



Echoes of Silence: 13 Reasons Why and Unravelling Teenage Suicide in the Digital Age

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In the digital age, adolescents are significantly shaped by the media they consume, with social media and online platforms exposing them to both positive and harmful content. A concerning trend is the rise in teenage suicides linked to online influences, including dangerous games like the Blue Whale Challenge that promote self-harm. This paper explores Jay Asher's novel *13 Reasons Why* and its Netflix adaptation as cultural texts that delve into the theme of teenage suicide through the character of Hannah Baker. Hannah, a high school student, takes her own life due to a combination of factors—bullying, depression, loneliness, substance use, sexual assault, and emotional neglect. Using Thomas Joiner's Interpersonal Theory of Suicide, the study analyses how Hannah's experiences reflect perceived burdensomeness, thwarted belongingness, and acquired capability for suicide. These dimensions make her character a powerful representation of adolescent psychological distress. The widespread appeal of the novel and its adaptation lies in their reflection of universal teenage experiences, highlighting the emotional fragility and mental health struggles common among youth. This paper also examines the role of parents, teachers, school counselors, and peer groups in recognizing and responding to adolescent emotional needs. It argues that *13 Reasons Why* serves as a wake-up call for society, urging a

more empathetic, proactive approach to supporting teenagers. By shedding light on the internal battles young people face, the narrative encourages a deeper understanding and more compassionate engagement with their struggles.

Keywords: Suicide, Digital Culture, Teenagers, 13 Reasons Why, Interpersonal Theory of Suicide

Introduction

Suicide has long been a subject of profound debate and analysis. Defining the term is complex due to its personal and social dimensions. It can be seen as a condition, a decision, or an outcome shaped by existential distress. According to sociologist Émile Durkheim in his seminal text *On Suicide*, suicide results from an individual's inability to cope with the demands of life and the pressures of their social environment. He writes, "Suicide is the term applied to any case of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act, carried out by the victim himself, which he was aware would produce this result" (Durkheim 12). Durkheim emphasized that social circumstances and integration are central to understanding suicide, which is not merely a personal act but a reflection of collective failures.

The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that over 727,000 people die by suicide each year, and many more attempt it. Suicide is a global tragedy that leaves lasting effects on families, communities, and nations. In 2021, it was the third leading cause of death among individuals aged 15–29 worldwide ("Suicide"). As an educator, I have witnessed a disturbing rise in the need for mental health support among students. This growing concern has prompted action from educational institutions and policymakers, including the government's mandate to appoint academic counselors in schools and professional colleges. However, despite these policy advancements, a critical issue persists: students often do not voice their emotional struggles. Tragically, recognition of depression, trauma, or anxiety often comes only after a student dies by suicide—too late for intervention.

A recent incident in Kerala illustrates this crisis. Mihir Ahammed, a 15-year-old student of Class IX at GEMS Modern Academy, Kochi, died by suicide after enduring prolonged bullying in

both his current and previous schools (Shaju, 2025). Despite transferring in search of a better environment, Mihir continued to suffer in silence. Labeled a “problem child,” his emotional distress went unnoticed by teachers and peers (Binu, 2025). His story closely mirrors that of Hannah Baker, the fictional protagonist of Netflix’s *13 Reasons Why*, who similarly faced ridicule, exclusion, and emotional neglect. Both Mihir and Hannah sought belonging but encountered only psychological abuse and a lack of empathy.

Following Mihir’s death, his mother publicly revealed the extent of the abuse he faced, including physical assaults and humiliation by seniors. Despite her repeated petitions and multiple complaints to school authorities, they failed to act. This case, like the fictional narrative of Hannah, highlights systemic failure, institutional apathy, and the urgent need for early intervention in student mental health, underscoring a recurring pattern of institutional apathy and missed warning signs.

Although *13 Reasons Why* is an American series, its themes are universal. Teenagers around the world—regardless of culture, caste, or nationality—share common emotional needs. The pain caused by bullying, social exclusion, and a lack of belonging transcends borders.

As Joiner argues in *Why People Die by Suicide*, suicidal ideation must be addressed seriously and urgently. He writes, “When people have ideas about suicide, it is quite true that risk is elevated compared to people who do not have suicidal ideas. Moreover, suicide is irreversible, and everything possible should be done to prevent it. Alarmists overreact, but they are doing so in the safe direction; ‘better safe than sorry,’ they might say” (Joiner 30). His perspective highlights the pressing need to identify early signs of emotional distress. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the portrayal of teenage suicide in the Netflix series *13 Reasons Why* through the lens of Joiner’s Interpersonal Theory, examine how schools, families, and peer groups can better support adolescents, and advocate for stronger institutional frameworks to prevent similar tragedies.

Suicide-related theories emerged in the 20th century to comprehend and explain this complex behavior, moving beyond

individual explanations to account for a diverse array of factors. Foundational work, such as Émile Durkheim's 1897 sociological theory, proposed that suicide is deeply influenced by social factors, specifically the levels of social integration (the strength of social ties) and social regulation (the degree of social control). This opened the door for multidimensional explanations. In the 20th century, psychiatric and psychological perspectives also became prominent, with theorists like Sigmund Freud exploring unconscious motives and unresolved conflicts, while Albert Bandura focused on the influence of modeling and observational learning on suicidal behavior. Advances in neuroscience led to biochemical and neurobiological theories examining the role of genetic predispositions and neurotransmitters, like serotonin, in suicidal behavior.

Contemporary theories have built on this foundation, often adopting a multidimensional approach that integrates psychological, sociological, and biological factors. A prominent example is the Cognitive Theory of Suicide, developed by Aaron Beck and his colleagues, which proposes that suicide results from a combination of negative thinking patterns, such as hopelessness and self-blame, and a deficit in problem-solving skills. Another highly influential modern framework is Thomas Joiner's Interpersonal Theory of Suicide. This theory posits that a desire for suicide emerges from two specific interpersonal factors: a perceived lack of belongingness (social isolation) and a perceived sense of being a burden on others. Crucially, Joiner's theory argues that this desire is separate from the acquired capability for suicide, which is what enables an individual to act on their suicidal thoughts. Among these theories the researcher has selected Thomas Joiner's Interpersonal Theory, new generation theory of suicide, as it suits this research work. Joiner's Interpersonal Theory as the first ideation-to-action theory of suicide, which has likely spawned a new generation of suicide theories.

Objectives of the study

This study mainly focused:

1. To examine How Thomas Joiner's Interpersonal Theory reflects Hannah's experiences on perceived burdensomeness, thwarted belongingness, and acquired capability for suicide.

2. To analyse the role of parents, teachers, school counsellors, and peer groups in recognizing and responding to adolescent emotional needs.

13 Reasons Why - Netflix Series

13 Reasons Why is a gripping American teen drama series developed for Netflix by Brian Yorkey, based on the 2007 novel *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher. The show, produced with the involvement of Selena Gomez as an executive producer, centers around the lives of students at the fictional Liberty High School. Initially, the series focuses on Clay Jensen, portrayed by Dylan Minnette, who receives a set of cassette tapes recorded by his classmate Hannah Baker, played by Katherine Langford. These tapes reveal the reasons behind Hannah's tragic decision to end her life, along with the individuals she holds responsible. The first season, released on March 31, 2017, was met with critical acclaim, drawing attention for its intense themes, compelling storytelling, and the standout performances of its lead actors.

The series quickly gained popularity, becoming one of the most-popular shows on Netflix at the time of its release. Its success led to the production of three more seasons, with the final season airing on June 5, 2020. However, as the series progressed, critical reception shifted, with the initial praise giving way to criticism in the later seasons. Mental health professionals expressed concerns about the show's graphic depiction of sensitive issues such as suicide, sexual assault, bullying, and mental health struggles. In response, Netflix added warning messages at the start of each episode and released a video with the cast, urging viewers to seek support if they were affected by the show's content.

Despite the controversy, *13 Reasons Why* left a significant impact on its audience, particularly for its raw exploration of complex and often uncomfortable topics affecting modern youth. Katherine Langford's performance as Hannah Baker earned her a Golden Globe nomination, while the series sparked widespread discussions about mental health awareness and responsible media representation.

Interpersonal Theory of Suicide

The Interpersonal Theory of Suicide (IPTS), developed by Thomas Joiner, is one of the most influential theories in modern suicide research. Psychological evaluations of people who commit suicide are not possible, which restricts the tools researchers can employ.(Van Orden,et al.575)"The instinct to lie about suicide is not rare. In one study,44 percent of those bereaved by suicide had lied to some extent about the cause of death, whereas none of those dying from accidents or natural causes lied."(Joiner 6) The Interpersonal Theory of Suicide (IPTS), developed by Thomas Joiner, is one of the most influential theories in modern suicide research.

This theory provides a framework for understanding why individuals engage in suicidal behavior, distinguishing between the desire for suicide and the ability to act on that desire. According to IPTS, the desire for suicide is primarily driven by two key interpersonal constructs: thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness. Thwarted belongingness refers to the painful feeling of being socially disconnected or isolated, while perceived burdensomeness is the belief that one's existence is a burden to others. When these two feelings are intensely experienced together, they create a powerful desire for suicide.

However, the theory also emphasizes that the desire for suicide alone is insufficient to result in a suicide attempt. An individual must also possess the acquired capability for suicide, which is the ability to overcome the innate fear of death and self-preservation. This acquired capability develops over time through repeated exposure to painful or traumatic experiences, which can diminish the natural fear of pain and death. For instance, individuals who have a history of self-harm, previous suicide attempts, or engagement in high-risk activities may have a higher acquired capability for lethal self-injury. This combination of intense suicidal desire and acquired capability is what makes a person most at risk for suicide.

While IPTS has been widely influential, it has also faced criticism, particularly regarding its lack of new insights beyond the traditional social integration theory of suicide proposed by Émile Durkheim. Critics argue that the concepts of thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness are essentially rephrased versions of

Durkheim's idea of low social integration, which describes how a lack of social connections can lead to suicidal behavior. (Van Orden et al., 575) Despite this critique, IPTS has made significant contributions by operationalizing these concepts in a more testable form and guiding research on suicide prevention, providing mental health professionals with a clearer understanding of the psychological and social factors contributing to suicidal behavior.

Discussion

We live in a digital era where everything is easily accessible at our fingertips. From entertainment to education, the internet has made content widely available to everyone, regardless of age or location. One of the widely discussed examples of this accessibility is the Netflix series *13 Reasons Why*. Its popularity surged not only among teenagers but also among parents, school authorities, and academicians. The series became a subject of widespread discussion because of its graphic depiction of suicide and the intense emotional struggles of its teenage characters. Due to the ease of access and binge-watching culture, many teenagers were deeply influenced by the narrative, and unfortunately, some even tried to imitate the protagonist's actions, leading to real-life consequences. These incidents sparked significant controversy and concern globally.

As an English faculty member and researcher, I was drawn to explore this series after witnessing its impact. *13 Reasons Why* portrays characters whose emotional states—such as loneliness, rejection, broken friendships, and the lack of meaningful support—are relatable to many teenagers. These experiences align closely with the Interpersonal Theory of Suicide, which emphasizes two main psychological states: perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness (Joiner 35). The characters, especially Hannah Baker, reflect these feelings deeply. The absence of effective interpersonal communication and support systems in the series resonates with real-life challenges faced by adolescents. This makes the series not just a piece of entertainment but also a critical case study for educators, parents, and school authorities to understand the urgent need for emotional support, early intervention, and open communication with young individuals.

Literature is a vehicle through which students can discuss such issues via the characters' actions. Novels and movies provide a safe and reflective space for readers and viewers to explore complex and often sensitive topics such as mental health, bullying, identity struggles, trauma, and suicide. Through the lens of fictional narratives, learners can engage with real-world issues without feeling directly exposed or judged. Characters become mirrors and windows—mirrors that reflect the reader's own struggles, and windows that offer insight into others' experiences.

Films and adaptations like *13 Reasons Why* serve as powerful visual texts that stimulate discussion, promote empathy, and raise awareness about the consequences of neglecting emotional well-being. Literature classes can thus become forums where students critically engage with content, question societal norms, and articulate their own emotional and ethical standpoints. Furthermore, discussing such narratives encourages the development of emotional intelligence, communication skills, and a deeper understanding of the human condition—essential qualities for both personal growth and social responsibility.

The Netflix series *13 Reasons Why* begins with a school setting, where a photograph of the protagonist, Hannah Baker, is displayed on a memorial shelf at the entrance, signifying her absence and the mystery surrounding her death. Hannah, a 17-year-old teenager, joins a new school with high hopes and aspirations, longing for friendship, acceptance, and a fresh start. However, her experiences quickly turn into a series of painful events. In the aftermath of her suicide, Hannah leaves behind 13 audio tapes, each addressed to a person she holds responsible for contributing to her emotional breakdown. These recordings serve not only as a narrative device but also as a haunting testimony of how interpersonal relationships, bullying, betrayal, and isolation can lead a vulnerable teenager to take such a tragic step. Through these tapes, the series explores the dark realities of adolescent life and the consequences of neglecting emotional and psychological well-being.

The seeds of Hannah's loneliness are planted in the second episode as she initially finds companionship in Jessica Davis and Alex

Standall, both newcomers to Liberty High. Their friendship flourishes briefly as they bond over shared experiences at Monet's Café. Justin Foley, Hannah's romantic interest, shares a private photo of their first kiss—a moment she had considered deeply personal and special. The image, once circulated, quickly becomes the subject of gossip, especially after Bryce Walker forwards it to the school group chat. The emotional damage caused by this betrayal is evident, and though Hannah is initially devastated, Jessica and Alex support her through the ordeal. Hannah's voice, in one of the tapes, poignantly states, "In spite of differences, we were what we each needed at that moment in time" (*13 Reasons Why*, 00:25:06–00:25:08).

However, this connection soon erodes when Alex and Jessica grow closer, excluding Hannah and leaving her increasingly isolated. Her sense of belonging is shaken. When Alex and Jessica break up, Jessica accuses Hannah and says, "Because that's what sluts do," followed by a slap, marking the loss of a meaningful friendship (*13 Reasons Why*, 00:38:18–00:38:20). As Hannah narrates, "Losing a friend is not easy, especially when you don't understand why you lost them in the first place" (*13 Reasons Why*, 00:45:45–00:45:52). Her feelings of abandonment deepen, suggesting the emergence of perceived burdensomeness.

Hannah Baker's journey in *13 Reasons Why* vividly illustrates the Interpersonal Theory of Suicide. From the beginning of her school life, she experiences thwarted belongingness when she loses her two close friends. Shneidman describes psychological pain or "psych ache" as pain stemming from thwarted psychological needs (qtd. in Joiner 35). After losing her friends, she befriends Courtney to find out who is taking her photographs at night. When a photograph of Hannah and Courtney kissing is leaked, Courtney distances herself to avoid outing her sexual identity. Hannah is blamed and shamed once again.

Durkheim emphasized the importance of social integration, stating that individuals who are less integrated into society are at a higher risk of suicide. Joiner echoes this by asserting that "higher rates of suicide were associated with individuals who were less integrated into society" (35).

A significant emotional blow comes during the Valentine's Day event, when Marcus invites Hannah to a date only to show up with his friends and sexually harass her. When she protests, he cruelly says, "Thought you were easy" (*13 Reasons Why*, 00:41:14). Such abuse habituates individuals to pain and erodes their self-worth, increasing suicide risk (Joiner 78).

Hannah's anonymously published poem in Episode 8 reveals intense psychological pain through lines like "skin to cover all my thoughts" and "stones tied to my feet," reflecting suicidal ideation. Joiner notes that suicidal individuals may view death as a form of relief (87). Her classmates mock the poem, and the counselor fails to identify it as a cry for help. When Mr. Baker later confronts the counselor about the poem, he says, "God help them if they come to you" (*13 Reasons Why*, 00:06:48–00:07:17).

Later, Hannah cuts her hair—a sign of seeking control or signaling distress. Yet no one notices, not even her parents, preoccupied with their business. Her mother's passive response to Hannah mentioning a party—"Go, don't go. I don't know. It's up to you" (*13 Reasons Why*, 00:11:50–00:11:52)—underscores emotional neglect. Parents often mistake financial provision for emotional presence.

In Episode 12, Hannah offers her savings to her struggling parents. Her father replies, "These aren't your money problems. They are ours" (*13 Reasons Why*, 00:11:00). When she loses the money, her mother scolds her. Hannah reflects, "It seemed like no matter what I did, I let people down" (*13 Reasons Why*, 00:33:44–00:33:48), a clear sign of perceived burdensomeness.

That night, Hannah is raped by Bryce Walker. Sexual assault is a traumatic event that accelerates acquired capability for suicide. Joiner writes, "Any activity that allows people to get used to pain and provocation can serve to reduce fear of injury and self-injury" (59). Hannah later says, "I felt like I was already dead" (*13 Reasons Why*, 00:45:37–00:47:14).

In Episode 13, Hannah visits Mr. Porter, the school counselor, hoping someone will recognize her distress. She expresses numbness: "Everything, I guess... Lost, I guess. Sort of empty. I don't feel anything. Like I don't care anymore" (*13 Reasons Why*, 00:19:42–00:20:32).

She discloses that Clay “hates” her, a sign of isolation (*13 Reasons Why*, 00:22:05–00:22:07). When she recounts the rape, Porter asks, “Did you tell him to stop?” and “Maybe you consented, then changed your mind?” (*13 Reasons Why*, 00:29:16–00:29:28), invalidating her trauma. She leaves, waiting outside, hoping he will stop her. He does not. Individuals may linger for intervention before suicide. When ignored, they accept death. Hannah asks, “Can you promise he’ll go to jail?” Mr. Porter replies, “I can’t promise that,” sealing her decision (*13 Reasons Why*, 00:32:32–00:32:34). Joiner further notes that acquired capability arises from habituation to pain and trauma. Hannah, abandoned by peers and invalidated by adults, gradually grows fearless. Her emotional numbness signals she no longer fears death. Her final silence is not sudden—it is the echo of many unanswered cries.

As someone who worked at a suicide prevention NGO, I saw firsthand how individuals on the brink of suicide do not usually take that step without exhausting all possibilities for help. Many just want someone to listen. They call not because they want to die immediately but because they are searching for a reason to stay alive. If each person they turn to dismisses their pain, they eventually reach a place of what Joiner calls “acquired capability.” Their fear of death diminishes. Pain and trauma no longer scare them—they have been habituated to it. Joiner writes, “Through years of frequent provocative and painful experiences, people do not need short-term practice; they just go.” (59)

Joiner’s theory further explains that suicidal behavior can stem from either fearlessness or courage—or both. Citing psychologist Stanley Rachman, Joiner distinguishes between losing fear entirely and pushing through fear with determination. ((64) In Hannah’s case, we see a progression toward emotional numbness. The repeated abuse, isolation, and invalidation have rendered her both fearless and resolved. When no help comes after her final attempt to speak, she walks away from life—not impulsively, but as someone who has rehearsed this emotional exit many times before.

Conclusion

Hannah Baker’s death is not the result of a single event but a cumulative failure of the systems and people around her. Hannah

made several attempts to communicate her distress and seek assistance, but at each turn, her voice was minimized or ignored. As mental health professionals, educators, and caregivers, we must recognize the critical importance of listening without judgment. Statements indicative of apathy, such as “I don’t care anymore,” should be interpreted as critical indicators requiring immediate and supportive intervention rather than dismissal. Because sometimes, suicide doesn’t happen when someone gives up on life—but when they finally accept that no one else will fight for them to stay.

The Netflix series *13 Reasons Why* became more than just a television drama—it became a global conversation starter. Its raw and unsettling portrayal of teenage struggles brought mental health, bullying, sexual assault, and suicide into mainstream discourse, especially among adolescents. While the show drew controversy for its graphic scenes, it also ignited awareness. In the digital age, where social validation is often measured in likes and silence is amplified through scrolling screens, the series resonated deeply with teenagers navigating identity, relationships, and isolation in both real and virtual worlds.

In today’s world, technology has become a double-edged sword. It gives teenagers a platform to express and connect—but also exposes them to cyberbullying, social comparison, and the pressure to perform happiness online. *13 Reasons Why* tapped into this very dilemma. Hannah’s story is not just about what happens in school corridors but also what goes unseen in texts, photos, and the silences between messages. As viewers, we were forced to reckon with the “echoes of silence”—the cries for help that often go unnoticed until it is too late.

This digital age, therefore, must also be an age of digital empathy. Media, education, and technology must work hand-in-hand to foster safe spaces where young people feel seen and heard—both online and offline. If *13 Reasons Why* teaches us anything, it is that prevention begins with presence, compassion, and the willingness to listen when someone whispers what they cannot shout.

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