

Streaming sexual violence: Binge-watching Netflix's *13 Reasons Why*

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Abstract:

This article explores the politics of streaming sexual violence through the case study of Netflix Original *13 Reasons Why* (2017-). Evaluating the observation that long-form drama with its extended temporality can engage with rape culture in more sustained and critical ways, this article argues that this is not necessarily the case. Tracking the ways in which Netflix hooks and trains its audiences to binge-watch *13 Reasons Why* – in both its narrative hermeneutics and its structures of reception – I argue that those reception practices and narrative hooks, particularly around sexually graphic content, are cultivated around successive levels of intensity, similar to levels in a video game. In effect, sexual violence is gamified in *13 Reasons Why* and is used as a structuring punctuation device for the full-drop season, which aims to keep viewers locked into Netflix's streaming interface. I conclude that the seriality of *13 Reasons Why* as a binge-able Netflix product places a premium upon the 'next episode' in a way that ultimately forecloses a deeper, more meaningful engagement with the serious issues of sexual violence and victimization. This article argues for the importance of examining how new technological and networked modes of delivery and response are shaping audience's affective encounters/engagements with images of sexual violence in the digital streaming era.

Keywords: sexual violence, seriality, Netflix, binge-watching, gamification, rape culture

Introduction

This essay focuses on the popular, and highly controversial, Netflix 'Original' *13 Reasons Why*, as a striking case study for an analysis of the kinds of cultural fears and fantasies that have coalesced around binge-watching as an endemic cultural practice of the early 21st century.¹ It should be noted from the start, that this essay is not about the activity of binge-watching per se,² but, rather, the discursive construction of the notion of the televisual 'binge' in the streaming era, as it emerges through *13 Reasons Why* and the reception and

marketing discourses that surround it. I am especially concerned with exploring how, in both season one and season two of *13 Reasons Why*, images of sexual assault are deployed in the service of the serialized, 'binge-able' Netflix format. Despite the media focus on its depiction of suicide, *13 Reasons Why* is, in fact, primarily a TV show about image-based abuse and rape, with 'almost every instalment of the 13-episode season deal[ing] with a different form of sexual harassment/sexual violence' (Berridge 2017).

In this, *13 Reasons Why* is one of a growing number of long-form arc-led TV series – other examples include *Jessica Jones* (Netflix, 2015-), *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (Netflix, 2015-2019), *Orange is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013-2019), *Top of the Lake* (BBC, Sundance Channel, Netflix, 2013-) and *Big Little Lies* (HBO, 2017-) – to engage with the notion of rape culture in the #metoo era. As Julia Havas has noted, 'in some incarnations of the trend – and doubtlessly reflecting on the Trump and MeToo era – sexual violence, rape culture, and ... the psychological aftermaths of sexual abuse have become focalised in several scripted series in ways that highlight the systemic nature of sexual violence and its key role in the makeup of the patriarchal social order' (Havas 2018). Following the 'trending' of rape culture in long-form TV drama, it is important to ask: To what extent does the stringing out of sexual violence storylines across serialized episodes – which are made available to viewers on full-drop release – enable a newfound interrogation of rape as a systemic social problem? How does Netflix's binge publication model impact its depiction of rape culture? And finally, how does the rhetoric around the Netflix modus operandi of binge-watching and full-drop release, affect how the depiction of sexual violence in *13 Reasons Why* is culturally received and understood?

Before I begin to attend to these questions, it is necessary to provide an overview of the cultural outcry over the first two seasons of *13 Reasons Why*.³ Following its full-drop release on Netflix on March 31, 2017, season one of *13 Reasons Why* initiated a global moral panic over its graphic depiction of suicide. In Canada, some schools reportedly forbade discussion of the drama on school premises (Elizabeth 2017), and in New Zealand, the 'New Zealand Office of Film and Literature created a new censorship category RP18 to address concerns over the series, issuing an immediate restriction on the show to those aged under 18, unless accompanied by an adult' (Ainge Roy 2017). Although teenager Hannah Baker's (Katherine Langford) suicide is part of the story from the start, the extremely graphic images of her death, in which she slits her wrists in a bathtub, are withheld until the series' thirteenth and final episode. Hannah herself appears as a charismatic character throughout the series, much of which is told in flashback. The worry, according to many psychologists, parents, and educators, is that the narrative romanticizes suicide through its revenge fantasy narrative and could create a suicide contagion effect amongst its young audience.⁴

Earning itself the accolade of the 'most tweeted television program of 2017' (Bruner 2017), the first season of *13 Reasons Why* also initiated conversation around its depiction of the image-based abuse and rape of teenaged girls, the latter of which occurs in episode nine and episode twelve respectively. While the show was praised for offering a critique of rape

culture, it was simultaneously criticized for the disturbing and explicit nature of its portrayal of sexual violence. The second season, which dropped on Netflix on May 18, 2018, generated even further controversy – and widespread moral condemnation – for its depiction of the rape of a male teenager in its thirteenth and final episode. The graphic anal rape of Tyler Down (Devin Druid) by a male student with a mop handle in a school bathroom, along with the problematic links drawn between that scene of sexual violence and a near school shooting, was the subject of much media outrage on Twitter and elsewhere for its apparently gratuitous shock tactics. Producer Brian Yorkey defended the scene on the grounds that ‘talking about [male rape is] so much better than silence’ (cited in Bradley 2018). But this did little to stem the outrage; The Parents TV Council, for example, issued an ‘urgent warning’ over the scene which they found sensationalist, irresponsible, and ‘triggering’ for vulnerable young people (Henson 2018).

Although it has not yet been discussed in any significant detail, I want to argue that there is another, interrelated cultural fear at stake in these debates over *13 Reasons Why*: the dangers of binge-watching. Indeed, the *13 Reasons Why* controversy constitutes what Alice Marwick (2008) calls a ‘technopanic,’ insofar as it revolves around anxieties about new media technologies and practices. As Catherine Page Jeffery summarizes it, there are three identifying characteristics of such technopanics: ‘they focus on new media forms (such as digital technologies); they generally pathologize young people’s use of this media; and this cultural anxiety is manifested through attempts to modify or regulate young people’s behaviours’ (2018, 367). In the warning issued over *13 Reasons Why* by the National Association of School Psychologists in the US, it was noted that ‘many teenagers are binge watching without adult guidance and support,’ which, (it was asserted), could ‘lead impressionable viewers to romanticize the choices made by the characters’ (Strauss 2017). In fact, some commentators warned parents not to let their children binge-watch. As this warning from Australia’s ‘leading online mental health organization for young people and their parents’ urged: ‘Don’t binge watch it. *13 Reasons Why* has some very distressing content, and the distress will be multiplied if you watch episodes back to back. Do something soothing after each episode, like having a cup of tea or milo [Australian chocolate malt drink] or watching something funny’ (‘What to do,’ 2017). The concern here, then, is not only the graphic content of the series but the non-stop consumption of its serialized content through online streaming and user-directed viewing. Such handwringing over the constellation of young people, violent images, and binge-watching in the *13 Reasons Why* furore, is part of a wider cultural anxiety about 24/7 ‘round-the-clock consumption’ (Horeck et. al 2018, 501), which has emerged with the rise of Netflix and other digital streaming services.⁵

Following TV scholar Mareike Jenner’s assertion that ‘Netflix is a corporation that panders to binge-watchers’ (2016, 267), I suggest that *13 Reasons Why* is an important case study for interrogating the ways in which audiences are being invited to engage with images of violence in a twenty-first century attention economy. In taking this popular teen drama as my case study, my aim in this essay is to explore the relationship between Netflix’s

interface, its promotion of a binge viewing culture, and the depiction of sexualized and gendered forms of violence. Evaluating the observation that long-form drama with its extended temporality can engage with rape culture in more sustained and critical ways, this article argues that this is not necessarily the case. Tracking the ways in which Netflix hooks and trains its audiences to binge-watch *13 Reasons Why* – in both its narrative hermeneutics and its structures of reception – I argue that those reception practices and narrative hooks, particularly around sexually graphic content, are cultivated around successive levels of intensity, similar to levels in a video game.⁶ In effect, sexual violence is gamified in *13 Reasons Why* and is used as a structuring punctuation device for the full-drop season, which aims to keep viewers locked into Netflix's streaming interface. If, as a recent *Washington Post* article contends, Netflix has a 'killer problem,' and relies on sensationally violent content to hook viewers into its streaming platform (Zeitlich 2019), then it is important to carefully examine the relationship between depictions of violence and the Netflix platform. By tracing *13 Reasons Why's* self-reflexive deployment of binge-watching motifs, its cultural reception, and its marketing discourses, I assert that it encourages audiences to engage with its rape storylines according to a user-directed, video game logic that ultimately undermines its pretensions to offer a sustained critique of rape culture.

The Netflix Stretch: Binge-watching and *13 Reasons Why*

Reflecting on the success of the first series of *13 Reasons Why* in *The Guardian*, Sam Woolaston suggests that it was 'originally destined to become a film,' before 'Netflix got a hold of it and gave it the Netflix stretch' (2018). As with other Netflix 'originals,' having thirteen episodes to fill up with material has been viewed as both a blessing and a curse. Those who see it as a blessing claim that the extended duration of the Netflix format allows for a deeper exploration of complex material (Rullo 2017); on this reading, long duration is tied to discourses of legitimation and 'quality TV' (Newman and Levine 2012). Those who see it as a curse commonly opine that such long duration leads to pointless filler episodes; as Woolaston complains of season two of *13 Reasons Why*, it 'circles aimlessly with its head to the ground' and 'is pointless, cumbersome, baggy, badly written, ponderous and boring' (2018).

But wherever one stands in relation to debates about its duration, or its quality as entertainment, *13 Reasons Why* is consistently framed in relation to a notion of binge-watching. Indeed, a google search of the terms 'binge-watching' and '*13 Reasons Why*' yields over 12 million results. However much some cultural commentators and educators worry about its ill effects on teenagers, *13 Reasons Why* is often highly recommended for its 'binge-worthiness.' Both seasons of *13 Reasons Why* made Netflix's 'most devoured' and 'most binge-watched' lists in 2017 and 2018 respectively (Sharf 2017; Michallon 2018). As was widely reported in media outlets, *13 Reasons Why* broke records on Twitter and was tweeted 3.5 million times in season one's first week of release (more than any other Netflix series) [Tang 2017]; the vast majority of the tweets – for both seasons of the show – reference its 'binge-ability' as a key factor in its popularity. Following the release of season

one in 2017, hundreds of articles and online listicles emerged,⁷ including the following examples: ‘5 Reasons You Need to Binge Watch 13 Reasons Why;’ (‘5 Reasons’ 2017); ‘13 Reasons Why You Will Binge Watch “13 Reasons Why”’ (2017) and ‘13 Reasons Why “13 Reasons Why” Should Be Your Next Netflix Binge’ (Kain 2017).⁸ Such listicles urge people to binge-watch the series for a multitude of reasons, from the banal – ‘because Selena Gomez did an acoustic cover for the show’⁹ (‘5 Reasons’ 2017) – to the serious – because it ‘treats an important subject and raises awareness about harassment, bullying, and suicide’ (Simiaut 2017). Rather tautologically, one of the listicles suggests that the 13th reason why you should binge-watch *13 Reasons Why*, is because it ‘makes you binge’ (‘13 Reasons Why You Should Binge Watch’). There is more to say about the role that the listicle plays in relation to *13 Reasons Why*, and in Netflix’s promotion of a recommendation and algorithmic viewing culture, but for now suffice it to say that the public discussion of *13 Reasons Why*, as with other Netflix series, is inseparable from the notion of binge-watching as a cultural practice whereby viewers can readily access and stream a show on their own terms, consuming an entire series in a concentrated period of time.¹⁰

As Jenner has noted, binge-watching is central to how Netflix ‘structures its interface and, through this, the experience of Netflix’ (2018, 120). While binge-watching has its origins in the ‘quality TV’ DVD box sets of the TV III era (Jenner 2017) and is by no means exclusive to Netflix, the streaming giant has undeniably played a central role in shaping and promoting mainstream understandings of binge-watching as a key part of its business model. As Netflix CEO Reed Hastings said in 2011, ‘Netflix’s brand for TV shows is really about binge viewing. It is...to just get hooked and watch episode after episode. It’s addictive, it’s exciting, it’s different’ (cited in D’Souza 2018). In 2013 Netflix declared ‘binge-watching’ to be ‘the new normal’ in a press release that published the statistics from a commissioned Harris Interactive Study, which found that seventy-three percent of streamers ‘felt good’ about binge-watching (‘Netflix Declares’ 2013). Since then, the term ‘binge’ has appeared repeatedly in Netflix’s marketing of itself and is central to how the streaming service discursively positions and addresses its audience. As Jenner suggests, ‘binge-watching ... functions as a way for Netflix to explain itself’ (2018: 126). In its marketing of its shows, as well as in the shows themselves, viewers are encouraged to become caught up in the flow of episodes of a given series through the post-play function and other features of the Netflix interface. As part of its attempt to “teach” its audience how to watch Netflix’ (Jenner 2016: 264) many of its original series include references to binge-watching in their story worlds (McCormick 2016).

13 Reasons Why is exemplary in this respect: the central narrative conceit of the first season, in which Hannah Baker leaves behind thirteen audio-cassette tapes for her peers to listen to after her suicide, enables Netflix to comment on the terms of its own reception and to telegraph the activity of bingeing. In the tapes, Hannah details the reasons why she took her own life and identifies the people she holds accountable. Once one person listens to all the tapes, they have to pass the tapes on to the next person who is implicated and so on. Just like a Netflix series, the tapes arrive as a ‘full-drop’ release. Though the series does not

explicitly use the term ‘binge,’ the central white male protagonist Clay Jensen’s (Dylan Minnette) reluctance to ‘binge listen’ is alluded to throughout season one. As an exasperated Tony Padilla (Christian Navarro), asks Clay in ‘Tape 1, Side B’ (Ep2): ‘What is taking you so long?’ Whereas in the novel, Clay listens to the tapes all in one night, in the Netflix series, he is the slowest of everyone to consume the tapes and metes them out over several weeks of story time – over thirteen episodes of our viewing time to be precise – which is a very convenient way for Netflix to extend and tailor the narrative to its serialized format.¹¹ The device of the tapes functions as a way to build suspense and anticipation for viewers, as information is stretched out across the thirteen episodes (each of which is nearly an hour long).

For many fans, the show’s thematization of binge-watching is key to the pleasures it provides. As one blogger writes:

So the cool thing about the show is that you literally feel like you are listening to these tapes along with Clay the protagonist. This is the most binge-worthy show I have ever seen in my life and it’s incorporated into the genius that makes the Netflix platform popular. If Clay listens to the tapes slow, so are you. If you listen to them quickly, so is Clay. The speed of the show is only going at the speed you are binge or not bingeing it. Its (sic) almost like you are in the world with them listening to the tapes, not just watching the show from which ever technology device you are streaming it. We are all essentially Clay. I loved that! (‘13 Reasons Why You Should’ 2017)

As the central on-screen guide for viewers, and the moral compass of the series, sensitive Clay expresses concern over the difficulty of consuming the tapes in meta-moments that self-consciously reference the activity of consuming the series itself. Thus, in season one, Alex Standall (Miles Heizer) tells Clay he listened to the tapes all in one night and in fact has listened to them twice. An anxious Clay admits that he hasn’t even listened to his own tape yet: ‘I can only listen in bits and pieces, because I freak out and feel a panic attack coming on’ – a statement that echoes what mental health authorities said regarding the need to take breaks while watching *13 Reasons Why* (‘the distress will be multiplied if you watch episodes back to back’).

In season two, the show’s self-referencing is taken to new heights as it attempts to respond to the strong criticism of the first season. The second time around, Netflix takes greater care to frame the graphic content of *13 Reasons Why* with trigger warnings and links to educational resources; there is a new public service announcement at the beginning of the first episode in which the young actors speak directly to camera and warn of the ‘tough, real-world issues’ tackled by their show, including ‘sexual assault, substance abuse, suicide and more.’ Young people ‘struggling with these issues’ are warned that the show might not be for them, while those who do proceed with watching are urged to ‘watch with a trusted

adult.’ Every episode ends with a voice-over from one of the characters giving information about crisis resources.

The emotional stakes of consuming the tapes is extended as a central theme in the diegetic world of season two, through the self-conscious responses of the characters themselves to the difficult material. For example, in episode one, ‘The First Polaroid,’ we learn that students have been banned from discussing Alex Standall’s suicide attempt (a season one cliffhanger) in an overt reference to the schools that banned discussion of season one of *13 Reasons Why*. There is even a conversation between the principal of Liberty High, Mr. Bolan (Steven Weber) and Clay Jensen in episode nine, ‘The Missing Page,’ which raises the issue of ‘suicide contagion.’ Echoing the charges levelled against the show by mental health authorities, Mr. Bolan worries that by listening to the tapes, some students might think that they can ‘live on after they die’; and that whoever posted the tapes seems to think that Hannah’s story ‘should go on forever.’ Clay responds with the same rationale Netflix used when asked to justify the show’s excessive violence:¹² ‘How does silence protect us?...Maybe they (who posted the tapes) just wanted to start a conversation.’ This is a theme that is stitched throughout the narrative fabric of the second season, as in ‘Two Girls Kissing’ (Ep2), when Courtney Crimsen’s (Michelle Selene Ang) two gay dads, who are about to watch lesbian-themed films in order to support their daughter’s coming out, reflect on how ‘TV and films can be a great learning tool’.

The second season’s structuring device of the trial, in which Hannah’s parents try to hold Liberty High legally accountable for her suicide, is another meta-device that enables the continual rehashing of events from the first series (often presented visually as flashbacks). Most significantly, in season two the tapes go ‘viral’ when Clay posts them online all at once as a digital file, thus mirroring the virality of the first series of *13 Reasons Why* itself. Characters discuss the tapes throughout the series and are often shown listening to them on their digital devices.

I suggest that the constant stream of meta-commentary on the tapes – and their replay within the diegesis – has significant implications when it comes to the series’ mode of audience address and its attempted critique of rape culture. The Netflix ‘stretch’ appears to potentially open up a space for what feminist theorists such as Liz Kelly (1988) and Karen Boyle (2018) refer to as ‘continuum thinking’ about sexual violence, in which sexual abuse is understood not as an individual, isolated act but part of a wider range of sexually aggressive acts and practices that can occur over a life-time. However, as I will now go on to argue, the binge-able-play-next-episode format ultimately results in a re-enactment of the very forms of harm the series professes to challenge.

The Gamification of Serial Sexual Violence

If, as Sarah Banet-Weiser has noted, ‘a crucial component of popular feminism has been to call attention to rape culture, to reveal its pervasive and normative presence’ (2018: 55), then *13 Reasons Why* is a striking example of a pop cultural artifact that has taken on board some of these feminist lessons, using the genre of teen drama to turn a critical lens on how

the institution of the school supports rape culture. The phrase ‘rape culture’ may not be used in *13 Reasons Why*, but the series does make frequent reference to ‘the culture’ or ‘the culture of sexism’ at Liberty High – the fictional high school at the centre of the story. In particular, it offers a critique of the masculinist sports culture that dominates at Liberty High, where co-captain of the baseball team and serial rapist, Bryce Walker (Justin Prentice), is a ringleader of a group of young men who bully vulnerable classmates and who routinely and casually denigrate and abuse young women. In contrast to the violent stranger rapes that dominated episodic prime-time TV of the early 1980s (Cuklanz 2000: 6), *13 Reasons Why* demonstrates that rape is a crime more commonly committed by men known to the victims – namely, friends and boyfriends.¹³ In its most commendable and challenging moments, *13 Reasons Why* exposes so-called ‘locker room chat’ for the violent, sexist, and homophobic discourse it is, and demonstrates how such ‘boys-will-be-boys’ talk is the scaffolding for a toxic masculinity that is damaging to both women and men.

At first glance, then, *13 Reasons Why* would appear to be one of the exceptions to Stuart Joy’s argument that ‘in this era of quality television, few programmes have sought to utilize the long-form narrative structure to meaningfully engage with issues surrounding abusive relationships and sexual violence’ (2017: 1). It is certainly remarkable how *13 Reasons Why* takes advantage of the affordances of post network ‘arc TV’ (Klinger 2018: 6) to put rape into a wider context of sexism and gendered power, harassment, and sexual double standards across not one but two Netflix series. In her perceptive analysis of season one of *13 Reasons Why*, Berridge notes how it critically demonstrates theorist Fiona Vera-Gray’s argument in *Men’s Intrusion, Women’s Embodiment* (2016), that girls are schooled from very early on to expect ‘continuous’ male ‘intrusion’ into their lives:

The structure of *13 Reasons Why* – with almost every episode dealing with a different form of boys’ (and occasionally girls’) abuse – speaks to this ‘continuous, cumulative, living reality’, allowing connections to be made between different acts of sexual violence...Its positioning on Netflix, a platform that encourages ‘binge’ viewing by releasing all episodes in a season simultaneously, further encourages connections to be made through intense viewing. It is difficult to view any of these experiences as a one-off occurrence due to their repetitive nature... The devastating impact of sexual violence is highlighted throughout. (Berridge 2017)

Season two further uncovers the endemic culture of sexual violence at Liberty High and develops a storyline across all thirteen episodes about the traumatic aftermath of sexual assault, especially through the character arc of Jessica Davis (Alisha Boe). In light of the privileging of white girls and women as the idealized victims of violent crime in the dominant media, it is significant that Jessica is a biracial woman, and that her intersectional experience is explored (to a limited extent) in the series. Though intersectionality is by no means a sustained focus of the series – which by dint of its format has a tendency to flit

from character to character across the thirteen episodes – there are nonetheless fleeting moments in which Jessica articulates the significance of her positionality as a rape victim in regards to the ‘double jeopardy’ (to borrow Frances Beal’s phrase [2008]) of race and gender. As she tells Clay in ‘The Drunk Slut’ (S2, E3): ‘Hannah’s gone and she was sweet and sensitive and white. Look at what they’re doing to *her*? Don’t you get it, I’m not the right kind of victim to go against Bryce Walker, not when it’s his word against mine.’

Bryce Walker is the archetypal sneering privileged rich boy and alpha white male sporting hero who emerges as the arch villain of both seasons.¹⁴ To a degree, the series resists making his crimes of serial sexual violence entirely a matter of his individual pathology or inherent ‘badness.’ It works to show how the Bryce Walkers of the world are a product of their environment, and are enabled by their coaches, teachers, friends, and parents, all of whom laud the qualities of egotism, competitiveness, and sexual aggression that shore up a hegemonic masculinity (what Bryce himself refers to as ‘the brotherhood’). However, the series is ultimately unable to sustain a nuanced, systemic analysis of gendered violence as what I call the ‘play-next-episode narrative drive’ gives way to a formulaic reliance on familiar tropes such as the ‘evil’ individual.



Fig. 1.1.: Trigger warning at the start of Season Two, Episode 11 of *13 Reasons Why*

In fact, it is important to read the series on its own terms – as a streaming Netflix Original that demands to be consumed quickly, all at once – and not to isolate the individual moments where it articulates a certain pop feminist wisdom about rape culture. In an era of post-network TV, the self-promotion of serial storytelling as it has functioned historically – in which ‘one episode, ending with an enigma or cliffhanger, tempts audiences to consume later installments’ (Klinger 2018: 5) – is well suited to streaming services and their emphasis on new modes of user-directed viewing. One of the central defining features of the

contemporary binge-able TV series, as epitomized by Netflix, is the gamification of the viewing experience.¹⁵ Writing about the mechanics of binge-watching in the *New York Times*, television critic James Poniewozik argues that streaming TV is a ‘distinct genre’, which is like ‘video gaming’ in so far as ‘each episode becomes a new level to unlock’ (2015). With the second season of *13 Reasons Why*, even the trigger warnings about the graphic images of sexual assault, which are ostensibly there to protect more vulnerable viewers, turn into part of the user-directed experience of ‘unlocking’ each episode (Fig. 1.1).¹⁶

While the cassette tapes were the structuring device of season one, it is the polaroid photos which constitute the mystery of season two. The question of who is sending Clay the photos (many of which depict sexual violence), where they were taken, and who appears in them, are central narrative hooks. Reviewers have noted the troubling way in which season one of *13 Reasons Why* turns Hannah’s suicide note, extended across thirteen episodes, into a ‘gamified treasure hunt’ (Herman 2017) or an ‘addictive scavenger hunt’ (Tolentino 2017). Season two uses the polaroid photos of sexual abuse in a similar way, to structure a gamified mystery involving all of the characters and soliciting audience participation. In the trailer for season two, polaroids float over the characters’ faces revealing ‘hidden clues’ which are, as *Seventeen* magazine informs its young readership, ‘VERY telling’ about key plot points (Fuentes 2018)¹⁷ [Fig. 1.2].

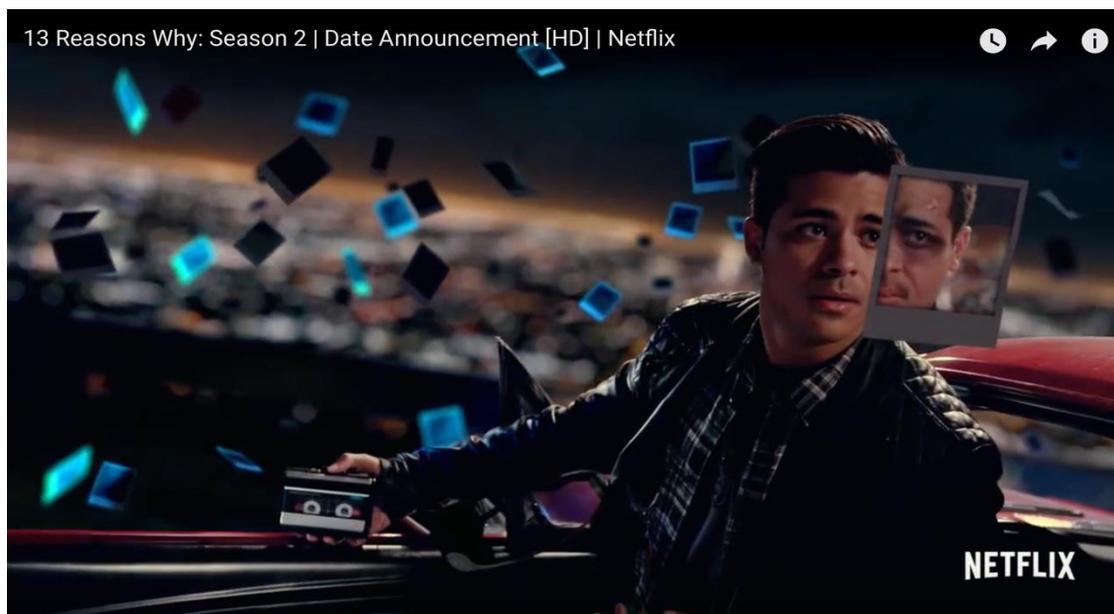


Fig 1.2: Image from date announcement trailer for season two of *13 Reasons Why*

The season two promotional campaign also created an *actual* scavenger hunt ‘for clues of what happened to Hannah across the US’ (Pearce 2018). In a short video on Netflix’s Instagram page, actor Christian Navarro, who plays the character of Tony Padilla, ‘launch [ed] the adventure, encouraging wannabe detectives to share what they find online’ (ibid.). As Navarro states in the video: ‘People think they know what happened at Liberty High, but

they have no idea... For the next 13 days we're going to be hiding the truth in plain sight – as clues, big reveals for season two, will be hidden all across the country.'

What such promotional stunts render explicit, is the extent to which *13 Reasons Why* commodifies the serious issues it deals with as part of a 'binge-able,' transmedia, entertainment 'experience.' The packaging of suicide and sexual violence as engaging, interactive mysteries to be 'solved' by viewers sits rather uncomfortably alongside the sombre public service framing of *13 Reasons Why* as an educational series that 'breaks the silence' and 'opens up conversations.' Inviting viewers to become 'detectives' and collect 'clues' in a scavenger hunt may be a gimmick *par excellence* but it is one that reveals the operations of Netflix as a 'culture machine' (Finn 2017, 92), which mines participatory media culture as part of its algorithmic shaping of consumer desire and viewer responses.

Social media networks are the backdrop for such stunts, and for contemporary 'internet distributed TV' or 'online TV'¹⁸ more broadly. When it comes to accounting for the streaming success of *13 Reasons Why*, the clue is in the title, which takes the form of a list. Social media networks, after all, abound with lists and listing. As Liam Cole Young has argued in his recent book, *List Cultures: Knowledge and Poetics from Mesopotamia to BuzzFeed*, although listing is 'an ancient technique,' the list seems 'almost paradigmatic' of digital culture: 'the zeitgeist in a BuzzFeed listicle' (2017: 12). Not only is listing an inherent part of Netflix's curation of TV programmes, it is also central to how people make sense of the activity of binge-watching. The ritual of listing 'top' TV shows for binge-watching, for example, puts an emphasis on completing series quickly, accumulating them as prized objects to be discussed and 'spoiled' on social media forums. Though it famously does not release its viewing figures, Netflix is preoccupied with metrics, and one only has to look at its press releases of the last five years to see the significant role played by the list in its promotion and construction of a binge-viewing culture. In press releases such as 'Ready, Set, Binge: More Than 8 Million Viewers "Binge Race" Their Favorite Series' (October 17, 2017) and 'Do you remember your first time ... bingeing on Netflix?' (February 7, 2018), there is a striking emphasis on statistics and 'listicles' in an attempt to quantify the binge-watching experience.

13 Reasons Why is itself, of course, formulated as a list, which lends itself to meme culture, the listicle, the activity of compressed viewing, and the terms of a wider media ecology obsessed with the generation of 'clicks, likes and shares' (Cole Young, 2017: 121). The list also plays a central, organizing role in the diegesis of *13 Reasons Why*. Indeed, season one's episodes are named after the sequential order of the tapes: 'Tape 1, Side A,' 'Tape 2, Side B,' and so on; in season two, characters continually refer back to the list of previous tapes, as when Jessica is repeatedly referred to as the girl from 'tape 9.' In season one, included on Hannah's list of '13 Reasons Why' she chooses to end her life, is a list of 'Hot or Not' drawn up by the high school boys and circulated across the school, which evaluates the girls' physical appearances (**Fig. 1.3**).

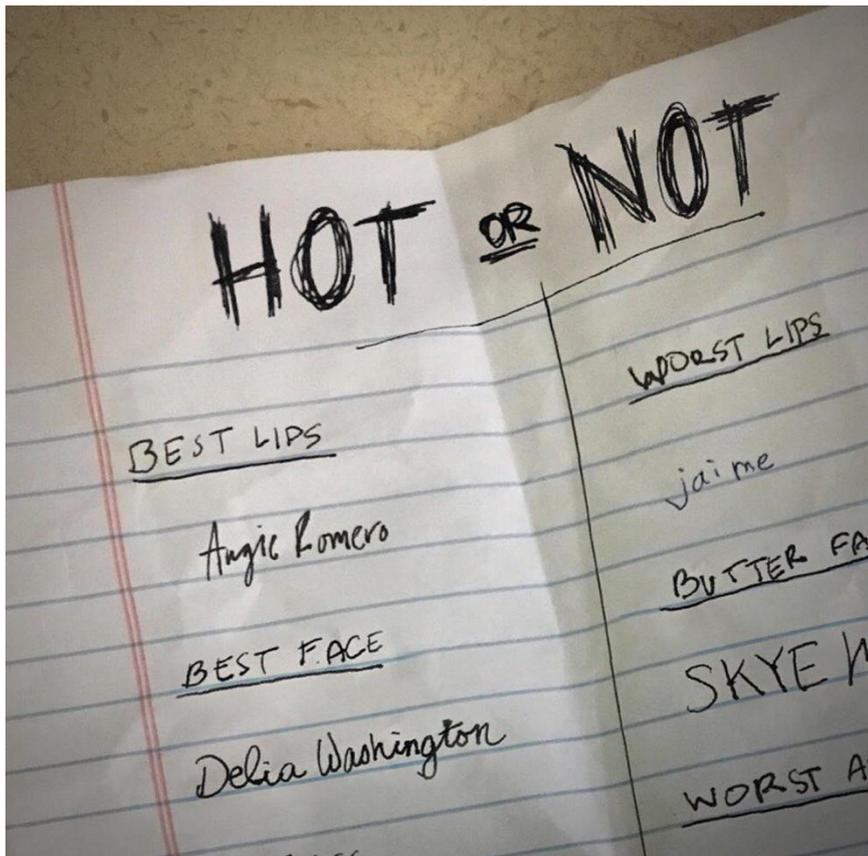


Fig 1.3: 'Hot or Not' list that circulates at Liberty High in season one of *13 Reasons Why*

This 'Hot or Not' list, which functions as a listicle in a listicle, is shown to be very damaging; it is what precipitates Hannah's slut-shaming, or at least what takes it to new levels. It is worth recalling that Facebook, 'the largest and most high-profile social media platform in the world' (Salter 2017: 8), emerged out of a 'Hot or Not' style list called 'Facemash', which was launched in 2003 by Mark Zuckerberg and his friends. This site invited 'Harvard students to rate and compare the attractiveness of female students' (Salter 2017: 8) and it is significant that a social media platform based on the 'quantification of popularity and attention' (Salter 2017: 8) through the use of emojis, comments, and shares, should have its origins in such base sexual objectification.

Cole Young contends that: 'It is not enough to say lists are good or bad. Their complicated and sometimes contradictory operations ... demand a precise tracing of how they function' (2017: 18). When considering *13 Reasons Why*, it is therefore important to examine how its depictions of sexual violence function in relation to the operational status of the list. In episode ten of season one, a distraught Clay, who is traumatized after listening to several of the (meta) tapes, says to Tony: 'Death and rape, and what the fuck is next?' The question of 'what-the-fuck-is-next' is crucial to the flow of Netflix's interface and its attempt to 'bind customers' (Jenner 2017: 305) into its binge-viewing format. Hannah's voice-over, which runs across every episode of season one of *13 Reasons Why*, continually foregrounds the viewer's urge to unlock the next 'tape' to find out what happened next –

‘See, I can tell the reason you are still listening is you want to find out who else is responsible for my death ... well you’re going to find out soon enough’, she says in episode two. I would argue, however, that in season one of *13 Reasons Why*, the nature of Hannah’s struggles – and the show’s engagement with the issues of sexual assault, image-based abuse, and suicide – are largely subsumed within the form of the list – and the attempt to continually guide viewer attention forward to the next, and the next, and the next. After the horrific scene in the final episode in which Hannah cuts her wrists and bleeds to death in a bath tub, the narrative quickly resumes, providing relief to the viewer, as new plot lines are immediately gestured towards; mere minutes after the visual depiction of her suicide, there is a cliffhanger suicide when Alex Standall shoots himself in the head and survives, and anticipation is built for new storylines as we watch troubled male student, Tyler Down, stockpile weapons and ammo – a potential mass shooting in the offing. This kind of constant forward momentum is all about generating viewer desire for the next episode – and for the next season. Just over a month after the full drop release of season one, on May 9, 2017, Netflix US deployed the device of the listicle on Twitter to gesture towards the new plotlines of season two of *13 Reasons Why* (Fig 1.4).

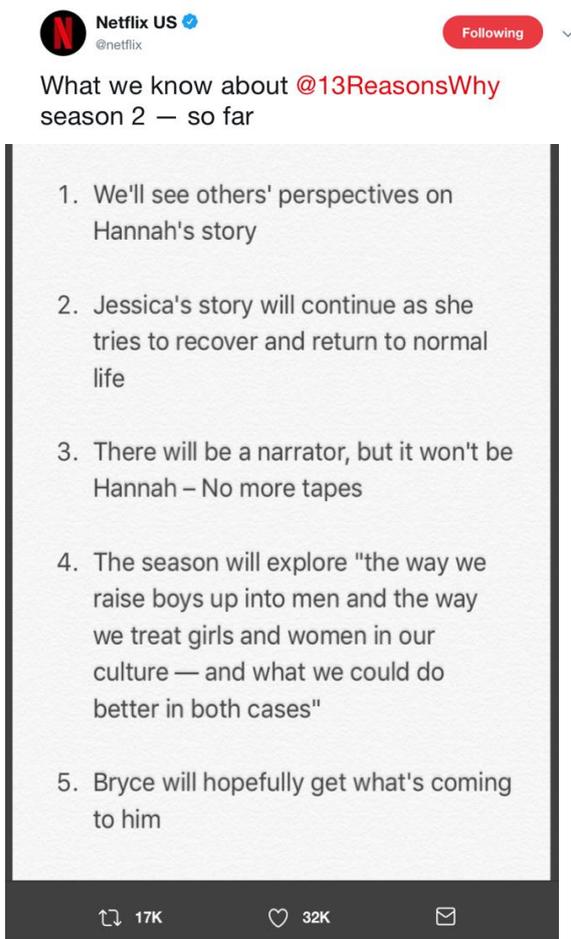


Fig 1.4: Netflix US listicle promoting season two of *13 Reasons Why*

Here the list as circulated on social media functions as a kind of blueprint for the TV season, much in the way that the pilot episode used to do in the age of network TV (Mittell 2015: 56). Ted Sarandos, Netflix's Chief Content Officer, has said that 'he considers the first season of a series, not the first episode, to be the "pilot"' (Poniewozik 2015). Following this logic, we might say that, if season one of *13 Reasons Why* works to establish a certain viewing protocol, then this template is returned to and fully exploited by season two, which is addressed to a binge viewer who already knows 'how to play the game and navigate the controls' (Mittell 2015: 57).

What is concerning about the second season of *13 Reasons Why* is how, despite presenting itself as offering a serious and topical interrogation of rape culture in a #metoo moment,¹⁹ it uses rape and sexually violent trauma in the service of producing yet more listicle-style binge-ability. Many reviewers have noted how rape is turned into a 'plot device' as the narrative of *13 Reasons Why* extends and stretches itself across a further thirteen episodes. In effect, sexual violence is 'gamified' and used as a structuring punctuation device for the full-drop season, which aims to generate a viewing experience whereby the viewer is encouraged to remain engaged with the Netflix interface and keep moving to 'the next episode in 5-4-3-2-1.' If the 'full-drop' release encourages viewers to become caught up in the flow of movement from episode to episode 'within the same programme' (Jenner 2018: 125), the use of violent images at strategic micro-intervals becomes a way of marking the flow of the series' narrative arc and the viewer's movement through it.

In *13 Reasons Why*, there is both a strange circling back to the past in a melodramatic 'what might have been' and a relentless forward march to the next episode. The pathos of what Linda Williams calls the 'too late' of melodrama (1998: 74) comes into constant – and often very jarring – contact with the 'hurry up' of binge watching, as is starkly evident in the promotional poster for season one of *13 Reasons Why*: 'If You're Listening, You're Too Late' (**Fig. 1.5**). As many critics have remarked, the decision to keep the dead character of Hannah Baker 'alive' across both seasons of *13 Reasons Why* is deeply problematic, increasingly so in the second season. The 'dead-but-not-gone girl' convention (Clarke Dillman 2014: 25), in which a female protagonist attains agency but only through her death, is taken to extremes in season two. Not only does dead Hannah appear as a ghost-like figure haunting male protagonist Clay in the present-day scenes, she also appears through a series of flashbacks which I believe are even more troubling: set to an eighties soundtrack, they revivify her character through romanticized back stories that show her losing her virginity and having fun summer romances. Reanimating Hannah as a vibrant and wise-cracking rom-com heroine in this way does a disservice to her character and to the serious issues of mental health, depression and suicide that are addressed but never fully explored by the series.



Fig 1.5: 'If You're Listening, You're Too Late' promotional poster for season one of *13 Reasons Why*

The shift between past and present registers also has a significant impact on the depiction of rape. Season two of *13 Reasons Why* continually revisits and replays the rape scenes from season one, both in flashbacks and in verbal testimony, but it also produces new images of rape for viewers to respond to: the end of 'The Third Polaroid' (E7) when Bryce 'date rapes'²⁰ Chloe, and towards the end of 'Bye' (E13) when Tyler is raped by Monty in the school bathroom. These episodes are framed by special trigger warnings which present them as especially dangerous and potentially unwatchable, not necessarily for YOU (to borrow Netflix's personalized mode of viewer address), but for a category of more vulnerable viewer constructed by the framing discourses around the series.

There is a strong sense in which the user-directed play-next-episode mechanics of the Netflix interface *demand* the infliction of violence and harm upon characters as a kind of video-game payoff. The rape of Tyler Down is presented as a moment of narrative climax, similar to how Hannah Baker's suicide functions in season one. Throughout season two, *13 Reasons Why* generates sympathy for Tyler as someone who has tried to reform, and deal with his anger issues (which, it should be noted, are nowhere near the levels of Bryce and many of his crew). But it generates this sympathy only in order that it may ultimately inflict egregious harm on him according to the terms of a viewing economy in which rape is an act of violence to be indefinitely replayed and re-enacted for viewers as part of a serialized narrative format. Writing on serial killer narratives, Richard Dyer has noted that the conventions of the genre leave little room for dwelling on the victim's experience precisely because 'the point is the repetition, the next episode/victim, in short the seriality' (cited in Hills 2005: 140). In similar fashion, the seriality of *13 Reasons Why* as a binge-able Netflix

product places a premium upon the 'next episode' in a way that forecloses a deeper, more meaningful engagement with the serious issue of sexual violence and victimization.

If season one of *13 Reasons Why* ends with the image of a troubled Tyler stockpiling guns and ammunition (strongly alluding to a possible school shooting), then season two toys with the possibility of such violence across all thirteen episodes. The images of Tyler and his friend Cyrus (Bryce Cass) as discontented outsiders, listening to punk music, dressing in black clothing, and carrying mysterious large bags down school corridors, unmistakably draws from the iconography of the Columbine shooting. The series in fact works to create anticipation for a school shooting through scenes that show an increasingly disgruntled Tyler and Cyrus as they shoot guns in the woods, hack into computers, and gather photo and video evidence to humiliate/blackmail their perceived foes.²¹ There is even a prank scene in which viewers are encouraged to imagine the worst, only for it all to end in a joke as a pink paint bomb explodes on the ever-obnoxious and Harvard bound Marcus (Steven Silver).

In season two, the foreshadowing of a school shooting thus serves as a kind of 'snare' for viewers. In her discussion of TV crime drama, Barbara Klinger has discussed how the snare functions as a way of 'stoking anticipation,' in which the 'postponing elicits both dread and longing to see the victim's potentially gruesome spectacle' (2018: 7, 13). And yet when the anticipated violence does come, it is not a school shooting that occurs but another rape. The assault on Tyler comes as a sudden eruption of brutality, which many viewers experience as a form of violence against them as spectators, as attested to by the strong responses to the rape on Twitter. However, in the diegetic world of the streaming text no time is left to explore the aftermath of such violence. Instead, the rape functions as a final bullet-point on the 'list' of reasons why an individual might commit a school shooting. Some few scenes later, Tyler arrives at the school dance armed with his stock of guns and ammo, only to be stopped in the nick of time by the ever-valiant Clay.

Having talked Tyler down from his attempt to murder his classmates, a shell-shocked Clay stands outside the school with Jessica Davis and Justin Foley; sirens wail as Tony speeds Tyler away to an unknown destination in his red mustang. 'What do we do now?' asks Justin, and it is here that season two ends. Except that nothing ever really ends in a 24/7 streaming culture, and we must brace ourselves for the inevitable announcement of a third season of *13 Reasons Why*. On June 6, 2018, this announcement came in the form of a short video, which shows someone opening a combination lock on a high school locker.²²

Conclusion

What is initially so promising about *13 Reasons Why* is that its extended structure, in which sexual violence is dealt with over the course of many episodes, might render visible the relationship between 'normative constructions of masculinity and sexual violence' (Berridge 2011: 479). However, as I have argued in this essay, this extension of the sexual violence storyline across the long-form narrative arc is also deeply problematic insofar as it withholds and 'saves' rape scenes until the latter episodes of both seasons, where they are presented

as climactic moments arguably engineered for an internet ‘clip culture’ (Grainge 2011: 7), fuelled by social media judgement and debate. While this kind of withholding of images of rape as a way of maximizing viewer anticipation and emotional response has a long and varied pre-digital era history – think, for example, of the final barroom rape scene in Jonathan Kaplan’s 1988 Hollywood film *The Accused* – it is also true that this kind of narrative strategy has different implications in the streaming era. In digital media convergence culture, TV series and films are now commonly accessed through digital ‘portals’ such as Netflix, Amazon Video, and HBO Now (described by Amanda Lotz as the ‘internet equivalent of channels’ [2017]). The public response to scenes of sexualized violence, accessed through such ‘portals,’ and displayed on laptops and mobile devices, can be immediately shared and circulated online through social media networks. In light of the intensive collaboration in the early 21st century between television, the internet, and film as ‘networks or systems of technologies, practices, and social formations’ (Grusin 2016), it is therefore important to consider how our affective encounters/engagements with images of sexual violence are staged and distributed across a range of viewing contexts, devices, and platforms.²³

My insistence that the controversial content of *13 Reasons Why* needs to be understood in relation to its technological and networked modes of delivery and response, differs from existing academic defences of the programme. For instance, the moral outrage over *13 Reasons Why* led a group of UK film and media studies scholars, fronted by William Proctor, to write an open letter to journalists, mental health campaigners, and psychologists, strongly refuting the ‘media harm theory’ that castigates the series as dangerous and immoral (Proctor 2017). For this group of academics, *13 Reasons Why* needs to be defended from ‘overly simplistic and reductive narratives of risk, panic, and the rhetoric of harm,’ in order to think about the more ‘positive’ effects of the show’s portrayal of serious and difficult issues for young people (Proctor 2017). While I agree it is important to challenge any simplistic media effects claims that would automatically condemn a fictional programme on the grounds that there is a direct link between reality and representation, my argument is that it is nevertheless important to closely explore the relationship between streaming, the full-drop release publication model, and sexually violent images on *13 Reasons Why* and other recent TV series.²⁴

Indeed, in a 24/7 world of social media networks, online content delivery, and digital streaming, significant new questions have emerged about the connection between online and offline forms of gendered violence. Image-based abuse, or technologically facilitated violence as it is also called (Henry and Powell 2017; Ging and Siapera 2018; Ringrose et. al 2019) has become endemic. There is a need for feminist media scholars to thus think carefully about the ways in which fictional narratives and images of rape and violence – as well as the public responses to them – are being shaped by the technosocial interfaces and streaming platforms on which they are exhibited. This is even more imperative given that so many TV shows are hyper-aware of new media technologies and increasingly incorporate digital interfaces into their storylines as a way of both referencing and anticipating a wider

culture of 'connected viewing' and social media response (Holt and Sanson 2014).²⁵ While there is a sense that the world of television, through its recent integration with the internet, is finally catching up with longstanding feminist arguments about rape, it is important to interrogate the extent to which such streaming TV shows, and their attempt to cater to an idea of the binge-watcher, are actually shifting cultural understandings of rape culture.

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Notes:

¹ It is interesting to note that in the recent British Board of Film Classification public consultation exercise, published on January 16, 2019, the two biggest emergent concerns were sexual violence and 'increased viewing via platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Video' (Classification Guidelines). While the focus of the report is on film, it is significant that *13 Reasons Why* is referenced as a touchstone for cultural concerns regarding screen violence and the profound changes in viewing practices and the media landscape in the last ten years.

² For an example of an excellent empirical study on binge-watching see Lisa Glebatis Perks (2015).

³ *13 Reasons Why* is based upon the best-selling 2007 novel of the same name by Jay Asher.

⁴ As I send this essay off to press, a new study claims that there was a spike in suicide rates amongst young males in the month after the release of the first series of *13 Reasons Why* (see Carey 2019).

⁵ There is, of course, a long history to moral panics around media and youth. As Timothy Shary writes in his research on the teen film, 'The 20th century produced a series of "moral panics" around young people and social behavior, and the cinema has been a perennial source of those panics, not only due to its function as a social gathering place, but more so in generating concerns about the ways that popular media influence youth' (2012: 581-582). The controversy over *13 Reasons Why* exemplifies widespread social unease about 24/7 access to screen culture and feeds into social anxiety about the internet as harmful to children and young people.

⁶ I am very grateful to Kathleen McHugh and Barbara Klinger for their useful, constructive feedback on this article and for helping me to clarify my argument.

⁷ The word 'listicle' entered the Oxford Dictionary in 2014, the same year as 'binge-watching.' Defined as 'an Internet article presented in the form of a numbered or bullet-pointed list,' it is one of many 'new words to be added to OxfordDictionaries.com after their use increased as a result of social media' ('A Listicle' 2014).

⁸ On the flipside, there are also listicles on why viewers should not binge watch *13 Reasons Why*. See, for example, Buckmaster (2017).

⁹ The former Disney star is one of the executive producers of *13 Reasons Why* and features in 'Beyond the Reasons,' a documentary about the series that follows the end of season one on Netflix.

¹⁰ According to the website, bingeclock.com, it would take one day and 26 minutes to view every episode of both seasons of *13 Reasons Why*.

¹¹ Clay's reluctance to binge the tapes led to a series of popular memes emerging online, which poked fun at the alleged frustration viewers felt as they waited for him to finish listening. See Google images, 'memes about Clay Jensen taking too long to listen to the tapes.'

¹² See Vincent (2017).

¹³ For important discussions of television images and narratives of sexual violence in the 1980s and the 1990s see Cuklanz's *Rape on Prime Time TV: Television, Masculinity, and Sexual Violence* (2000), Sarah Projansky's *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* (2001) and Sujata Moorti's *Color of Rape: Gender and Race in Television's Public Spheres* (2002).

¹⁴ Bryce Walker's characterization as a privileged white sports champion resonates with recent high-profile rape cases such as that of the Brock Turner case, more generally referred to as the 'Stanford rape case.' See Koren (2016) for a detailed discussion of this case.

¹⁵ This gamification is overtly realized in Netflix's recent turn to 'interactive content' as with *Puss in Book: Trapped in an Epic Tale* (2017) and *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018).

¹⁶ Anecdotally, my students have noted that anyone who makes it to the final episodes of the second season of *13 Reasons Why* is unlikely to turn away from the programme because of the trigger warnings. Rather, such warnings serve to heighten the viewing experience by further framing the cachet of the content as 'extreme' and 'forbidden.'

¹⁷ The date announcement trailer for season two of *13 Reasons Why* can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O92pekaban8>

¹⁸ See Amanda Lotz (2017) and Catherine Johnson (2019) for discussions of the convergence between TV and the internet.

¹⁹ The series' most overt referencing of the #metoo movement is at the beginning of the thirteenth and final episode of the second season, 'Bye', during Jessica Davis's victim statement at the trial of Bryce Walker. As Jessica speaks of her rape, a series of other female characters (young and old) suddenly appear in her place in front of the judge as one after the other they disclose their experiences of sexual assault in a visual rendering of the #metoo stories that emerged online throughout 2017 and 2018. While it is a powerful attempt to acknowledge the collectivity of violence against women, the moment feels rather tacked on.

²⁰ 'Date rape' is an increasingly outmoded, problematic term because of how it implies that sexual assault by an acquaintance or partner is somehow less serious, hence the scare quotes. Though Bryce coerces a form of verbal consent from Chloe ('you're into this, right?'), the scene makes it clear, through close ups of the intense discomfort registered on her face, that this is a sexual assault.

²¹ Netflix cancelled the Los Angeles premiere of season two of *13 Reasons Why* following the high school shooting in Santa Fe, Texas on May 18, 2018 in which ten people were killed. However, the series was still released on Netflix. See Loughrey (2018).

²² The teaser trailer for Season Three can be found here: <https://youtu.be/4p4GUgzFF1M>.

²³ Though I do not have the space to explore this here, it is important to examine what happens when rape scenes from long-form series such as *13 Reasons Why* are extracted from the shows, and their wider narrative context, and circulated and repurposed online in the form of YouTube clips and internet memes.

²⁴ Julia Havas and I discuss Netflix, feminism, and rape culture in a forthcoming chapter, provisionally titled, 'Netflix Feminism: Binge-watching Rape Culture' in the edited book collection *Binge-Watching and Contemporary Television Research* (forthcoming from Edinburgh University Press, Spring 2020).

²⁵ For a discussion of how rape culture is framed through digital media screens in contemporary TV crime drama, see Horeck (2018).