



ARTICLE ORIGINAL

“13 Reasons Why”: social blog posts about the book and series related to suicidal behavior among young individuals

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Abstract

Objective: This study reviewed topics related to the TV series and the book “13 Reasons Why” in blog posts written in Portuguese. Method: Qualitative study conducted on the Tumblr platform. By searching for the expression “13 porquês”, all text posts in Portuguese were selected and submitted to Thematic Review. Results: The main topics related to the series and book “13 Reasons Why” in blog posts were represented by the categories “Identification with the main character and with the other characters in the series”, “To be or not to be a why” and “Suicide prevention”. The piece had varied and ambiguous repercussion. It provided visibility and reflection on suicide prevention and the importance of healthy interpersonal relations, but also favored the identification with suicide behavior, distorted views of suicide and feelings of guilt. Conclusion: Artistic works can spark interest for the “suicide” topic, but need to be followed with a careful action guided by prevention specialist professionals.

Keywords: Suicide; Internet; Mental Health; Primary Prevention.

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INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that a person dies by suicide at every 40 seconds worldwide, totaling around 804,000 deaths of this nature per year. Although it is considered a preventable death, suicide is the second general cause of death among individuals aged 15-29, which draws attention to this problem in the young population.¹ Suicide is complex and multifactorial, and can affect individuals in several ways. With the internet, the suicide topic has become easily accessible, facilitating search, communication, expression of thoughts and feelings on the topic among the individuals.^{2,3}

Currently, social media is used in several stages of life. Along the last decade, Internet has become an influential tool in people's lives, especially among the young population, which often consists of vulnerable teenagers, susceptible to intimidation, victimization and social exclusion.^{4,5} The several possibilities of mass communication that arose with the Internet make it possible for suicide to become available to the public, often in a controversial manner.⁵ Social media has diverse content and an ambiguous relationship with suicide content, which means that it could either establish a support and well-being network for suffering individuals or spread information with pro-suicide content.⁶

In addition to the Internet, other media find it difficult to reconcile the duty to inform without hurting the individuals' susceptibility and without causing damage, particularly when it concerns the suicide of a celebrity or public figure.⁶ Goethe's novel “The Sorrows of Young Werther”, which portrays the suicide of its main character, caused a wave of imitation suicides that became known as the “Werther effect”, after its first publication in 1774.⁷ The inappropriate

disclosure of suicide cases may cause the encouragement to act in vulnerable individuals, known as “contagious effect” or “Werther effect”.⁶ Many risk groups susceptible to suicide, may be influenced by group behaviors through the dissemination of ideas and values in social media. These information channels allow and stimulate social interaction and the generation and sharing of information through media such as the Internet, television and radio.⁸ Therefore, there should be strategies in place to reverse the contagion, with the purpose to inform and aid the exposed population or those in risk of committing suicide.⁹

Although some countries have a control and restriction policy for contents published on the Internet, there is no worldwide jurisdiction on the access to suicide promotion content. The assessment and long-term consideration of online suicide prevention strategies is important, also taking into account public actions along with the media and education and health players.^{10,11} Social media growth presented new challenges on suicide prevention, since young individuals often express their suicidal thoughts and intentions on social media and also use this media to search knowledge about suicide methods or related topics.⁴

Netflix is an American global content provider of online streaming service, started in 1997. The company allows users to watch, with no advertisement, contents such as movies, TV series and documentaries saved on the platform, through compatible devices connected to the Internet. Every month, new content is added to the platform and access to this content is unlimited to all subscribers in several countries.¹²

The series *13 Reasons Why* was based on the book by Jay Asher “Thirteen Reasons Why”, adapted to Netflix by Brian Yorkey and produced

by Selena Gomez. It was launched in May 2017 by Netflix, in one 13-episode season, each episode with an approximate duration of 49 to 61 minutes. According to information retrieved from Netflix, its genre falls into “Series”, “USA Series”, “Teen TV” and “Drama Series”, with “Thrilling” and “Tense” moments and is not recommended to audience under 16 years of age. Its synopsis states “While everyone at school is mourning the loss of Hannah Baker, Clay receives a box with tapes recorded by her before the suicide”.¹³ On Jay Asher book’s official website, in USA, there is a brief description of the book: “Clay Jensen returns home from school to find a strange package with his name on it lying on his porch. Inside, he discovers several cassette tapes recorded by Hannah Baker – his classmate and crush – who committed suicide two weeks earlier. Hannah’s voice tells him that there are thirteen reasons why she decided to end her life. Clay is one of them. If he listens, he’ll find out why. Clay spends the night crisscrossing his with Hannah as his guide. He becomes a firsthand witness to Hanna’s pain, and as he follows Hannah’s recorded words throughout his town, what he discovers changes his life forever”.¹⁴

After launched, the series rapidly became popular and this brought on an enormous amount of reviews, critics, compliments and comments on the main content addressed: a teenager girl’s suicide. Although the series has been watched, shared and commented by the media in several communication platforms, so far, there are no studies that address it in scientific research.

Despite the relevance of the discussions and comments that emerged after the Netflix series launch, no studies focused on the repercussion of “13 reasons why” on the population were found. Investigations on the topic on the Internet, where the series became

popular, are necessary to plan effective prevention and support strategies. Considering how relevant the subject is, the gaps in scientific literature and the series popularity, the present study had the purpose to review the topics related to the “13 reasons why” series and book in blog posts in Portuguese.

METHOD

Type of study

This is a cross-sectional study, with qualitative approach. The qualitative approach was used because it involves a non-mathematical process of interpretation, which was adequate for the aim of this study.

Source of data collection

The TUMBLR blogs platform was selected as source for data collection for the study because it hosts a large number of blogs (approximately 289 million, according to information retrieved from the site).

This platform was founded in 2007, with headquarters in the city of New York, USA. The website homepage states the network purpose “*We made it really, really simple for people to make a blog and put whatever they want on it*”. (Retrieved on April 22, 2016, from: < <https://www.tumblr.com> >). Tumblr’s Private Policy does not rule what the users do in their blogs, provides flexibility in the blogs’ construction and an anonymity option in the users’ account setup.

Posts search strategy

The expressions “*13 porquês*” and “*13 porques*”, which mean 13 reasons in Portuguese, were entered in the search tool of website’s homepage, matching the Portuguese wording of the title of the book. Then, the posts were organized by the “most popular” tool, which classified the posts and orders them from the most popular to the least popular.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

All posts in Portuguese classified as “most popular”, “text” type or “quotation”, identifiable through the search strategy mentioned above, were eligible for the study. Posts associated with videos, links, audio, chats, images, and in any language other than Portuguese were excluded.

Data collection procedure

Posts that fulfilled the study selection criteria were saved through screen capture and identified with a number corresponding to the order in which they were found. Each post was transcribed in an editable document and the transcriptions were reviewed for the correction of any possible errors.

Data analysis

Inductive thematic analysis of the data, in the version proposed by Braun and Clarke (2008), was used in this study to identify hidden topics or standards and meanings in the data. The four initial steps (familiarization with the data, construction of initial codes, topics search, and topics reviews) were performed by two researchers and later compared, verified and judged by two different researchers. Then, the four researchers moved on to the final review steps (definition and assignment of names to the topics and report production).¹⁵ Finally, discussions were held to establish a consensus among the researchers.

Ethical aspects

Tumblr posts are public and freely accessible. The bloggers' anonymity was maintained in the study and the study complied with all recommendations concerning research involving human beings, as proposed by the Brazilian legislation and the Declaration of Helsinki.

included in this study are represented below.

Identification with the main character and with the other characters in the series

In the posts, the identification with the character, who dies by suicide, or with the other characters (who are considered the reasons for her suicide) is a recurring theme. Bloggers compare themselves particularly with the suicidal character on many aspects, such as feelings, personal history, interpersonal needs and dissatisfactions, forms of communication, conflicts, behaviors, reasons to take their own lives and the “courage to kill themselves”.

And now I see myself here, Hannah's copy.” (P1)

And I saw myself as Hannah Baker, desperate for some comfort, sending little signs for attention of the people around her, and failing... (P7)

Each person who watched 13 reasons why was touched, but not like me. Each thing that happened, each step she took, everything so much like my life (P18).

I have more reasons to be dead than Hannah. She did it on the first attempt, I have tried several times and to wake up alive on the next day sucks! This series is making people look at us to relieve a likely guilt and not become a reason why in somebody's life. How about when we pretend really well? When our fear of speaking is so much greater than our fear of dying? Don't fool yourself, I have been feeling dead since the first time I attempted to commit suicide (P26).

In the posts, bad feelings triggered by the series associated with the greater perception of one's own

RESULTS

The categories that represent the main topics addressed in the posts

emptiness, psychological unease, personal dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, invisibility, frustrations, problems, difficult situations, social hypocrisy are also seen.

[...] just empty. Just nothing. I don't care anymore. (P8)

To be or not to be a reason why

According to the posts, interpersonal relations are determinants for the individual “to be or not to be a reason why” for somebody’s suicide. In the bloggers’ perspective, relationships have an impact on suicide risk or protection and can “cause” suicide.

[...] it is impossible to know everything that goes on in that person's life and how much we can magnify their pain. People have an impact on other people's lives, that's undeniable.” (P4)

Reflections and arguments on the need of greater self-criticism, empathy, love, kindness, acceptance, solidarity, attention and care in interpersonal relations were manifested. Also, bloggers emphasized the importance of the quality of social connections to prevent helplessness, isolation and loneliness.

[...] Each of us have our own problems, you never know how someone really is, be nice (P20)

The importance of preventing the reproduction of behaviors that could lead to suicide risk, such as bullying, cyberbullying, intolerance, judgement, discrimination, disrespect, violence and sexual abuse was also emphasized.

, [...] do not say that it is a way to draw attention. You don't know what your neighbor's problems are, you can't be in somebody else's shoes [...] (P6)

Don't be a reason why, don't be a bully, point your finger, discriminate, judge, despise, condemn, make fun (P34)

When interpersonal relations were considered suicide causes, posts expressed guilt (towards oneself or others) and had a punitive, threatening, recriminating tone, associated to fear, conflict, and revenge.

No one knows exactly the impact they have on other people's lives (P30), [...] a simple action can turn into something huge and lead to the end of someone's life (P33).

“I may have been a reason why in somebody's life.”; “people think they're Hannah, but they're actually one of the reasons why.”

You may not know, but you could be one of somebody's 'reasons why' (P15)

Suicide prevention

Bloggers mentioned that the “13 reasons why” series and book provided visibility to the importance of suicide prevention. We identified posts on the impact of suicide (loss to the individual, family members or people who are close to them) and on the awareness, understanding of the subject, knowledge of risk factors and identification of suicide risks and signs and emotional distress, information on support resources.

[...] The subject needs to be discussed. People need to create more. (P46)

[...] It is important for the parents to watch and pay attention to their children. Everyone must watch out for behaviors like social isolation, outbursts of temper. It is very important to talk [...].

Bloggers seemed to want to influence, motivate people and provoke changes and positive behaviors in relation their own lives. These aspects were manifested by the encouragement to seek and offer support, stimulation to value life, optimism, persistence, hope and the promotion of the belief that it is possible to overcome problems and difficulties.

Insist, because there will Always be good in you, and there will Always be people who need you. This should be worth it, it is worth to live! (P12)

Life is worth it, people cared about you, they will hug you, understand you, and think they are lucky to have you by their side, you are not alone (P3)

DISCUSSIONS

The main topics related to the “13 reasons why” series and book, in blog posts, were represented by the categories “Identification with the main character and the other characters in the series”, “to be or not to be a reason why”, and “suicide prevention”.

“Identification with the main character and the other characters in the series” expresses that the series enables a higher perception and intensification of the individuals’ own sorrows, feelings, dissatisfactions, conflicts, frustrations, suicidal behavior or guilt. This finding is associated with the possibility of “contagious effect” or “Werther effect”,⁷ in which the inappropriate disclosure of the suicide topic by the media would produce a negative impact among vulnerable individuals⁶ and favor the dissemination of suicidal behavior. Literature shows that the concept of suicidal contagion and implied mechanisms are still nuclear, and a more careful and critical investigation on the subject is needed.¹⁶ However, our study shows that bloggers

have a clear perception of the phenomenon of their identification with suicidal behavior exposed by the media. In addition, the identification with characters “guilty” for the suicide in the series was observed.

“To be or not to be a reason why” shows the belief that interpersonal relations are determinants for suicide. From this belief, there were individuals that expressed the need to foster healthy and gratifying relations, while others focused on the blame for the suicide, directed to themselves or others and associates with punishment, fear, recrimination, conflict, revenge and threat. Thus, the series effects on interpersonal relations seemed to be ambiguous. Unsatisfactory interpersonal relations, a feeling of social inadequacy and lack of support are all elements that can exacerbate the psychological pain associated with suicidal behavior.¹⁷ However, suicide is a complex and multifactorial phenomenon^{1,18,19} and reducing it to a consequence of interpersonal relations could be risky. Suicide is commonly addressed in virtual environments in a controversial manner.⁵ This is a public health issue of great impact worldwide and needs to be addressed very carefully.

“Suicide prevention” was a necessity perceived from the “13 reasons why” series and book. Bloggers emphasized the importance of the awareness, understanding and divulgation of knowledge on the subject. They also showed the intention to influence positive changes and behaviors regarding the individuals’ own lives. Suicide is a particularly important issue among young individuals, as it is the second greatest cause of death in those aged 15-29⁽¹⁾ and prevention efforts need to consider the necessities in this public.¹ Preventive interventions must include virtual strategies that are promising

because of the internet's influence among the young.⁴

The responsible and critical use of the Internet could benefit vulnerable individuals^{20,21} through social connections among peers with similar experiences, programs, prevention hotlines, educational and support resources¹⁰ and referrals to support services from search tools. However, there are few studies on the efficacy of such strategies¹⁰ and websites with pro-suicidal content are the first to show in the popular search tools.¹⁰

Individuals with higher risk to commit suicide are more prone to discuss suicide on the internet.²² Thus, if no investment is made in preventive actions that involve online social media, there is a risk that these media potentialize only the interaction among individuals vulnerable to suicidal behavior, not always with positive consequences.

This study has novel relevant knowledge for the tracking of the need to mediate discussions among young individuals related to artistic works on suicidal behavior. A limitation of this study was the inclusion of posts in Portuguese, not explored in previous studies. Another limitation of the study was the inclusion only of text, which would provide the thematic analysis of contents written by bloggers in a standardized manner.

The results of this study show that it is necessary to implement and assess online and offline suicidal behavior prevention actions that address series, books and other artistic pieces related to suicidal behavior among young people.

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