



**AVALANCHE OF MISERY: AN ANALYSIS OF THE
“SNOWBALL EFFECT” PHENOMENON IN CONTEXT TO THE
NOVEL “*THIRTEEN REASONS WHY*”.**

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Abstract:

Depression and suicidal ideations are prevalent in adolescents these days as they get a sense of rapid increase in intensity of the events that transpire. This phenomenon is referred to as “Snowball effect”. Jay Asher’s Best-selling novel *Thirteen Reasons Why*, published in 2007, presents us with a compelling representation of the effect on a young adult named Hannah, the primary protagonist of the book, commits suicide and leaves a set of tapes which provide with an image of her thoughts that formulated her mental snowball, eventually driving her to take her own life. The paper will highlight the relevance and negative impact of “Snowball Effect” on Hannah Baker’s state of mind, her traumas, and their repercussions in context of the selected source material.

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Introduction

Adolescence is the age of rapid and drastic changes in terms of physiological, psychological as well as social context. Onset of puberty is met with paradigm shifts in the attitude of oneself perception and the perception others have about themselves. When met with a state of imbalance, this can cause turmoil in their state of minds. This sort of turmoil formulates a cascading effect similar to that of a snowball and can cause feelings of neglect and expulsion, eventually leading to depressive effects. (Bukowski et al., 2010)

Suicidal ideation is one of the alarming repercussions of depression. According to the research, individuals who are depressed are substantially more prone than those who are not to harbor suicide thoughts. According to research by O'Connor and Nock (2014), those with depression were roughly 20 times more likely than people without depression to have suicide thoughts. Furthermore, (Hankin et al. 2015) discovered that depression was a strong predictor of suicide thoughts over time in their longitudinal research.

Jay Asher's 2007 novel "*Thirteen Reasons Why*" is a young adult novel presenting the concept of the cascading descent into emotional abuse of an individual. In the novel, Clay Jensen, a high school student, receives a package of cassette tapes from his classmate Hannah Baker, who has recently died by suicide. Clay and the reader learn about Hannah's emotional struggles and the bullying, harassment, and mistreatment she endured from her peers through Hannah's words (Wilson, 2021). It highlights the power of small actions and how they can accumulate to have a significant impact on someone's life.

Jay Asher believes that "*Thirteen Reasons Why*" is a book that can help raise awareness and start conversations about important issues, while also recognizing the complexities and sensitivities of the topics it addresses (Jay Asher, n.d.).

Literature review

Thirteen Reasons Why, the novel written by Jay Asher is concerned about how small continuous incidents in a person's life led to bigger consequences. The story unfolds with a boy named Clay Jensen, who received a package of audiotapes recorded by Hannah Baker, a high school teenage student, who died of suicide. Suicide is defined as 'the intentional taking of one's own life' (Medical Dictionary). She recorded in total seven cassettes, with thirteen audiotapes about the reasons for her

death. Including the names of thirteen people (each cassette for each person) whom she felt were the reasons for her death.

The study focuses on how in the novel, *Thirteen Reasons Why*, Hannah Baker experienced a series of events that resulted in a snowball effect leading to her suicide. Depression forms a major part of public health problems with a lifetime prevalence of about 17-18 per cent in the Western world (Swedish Council on Health Technology Assessment [SBU], 2004). The character Hannah faced mental health issues like depression due to sexual harassment, bullying, social abuse, and the impact of love and relationship. Hannah's ultimate decision of suicide was not impulsive or a ploy to get attention but the effect of consistent bullying, depression, hopelessness, and a lack of self-expression (Martin, 2019). In contemporary times, depression is a common mental concern which is found in most teenagers in high school. Students suffer from low academic performance due to a lack of interest in subjects, relationships and emotional issues with their partner, peer pressure, bullying by the seniors and other social factors due to mismanagement of emotions and workload they sometimes feel stressed and this stress for a long-time lead to depression. Sometimes people find suicide the only way to escape from emotional pain. This is something similar to what happened with Hannah in high school.

Teenage plays an important role in forming the emotional perspective of a person. Feelings and incidents related to emotions like love and relationships have a great impact on the psychological health of a person who belongs to this age. Freud defined love as "the frustrated desire" (1922/1951). Medical news today also discussed the consequences of heartbreak on a person's health (Love Study: Brain Reacts to Heartbreak Same as Physical Pain, n.d.). Hannah experienced love and relationship in her teenage life, and chapter one portrays the relationship between Hannah and Justin Foley, her former friend. Justin spread rumors of a sexual relationship with Hannah after their first kiss. In chapter ten of the book, Hannah discussed how Justin, her first reason for heartbreak and later left vulnerable her. Relationship satisfaction is the best predictor of stability in the relationship (horn et al., 1997) any problem in your love relationship can harm the mental health of the victim.

In Western societies commenting on the body of a person, body shaming and abusing him/her has

become popular. Sexual harassment occurs when people are targets of unwanted sexual comments, gestures, or actions because of their actual gender, or gender expression (Burn, 2018). In this novel, Hannah was a victim of social abuse and sexual harassment. In chapter three of the book Hannah revealed how Alex Standall, a boy in her class included her in the "hot or not" list, which ranked girls according to their looks, then in the upcoming chapter she talked about "Tyler" who was a school photographer, stalked and secretly took picture of her. A boy named "Marcus Cole", a boy she went on a date with sexually harassed her. In chapter 12 Hannah detailed how Bryce Walker, a wealthy and popular boy, raped her at a party.

The story also portrays the lack of psychologist's capacities to understand and analyze their patient's mental health more accurately. Mr. Porter, Hannah's guidance counselor, failed to provide her with the help she needed when she reached out to him. Due to which, he was one of the reasons mentioned on the cassette for her suicide.

The research mainly focuses on the above-mentioned affects and how regularly occurring phenomena in the life of a person affect them.

Research gap

The selected topic provides a relative novelty in terms of pre-existing research findings as there are research available for the snowball effect and the novel *Thirteen Reasons Why* but not in collaboration. In terms of snowball effect, researches have been done in the fields of Psychology, Sociology as well as Economics. In case of psychology, the phenomenon has been paired with depression as a variable. The novel *Thirteen Reasons Why* is used as a subject matter for various researches in order to understand suicidal ideation. We further tried to cover aspects which were lacked in the previous studies on this novel.

Objectives.

1. To present an analysis of the psychological well-being of the protagonist from the novel *Thirteen Reasons Why*.
2. To explore the presented case from the novel *Thirteen reasons why*.
3. To raise awareness about the themes presented in the novel.
4. To examine the concept of the Snowball Effect
5. To study the events that produce a cascading descent into depression and social isolation from the literary source.

Methodology:

The methodology implemented in the study is the qualitative research, an in-depth textual analysis, and a study on the snowball effect.

Snowball Effect:

The snowball effect, sometimes known as the "Matthew Effect" after a biblical verse from Matthew's Gospel ("For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who does not have, even what he has will be taken away."), alludes to the idea that success fosters success and that initial advantages can compound over time, leading to greater and greater success.

The snowball effect has been employed in many domains, including economics, psychology, and sociology. The snowball effect, for example, has been used in economics to explain the dynamics of wealth accumulation, with those with more resources being able to generate even more wealth over time (Liberto, 2022). The snowball effect has been used in psychology to describe how happy or negative experiences can build upon themselves, leading to a spiral of escalating success or failure.

According to research, the snowball effect can be both positive and detrimental. For example, in a study of primary school pupils' academic success, researchers discovered that early inequalities in reading ability were compounded over time, with more adept readers having bigger benefits in terms of academic achievement (Stanovich, 1986). The snowball effect, on the other hand, might have disastrous implications. In a study of social networks, researchers discovered that the snowball effect might aggravate the spread of misinformation, as erroneous information is more likely to be repeated by persons with a big number of followers (Del Vicario et al., 2016)

To summarize, the snowball effect is a tremendous force that can have both positive and negative consequences. Researchers and policymakers can attempt to limit the negative consequences of the snowball effect and harness its positive potential by understanding the elements that contribute to it.

Textual analysis:

Thirteen Reasons Why presents the story of Hannah Baker who committed suicide. A fortnight after her death, a set of audio tape is circulated, having the explanation of the thirteen reasons that drove her to give up her life, eventually making its way to Clay Jensen, who apparently is one of the perpetrators.

Cassette 1 Side A:

Hannah starts her story with Justin Foley as her first reason and the cause of her mental snowball to develop. She liked Justin, her senior at high school, who also showed interest in Hannah. One day, they decided to meet up at the park and Hannah has her first kiss. They dated for a month and a week after that, some rumours started to pop up that completely changed the events that took place between them. It turns out that Justin changed the narrative in a way that puts Hannah in a negative light giving her the reputation of a 'slut' as things between them started to escalate and it was Hannah who started it. She suspects that this one thing is an initiation of something that can get out of her control as "a rumour based on a kiss ruined a memory that I hoped would be special. A rumour based on a kiss started a reputation that other people believed in and reacted to. And sometimes, a rumour based on a kiss has a snowball effect. A rumour, based on a kiss, is just the beginning." (Asher, 2017) It developed a sense of perverseness within anyone who knew Hannah, and everyone saw her in a very different way. In a study conducted in 2007, it was found that gossips and rumours often play a role in social isolation as when done in correct way it can either eliminate or lead an individual to face social exclusion. (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007)

Cassette 1 Side B:

Hannah was a new to the city and her high school and she was able to make two new friends, Alex Standall and Jessica Davis. This next tape was addressed to Alex. After the rumour about Hannah broke out, Alex Standall made a list commenting on the body parts of first-year students in the high school. On the list, Hannah was voted to as 'Best ass in the Freshman class' (Asher, 2017) while Jessica was listed on the opposite side as 'worst ass' (Asher, 2017). Hannah was aware that her name being on the list was a means of retaliation by Alex, projected towards Jessica. She even explains that the reason Alex is on the list is not because of the use of her name but was actually because of the repercussions she had to face. She says to Alex that "You needed a name to put down opposite Jessica's. And since everyone at school already had a perverted image of me after Justin's little number, I was the perfect choice, wasn't I?" (Asher, 2017)

The day is the list was circulated, Hannah when to her favourite store to buy some candies where an unnamed fellow student at her high school assaults her. Hannah is quite shaken by the incident as he

mentions the list Alex made as an excuse of touching her. She analyses the event thoroughly and concludes that Alex wanted to ridicule Jessica, but the aftereffects were on Hannah as well. She does believe that Justin is a part of this too as "and the snowball keeps a-rollin' Thanks, Justin." (Asher, 2017). The incident at the shop acts as Hannah's initial experience of sexual predation at a public place which is fairly common in United States. (Balemba & Beauregard, 2013) This event, along with the list and her experience with Justin, led to the increase in the intensity of her mental snowball.

Cassette 2 Side A:

Hannah now address the third person accountable, Jessica Davis. She starts by giving a background of how they met which is through there guidance counsellor. They started to hang out together and eventually added Alex in their small clique and they would hang out add a local cafe called Monet's. As time progressed, they started to drift away from Hannah. Jessica and Alex were in a relationship and had broken up before Alex released the list. A few days after the event of whose heart list Jessica invites Hannah to the cafe to talk about something serious. There she blames Hannah along with the rumours associated with her, to be the reason Alex broke up with her. Jessica even tries to hit Hannah in a fit of rage leaving a scar on her eyebrows which taunts her about the friends she has lost. "It's more than just a scratch. It's a punch in the stomach and a slap in the face. It's a knife in my back because you would rather believe some made-up rumour than what you knew to be true." (Asher, 2017) This event completely shatters Hannah, and her friends are making her feel alone even though she was surrounded by people. The scar she got from that physical confrontation is a haunting reminder for such.

Cassette 2 Side B:

The next person on the list is Tyler Down. Tyler is the part of the school yearbook committee and is a photographer. Tyler under the influence of the rumours and the list Alex made, uses his photography skills to spy on Hannah, acting as a "peeping tom" (Asher, 2017). Hannah felt that she was being watched when she heard the sounds of camera clicks when she was in her room one night when her parents were away. The next day, Hannah told an unnamed student about the things she experienced last night. The student decides to help Hannah, but Hannah considers her incompetent for this task because of the way the student reacts to

her condition. They devise a plan where the student will come over at Hannah's place, they will catch the peeping tom. This plan backfires as the student, fascinated by the idea of having a peeping tom, makes some posed images which further solidifies Hannah's image and tarnishes her reputation.

Hannah reveals that she is recording the tape while stalking Tyler with the intention to make him feel the same way she felt when she couldn't find the sense of safety and security in her own house and all this was not for revenge as "Revenge, in a twisted way, would have given me some sense of satisfaction. But this, standing outside Tyler's window, satisfies nothing. My mind is made up." (Asher, 2017). She believes that seeking revenge on everyone cannot undo the things that have been done and the only alternative left is for her to end her life. This act of Hannah, stalking in retaliation, as well as Tyler's action of stalking Hannah as an act of sexual predation, are one of the common reasons of why people often indulge in stalking. (Purcell et al., 2010)

Cassette 3 Side A:

Hannah reveals the identity of student with whom she devised the plan to catch Tyler as Courtney Crimsen. After the events with Tyler, Courtney grew distant and started to ignore Hannah as much as she could. This made Hannah to lose hope in the people around her as she believe that she could be friends with someone as her last shred of social support in the trying times. Then suddenly out of the blues, Courtney reaches out to Hannah but use her again as a ride to a party they were attending. At the party, it is revealed to Hannah that Courtney has used her night with Hannah as a means of making her reputations far worse than it was before. She sets Hannah up with a boy more as a way to pimp her out by spreading a rumour that Hannah is extremely sexual and is in possession of sex toys. This event makes her discover new ways and the idea that she "was sick of this town and everything in it." (Asher, 2017)

Cassette 3 Side B:

Hannah felt lonelier with the past few events that took place and time was not helping. Every year at school on Valentine's day, the cheer camp sets up "Oh My Dollar Valentines" as means of setting up students together. Hannah fills up the survey as a means finding hope as "This time, for the first time, I saw the possibilities in giving up. I even found hope in it." (Asher, 2017) Her hope for life is short lived as Marcus Cooley enters the picture as the sixth reason for Hannah's death and a deadly

reminder of what her life has become due to the rumours. Marcus asks Hannah out on a date because she appeared as his match on the survey. They decided to meet up at Rosie's, a local diner. She tries her best to have an upbeat attitude towards thing. "It may seem that every time, someone offers you a hand up, they just let go and you slip further down. But you must stop being so pessimistic, Hannah, and learn to trust those around you. So, I do. One more time." (Asher, 2017)

They meet up and chat but suddenly Marcus makes a move on Hannah, but she shoves him off. He calls her a tease and leaves. This event makes Hannah feel hollow within as she needed a reason to trust the people around, but the things are going the other way as she decides to trust no one anymore.

Cassette 4 Side A:

In this tape, the events that take place, start at once after Marcus leaves Hannah at the booth in Rosie's and Marcus leaves, Zach Dempsey, another recurring character in her tapes, comes to console Hannah but she doesn't respond well as she is distorted by the incident which just happened. So, as a means of retaliation for supposedly rejecting his advances, Zach steals the notes of encouragement which were a part of the Peer Communications class they had together. These notes of encouragement were Hannah's only hope for having a stable social interaction with her peers. She later catches and confronts Zach, but he doesn't give any explanation for his actions. She reminisces that "Maybe he sees it now as a prologue to these tapes. Because in there, I admitted that I was at a point in my life where I really could have used any encouragement anyone might have left me. Encouragement . . . that he stole." (Asher, 2017). The encouragement was something Hannah needed the most at that time and losing it was tearing her apart.

Cassette 4 Side B:

Hannah's journey went on a perilous route as along with losing her physical privacy, she lost her warmth of her thoughts as well. The culprit for such, according to Hannah is Ryan Shaver. Ryan and Hannah met at a poetry class at the public library. They bond over their similar interests in poetry and exchange their poems. Ryan was also the editor of the 'Lost-N-Found' Gazette where he publishes any form of art whether it be doodles, letters, and stories anonymously. He publishes Hannah's poem without her permission which leads to a spur at the school. Her poem gets recognition as it even is discussed in the classes as

a classic poetry. Things started to worsen up as the poetry was dissected and ridiculed by making parodies which made Hannah feel like her thoughts and ideas were intruded.

She loses her sense of safety as "school hadn't been a safe haven of mine for a long time. And after your photo escapades, Tyler, my home was no longer secure. Now, suddenly; even my own thoughts were being offered up for ridicule." (Asher, 2017) Hannah not only loses her security but the right to have her thoughts after this event because of ridicule her thoughts had to face.

Cassette 5 Side A:

The time Clay Jensen, the current holder of the tapes, dreaded finally came as its now his turn to learn about his part in Hannah's journey to self-harm but to his surprise, he did not do anything wrong. It turns out that she blamed herself for this and was projecting it through Clay although she never blamed him. He is on the list only to tie the events together. Hannah attended a party in order to meet Clay. They chat and connect emotionally. Hannah contemplates on the possibility that "If only I'd talked to you sooner. We could have been ... we could've . . . I don't know. But things had gone too far by then. My mind was set. Not on ending my life. Not yet. It was set on floating through school. On never being close to anyone. That was my plan. I'd graduate, then I'd leave." (Asher, 2017)

They start kissing each other. This event sparks hope in the mind of Hannah, but her emotions take a hold of her as she recalls her first kiss with Justin and how it turned her life apart. She stops him and starts to cry, thinking about the things she had to endure and what her presence can do to Clay as while they were kissing, she thinks that "I shut my eyes so tight it was painful. Trying to push away all that I was seeing in my head. And what I saw was everyone on this list . . . and more. Everyone up to that night. Everyone who caused me to be so intrigued by Clays reputation--how his reputation was so different from mine." (Asher, 2017). At the end of the tape, she apologizes to Clay for what she has done as she pushed him away because she did not want her current reputation to have an impact on Clay.

Cassette 5 Side B:

The events in this tape start at once after Clay leaves Hannah at the party. Hannah is in the room and one of the earlier persons on the list reappears with his girlfriend. She hides in the closet and sees

that the girl is drunk and disoriented. The guy goes out of the room who sends his friend in the room to sexually assault his girlfriend. Hannah reveals that the guy is Justin foley and identities of the girlfriend and the assaulter were revealed by Clay to be Jessica Davis and Bryce Walker.

In this tape, Hannah blames herself and Justin as they both "... could have saved her. And I'm admitting this to you. To all of you. That girl had two chances. And both of us let her down." (Asher, 2017). The reason behind they did not do anything is because Hannah was afraid for her own life and Justin because he wanted it to happen.

Cassette 6 Side A:

After the events in the bedroom, Hannah meets Jenny Kurtz, the subject of this section. She helps Hannah by offering her to give a ride home. On the way, Jenny hits a stop sign on the way and refuses to report it to the respective authorities. This makes Hannah feel anxious and the two get into an argument and Jenny leaves Hannah stranded on the street. Eventually she does report the damage to the stop sign but finds out that it's been too late as one of a senior in their school, met with an accident while delivering pizzas. This makes Hannah feel guilty for being a part of someone's death and uses her tapes as a means to tell Jenny that she is in it with her as well. She believes that "If time was a string connecting all of your stories, that party would be the point where everything knots up. And that knot keeps growing and growing, getting more and more tangled, dragging the rest of your stories into it." (Asher, 2017). Hannah believes that the party was just the beginning of the worse things to happen.

Cassette 6 Side B:

The penultimate tape features a segment about Bryce Walker. Hannah did not attend Courtney's house party a week after that traumatic night of the party, despite the fact that she was housesitting close by. Instead, Hannah made the choice to go by the home after the party was over, and it was there that she came across Bryce and Courtney relaxing in a hot tub. After Courtney exits the hot tub, and Bryce then sexually abuses her although she doesn't resist it. She believes that the false sense of idea everyone had about her eventually made it into her brain. "So, congratulations, Bryce. You're the one. I let my reputation catch up with me I let my reputation become me with you." (Asher, 2017). The moment she understands that she is now what everyone expected her to be. This is when Hannah decides to end her life. Studies suggest that sexual

assault in either childhood or adulthood contributes to develop suicidal ideation in women. (Davidson, 1996)

Cassette 7 Side A:

The final member of the "Baker's Dozen" is revealed to be Mr. Porter, Hannah's guidance counsellor. In this tape, Hannah visits Mr. Porter and records the entire session with him as a means to prove that she did try taking help and how it turned out to be.

"(Hannah) I don't want my life to end. That's why I'm here.

(Mr. Porter)-So what happened, Hannah? How did we get here?

(Hannah) We? Or how did I get here?

(Mr. Porter)-You, Hannah. How did you get to this point? I know you can't sum it all up. It's the snowball effect, am I right?" (Asher, 2017)

She tells him about the incident with Bryce. He gives her two options, either to confront him and press charges against him, which Hannah was hesitant to do, or to 'move on' (Asher, 2017). Enraged Hannah leaves the session and apologizes to the people who actually cared for her. It is then revealed that she commits suicide.

Conclusion

The study one can concur that the snowball effect can produce positive as well as negative sense of perception in an individual's mind. The effect leads to a cascading descent that can lead to prospects of depression and even suicidal ideation amongst a large demographic of adolescence. After an in-depth analysis of the snowball effect in context of the novel *Thirteen Reason Why* presents an interesting scenario where the protagonist, Hannah Baker, undergoes a snowball effect which causes an emotional turmoil in eventually leading her to commit suicide. The book emphasises how little things people do can add up to a bigger issue, like bullying and social isolation. It all starts when certain rumours start to pop up which cause issues in her personal and social life. She loses her privacy, her friends, her intellectual property, is bullied and is even abused both physically, sexually, and psychologically. Throughout the journey, correlates her situation to the snowball effect. She does try to seek help, but the descent caused by the negative experiences were strong enough to overpower the positive events. The snowball effect can be used as a metaphor for how harmful attitudes and behaviours can build within a community and spread, with disastrous effects.

Overall, "Thirteen Reasons Why" is an effective reminder of the effect one's actions may have on others and the value of compassion, understanding, kindness in building a positive and encouraging community, along with the turmoil of people dealing with social isolation, suicidal ideation, and depression.

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