

## Connect Corner: Dramatization of Media Portrayal of Suicide Over Time: A Comparison of *The Virgin Suicides* to *13 Reasons Why*

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The first time I considered watching the controversial Netflix teen drama *13 Reasons Why*<sup>1</sup> was during an emergency room interview with a teenage boy. He said the show opened a window for him to contemplate suicide as an option. This was so compelling to me that after months of ignoring the chatter I heard about the show, I watched the first two seasons to try to understand how it might be influencing my patients' mental health. I wondered, have media depictions of suicide always held this influence, or was this something unique to this new hit series? In an attempt to characterize a shift in media portrayal of suicide over time, I decided to compare the movie, *The Virgin Suicides* (released in 2000),<sup>2</sup> and the Netflix series, *13 Reasons Why* (released in 2017). While *The Virgin Suicides*, set in the 1970s, chronicles the mysterious suicides of the 5 Lisbon sisters as told by a group of infatuated neighborhood boys, *13 Reasons Why* focuses on the singular teen suicide of Hannah Baker as told through the cassette tapes she left behind. Each tape contains one reason why she decided to end her life, centered around the people whom she felt hurt her most. Her classmates are similarly showcased in the aftermath of her death, with a focus on a boy named Clay. The allure of *The Virgin Suicides* hinges on adult nostalgia for 70's suburbia as watchers wade in the hazy, mysterious cloud surrounding the Lisbon sister's suicides. Conversely, in *13 Reasons Why*, there is no mystery as Hannah unabashedly details how the hurt she endured from her peers influenced her decision to end her life.

Both productions show the male figures having hallucinations of the deceased main character. In this way, the main characters who have ended their life remain present among the living characters, which has the

potential to confuse at-risk viewers about the finality of death. In *13 Reasons Why*, Clay consistently sees and converses with Hannah after she ends her life. In *The Virgin Suicides*, one of the neighborhood boys sees Cecilia in a tree as he drives through the suburb after her suicide. These portrayals have the potential to suggest to youth that if they are to end their lives, they will in some way become an object of immortal wonder and watch down upon those they left behind to bask in the attention that they were not able to access in life. Although both productions dance with the idea of a continued presence of the deceased, this concept is portrayed in a fleeting scene in *The Virgin Suicides*, while it is the core of the plot in *13 Reasons Why*. In *13 Reasons Why*, Hannah is present throughout the series as a ghostly narrator, which is achieved by depicting her as a hallucination of Clay's. Her continual presence alongside her peers whose lives now focus entirely on the tapes she left behind certainly does nothing to reinforce the finality of death, already a difficult concept for youth to grasp. It is easy to see how being a romanticized ghost and "teaching a lesson" to bullies might appeal to youth, but what they may not be able to understand is that one cannot both enjoy the attention and be deceased at the same time.

The most glaring difference between these two productions is the actual portrayal of suicide. In *The Virgin Suicides*, Cecilia's is the most dramatic of the sisters' deaths as she is impaled by a fence after jumping from her house. In the scene, she unrealistically levitates on the fence in her father's arms moments after having presumably jumped from her house window. On the contrary, everything in *13 Reasons Why* is painfully explicit and dramatized, including Hannah's suicide. A study by Bridge *et al.*<sup>3</sup> found that the release

of *13 Reasons Why* was associated with a significant increase in monthly suicide rates among US youth 10-17 years old. They concluded that the exposure of children and adolescents to the series warrants caution. Netflix subsequently publicly announced that they were going to edit out Hannah's graphic suicide scene "on the advice of medical experts".<sup>4</sup>

Comparing the two in the context of social learning, it seems that young viewers would be more likely to model the behavior which is explicitly laid out like a handbook (*13 Reasons Why*) than behavior which is unrealistic and distant (*The Virgin Suicides*). In a world where adolescents spend increasing amounts of time on their phones/computers connected to media, it is important to think about the replacement for what would have been face to face social learning from their peers in decades past. The idea that suicidal behaviors can be imitated from media is not new; a study by Gould *et al.*<sup>5</sup> related that social learning theory is a paradigm through which suicide contagion may be understood. This review called for continued education of media professionals about the risk of suicide imitation based on media portrayals. Furthermore, media is often referred to as a "super-peer" for adolescents; the behavior emulated on a screen is believed by viewers to be the norm. Explicitly portraying suicide in a peer who viewers easily identify with may make it easier for the viewers to see themselves carrying out the same actions. This "super-peer" effect has been studied in the context of youth's views about social approval for and prevalence of alcohol and tobacco use in their age group. In this study, they found that media related cognitions heavily influenced participants perceptions about the acceptance/prevalence of smoking and drinking.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, it is possible that media influences on cognitions about suicide may cause youth to believe that it is more prevalent, more desirable, more of an option and more accessible than ever before.

Overall, it appears that some possibly damaging themes have existed in media portrayal of suicide for years, but more recent productions have become alarmingly explicit and it is important for producers to think about

the impact their work may have on suggestible youth. A study by Arendt *et al.*<sup>7</sup> showed that young adults aged 18-29 were at increased risk for suicide if they were unable to finish the second season of *13 Reasons Why*, presumably because it was distressing to them. This leads one to wonder what kind of risk exists for younger viewers who may be inherently more susceptible to the negative effects of the series. It is important for producers to follow the existing guidelines for media portrayal of suicide, especially when creating a series whose target audience is youth. One of the pillars of the updated WHO 2017<sup>8</sup> guidelines is, "Do not explicitly describe the method used," and they elaborate that doing so, "will increase the likelihood that a vulnerable person will copy the act." It is important to pay attention to the direction media has taken with increasingly dramatic productions and the impact that these changes have on the public. Furthermore, these dramatic depictions of youth suffering, not getting help and ending their lives are not balanced with movies/TV shows about youth getting help, overcoming adversity, and finding an alternative to suicide. With this skewed presentation by the media, youth are bound to feel disheartened when faced with adversity in their own lives, when the reality is that help is available, and things can get better. It may make sense for psychiatrists to become more involved in media productions from a prevention and public health standpoint.

### **Take Home Summary**

Screen media portrayals of suicide have become increasingly dramatized and explicit over time, which is a concern because of known contagion effects.

### **References**

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