



Social Isolation and Rejection in 13 Reasons Why, Season 1

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

13 Reasons Why,
Hannah Baker,
suicidal ideation,
suicidal thoughts, isolation,
rejection, belongingness.

This study traces the elements of Isolation, Belongingness and Rejection in the series 'Thirteen Reasons Why' season 1, an American mystery teen drama, aired on 31st March, 2017 on Netflix. The story revolves around the mysterious suicide of an American high schooler named Hannah Baker and the thirteen reasons behind it. The study is based on descriptive-qualitative analysis of the selected dialogues from the series and examines them on the basis of the concepts of Isolation and Rejection given by Ilene and Leary (2013). The results of the study revealed that social isolation and rejection cause issues of anxiety and stress which leads to suicide.

INTRODUCTION

Belonging is a complex social design of relativity to people, places and things, and it is essential for personality and social welfare (Ilene, 2013). If belonging is relatedness, then social isolation is the detachment of a person, physically and psychologically, from his or her desired social group (Ilene, 2013). Hence, social isolation is being shunned and feeling like the individual is no longer the part of a group.

Rejection is a concept similar to social isolation. According to Leary (2006), humans give importance to their relationships to varying degrees of preferences. Relational evaluation is a concept which symbolizes the value, humans give to their relations. This relational evaluation may vary from high degree to low degree of preferences. Rejection is a case of low relational evaluation, in which a specific relation with a person is not deemed significantly for an individual. A person's reaction to acceptance and rejection depends upon their opinion of the relational value in other's mind. People might feel rejected when the other person doesn't value their relation and the perceived relational evaluation does not reach the level they wished for, even though they realize that they are actually valued, and accepted (Leary, 2006). Moreover, at times, individuals believe that their relational value decreased in other's eyes as it is not at the same level as it was before,

which causes strong feelings of dejection and pain (Buckley, Winkel, & Leary, 2004 and Leary, 2001, cited by Leary, 2006). Hence, rejection is an extremely subjective feeling, as it is mostly perceived by the person experiencing it and causes distress for the said individual.

The idea that literature reflects life is as old as Plato's theory of Imitation (Albrecht, 1954). It is perceived to reflect the cultural norms and values, interpersonal relationships, and other aspects related to society. As Albrecht (1954) states, "literature is a record of social experiences", which implies that our experiences, traumas, and our feelings regarding them are also discussed in literature. Joiner (2007) in his Interpersonal Psychological theory of suicidal behaviour suggests that an individual's need to belonging is so fundamental that if it is not fulfilled, then it can become a major cause of suicidal desires. Literature on suicide suggests that people who commit suicide, often suffer from social isolation before their deaths (Van Orden, 2008). As literature represents the aspects of our lives, therefore, we can analyse the true picture of life by studying literature. The study analyses the character of Hannah Baker and her experience regarding feelings of rejection and social isolation with its connection to suicide, in the series '13 Reasons Why, Season 1' (TRW 1).

13 Reasons Why Season 1

'13 Reasons Why' is an American crime-thriller series broadcasted by Netflix, based on a novel by Jay Asher. The series is based on the story of a young girl named 'Hannah Baker', who commits suicide and leaves behind 13 tapes, mentioning 13 reasons that lead to her suicide. Through these tapes, one gets an insight in the lives of American high schoolers.

Hannah Baker is the new girl in school who recently moved to the town with her family and is trying to find people for social connectivity. The show begins with Baker's voice, saying that she will tell her story and the reason she killed herself. The story swings back and forth in flashbacks from the time when she was alive, to the present, when she is dead. In the first episode, Clay Jensen, the male lead role, finds the box of tapes Baker left behind in the care of Toni Padilla to make sure that all the people mentioned in the tapes must listen to them and pass on to the next person. The people she mentioned in the tapes are Justin Folly, Jessica Davis, Alex Standall, Zach Dempsey, Sherry Holland, Ryan Shaver, Tyler Down, Bryce Walker, Kevin Porter, and Clay Jensen. Before Clay, the aforementioned people have already listened to the tapes except for Kevin Porter and Bryce Walker, who are mentioned after Clay in the tapes. Hence, he was supposed to pass these tapes onto them. These tapes leave everyone in a whirlwind and forces everyone to realize how horrible they can be either knowingly or unknowingly. This study focuses to highlight causes of rejection and social isolation which leads to the suicide of Hannah Baker.

Aims and Objectives

The study aims to identify:

- Social isolation and rejection leading to Baker's suicide by tracing evidences from season 1.
- Effects of rejection on teen's behavior in their friend's circles.
- Social isolation and its consequences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Human beings have the tendency to be influenced by their friends and peers. They accommodate their behaviour based on the attitudes modelled by their friends (Paluck, 2011), which implies that the attitude of the peers and friends reflect highly on their own mood and life. They tolerate rude, insensitive behaviour of their peers just in order to connect with them, as humans naturally seek validation and approval of their peers and try to avoid the stigma of social divergence. (Paluck, 2011). Teenagers start spending more time with their friends and less time with their family with the onset of their youth (London, and Ingram, 2018). This suggests that if people do not get the approval they seek, they feel like they don't belong, and as Joiner states, feeling of not belonging can cause 'suicidal desires' (Joiner, 2007).

The interpersonal-psychological theory proposes a list of risk factors that must be present in order for someone to commit suicide, and Van Orden's (Van Orden, 2008) study focused on two main domains of the theory; "the role of thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness in suicidal desire and the acquired capability for suicide".

Thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness

Van Orden's study shows that the combined presence of two social variables, such as thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness can result in highly destructive form of suicidal desires (2008). Moreover, majority of literature supports the hypothesis that low level of belongingness can result in high levels of suicidal desires (Joiner, Hollar, & Van Orden, 2006) and that people with high level of burdensomeness will have increased suicidal desires (De Catanzaro, 1995). Van Orden (2008) emphasized that these variables are not the only ways to suicidal behaviour or rather their joint presence is more likely to end up in a highly dangerous form of suicidal thoughts.

Suicidal Ideation

Studies prove that low level of interpersonal interaction with family and peers lead towards depression and eventually suicidal ideation (Kandel, 1991). Young adults having no appropriate support system might lean towards acting out, eating disorders or drugs, as they cannot find a healthy outlet to deal with their stress and loneliness.

Suicidal ideation increases the risk of the attempt of the actual action, but only when the individual has access and opportunity to act on the desires and the heart to bear the thought and pain of inflicting injury upon one's self (Van Orden, 2008). Kandel's (1991) study of 'Suicidal Ideation in Adolescence' shows that suicidal teenagers function at a low level and a more stressful life than their non-suicidal peers. Moreover, the number of stressful events has increased their suicidal desires. There is an observational support that low level of social connection, sexual abuse, and genetic depression lead towards suicidal thoughts in adolescence (Strandheim, 2014).

This study is based on the descriptive-qualitative analysis of the selected dialogues of the main character, Hannah Baker. Primary source was transcript of the series '13 Reasons Why', season 1 and secondary source was the studies of other researchers, related to the topics of social isolation and rejection.

ANALYSIS

In season 1 of TRW, one can see the elements of belongingness, rejection and isolation experienced by the character of Hannah Baker. These three concepts are inter-connected and combinedly they drove Baker's life to an end. In the beginning of the tape, Hannah mentions:

“Hey, it’s Hannah. Hannah baker. That’s right. Don’t adjust your... whatever device you’re hearing this on. It’s me, live and in stereo. No return engagements, no encore, and this time, absolutely no requests. Get a snack. Settle in. Because I’m about to tell you the story of my life. More specifically, why my life ended. And if you are listening to this tape... you’re one of the reasons why.”

The opening of the story shows the factor of social isolation. The way Baker introduces herself in the start reveals the fact that she had this feeling of isolation deep down in her heart. She feels lonely and a nobody who needed to be introduced to her own fellows or else no one will know her. These lines hold grave importance in the series because the entire story is based on the witch hunt of the culprits. Baker narrates the events that happened to her one after the other, holding people accountable for their actions and is trying to make it sure that they should face the consequences. Her comment that this time she does not have any requests shed light on the fact that she is dead in the present and is now going to get her justice instead of begging for companionship and support. She is bringing listeners on a single platform with the revelation of knowing each of them had their own tape. This way each one of them will get to know who is next in line and will carry the tapes to that person. Her this technique identifies the feeling of rejection. She wanted to be the centre of attention but none of them paid attention to her. This was, in a way, her revenge on everyone who wronged her.

Thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness

In the beginning, there are traces of Baker's belongingness with Jessica Davis as they became friends and started depending on each other emotionally. Next came Alex Standall and the three of them bonded nicely. Baker felt connected and her level of belongingness towards them increased with time. She stated at one point about the bond of friendship between them. She said:

“For a while, we were the kind of friends you wish you had.” (25:07, episode 2).

However, as time passed, she realized she became a burden to the two of them, and her relational evaluation dropped in their eyes. She commented:

“it was a hot chocolate friendship, good for cold months, but may be not perfect for all seasons” (17:19, episode 2).

Baker's statement implies that their friendship was only good for them when it benefitted them. When they had no other friends. However, when the summer came, and they made new friends,

their friendship with Baker took a route to the cold town and left her feeling stranded. Her sense of belongingness with her only friends at that time, was ruined and she felt rejection at the hands of those two. She felt herself as a burden to them and realized that she is no more welcome in the group. This was one of the first events that contributed to the bigger picture of Baker's death.

An event occurring at just the right time at the right place, can cause a hurricane somewhere else, one small action can cause destruction in many lives. The Butterfly Effect started with Justin Folly in the first episode. During Baker's phase of happy days with friends, she was attracted towards Justin Folly. They hung out once and Folly took an inappropriate picture of Baker which was leaked the next day. Consequently, she became the spectacle of humiliation which added as another reason of her suicide. When he leaked a picture of Baker, he let the other boys believe things that were not true.

“You’ve heard of the butterfly effect, right? That if a butterfly flaps its wings at just the right time in just the right place... it can cause a hurricane thousands of miles away.” (00:35, episode 3).

The picture started a series of rumours about Baker which in turn, caused a lot of mental stress. The second hurricane was caused by Alex Standall. The boys in Hannah's class made a 'Hot List' as Jensen called it, objectifying the girls of their class. Standall put her name in the list with the other girls and circulated it amongst everyone in the school. Due to that list, Baker felt like she was bullied by several people, first off, the rumours spread by Folly about their relation didn't help, then the list only made it worse.

“It seems like nothing. Until the hurricane hits. Because when you put my name on that list, you put a target on my... well, it wasn't just my ass. You made an open season on Hannah Baker” (43:12, episode 3).

After being isolated by Davis and Standall, and rejected by Folly, Baker had another chance of finding a connection and belongingness with Kourtney Crimson, but a certain series of events ruined that hope as well. When Tyler Down leaked the picture of Crimson kissing Baker, she cut off her ties with her. Here, again Baker was rejected by another friend.

For a while, she felt connected to Crimson, but when the times got tough, even she left her high and dry, putting all the blame on Baker, starting a new series of rumours and leaving her alone to defend herself against all of them. This event not only left her feeling rejected and isolated, but it also contributed in the mental suffering and bullying caused by the rumours.

The Bakers were struggling to make the ends meet. Things were rough and life became complicated. Seeing her parents argue all the time, detached Baker from her family. She felt invisible at her own house and among her own family. In her last days, which were very dark for her, when she needed her parents' help more than ever, they were not there for her. The reason

was, they did not notice the bad things that happened in her life. She felt like she had lost the connection with them which made her feel more isolated. The unmet need of belongingness to her friends and her parents caused her to spiral down towards suicidal thoughts.

Suicidal ideation

Baker started thinking about taking her life at the end after the rejection, humiliation and mental suffering because of the drama caused by Folly, Down, and Crimson. She started taking the thought of suicide seriously at one point, when she mentioned:

“I did some research on tombstones the other day. Or, more specifically on epitaphs on tombstones. The best one I could find was by this writer called Henry Charles Bukowski, Jr. on his tombstone, he has engraved the picture of a boxer... and beneath the boxer, two simple words: “Don’t try.” I wonder what will be on mine.” (49:17, episode 6)

At the end of this episode, Baker lays on her bed thinking about tombstones and epitaphs. Here, she ponders over her own death and predicted its effect on the lives of people round her. It was where the suicidal ideation began because of the rejection, low self-esteem due to bullying, rumours, and hopelessness. After that, she kept thinking about whatever happened to her and the pain she was in. She penetrated:

“What if the only way not feel anything bad is to stop feeling anything at all, forever.” (36:51, episode 7).

She wrote a letter, asking whether ending her life is the only way to end her misery and left it in the complement box in the class. Her classmates agreed that the person who wrote the letter is in great deal of pain. However, no one bothered to get into the problem and find out who needed help.

The third time of suicidal ideation was when she wrote a poem for her poetry group. It contained suicidal imagery and she was mortified when Ryan Shaver published it in his magazine and the whole school read it. She commented:

“So, you bear your heart to one person and everybody ends up laughing.” (32:55, episode 8).

Another major event, that changed the statistics of Baker’s life, and after which she decided to commit suicide was her rape by Bryce Walker. She was once sexually harassed by him in the grocery store and later in the last episode of season 1, she was brutally raped by him. This incident served as the last nail in the coffin. Hannah’s rape, and her witnessing of Jessica’s rape by the

same person were traumatic events for her and she was in the state of post-traumatic stress disorder for several days. She could not stand the situation anymore. As a result, she recorded the tapes and committed suicide.

DISCUSSION

The study suggested that Baker's death was a tragic one. It happened because a series of events went wrong in a row. All humans feel sad, depressed, rejected, lonely, betrayed, hurt, and lost at times. The thing which was different in her case was she tried to seek help implicitly but did not get any. There are two sides of each story, she was stupid because she only saw her side of the story and believed it. This shows that she was emotionally unstable and went overboard. Though, it was not her fault completely, yet she is responsible for her actions.

Her greatest folly was that she was desperate for a connection. She really wanted to have a friend but instead, got rejected by every single person she tried to bond with. May it be her foolishness or innocence, she really wanted to believe that someone would be her friend.

This study presents social rejection and isolation as two main factors of suicidal attempt. Even a single person is enough for a human to stop him from committing suicide. Baker's case not only landmarks the common issue of high schoolers these days but also leads to one of the social issues of the society. She like everybody else wanted to be loved and cherished by people around her but in contrast got rejected and isolated.

The study also signifies the importance of social acceptability. Physical abuse and sexual harassment are the two main reasons which strike like a bolt on Baker's mental health and pushes her to commit suicide. She was desperate to share her mental state but was let down by family and friends. In the end, she decided to condemn her peers to a harsh fate and left thirteen tapes that changed lives of the culprits.

The study revolves around the two main factors namely: social rejection and isolation as a powerful force to commit suicide. Baker's case helps in idealizing the mental instability due to rejection and social isolation. The study stresses the need of social acceptability. Humans need to be praised and accepted by the people around them and once the found this factor missing in their lives, they start thinking of themselves useless and impotent. The study suggests that social isolation and rejection is fatal. It leaves no choice to a person to proceed in life and acts as a strapping force to end his life.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the factors of social isolation and rejection in Asher's '13 Reasons Why', season 1. Taking in consideration the situation of Hannah Baker, the study reveals the issues. Moreover, it also points out that going through a chain of stressful events damages the self-esteem of a person and provokes him towards suicidal ideation. Analysis of the transcript proves that thwarted belongingness and suicidal ideation are the two main factors which leads to Hannah's suicide. Traces of social isolation and rejection have been found in the character which becomes

the sole cause of suicide. Moreover, as the story proceeds, it has been proved that the effects of rejection on teenagers, who are isolated from their peers, tend to put them in situations in which they sabotage themselves. Either they get depressed or develop issues of anxiety, or try to physically damage themselves by using drugs. The fear of losing isolate a person from the society and forces him to take his own life. In this study, the main character took her own life after being isolated and rejected by the society. Hence, it can be deduced that the consequences of social isolation and rejection are always harmful, and frequently fatal.

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