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Final paper in research project in social sciences:

**Can movies portraying a suicide help reduce suicide ideation and suicide risks for
their viewers?**

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Introduction:

“All the bright places”, “It’s my party”, “Thelma & Louise”, “Dead Poets Society”, who does not enjoy a good movie? In fact, according to Till et al., (2013) we spend more time watching movies than doing any other activity. In a century where technology is taking more and more space and where the movie industry is ever growing, the impact they have is immense. Movies are made to escape reality, learn new cultures, entertain yourself; only it is not a benign act. Indeed, if you relate to the character you might want to dress like them, act like them etc. The media has a big influence on our society. In fact, multiple studies have been conducted showing the impact that movies have on society. Watching a movie affects you in complex and deep ways.

Therefore, when watching movies portraying extreme violence or with substance abuse, drugs, sex, or suicide one should keep in mind the effect, positive or negative, it could have. The movies cited above present the particularity of portraying a character’s suicide. In a time where suicide is the fourth leading cause of death among 15-19 years old (WHO, 17 June 2021) it can be wondered what the impact of movies portraying suicides is on suicide ideation and suicide rates.

In this paper content analysis will be used to answer the research question. Content analysis will be useful to collect, compare and contrast the data already found by researchers. Plus, there will also be a more professional input from psychologists and psychiatrists regarding suicide risk, ideation, and the cause.

Research question: When a movie chooses to portray a suicide it can be done in various ways which later on impact differently the viewers. In this paper it will be researched whether movies which choose to portray suicide can help reduce suicide ideation and therefore suicide rates amongst their viewers.

Hypothesis: We believe the portrayal of suicide in movies has bigger negative impacts than positives on the younger population.

Which population is more affected by suicide exposure and why

Studies identify two categories in the population that can be affected by suicide exposure, the ones being 24 or less and the others being older than 24. Indeed, those categories are called, in order, the young population and the old population.

Everyone can be affected by the exposure to suicide, but studies found that, most of the time, the young population is more easily touched by it and suffers the most the consequences.

Indeed, the older population has more life experiences which helps them when having to deal with daily issues and/or more serious issues. Someone who is married, has a long-term partner, children or grandchildren is in a different place mentally and socially than someone who is just coming into their own, living with roommates or alone. Having a strong entourage and not being socially left alone is a strong factor for not having the negative impacts of portrayal of suicide be as important. Moreover, their brain is completely

developed which helps them to put more thought into their decisions. However, suicide is the second-leading cause of death among people aged 15 to 24 in the US. Nearly 20% of high school students report serious thoughts of suicide and 9% have made an attempt to take their lives according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness. That being said, two major factors explain this situation towards suicide exposure in movies or series. First of all, the younger population is learning how life works, is trying new experiences, etc. Of course, everyone is always learning, notwithstanding, the younger ones particularly experience and take examples of what they see whether it is in real life or in movies. Furthermore, the youth are a category of the population that watches the most movies. And as (Crone & Konijn, 2018) advance in their research: “the adolescent brain is heavily influenced by media while still developing the ability to mediate risky behaviors and intense emotions.” Meaning they are the most impacted when watching movies. Furthermore, as UniSA PhD candidate McIntyre states “We live in a highly digitized world, where people have access to screens 24/7 and often ‘binge-watch’ through streaming services”. The access to movies is far easier than it used to be, and the culture has changed in a way which makes people “binge-watch” shows or movies, meaning they watch a lot of media in a small amount of time. In fact, as Dr. Carl Fleisher explained: “their judgement and decision-making abilities are still coming online. The prefrontal cortex, the brain’s executive control center, doesn’t fully develop until one’s mid-20s.”. Therefore, and secondly, it makes them more impulsive as he also said: “They’re not going to weigh risks and consequences or values in quite the same way that older folks will”. For this reason, suicide exposure can give an idea of a supposedly solution for an issue that can be solved by other alternatives. Furthermore, during this age, this population is more

influenceable. As shown in a study by Carla Zdanow and Bianca Wright, after the American icon, Marilyn Monroe, killed herself in 1962, there had been a huge number of copycat suicides, around 2000 people were influenced by Monroe's suicide and attempted and 303 suicides attempts succeeded. While nothing can be scientifically proven, it is strongly suggested that suicide exposure influences the youth in a negative way. On top of that, as Dr. Carl Fleisher said: "The things that make them vulnerable are where they stand socially and where they stand developmentally". Hence, if in a harmful environment, it can emphasize the impact a movie or series representing suicide can have on that public.

Thus, the young population tend to be more affected by the representation of suicide in movies or series because of their influenceability and lack of life experiences. Therefore, it can influence the youth more in a negative way than the older population.

Negative and positive effects on the population

While all studies agree that watching movies which portray a suicide impact people, some claim that the impact can be both positive and negative while others argue that the negative impact outweighs the few positives it can bring.

As shown earlier it is now proven that the youth is the population the most affected by the portrayals of suicide in movies and the most affected by suicide in general and the effects found are mostly negative. Of course, one of the worst consequences is the growth of suicide rates due to the portrayal of suicide in movies. And when suicide portrayals lead to higher suicide rates it creates a public health issue which need to be addressed fast and

with great force. For instance, the European Region, where suicide rates are the highest in the world must take considerable measures to fight back the stigma and the lack of mental health support available. Furthermore, suicide is a public health issue as “On average, a single suicide intimately affects at least six people. If a suicide occurs in a school or workplace, it has an impact on hundreds of people.” (WHO, 2005). Suicide impact everyone meaning that one movie portraying suicide can impact up to thousands of persons. Although, no studies can show with certainty that movies with a suicide portrayal rises the rates of suicide, the rising of the rates when for example the show “13 Reasons Why” aired is no coincidence.

Therefore, while it cannot be scientifically proven, it is understood that movies with portrayals of suicide have a negative impact on the youth.

On the other hand, movies which portray suicide can sometimes have a good impact as they “both reflect and help shape norms that are relevant in everyday life” (Till et al., 2014) meaning that they shed a light on what is still largely considered like a stigma. This means that governments, associations, schools etc. bring forward more resources and the help needed for people with a high risk of suicide. For example, the European region created The Mental Health Action Plan Europe which brings resources everywhere needed. Besides, when scanning for people with a high risk of committing it can be helpful to know which genres of movies they particularly enjoy because “The preference for [a] film genre could be added to suicide risk inventories and questionnaires and may help clinicians identifying individuals most at risk for suicide”. Therefore, movies portraying suicides can

have a positive impact as they can bring forward resources and can help people at a high risk for suicide.

It is important to not forget that they have a largely more negative impact than good as for now.

Who the viewers are and how the movie portrays the suicide have an impact on the resulting behaviors:

Every human is unique. Life is a special and different experience for each. Some will live an easier life than others, while some might have to face obstacles to arrive to where they are meant to be. Since every human is different and live each event in their own unique perspective the same experience does not impact you in the same way as another person.

Therefore, when watching a movie portraying suicide, depending on who you are the impact will not be the same. Till, B., et al (2013) argue that you own amount of suicidality and whether you can relate to the character committing suicide means not everyone will be impacted in the same way while watching the same movie. If a person has a low amount of suicidality, watching movies portraying suicide is not something to which they will relate. They can still enjoy the story of the movie and can feel empathy towards the character but will not transpose their own experiences and feelings and are capable of distinguishing fiction from reality. Therefore, watching a movie depicting a suicide does not have a huge impact on them, either negatively or positively.

On the other hand, people with high suicidality are more likely to identify with the character who commits suicide or attempts. They can find in the character's behavior means of coping and apply what they are seeing on the screen to their real-life behavior while not differentiating the fictional with the reality. This can cause dangerous situations for the viewers. Indeed, if a character's way of coping is self-harm, then copying their behaviors puts the viewer at risk. Nevertheless, a different study found "that individuals with higher scores on risk factors for suicide have a tendency to prefer films with sad content, but at the same time they do not experience enjoyment during films with suicide portrayals." Niederkrötenhaller, T et al (2014). Consequently, people with a high suicidality can also not relate much with movies portraying suicides and not use their coping methods or go as far as also attempting suicide because of the movie watched. Nevertheless, when watching a sad movie, the viewer is at risk of only watching it to use the pain portrayed and the impact is only negative on their behavior and mental health. Therefore, the impact of both sad movies and those portraying a suicide negatively impacts the viewer who is at a high risk for suicide. Furthermore, Kene & Hovey (2014) affirm in their study "painful and provocative experiences diminish the fear of self-injury and cause desensitization to pain. This diminution in fear in turn weakens the basic instinct of self-preservation and enables the individual to engage in lethal self-injury", watching movies portraying a violent suicide or graphic images of self-harm are considered "painful and provocative experiences" meaning that engaging in such activities can be a trigger for people with a high suicidality. In which case movies portraying suicide cannot help reducing suicide ideation nor suicide risks but rather heightens them.

But while, Herberth, A.; et al (2013) debate that personal suicidality is a far more important factor in the negative ways suicide portrayals affect viewers rather than the way it is portrayed, Alison Knopf states that the way a character's suicide is portrayed affects the most the viewers. The way a movie chooses to portray a suicide is crucial in the effect it will have on the behavior of its viewers.

The movie can choose to depict the suicide method used. It can be depicted with very graphic images and therefore give, if not an example, an “how to” manual for the viewers. In fact, Knopf recommends “that the entertainment media [...] avoid depicting the suicide method used” (Knopf, 2019) that is because if the message conveyed is that suicide is the only solution viewers watching with a medium to high suicidality receive this message as being the only truth and therefore can go as far as committing suicide. Thus, when the show “13 Reasons Why” was originally released it contained a graphic scene of the main character's suicide, depicting in detail the ways she committed, it has now been replaced by a less graphic one as studies found “that the show was associated with a 28.9% increase in suicide rates among U.S. youth ages 10–17” (Knopf, 2019).

Therefore, it is highly recommended by mental health professional to not depict the suicide method used by the character when character attempts. It is also recommended to depict suicide in an accurate way, meaning to not ridicule, infantilize or lessen the act and impact suicide has on a person or persons. As is explained on the Action Alliance for Suicide Preventions website (<https://theactionalliance.org>) , suicide needs to be portrayed in a “complexed [way] and often caused by a range of factors”, this helps people relate with the character's struggles and with “show[ing] that help is available”, “us[ing] non-

judgmental language” and “portray[ing] everyday characters who can be a lifeline” the movie portraying the suicide can have positive effects on the viewers as it can help them reach out for help and therefore reduce suicide ideation and suicide attempts. As Posselt et al., (2020) found in their research “If used as an opportunity to educate, screen media could be a potentially powerful tool in suicide prevention, increasing awareness for mental health issues and reducing suicide shame and stigma”. Furthermore, as they state, “Television shows and movies can start conversations and share vital messages by helping to normalize the experience of having mental health difficulties and suicidal thoughts, as well normalizing the act of reaching out to ask for help.”

Conclusion:

Can movies portraying a suicide help reduce suicide ideation and suicide risks for their viewers? To answer, in most of the case, it does not help or reduce suicide ideation and suicide risks for the viewers but on the contrary can increase them. In our hypothesis, we believed that the portrayal of suicide in movies have a bigger negative impact than positive. It has been confirmed in this research paper. While the link between movies portraying suicide and the rise or decrease of suicide rates has not been scientifically proven, it is understood that there is a correlation between the two. Indeed, during youth, between 0 and 24 years old, children, teenagers and young adults tend to be more influenced than adults and seniors. Therefore, portraying suicide in movies impacts this population who, for most of them, spend a lot of time watching movies or series. This activity affects a lot of them negatively by presenting suicide as a solution like in “13

Reasons Why”, nevertheless, it can also be introduced as positive by representing suicidal thoughts and showing how to be helped. In addition, how movies portray suicide has an actual impact on someone's life but depends on how it is presented and on the sensibility of the person. Consequently, suicide portrayal needs to be done in a specific way. In effect, it is recommended to not depict the method used by the character but also to not infantilize or lessen the act and the impact it has.

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