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Undergraduate

*Education is the most
powerful weapon which you
can use to change the world.
- Nelson Mandela*





A Review of the Werther Effect and Depictions of
Suicide: *13 Reasons Why*

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Werther effect, suicide in media, suicide contagion, *13 Reasons Why*,
trigger warnings



Abstract

The purpose of this review is to evaluate what influence Netflix's show *13 Reasons Why* will have on the public in accordance with the Werther effect. The Werther effect occurs when a publicized suicide is correlated with an increase in suicides (Philips, 1974). This effect is also referred to as suicide contagion and suicide suggestion. Research about the Werther effect can be generalized to gauge the possibility and severity of a contagion effect after the release of *13 Reasons Why*. Additionally, censorship and trigger warnings were analyzed as possible mitigating factors when viewing graphic suicide-related content. The limited effects of censorship and the lack of research surrounding trigger warnings have serious implications when it comes to moderating the effects of suicide contagion. Furthermore, Ayers et al. (2017) found that Google searches for "How to kill yourself" significantly increased after the release of *13 Reasons Why*. Thus, it is vital that research is done about suicide rates following the release of the show. The results indicate that television shows depicting suicide are associated with an increase in suicide and that warning labels increased desire to view violent content (Bushman, 2006; Schmidtke & Hafner, 1988). This review is meant to contribute to the literature on suicide contagion and gauge the impact *13 Reasons Why* will have on the public.



A Review of the Werther Effect and Depictions of Suicide: *13 Reasons Why*

According to Heron (2016), suicide is now the second-leading cause of death among individuals aged 15-19. In 2015, the suicide rate for individuals aged 15 to 24 was 12.5 per 100,000 (AFSP, 2017). It is estimated that for every successful suicide there are 25 attempts, and studies show that suicide planning has risen from 10.9% to 14.6% between 2009 and 2015 (Kann et al., 2017). The literature suggests that one contributing factor to suicide and suicide attempts is exposure, a phenomenon referred to as suicide contagion or suicide suggestion. For example, researchers Muller and Abrutyn (2015) found that individuals in Grades 7 through 12 were more likely to report suicidality if they had knowledge of a peer's suicide attempt. Further research has indicated that teenage girls are especially susceptible to increased suicidal thoughts and behavior following a role model's suicide attempt (Mueller & Abrutyn, 2014). In addition to peer influence, repeated media coverage of suicide has also been shown to trigger an increase in suicide and suicidal behavior (Niederkrötenhaler, Voracek, Herberth, Till, Strauss, Etzersdorfer, Eisenwort, & Sonneck, 2014). Unfortunately, rising suicide rates mean that suicide contagion is also on the rise, and as such, more research is needed to how to prevent its spread.

After the March 31, 2017 release of *13 Reasons Why*, a show that depicts the suicide of a female teenager in graphic detail, Ayers, Althouse, Leas, Dredze, and Allem (2017) found that Google queries related to suicide increased by 19%. The search phrases that significantly increased were related to methods of suicide and suicide prevention. Therefore, it is unclear whether the popular Netflix show helped those dealing with suicidal ideation or reinforced



suicidal behaviors. One ABC news article reported that two teens committed suicide within days of watching the series (Kindelan & Ghebremedhin, 2017). As such, it is important to understand why the show has such an effect on its audience. The purpose of this review is to gauge the influence *13 Reasons Why* will have on the public and the adequacy of the trigger warnings in the show.

Literature Review

The Werther Effect

The Werther effect refers to the fact that the rates of suicide increase after a highly publicized suicide. It was named after Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's novel *The Sorrows of the Young Werther* in which the main character commits suicide by shooting himself in the head (Philips, 1974). After its publishing in 1774, there was an increase in suicides. 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 effects. The contagion effect following the release of *The Sorrows of the Young Werther* indicates that suicide contagion occurs not only when accounts of suicide are real but also when they are fictionalized.

Evidence for the Werther effect

The terms *suicide contagion* or suggestion and copycat suicide are common synonyms for the Werther effect. The ground-breaking article "The Influence of Suggestion on Suicide" by Philips (1974) revealed that as front-page stories about suicide increase, suicide rates increase as



well. For example, after Marilyn Monroe's suicide was publicized, suicide rates increased across the United States and Britain by 12.04% and 8.83%, respectively (Philips, 1974). Philips also discovered that suicide rates were higher during the month the stories appear and in the following month. Subsequent research has discovered a link between suicide rates and celebrity suicides, suicide coverage in the media, and fictionalized accounts of suicide (Mueller & Abrutyn, 2014; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2014). In other words, the more people who are exposed to a particular suicide, the more likely they are to attempt suicide or complete suicide themselves.

Considering the aforementioned research, the Werther Effect may suggest that there is a risk for a significant increase in suicides following the release of *13 Reasons Why*. This has serious implications considering the show was marketed toward adolescents who are even more likely than adults to experience suicidal ideation after being exposed to suicide or a suicide attempt (Mueller & Abrutyn, 2014). The link between suicidal ideation and behavior should be explored as it relates to *13 Reasons Why*. As the character who committed suicide in *13 Reasons Why* was a teenage female, researchers should investigate how the rates of female teenager suicides and attempts changed after the show when compared to other groups (i.e. teenage boys, adult women, etcetera).

Suicide in Media

Niederkrotenthaler et al. (2014) discuss the impact of media coverage on suicide rates. They argue that there are five characteristics of reporting that contribute to the increase in



suicides: the amount of reporting, the focus of the reports (i.e. completed versus attempted suicide), the method of suicide, prominence of the suicide (i.e. front-page article), and the fictionality of the reported suicide. As expected, repetitive reporting and some methods of suicide were significantly associated with an increase in suicide rates, $r(0.21), p = 0.01$.

Furthermore, Niederkotenthaler et al. (2014) found media coverage of individuals with suicidal ideation was negatively correlated with suicide rates, $r(-0.15), p = 0.001$. According to researchers, these reports allow others to identify with people who have learned to cope with suicidal thoughts. However, this only occurred if the reports of ideation were not accompanied by a suicide or suicide attempt. Many experts agree that raising awareness of suicide is vital to stopping its spread, but research has not yet identified how to accomplish this without inciting a contagion effect. Looking at this study, it seems that the key is to not sensationalize suicide but to focus on individual cases of people who were able to cope with suicidal thoughts.

Following the release of *13 Reasons Why*, many news outlets reported on its possible harmful effects and copycat behavior inspired by the Netflix show. One news article, “2 California families claim '13 Reasons Why' triggered teens' suicides,” focused on how two teens killed themselves after watching the show (Kindelan & Ghebremedhin, 2017). A Google search of the article’s title will yield nine different links to the story on the first results page. Because research has shown that increased reporting of suicides is positively correlated with suicide rates, $r(0.21), p = 0.01$, it will be difficult to separate the influence *13 Reasons Why* had on suicide rates in comparison to the influence media reporting had on suicide rates (Niederkotenthaler et



al., 2014). While it is important for the media to raise awareness about suicide, it is equally important that they do not inadvertently create a contagion effect themselves.

The Impact of Fictionalized Suicide on Non-Suicidal Individuals

Research on the Werther effect demonstrates that media coverage of suicide is associated with an increase in suicide rates; however, fictionalized suicide can also have a negative impact on individuals (Philips, 1974). Till, Niederkrotenthaller, Herberth, Vitouch, and Sonneck (2010) ran an experiment to determine the effects of censored versus uncensored suicide scenes in the movies *It's My Party* and *The Fire Within*. Researchers used a scale from the article "Scales for longitudinal studies of affective state" to measure overall mood, and found that there was a significant decrease in overall mood, regardless if participants watched the censored versions of the movie or not, $p < .001$. There was also an increase in depression and inner tension, regardless if they watched the censored version of the movies or not. The researchers theorized that the censored movies did not decrease the negative effects because viewers simply "complemented the missing details of the scenes by using their imagination" (Till et al., 2010, p. 325). It was also discovered that the more an individual identified with the main character, the negative effects they experienced became more severe. For example, there was a significant relationship between identification with the character who committed suicide and feelings of depression, $r(0.33)$, $p < 0.001$. Therefore, as identification increases, so do feelings of depression.

Research has shown that censoring stories about suicide does little to mitigate feelings of depression in non-suicidal individuals (Till et al., 2010). These findings have important



implications for guidelines put forth by the World Health Organization (WHO) to mitigate suicide contagion. If the results from Till et al. (2010) are accurate, then releasing a censored version of the Netflix show *13 Reasons Why* may not combat the contagion effects or the negative effects of viewing graphic suicide-related content. More research is clearly needed in this area to determine what is appropriate and safe to show audiences.

World Health Organization Guidelines for Depictions of Suicide in Media

In 2008, the World Health Organization released a set of guidelines for media professionals to limit the number of imitation suicides. These guidelines included: “Avoid explicit description of the method used in a completed or attempted suicide” (p. 8) and “Exercise caution in using photographs or video footage” (p. 9). The reason these guidelines are set in place is to ensure that individuals will not be able to repeat or copy the way someone else has committed or attempted suicide. This is especially poignant because studies have indicated that explicit details related to a suicide lead to an increase in the rates of suicide (Niederkrötenhaler et al., 2014).

Unfortunately, these guidelines are specific to the news media and not entertainment. This becomes a problem when popular shows, like *13 Reasons Why*, are released that depict suicides in graphic detail. While Netflix would not be obliged to follow censorship guidelines, it is important to raise awareness about the consequences of graphic suicidal content. A discussion about how to mitigate the negative effects of media and art should be had, however, censorship



of any kind is polarizing. In the meantime, one could argue that trigger warnings, as opposed to censorship, is an alternative way to mitigate the effects of graphic content.

Trigger Warnings and *13 Reasons Why*

In response to backlash over the portrayal of sexual assault and suicide in *13 Reasons Why*, Netflix announced that they would add new trigger warnings to the beginning of the show's first season (Louis, 2017). The new warnings give a general description of possible triggers. For example, the warnings reference depression, suicide, sexual assault, and rape. Boysen (2017) defines trigger warnings as "teachers offering prior notification of an educational topic so that students may prepare for or avoid distress that is automatically evoked by that topic due to clinical mental health problems" (p. 164). While this definition is specific to school environments, it can be generalized to other situations by defining trigger warnings as any prior notification about topics or stimuli that may lead to distress caused by mental health problems. If a general definition is used, then the warnings released for *13 Reasons Why* would qualify as trigger warnings (see *Figure 1*). Implementing new trigger warnings was a way Netflix attempted to practice responsibility after they received backlash for showing scenes that depict rape and suicide in detail (Reilly, 2017). Unfortunately, trigger warnings themselves have not been researched, and as such no research has been conducted on the effectiveness of trigger warnings to reduce intrusive symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The only research on trigger warning thus far has focused on higher education and whether they should be used in classrooms or not (Boysen, 2017).

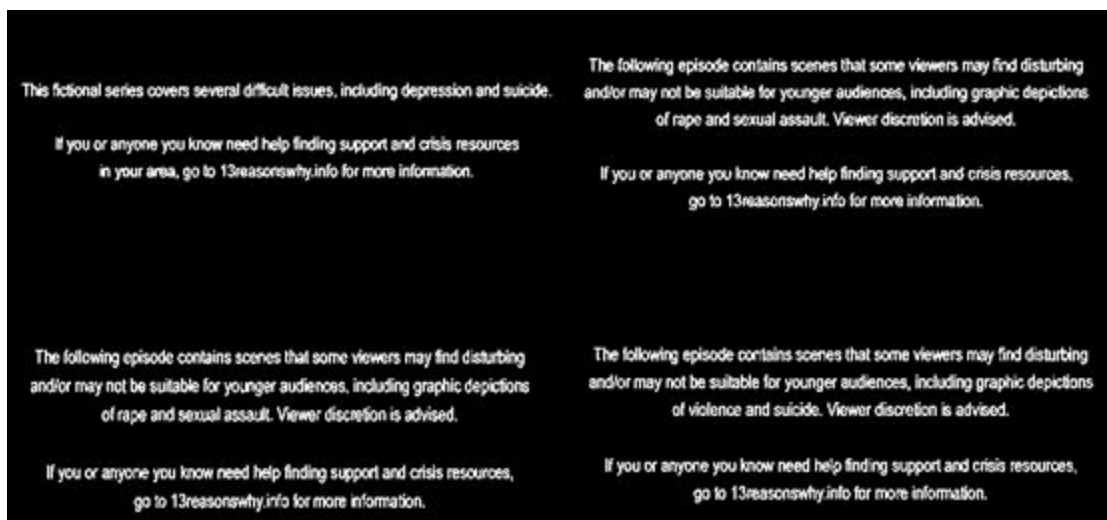


Figure 1. The trigger warnings are from the first, ninth, twelfth, and thirteenth episodes of *13 Reasons Why* (from left to right). These warnings were added after public backlash (Louis 2017). These are not the original warnings.

Related research of triggers and warnings

According to Grillon et al. (2009), giving a warning about unpleasant stimuli was associated with a decrease in startle response in individuals with PTSD. Thus, giving viewers a warning about triggering stimuli may decrease symptoms of PTSD such as re-experiencing and hypervigilance. On the other hand, the trigger warnings for *13 Reasons Why* may not be enough for viewers to avoid intrusive symptoms of PTSD. For example, Kleim et al. (2013) discovered that individuals with PTSD were unable to identify the trigger for their intrusive symptoms 39% of the time. This suggests that triggers are highly individualized and difficult to identify. Therefore, the trigger warnings produced by Netflix may not be specific enough to prevent intrusive symptoms for viewers with PTSD.



Figure 2. The website referenced in *13 Reasons Why* Trigger Warnings. Retrieved from <http://13reasonswhy.info/#usa>

Furthermore, the trigger warnings provide a website to visit for more information or resources. The website from the trigger warnings provides crisis information with links and phone numbers to multiple suicide prevention resources (see *Figure 2*). While the purpose of the website is to help prevent suicide, Niederkrotenthaler et al. (2014) found that media coverage of support services was related to an increase in suicides, $r(0.10), p = 0.04$. More research is needed to determine the effectiveness of trigger warnings and support services.

The appearance of the trigger warnings also does little to deter individuals from viewing the triggering material. They are black and white and only appear once before the episode begins. Additionally, research has shown that people with depression have an attention bias for



emotional stimuli, particularly sad stimuli (Disner, Beevers, Haigh, & Beck, 2011). This means that they are more likely to look at sad stimuli and less likely to look away from it. Taking this into consideration, warnings may increase the likelihood that people with depression will view triggering material. That is, the people who are more negatively impacted by triggering stimuli are more likely to attend to it.

Additionally, previous research has demonstrated that warnings about violence in television shows increase individual's desire to view the show with violent content. For example, Bushman (2006) found that participants who read a warning reported that they wanted to view the violent material more than participants in other conditions. In the study, participants were asked to read information about fictitious violent and non-violent television shows. Those asked to read information about violent shows were divided into three conditions: warning label, information label, and no label. The warning label contained the phrases "This program contains violence" (p. 2075) and "Viewer discretion is advised" (p. 2075) whereas the information label only contained the former phrase. Analysis of the data demonstrated that participants in the warning condition were significantly more interested in viewing shows depicting violence than those in the information condition, $t(869) = 2.35, p < 0.05$, or the no-label control condition, $t(869) = 3.59, p < 0.05$. The researchers hypothesized that this occurred because of reactance which is a negative reaction to the actual, perceived, or threatened loss. Therefore, when individuals believe that they have or could lose an option, they respond with desiring the 'lost' option more. In addition, Bushman (2006) found that "Children under 18 years old expressed the



greatest interest in viewing the violent programs, followed by college students 18–20 years old” (p. 2077). In other words, participants under the age of 18 were more prone to reactance than other age groups.

While the purpose of the trigger warnings was to dissuade vulnerable viewers of *13 Reasons Why* from watching the show, Bushman (2006) found that certain warning labels can have the opposite effect because of reactance. This effect was observed when the labels contained the phrase “Viewer discretion is advised” (p. 2075), like the trigger warnings for *13 Reasons Why*. Future research can examine whether there was evidence of reactance among viewers of the show. Additionally, more research is needed to determine an effective way to warn viewers, especially those under 18, of triggering stimuli.

Google Searches Following *13 Reasons Why*

Ayers et al. (2017) conducted a quasi-experimental study to determine if there was an increase in suicide queries following the release of *13 Reasons Why*. They discovered that between March 31, 2017 and April 18, 2017 there was a 900,000 to 1.5 million increase in searches related to suicide. Depending on the day, Google searches related to suicide increased by 15% to 44% than was expected. Among the search phrases that significantly increased were “how to kill yourself” and “how to commit suicide.”

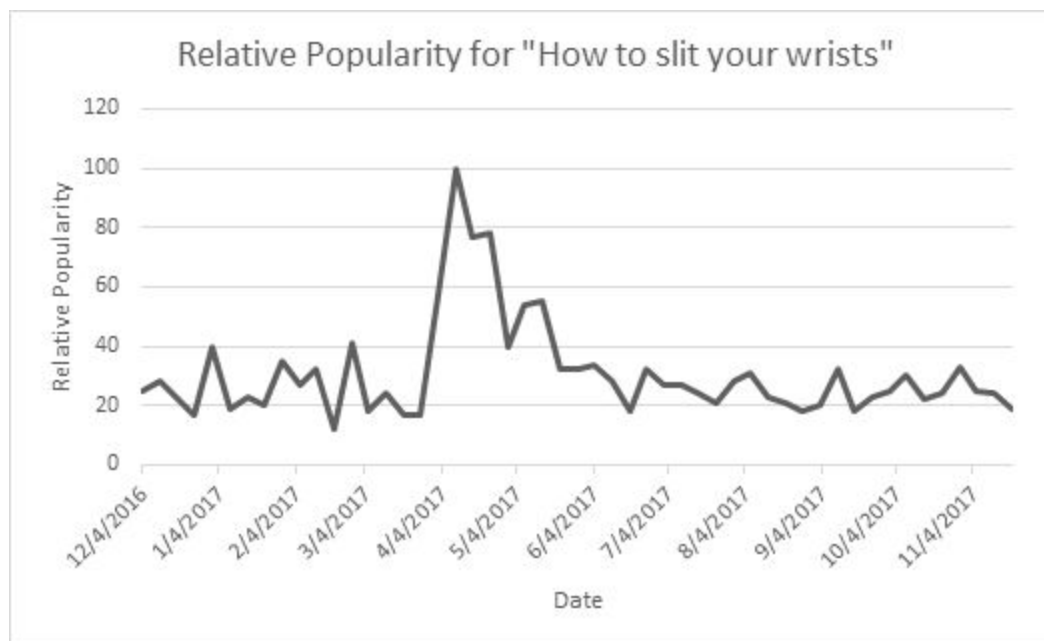


Figure 3. Google Trends Data on the Search Phrase “How to slit your wrists.” The data was accessed November 27, 2017. Data can be retrieved from:
<https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?q=How%20to%20slit%20your%20wrists>

In *13 Reasons Why*, the main character’s suicide by exsanguination is shown in detail. Previous research has established that when the media gives detailed information about the methods of a suicide to the public, there is an increase in suicides using the same methods covered in the news, depending on the methods used (Niederkrötenhaler et al., 2014). This may help explain why Google searches for “How to slit your wrists” reached peak relative popularity between April 9, 2017 and April 15, 2017 (see *Figure 3*). However, Google trends does not give specific information about the exact number of searches, so more research is needed to determine the real increase of searches.

Conclusions



Research on the Werther effect demonstrates a relationship between publicized suicides and increased rates of suicide; additionally, research indicates that the effect also takes place after television shows depicting suicide are released (Philips, 1974). Schmidtke and Hafner (1988) observed suicide rates following the release of a six-part television show in which the main character, a 19-year-old male, commits suicide via railway. Researchers found that there was a 175% increase in railway suicides of males aged 15 to 19. While this research is outdated, it does demonstrate how television shows can influence suicide rates and the importance of studying suicide contagion. As the most recent national suicide statistics are from 2015, it will be years before researchers can determine whether *13 Reasons Why* was associated with a contagion effect (American Association of Suicidology, 2017). With the controversial show being renewed for a second season, access to the suicide rates for 2017 is vital (Calfas, 2017).

In order to combat increasing suicide rates, it is vital that researchers continue to identify possible risk factors for suicide. It is also worth noting that suicide rates for adolescent females have reached 5.1 per 100,000, a 40-year-high (CDC, 2017). As the character who committed suicide in *13 Reasons Why* was a female 17-year-old, previous research indicates that suicide rates for female adolescents would increase (Niederkröthaler et al., 2014; Schmidtke & Hafner, 1988). While no research will be able to determine all the factors that lead to or influence suicide, researchers can work to identify trends and raise awareness about risk factors. In addition, the media could implement research-based practices when it comes to suicide coverage. For example, Niederkröthaler et al. (2014) demonstrated a significant relationship



between media reports and a significant decrease in suicide rates, $p = 0.001$. By focusing on stories of suicidal ideation, research suggests the media could significantly reduce suicide rates.

While it is vital that to discuss suicide as a growing problem, it is just as important that such discussions do not inadvertently create a contagion effect. Ultimately, writers, directors, producers, and the general media should use research as a guide when reporting and depicting suicide. That said, researchers need to further investigate the most effective ways to discuss and reduce the rates of suicide.

Implications for Further Research

Research on the Werther effect has identified numerous instances associated with an increase of suicides such as media reporting and fictionalized portrayals of suicide (Philips, 1974; Schmidtke & Hafner, 1988). However, future research can focus on which circumstances are more likely to spark a contagion effect as well as ways to mitigate the impact of suicide on the public. Additionally, when the suicide statistics for the year 2017 are determined, researchers can focus on whether there was an increase in suicides after the March 31 release date of *13 Reasons Why* or not. Researchers should particularly focus on suicide rates for teenage females, as they are the group most at risk for the Werther effect, as it relates to the show. Research can also indicate whether there was an increase in suicide by exsanguination, the method of suicide depicted in *13 Reasons Why* or not.



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