help - who will likely become devastated afterwards.

Unfortunately, Hannah was not around to experience all the changes embarked by her friends even though they treated her poorly sometimes. It seems that if she had chosen not to commit suicide and given it some time then many things would have changed. As the trial progresses in season two, we learn that she engaged in a secret relationship with Zach who feels guilty about the way he treated Hannah and the way their relationship ended. Unfortunately, she was never around to experience the effect she had on him or to hear him say "Hannah had nothing to be ashamed of. I made her feel like she did [...] and I'll be ashamed for the rest of my life" (S2:E6 / 51:42 - 53:54). In the end Hannah's story can teach the audience to be more aware, more vigilant, and more understanding of those around them. The show opens a discussion of suicide which forces us to consider whether it is important to learn the reasons why. Could it perhaps make our lives worse or teach us to treat each other differently in the future?

The tapes, made by Hannah in season one, create a state of distress and anxiety within Clay several times during the show. This is first seen when he has an accident on his bike while listening to the tapes and becoming frustrated with statements made by Hannah such as "do not take for granted. Not again. (S1:E1 / 20:31 – 21:47). In season two Clay tries to convince himself that he has moved on and is no longer affected by Hannah's death but that is not the case. During a somewhat heated conversation with his mother, about the upcoming trial regarding Hannah's suicide, she says "Clay, I know this is going to be very hard for you" but Clay is in denial and has problems sharing his feelings causing him to say "it's not. I haven't thought about Hannah in months". Afterwards he is seen in his room while experiencing a ghostly appearance of Hannah, proving that she still occupies his thoughts (S2:E1 / 08:50 - 09:31).

Throughout both seasons Clay reflects upon the ways in which he could have done more to help Hannah, by imagining the things he would have done differently and what signs he missed. Hopefully many viewers, who watched the series to end, were probably able to empathise with the challenges faced by the main characters and to take away a life-affirming lesson applied to their own lives. The second season may have conveyed this message with more effectiveness than the first season, which mainly focused on the harm that the suicide inflicted on Hannah's friends and family.

In the final episode of season two, Hannah's mother shows Clay a list she found made by Hannah featuring 11 reasons why she should not kill herself. Since Clay is mentioned several times it indicates that Hannah felt supported by him which relieved his doubts about his own role in her death. Furthermore, she also gave him the message that staying alive is always better than ending it perhaps helping him overcome his own suicidal tendencies (Arendt et al. 2019: 8) when saying “no matter how many reasons there are, there are always more reasons why not (S2:E13 / 36:12 - 37:39).

During Hannah’s memorial service Clay is struggling to keep himself composed thus resulting in a heart-breaking, emotional speech:

“I loved her. I loved her so much. And I ask her everyday why she did what she did. But I get no answers. She took those with her when she went leaving me, all of us, angry, empty, confused and I know that hurt won’t ever go away but there will come a day when I don’t feel it every minute”  
[..]“I can love you and still let you go [...]I hope that wherever you go next you feel peace, you feel safe in a way that you never did here” (S2:E13 / 20:20 – 23:46).

As everyone else in the room disappears Clay witness the ghost of Hannah for the last time which is depicted in image 7 and 8 below. Hannah arises walking out the door and functioning as a symbol of the grief, frustration and anger that Clay has finally let go of. Clay’s statement paired with a touching closeup of his mournful, teary face, depicts his most vulnerable side which may have a powerful effect in relation to the viewers emotional response when showing the horrible repercussions of suicide.

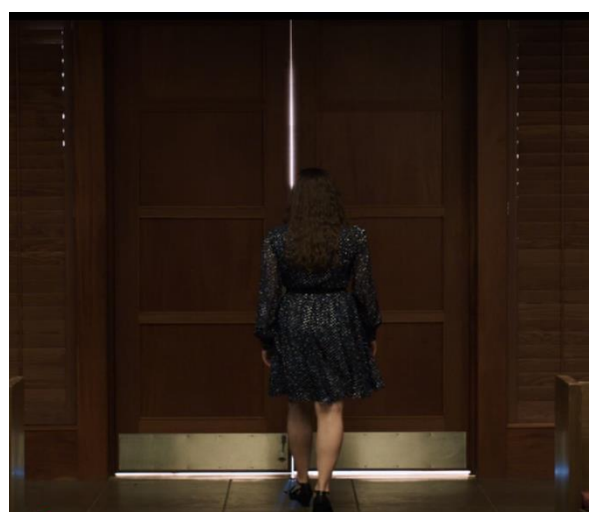


Image 7: Clay giving his speech at Hannah's memorial (S2:E13 /48:15)

Image 8: Hannah last appearance (S2:E13 /46:48)

Nevertheless, the series succeeds in creating an honest representation of suicide where its exposure might have produced beneficial effects on viewers regarding their intentions to help a suicidal person (Arendt et al. 2019: 8-9). This is further emphasized by Clay's voiceover stating "we can get better. We can do better" (S2:E13 / 39:47).

By incorporating Solomon's argument regarding the therapeutic value of movies, the tragic suicide, depicted below in image 9, will hopefully lead to a changed perspective among viewers in the way they treat one another. Nevertheless, the explicit suicide scene, where Hannah slits her wrists while bleeding to death in a bathtub (S1:E13 / 35:40 – 37:59), is shocking but by using Solomon's argument it seems there may be an importance of showing the scene. By seeing the pain, a suicidal individual, such as Hannah, experiences, the series will hopefully create a feeling of empathy towards her since it is both painful and heartbreaking to watch. This is emphasized by Hannah's father saying, "we owe it to the next kid to make sure this doesn't happen again" (S1:E1 /15:00). One might wonder whether suicidal content should be the object of entertainment, but some viewers may find that the direct and honest portrayal of trauma and suicidality enhances their awareness to these issues possibly helping to reduce stigma and create more opportunities for discussions.

Unfortunately, there are many critics who believe the disturbing suicide scene is dangerous (featured in image 2 below) thus contributing to a discussion regarding media responsibility when portraying suicide. This notion will be examined further below by exploring the influence of 13 reasons why on suicide contagion.



Image 9: The picture depicts the graphic nature of Hannah's suicide which has been both praised and criticized (S1:E13 /23:06)

## Discussion

Since its debut *13 Reasons Why* has inspired conversation, courted controversy and gotten a lot of critique globally based on its graphic depiction of issues such as rape and suicide. As previously mentioned, engaging characters is an important narrative element within the show, however some critics fear that this might cause viewers to identify with Hannah, leading to suicide imitation.

Based on this it would be interesting to discuss whether the series romanticise and glamorise the act of suicide while exploring the complexities of viewing practices further. Therefore, the purpose of this discussion is to evaluate what influence the series, and the characters within it, has had on the public. This will be done using the investigation from the analysis which examines how the series ensures character engagement formally while considering to what degree these devices impact society culturally. The outcry surrounding the series seemed to create a split between those who criticised it and felt the details around certain topics were excessive and might inspire suicide contagion and those who praised it and felt that it encouraged a good discussion among parents, teens, and adults working with children and adolescents (Walters). This makes for an interesting discussion as to whether these concerns are justified.

### Suicide in the media

The question of whether media portrayals of suicide can lead to imitation has been raised many times and hotly debated over the years, but it is only in the last 50 years or so that scientific studies have been conducted on this subject (Pirkis, Jane et al. 2). The discussion began back in 1774 when the famous author Goethe wrote a novel called *The Sorrows of Young Werther* where the protagonist killed himself. The popularity of the book and the increase in suicides in several European countries led to the assertion that the book was directly influencing some of its readers to take their own lives. Based on this the relationship between media portrayals of suicide and imitation acts is now known as the "Werther effect". The relationship between the novel and the increased suicide rates was never conclusively supported but the book was banned in several places after authorities became nervous about its effect (Pirkis, Jane 7).

Most research in the past on imitative suicide has focused on the reporting of non-fictional suicide stories. This was investigated by David Phillips in 1974 where monthly U.S suicide data from 1948 through 1968 was compared with suicide stories from page one of the New York Times. The study showed that newspaper stories about suicides may lead to imitation, within the readership area of the newspaper (Martin 52/59). However more recent research has discovered that news reporting on suicide where publishing stories about individuals who successfully overcame a suicidal crisis can reduce suicidal behaviour: a phenomenon referred to as the Papageno effect (Arendt et al. 1).

Based on previous studies it seems that a youth-oriented show, such as *13 Reasons Why*, on suicide was a reasonable target for concern (Wartella 369). However recently, alternative research strategies have been introduced to study media influences. In contrast to ecological studies that apply death certificate data to study community suicide rates, the newer paradigms include experimental studies that investigate youth's reactions to suicide in the media (Gould et al. 1273). The ecological studies are not complemented by descriptive studies or individual-level analytical studies which might shed more light on their criteria (Pirkis, Jane 5). More nuanced research showed that if news outlets changed their media guidelines for reporting suicides such that stories were more emphatically described, alternatives to suicidal behaviour were clearly stated and resources were available for those who felt suicidal, there was a decrease in regional suicides (Wartella 369).

## **The impact of fictionalised and non-fictionalised suicides**

A meta-analysis of media contagion and suicide among adolescents found that news reports of suicides had a stronger effect on media contagion and suicide in comparison to fictional narratives. Therefore, it is important that more research investigates the actual impact and effect of fictional media depictions and what role they may play on a variety of outcomes (Wartella et al. 369).

Following the release of the first season of *13 Reasons Why* and the initial negative press, a study of internet searches for suicide was conducted (Ayers et al. 1528). Some of the results, which can be seen on the figure 1 below, were mentioned in an editor's commentary by Anne Walthers (Clinical Associate Professor of Psychiatry and Human Behaviour) who states that google queries such as "how to commit suicide" and "teen suicide" rose 20-30% in the 19 days after it aired. However, others have noticed that this is not necessarily a red flag since searches elevate on any



topic when it receives media attention (Walters). Furthermore Walters fails to mention that queries such as “suicide hotline number” and “suicide prevention” also rose with at least 20%. Therefore, it becomes unclear whether the popular Netflix show helped those dealing with suicidal thoughts or reinforced suicidal behaviour which is why more research is needed to determine the real increases of the searches and rule out other factors. Furthermore, such studies cannot affirm that the people searching for such queries have actually seen the show in question which makes it an assumption and no direct causal link can be made (Ferguson 2)

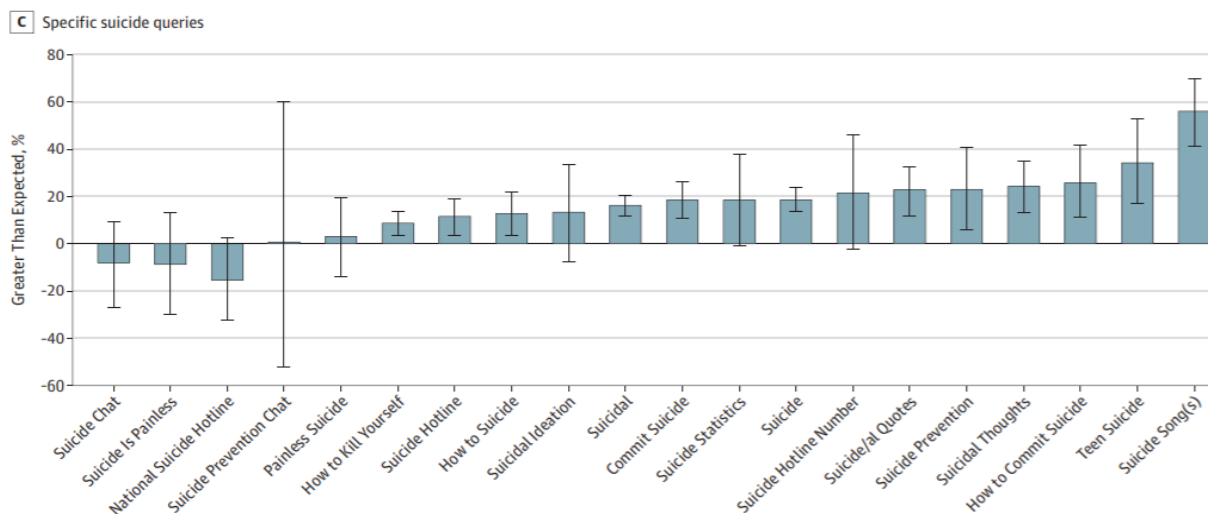


Image 10: The graph above compares internet searches of suicide after the premiere of *13 Reasons Why* with expected search volumes if the series had never been released (Ayers et al. 1528).

Before jumping to the conclusion that suicide contagion occurs when accounts of suicide are fictionalised, it is important to include an article published by Ellen Wartella, Drew Cingel and Alexis Lauricella featuring the press coverage of *13 Reasons Why*. The mentioning of previous work as well as their own study clearly indicates that well-designed media can have positive health effects on viewers, but this body of work has not seemed to change the rather negative view in the popular press about media and technology in the lives of young people (Wartella et al. 368). The scholars were interested in conducting empirical, scientific research to answer the highly applied question of how viewers responded to *13 Reasons Why*. This was done at the Center on Media and Human Development at Northwestern University which is a center that has been studying the applied impact of media on children and adolescents for nearly a decade and regularly evaluates media content (Wartella et al. 369). An online survey of 5400 individuals in five countries evenly divided between viewers and nonviewers showed that majorities had a better understanding of

suicide and most of them had sought more information on the matter after watching the program. This could be one explanation for the increased Google searches for suicide following the series (Wartella et al. 370).

In addition, the scholars say their most important finding was that many viewers reported engaging in empathic behaviour following exposure to the show. Majorities of adolescents and young adults said they tried to be more considerate about how they treated others and that viewing motivated them to help others they thought might be struggling with their mental health (Wartella et al. 370). It is interesting that most press stories did not cover any of the main findings from the survey since they are also applicable to the lives of viewers. Because of the controversy, many forgot that most young viewers watching the series reported engaging in helpful conversations with supportive adults and became more empathetic towards others. What becomes concerning is that controversy sells rather than science.

The scholars further mentioned that several press outlets such as major newspapers cancelled interviews with the lead researcher after receiving the full report. Therefore it is possible that they became uninterested in publishing news stories about the main findings when the press organisations learned that they were not able to directly assess the impact of viewing the show with suicidal behaviour, since this is a central question of interest. The press did however provide attention to the study conducted by Ayes et al. which relied on online data of Google searches and did not take viewers' suicidal ideation into consideration. Even though the study is important work and fully deserving of the press attention that it received, Wartella et al. argue that in order for the public to fully understand how viewers responded to the show, the press must be willing to present both the positive and negative findings – even if it does not correspond with the conceived narrative (371).

Some of the people that defend suicide in fiction are lecturer Marco Scalvani and psychotherapist Flandina Rigamonti who state that we should not regulate the way film and television companies depict suicide on screen. In their opinion *13 Reasons Why* does not violate any guidelines for suicidal portrayal in the media that might inspire increased risk behaviours in some vulnerable young people. The scholars reflect on whether any risk of self-harm can be reduced by regulation or guidelines and highlight the danger of censorship to public health. It seems we must accept that the media can have an affect but the scholars say it is likely to be minimal and not a sufficient condition to drive everyone to commit suicide. As a result, the series not only deal with trauma but also show a more positive interest in pathology when attempting to understand why

someone chooses to kill themselves.

It seems individuals in adverse life circumstances, who already have suicidal thoughts, may be most likely to act out their suicidal feelings when exposed to suicidal content in the media (Till Benedikt et al. 384). Additionally, some people dealing with issues related to suicide may be triggered by the suicide scene in the show whereas others may find it horrible, disturbing and disgusting. This way the series may not necessarily glorify suicide but instead serve as a caution proving to be more helpful than harmful when discussing suicide among teenagers. The evidence that impressionable adolescents are susceptible to the influence of reports and depictions of suicide in the mass media emphasises the importance of educating media professionals about the potential for suicide imitation and ways to avoid it (Gould et al. 1276-1277).

Scalvani & Rigamonti advocate for the moral merits of both reading and watching fiction containing depictions of suicide because it may, among other things, lessen the sense of alienation when one realises that he or she is not alone in their experience of despair. However, Sansea Jacobsen, a director of child and adolescent psychiatry at the University of Pittsburgh, says that the issue of suicide is too dangerous a topic for entertainment which, according to her, is the primary purpose in *13 Reasons Why* (2017). Nonetheless it can be argued that the show might be entertaining as well as educational. *13 Reasons Why* gives us an opportunity to talk about some of the troubling and traumatic events that confront young adults in American society today. Rather than sanitise the fiction, that deals with suicide and opens a dialogue with the people in need of help, the stories should be used to demand that the government invest more in mental health services of young people as well as provide more information and counselling regarding self-harm and suicide (Scalvani & Rigamonti).

Previous work has demonstrated that exposure to difficult topics in narrative media can have positive effects on viewers. A qualitative analysis conducted by Scholars Victoria Carmichael and Rob Whitley, where they examined the Canadian newspaper coverage of *13 Reasons Why*, showed that Canadian journalists tended to apply a critical lens when discussing the series and its implication for youth suicide. Articles both praised and criticised the series in equal measure, but their findings mostly suggest that the media may have a positive effect on public beliefs, behaviours and attitudes when promoting a dialogue regarding youth suicide (Carmichael & Whitley 7).

**Table 2** Basic description of newspaper variables

Variables	Number of articles	Percent (N = 71)
Link to wider social issues	31	43.7
Mental health expert quoted	32	45.1
Method discussed	8	11.3
Use of "commit"	11	15.5
Tell others how they can get help	18	25.4

Image 11: the table conveys the different relevant variables selected by Carmichael & Whitley. These were investigated in terms of frequency in relation to 71 different articles from Canadian newspapers mentioning the series *13 Reasons Why* (Carmichael and Whitley 6).

The table above shows that out of 71 articles, 45,1 % quoted a mental health expert. This indicates a pattern of responsible reporting and shows that many journalists used the series as an opportunity to raise awareness of suicide and suicide prevention (Carmichael & Whitley 6). With regards to suicide Carmichael & Whitley mention previous studies where the media proved to be a positive force when it comes to educating the community and raising awareness of important suicide related issues. However other studies suggest that some media tend to simplify issues surrounding suicide, which may lead to public misunderstandings and even suicide contagion. They also state that there is room for improvement in the Canadian media since only half of the articles linked to a mental health expert (Carmichael & Whitley 6) and only 25,4 % of the articles included information about where to get help for those considering suicide (Carmichael & Whitley 2). Furthermore, it stands in contrast to several recommendations which suggest providing information about available resources or crisis hotlines when reporting about suicide which could help those in distress to seek help (Carmichael & Whitley 6-7). Nonetheless the results show that *13 Reasons Why* does more than glorify suicide - also prompting a productive discussion and dialogue about youth suicide.

According to Carmichael & Whitley suicide contagion is a well-documented phenomenon which means that an increase in suicide and suicidal behaviour is observed following the suicide of a celebrity, peer or family member. The scholars furthermore state that some research indicates that glorified media coverage of a suicide can lead to an increase in contagion behaviour, especially if it describes the suicide method in detail (Carmichael & Whitley 2). This makes one consider how suicide should be portrayed without glorifying the issue. Nevertheless, in their research, which can be seen in image 1.2 above, only eight out of 71 articles described the method Hannah used

(Carmichael & Whitley 4). Based on their findings the Canadian media may in fact raise awareness of youth suicide rather than contribute to an increase of suicide.

The alleged glorification of suicide in the show attracted controversy among many people because it did not spare people the trauma of seeing the act of suicide. Viewers, experts etc. might ask themselves why the show decided to display Hannah's suicide in such graphic detail. The method of suicide, called exsanguination, which Hannah uses to kill herself in the last episode of season one, is clearly conveyed and considered to be graphic, bloody and brutal while showing what a horrifying experience it is.

Furthermore, it is interesting why the producers decided to make Hannah bleed to death in the show when she simply overdosed in the book: was it to create a more dramatic and entertaining ending? Perhaps the gruesomeness of the scene, which makes it painful to watch for some people, was intentional to portray that there is nothing worthwhile about suicide. This is the case according to Jay Asher, who is the author of the book, and said it served a crucial purpose. The scene was intended to be painful and disturbing to focus on the tragic circumstances that bring the protagonist to such extremities. The decision to depict Hannah's death in such a graphic manner was intended to send viewers the potentially life-saving message that suicide is never a glamorous choice (Orenstein). Ultimately people are debating whether the graphic scene was helpful or harmful. However, when discussing how we should depict suicide in the media it may become necessary to show the brutal reality, and excruciating details, instead of shying away from it.

One might wonder if the series had created the same effect by not showing the act of suicide. The question is whether viewers become more affected when experiencing the scene visually rather than reading it in the book. Perhaps when including the importance of the character's physical portrayal, the visual experience with moving images will have a more powerful effect. This is because movies and TV-series are offering advantages by providing stimulation on additional sensate levels (such as visual and auditory), making them more impactful than other art forms (Vallarelli et al. 94).

The same way viewers bond with characters in a TV- series, readers also form bonds with the characters that they read about in literary works. In this sense, the two media forms are very much alike; however, a major difference is that one could argue that viewers of a TV-series create stronger bonds than book readers. Actors embody their characters (Mittell 124) and TV has the advantage of being able to use exterior markers, because viewers can see the characters when they are watching a show.

This makes us wonder if human emotions are produced or amplified by visual works or whether they extend an invitation to experience a range of feelings that we may refuse. One of the scholars that refers to emotions and affect in terms of moving images is Solomon. As previously mentioned, the mediated nature of the relationship between the viewer and the characters in visual works can help viewers deal with life's emotional problems since it might be easier to talk about something fictional. Sometimes it seems the insight provided by the movie may also provide insight into the subject's own situation when they are presented with issues from our culture on the screen. However, one might wonder whether Solomon's argument is convincing and to what extent emotions function as self-care. By challenging Solomon's view of emotions, and its effectiveness, it might be worth considering whether viewers can solve their psychological problems by merely watching movies /TV- shows and if we all gain the same from them. We can wonder whether the process is more complex since audience responses are difficult to predict. Perhaps one should be careful when trying to turn human emotions into a tool or a resource and use movies/series as a form of self-regulation because a series, such as *13 Reasons Why*, might have psychological benefits for some people but not for everyone. On the other hand, the feelings elicited by movies may trigger therapeutically helpful emotions within some viewers that prove to be helpful in some cases.

When it comes to viewer engagement it is important not to generalize since there are many ways to engage with a fictional work of art. On the one hand TV-series can function as a fantasy fulfillment. This argument hinges on the idea of "affective closure" where the audience lives out desires in fictional form while maintaining normalcy in real life (Kotsko 4). On the other hand some people might watch a show such as *13 Reasons Why* because of their curiosity of human nature and its psyche. This way it may not only create a cathartic effect, where viewers experience an emotional release through art but also show what it is like dealing with suicidal thoughts and the trauma surrounding suicide.

The different ways viewers engage with TV-series challenges the notion of the widespread term known as identification. Given the impreciseness with which the term is generally used, it seems all the various responses and reactions viewers have along the way are more manifold. Mittell further argues for the fact that viewers do not literally think of characters as standing in for them within the storyworld or imagine themselves as being the characters, as implied by identification (Mittell 129). In other words, even if we engage with different characters it does not necessarily mean that we identify with them. It is because of these kinds of difficulties that a more

encompassing umbrella term such as parasocial interaction or parasocial bond has been introduced and many theorists are beginning to replace the term identification with it (Mittell 129).

When it comes to investigating whether viewers form parasocial bonds or identify with characters in *13 Reasons Why* it is difficult to resort to generalisation and assume that all viewers will experience the same since factors such as race, gender, nationality and age all play a part in forming their responses (Eder, Jannidis and Schneider 47). However, whether viewers experience one or the other also relies on one's definition of identification. Parasocial interaction is about encountering a figure through a medium such as TV-shows and treating the figure as if it were another human being. The parasocial bond, which functions as a one-sided nonreciprocal relationship between the viewer and character, is often referred to as identification but it can be argued that this term is too inadequate to convey the complexity of the viewing process (Eder, Jannidis and Schneider: 451- 453). When viewers engage with characters it involves several practices such as recognition, alignment and allegiance. However one might wonder whether viewing responses also go beyond these explanations and if so how might it be theorized?

While the parasocial relationships between media consumers and fictional characters, have been pathologized as an unhealthy inability to distinguish between reality and media, they should instead be viewed as “an active, participatory facet of media consumption, with fans choosing to engage with a media text and extend its reach into their own lives”. Mittell presents a less critical view by stating: we should not presume that caring deeply about characters is a sign of unhealthy boundaries but embrace it as a central component of storytelling where we temporarily give part of ourselves over to a fiction in order to produce an intense emotional affect (127).

Sometimes it will be difficult to feel the same as the characters and it can be argued that we feel with the characters and what they go through. Instead viewers might experience allegiance towards characters when we sympathise with them rather than identify with them. Even though a serial depends on creating connections between the viewer and fictional characters, it does not necessarily mean that the characters have to be sympathetic or morally upright, instead they must be compelling while creating an emotional attachment and investment in their lives, relationships and actions, leading us to think that maybe there is more going on than just identification (Mittell 231). In other words, not all viewers will identify with Hannah and her situation. Therefore, the series may not lead to copycat suicide acts among all teenagers watching the show. Perhaps by censoring it or stopping the production of the show we are missing an important opportunity to help some troubled and vulnerable adolescents.

Unfortunately some research shows a correlation between reporting on a suicide method and subsequent suicide by the said method. This often occurs if the suicide involves a celebrity or public figure. This was seen in the months following Robin Williams' suicide where a study found a 10% increase in suicides in the U.S. In fact evidence suggests that the youth is particularly influenced by suicide coverage in the media – both real and fictional. Notably it must be taken into consideration that Graham Martin found inconclusive evidence of influence after fictional stories on television with only some studies pointing toward increases of suicides after media broadcasts (Martin 52-55). Most evidence suggests that nonfictional media stories on suicide can trigger suicidal behaviour and less research has been conducted on the influence of the fictional representation of suicide. As such the media - and *13 Reasons Why* – can raise awareness of youth suicide issues, educate the public regarding social determinants and available treatments but may also contribute to suicide contagion (Carmichael & Whitley 2).

## **Warnings and the role of media guidelines**

Given the “dual potentiality of the media”, recommendations and practices are being implemented for journalists when reporting about issues such as suicide. When series, movies and journalists take on sensitive subjects, such as suicide, they have an ethical and moral responsibility to do so in a way that will not cause harm and create emotional distress (Carmichael & Whitley 2). This is something that *13 Reasons Why* took into consideration when producing the show. As such it was accompanied by a website called [www.13reasonswhy.info](http://www.13reasonswhy.info) where preventive, educational material can be found to procure crisis resources for support if viewers were suffering from mental health issues (S2:E1 – 00:30). People involved in making the show, such as producer Brian Yorkey and executive producer Selena Gomez have also spoken about the intentions and motivations behind the series in the follow-up Netflix programs, *13 Reasons: Beyond the Reasons*. The writers and producers state that the series is intended to help viewers start a conversation by shedding light on a range of difficult topics and believed the explicit suicide scene would discourage people from attempting suicide themselves (beyond the reasons).

The media have been recognized as shaping both the elicitation and prevention of suicide (Arendt et al.1). Therefore, The World Health Organisation released a set of guidelines for media professionals in order to reduce the number of suicide imitations, but these guidelines are specific to the news and not fictional entertainment (Gould et al.1273) - such as *13 Reasons Why*. While Netflix is not obliged to follow such censorship guidelines it is still important to raise awareness



about the consequences of graphic suicidal content which makes one wonder whether the show is doing enough to warn viewers of its graphic content. However, viewer discretion was advised by Netflix after massive criticism and concerns as the show is rated MA for mature audiences (“Talk to Someone”). Furthermore, the producers released a cautionary message for certain episodes in season one, which were also added at the end of each episode in the second season, about the show's potentially distressing content to further encourage potentially suicidal viewers to seek help as an attempt to practice responsibility (Arendt et al. 2) – An example of such warning can be seen in the image below.

However, it seems more research is needed to determine the effectiveness of trigger warnings and support services. The appearance of trigger warnings does little to prevent individuals from viewing the triggered material, since they only appear quickly before each episode. Research has shown that people with depression have an attention bias when it comes to emotional stimuli. This means that they are more likely to look at distressing stimuli than to look away from it. Taking this into consideration warnings may increase the likelihood that people with depression will view triggering material (Disner et al. 2). This shows how important it is to understand the effects of fictional portrayals when developing guidelines and discussing trigger warnings and censorship.

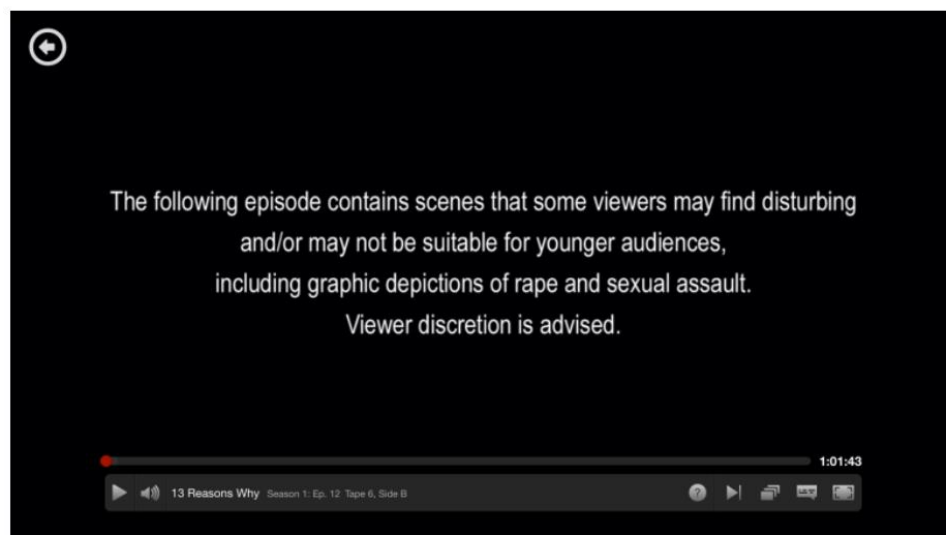


Image 12: the image portrays an example of a trigger warning which Netflix implemented in season one, episode 12 due to its graphic content (Nguyen).

Media depictions of suicide can elicit detrimental and beneficial effects on suicidal behaviour (Arendt et al. 1) and it seems Netflix worked hard to ensure that they handle this sensitive issue responsibly. However, there are critics who believe they could do more and the questions then become: should Netflix do more to ensure the appropriate age verification and is the series too easily accessible? Despite several trigger warnings the series is still available to everyone which forces us to consider who is responsible for an audience mostly composed of adolescents. When discussing responsibility, it becomes difficult for adults, trying to stop younger children from watching *13 Reasons Why*, since the show is available on electronic devices. Nonetheless, it is important for youth and adults to treat the MA rating with respect since most children should not watch this show - or only in the company of a trusted adult.

Despite its well-known public health implications, the extent to which it is safe to inform, discuss, and portray suicide within society is yet unknown. In times of easy access to digital content, the way issues surrounding suicide are portrayed in fiction needs to be carefully debated and thought out (Rosa et al. 2019: 2). According to Arendt et al. the producers should have done more to ensure the engagement from high-risk viewers in order for them to experience the potential benefits which the scholars found came after watching the entire season - since it is important that they also experience the part of the story which have a more uplifting effect (9). One might wonder how producers should be able to ensure this engagement and whether it is their responsibility.

What appears to be crucial “is a collaborative approach between professionals and the media to promote a negative attitude toward suicide without increasing stigma toward those with mental health problems” (Martin 51). This seems to be the case regarding *13 Reasons Why* and it conveys the impression that the intention was not a glorification of suicide but the opening of a discussion to a sensitive topic since the show uses trigger warnings as a mitigating factor for those watching suicide related content. Therefore, one could argue that trigger warnings, as opposed to censorship, is an alternative way to diminish the effects of suicidal content.

In order to determine the influence of censorship, Till Benedikt et al. ran an experiment using censored and uncensored suicide scenes from movies such as *It's My Party* (1996) and *The Fire Within* (1963). The researchers measured the emotional and mental state of their participants and found viewing led to a deterioration of mood and an increase in inner tension and depression but also to a rise in self-esteem and life satisfaction and to a drop in suicidality. What became interesting was that their mood decreased regardless whether they watched the censored version or not. Based on the study the scholars assumed censoring movies would not decrease its negative

effects because viewers “complemented the missing details of the scenes by using their imagination” (Till Benedikt et al. 325).

However, this experiment was conducted on non-suicidal individuals and perhaps the results would be different if the study was applied to clinically suicidal individuals who seem to be at greatest risk for imitative suicide since they are more impressionable when exposed to media products with suicidal content (Till Benedikt et al. 389). By taking the results from Till Benedikt et al. into account, then releasing a censored version of *13 Reasons Why*, where the suicide scene is removed, may not diminish the deleterious effect of viewing graphic suicide related content. In fact, by censoring the content, it could remove the powerful and hopeful messages it produces.

Jacobsen is one of the people who are concerned about *13 Reasons Why*, and states that the series romanticises suicide. She mentions that the imitative effect is intensified when suicide is presented in the absence of information about mental illness (which *13 Reasons Why* does offer). She is worried that many adolescents are watching the show unaccompanied by the adults needed to reinforce the warnings. Even though the sensitive topics raised are important and should not be ignored, she is concerned about the portrayal of the issues. The concern is that it normalises and legitimises suicide by suggesting that the event is reasonable, given a particular set of circumstances. Many experts fear people who have experienced similar problems may begin to view suicide as a viable option for them as well.

Several psychologists and mental health groups have spoken out publicly against the show and the question becomes whether it was responsibly produced. According to Ferguson most public statements by professional groups, advocacy groups, educators and counselors are not connected to a large base of empirical data and the majority of these concerns are based on speculation. This questions whether concerns about suicide contagion by fictional media are connected to peer-reviewed data (2).

Unfortunately, there are several cases where parents are blaming the series for the death of their children. A mother in Florida claims her 15-year-old daughter’s suicide attempt mimics the main character’s death. The woman uncovered texts that her daughter sent referencing the show. “It’s taking too long...it’s not like on 13 Reasons,” her daughter wrote in one message, after reportedly cutting her arms open from wrist to elbow inside of a bathtub (Perez). Furthermore, a teenager in Alabama, named Anna Bright, also killed herself two weeks after watching *13 Reasons Why*. Anna shut herself in the family bathroom and her body was also found staged in a way closely resembling the death of Hannah. It seems she also left seven letters addressed to specific people, the

same way Hannah left 13 tapes to the 13 people she blamed for her suicide (Is 13 Reasons Why Causing Youths to Commit Suicide?). This supports a notion presented by Arendt et al. who found that the series served as an indicator of distress among some vulnerable viewers who were already at a higher risk of suicide. Watching only some of the series led those viewers to discontinue exposure to the upsetting content eventually leading to an elevated risk for suicide in the future (7-8).

Ultimately, it is worth considering whether the positive attributes of the series outweigh the risks in terms of the more vulnerable viewers. For individuals who have a prior history of suicidal thoughts similar to Hannah, viewing such scenes may be triggering and cause heightened distress and pain. Hannah's belief that she has no other choice but to commit suicide, can be dangerous for young people who identify with these engaging characters. These cases show that Hannah's story can be problematic when portraying suicide as her only option due to the cruelty and indifference of those around her. Viewers may be inspired by the story and consider Hannah's suicide to be "successful," since it led others to feel remorse after her death. While the intention was to try to dissuade others from considering suicide as an option, cases such as the ones mentioned above show that exposure to specific suicide details and methods can elevate the likelihood of an attempt in individuals who are in distress and thinking of suicide. Due to this, critics such as Jacobsen and Walthers believe the series misses an important opportunity to educate viewers about alternative resources for help and support that are available.

Nonetheless these cases prove it is essential to understand the influence the series might have on its audience. It can be argued whether the cases should be interpreted as a call for censorship of the media. However, Pirkis, Jane et al. found that only irresponsible presentations of suicide in news and information media can influence copycat acts. This indicates that media presentations of suicide should be done responsibly and not necessarily censored (6).

Arendt et al. refers to two studies conducted after the release of the first season which found contradictory results (2). Rosa et al. studied Brazilian adolescents and found reports of worsening mood among those who reported to be suicidal prior to watching the show (2). Nevertheless, another study conducted by Zimmerman et al. of both Brazilian and US adolescents showed greater reduction than increase in suicidal ideation among those who reported they had ideation prior seeing the series. Notably this study only included individuals who had watched the entire first season, whereas Rosa et al. did not differentiate between those who watched all or only some of the series (Arendt et al. 2).

Moreover, the study conducted by Arendt et al. which was mentioned in the analysis,

showed that future research should distinguish between those who watched a few episodes and those who watched the full season since the beneficial effects of *13 Reasons Why* only existed for participants who finished the entire second season and those who stopped watching along the way were at greater risk for suicide (1).

Content that portrays suicide as the only possible solution to a difficult life situation should be avoided (Till Benedikt et al. 390). The series is often accused of romanticising suicide since it offers no alternative to Hannah's death. From the beginning of season one, we know that Hannah has killed herself which is why her scenes function as flashbacks. By using this approach, the series is often accused of presenting suicide as the only option when dealing with problems. However just because the show decided not to create a story of a person struggling with difficult emotions and figuring out how to survive with support from others, it does not mean that it glamorises suicide. Even though it is too late to save Hannah, a lot of changes are implemented to prevent the same from happening to someone else in the future.

Instead it can be argued that the series sparked conversations and succeeded in creating an opportunity to depict how painful a suicide can be while dispelling the myth of drifting away in a peaceful manner. In the book Hannah commits suicide by taking an overdose but if the show had chosen to portray suicide the same way by making her take a handful of pills and falling asleep afterwards, would that not have glamorised the suicide more?

According to Jacobsen the series focuses on blaming others while the tapes serve as revenge (Jacobsen) and agrees with Walthers on the fact that the show appears to be more successful at exploiting difficult topics than it is at raising awareness or offering solutions (Walthers). The concern is that the impact of suicide through depictions of grieving relatives, teachers, friends and classmates may encourage potential, susceptible victims to see suicide as a way of getting attention or as a form of retaliation against others which functions as an effective solution (Gould et al. 1279). However, the aftermath of Hannah's death also portrays all the things which she never experiences such as her parents falling apart or the guilt her friends felt for treating her poorly—causing her former friend Alex to shoot himself in the head. On the one hand the concern is that some people might be inspired by Hannah's suicide which could be traumatising to watch. On the other hand, the show could prevent future suicides among the youthful demographic by showing the harm a suicide can cause as well as how it affects and hurt people. This notion is supported by the show's creator, Brian Yorkey, in an episode called "beyond the reasons" where the cast, producers and mental health professionals discuss scenes dealing with difficult issues, stating that young

people could use an honest representation of their experiences (2:40).

A study conducted by Jena, Gray & Sunstein of 4,500 medical practices notes showed that physician visits for 14-20-year olds involving suicidal thoughts increased by 40% in two months after the first season aired (Walthers). Critics believe this is due to the show and its depiction of suicide which has sparked suicidal tendencies among adolescents (Carmichael & Whitley 6). Furthermore, physicians report that several children has begun creating lists of 13 reasons why they wanted to kill themselves while hospitals experience an increase in admissions of children with suicide-related behaviour (Arendt et al. 2).

After the release of the first season, The Toronto Star referred to a *13 Reasons Why effect* where an increase in suicide threats and hospitalisations among youth is linked to the series. However, the observed increase in doctors' visits could reflect an increase in the number of teens seeking help as a result of viewing the show. Carmichael and Whitley also mention an article which noted that calls to a Hamilton crisis line have tripled after the show was released and those in the mental health field say some of it is caused by the series (6). Even though it may not be entirely negative that more people are seeking help it seems that many of the callers mention the show and that for some it sparks suicidal thoughts. This has caused The Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board to issue a warning to parents about the show (Craggs).

When it comes to suicide prevention it is often discussed whether it is better to talk or to not talk about it. Should we take action or stay silent? (Carmichael & Whitley 7). Jacobsen states that talking about suicide does not increase the risk of suicide; it is the silence that is dangerous. This makes one wonder why the depictions of suicide in the media create such controversy. It seems that visual content may play a role in regard to suicide. On the one hand some of the research previously mentioned suggests that people prefer not to depict suicide out of fear that it could lead to contagion and suicidality. On the other hand, some of the research also shows that the series can open a discussion about suicide that may reduce suicide ideation and encourage help-seeking behaviour. The cases regarding young girls who recently killed themselves due to graphic images of suicide and self-harm, express why many experts are advocating for responsible media reporting of suicide. Therefore, it seems that future research of suicidal content on social media and its impact on users, as well as the relation between fictional media and suicide contagion, is something that calls for attention (Carmichael & Whitley 7).

## Implications for future research

What can we take away from all the conflicting findings so far? As media outlets continue to evolve, the exposure to controversial content will likely continue to grow. Producers of *13 Reasons Why* insist they wanted a vehicle to heighten awareness of the issues adolescents face but the question is whether the benefits have outweighed the risks? There are undoubtedly important topics to discuss but many continue to argue whether the graphic details are necessary (Walthers). The aforementioned studies suggest that triggers are individual and difficult to identify and avoid completely when dealing with such sensitive topics. For some viewers, the series glamorizes the victim and the suicide act in a way that promotes suicide, while for other viewers the series raises suicide awareness (Gilbert 1527). The discussion of whether the series romanticises suicide have provided many ambivalent opinions about the series and its implications for viewers and society as a whole. According to Carmichael & Whitley this ambivalence “parallels a wider societal discourse over the best approach to suicide prevention” (Carmichael & Whitley 7).

Furthermore this paper found that there are important consequences when several news outlets decline to cover research that provides positive outcomes of media use among youth. In the case regarding *13 Reasons Why*, parents, caregivers, teachers, counsellors and young people themselves are not being informed about all of the potential impacts of this particular show and generally of entertainment media on tough topics. This one-sided press coverage distorts the more general understanding of the many different ways the media influences the youth, with the negative consequences being more likely to be reported than the positive impacts (Wartella et al. 371). Studies that find an effect may be more exciting and more publishable, potentially distorting the academic record (Ferguson 7). This does not mean that the press should not cover the negative effects of media use on children and adolescents as well but in a world where media use is intertwined in the lives of young people it is also important to communicate about positive, adaptive uses of media. As a result, children, adolescents and supportive adults can understand the way in which media can, and cannot, be used to influence healthy development (Wartella et al. 371).

In order to avoid increasing suicide rates, it is crucial that researchers continue to identify possible risk factors for suicide. Even though no research will be able to determine all the factors that lead to or influence suicide, scholars can work to identify trends and raise awareness about potential risk factors. That said researchers need to examine the most effective ways to discuss and reduce the rates of suicide. Efforts need to be focused on the media’s potential for preventive programming and reporting (Gould et al.1273). In addition, developing guidelines for fictional

entertainment when depicting sensitive topics such as suicide would be desirable (Gould et al. 1269). Due to lack of consistency in current research results it seems widespread methodological concerns limit confidence in conclusions from many studies. According to Christopher Ferguson it seems a commitment to better methods and open science is warranted. It is recommended that individuals remain critical when linking public statements about suicide-themed fictional media to suicide contagion as the data may not be able to support such claims (1).

In conclusion many experts agree that raising awareness of suicide is vital to preventing it in the future but it is still unclear how to accomplish this without inciting a contagion effect. This is an issue of some complexity and requires that professionals collaborate with the media to achieve the optimum result (Martin 62). Clearly more research is needed in the search for solutions to determine what is appropriate and safe to show audiences. Until such time it is suggested that newsmakers and advocates refrain from making causal attributions regarding suicide-themed series such as *13 Reasons Why* (Ferguson 8). According to Romer series, such as *13 Reasons Why*, are complicated and the various effects they have on people are different which is why it is hard to predict or give advice about who should or should not watch this show (Pattani).

## Conclusion

It was the purpose of this project to explore how *13 Reasons Why* ensures character engagement, leading to a discussion of whether the series romanticises suicide. The investigation has found that One of the ways *13 Reasons Why* appeals to viewers is through the immense focus on character. The popular series is trying to create compelling characters, such as Hannah and Clay, and has succeeded with the use of devices such as recognition, alignment, allegiance and shipping that ensures character engagement among some viewers. The terms provided by Mittell, which are used to investigate viewers' emotional responses to certain characters, form a limitless variety of complex engagement patterns. The complex engagement produces a structure more accustomed to the range of emotional perspectives represented within the series than when examining the characters through the diminutive filter of identification. Although not all viewers will identify with Hannah, it does not mean that some will not find her character both interesting and fascinating. In conclusion, most viewers likely experience feelings of engagement and not necessarily identification towards the characters within the show. By knowing more about Hannah and Clay through devices such as



alignment and allegiance, and the context in which their actions are enclosed, the audience gain a deeper understanding of their moral values. The viewers care about the Hannah and Clay's well-being which fosters sympathy. Therefore, the audience is motivated by the narrative to empathise with them despite their questionable actions.

Furthermore, the analysis demonstrated that *13 Reasons Why* also provides its viewers with countless hopeful and life-altering messages which could elicit many positive changes in their own lives. The value of cinematherapy may help viewers familiarise emotional problems in the characters, such as Clay and Hannah, which they have difficulty identifying themselves. As such the messages provided by the series can alter behavior, foster insight, and deepen the viewers personal understanding.

As previously mentioned, suicide in the media is a complex phenomenon and we must not jump to conclusion without proper information and research. The discussion showed that reports of real suicides are more likely to be associated with copycat effects rather than fictional ones. Given the potential impact of both film and television, the portrayal of suicide in fiction needs more research in order to establish the harmful effects which *13 Reasons Why* has been accused of since it aired. The primary findings of several studies suggest that a contagious suicide effect occurs within a small percentage of vulnerable individuals who has a history of suicidal attempts and suffer from severe feelings of sadness (Rosa et al. 2). Even though it would be convenient to blame the series for the rising suicide rates within America, the discussion has proved that there are other convoluted factors which also contribute to suicide. Nonetheless, suicide among adolescents are not necessarily caused by the show since it is difficult to identify the impact.

Ultimately, the results suggest that a fictional story, such as the one presented in *13 Reasons Why*, with a focus on suicidal content can have both harmful and helpful effects on viewers. It seems media producers of suicide-related fictional content, such as Netflix, should be aware of the potential effects of their shows, particularly on vulnerable audiences – which they have proven in terms of using trigger warnings etc. It seems vulnerable adolescents with a high risk of suicide ideation should consider avoid watching the show due to its triggering content. However, for those who may see it as a valuable experience, there is no reason for the show to be censored. Nevertheless, there is not one single solution that fits all when it comes to suicide prevention in fictional suicide depictions. It appears that audiences relate differently to such content depending on their backgrounds and viewing patterns (Arendt et al. 10).

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