The Simultaneity of Loneliness and Popularity in Dear Evan Hansen

Rebecca Lewis

University of Westminster, London, UK
Correspondence: rebeccahayleylewis@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0003-3500-7416

Abstract

Musical theatre is an often neglected medium amongst popular culture studies. Critics of the theatre art form are quick to open the distance between musical theatre and other dramatic varieties, seeing it as melodramatic or banal. Dear Evan Hansen, ⸺ which first opened on Broadway in 2016, ⸺ has generated a new wave of fans and critics alike by addressing larger cultural topics of mental health through songs. The narrative centres on the titular character, a nerd and self-professed social outcast struggling with loneliness and low self-worth, who gets caught up in a lie that sparks a social media movement. The audience watches as Evan attempts to negotiate his newly found popularity, being driven by the fear of losing a validation he had always longed to receive.

Despite technology and social media easing long distance communication and creating communities, nearly half of Americans report feeling alone or left out and struggle with presenting a 'worthy' self-image to a highly critical yet invisible online audience. Using a psychoanalytic approach, this paper will first discuss the modern narrative of Dear Evan Hansen and its motifs of loneliness and social belonging, before moving on to consider how musical theatre articulates conversations of loneliness and popularity whilst simultaneously engaging the audience as integral characters in the performance.

Keywords: musical theatre; social media; mental health; nerd

Lewis. Exchanges 2022 9(3), pp. 84-103

84

Introduction

Dear Evan Hansen, a musical written by Benj Pasek and Justin Paul, premiered on Broadway in December 2016 following successful runs in Washington DC and Off-Broadway between July 2015 and May 2016 to high public acclaim. Electing to open with a monologue, rather than a grand opening number, it challenges the stereotyped image of musical theatre from its outset.

The musical is traditionally a play in which song and dance are incorporated into a dramatic story that evoke emotions beyond joy. Despite this, musical theatre is often viewed as a lesser art form. Musical theatre on Broadway developed from variety and minstrel shows to Vaudeville and Burlesque, thus being viewed by upper class 'legitimate' theatre goers as gaudy and tacky. Early musical theatre has historically been engaged with as a singular media form, with just a few hours to give a rounded performance that leaves the viewer both entertained and satisfied, and the expectation they would have little interaction with the show and its content after the final curtain. The invention of the internet has made musical theatre wholly more accessible, as those without the access or means to see performances can stream soundtracks and performances. Moreover, reviews are no longer limited to critics belonging to the elite but include the opinions of the regular audience member, and online interactions generate debate that open new perspectives on the content.

Musical theatre now has the technological capacity to reach the same broad audiences as film and television but must utilise different techniques. Novels and television series have time to develop characters and flesh out the narrative. Films, similar in length to a musical theatre performance, can use multiple filming locations and expensive editing techniques to create feelings of scale or push emotions onto the viewer. To compete with the sense of scale in television and film, musical theatre instead adopts elaborate orchestration (*Sunset Boulevard,* 1991; *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang,* 2002) and set and costume design (*Phantom of the Opera,* 1986; Wicked, 2003) as the norm to transform a small stage into a new world and convincing the audience of its rules. In contrast, the eight-member cast of *Dear Evan Hansen* dress in nondescript, everyday clothing, the stage design minimalist with its main feature being several tall screens that project social media timelines and posts. These elements combine to evoke a feeling of a small local performance, rather than the extravagant experience of large chorus productions on Broadway. This shift gives rise to a sense of smallness and closeness, allowing for a greater focus on each character and helping the audience to develop a personal connection with those on stage.

Lewis. Exchanges 2022 9(3), pp. 84-103

85

The plot of the musical centres wholly on Evan Hansen, a socially anxious high school student with no real friends. At the start of the musical, Evan is instructed by his counsellor to write letters to himself to foster positivity after suffering social anxiety, and one is intercepted by a fellow student, Connor Murphy. Shortly after, Connor is revealed to have died with Evan's letter still on him, leading the Murphy family to conclude Connor wrote the letter for Evan. Unable to admit the truth, Evan begins lying about his close friendship with Connor, and enlists family friend Jared Kleinman to forge emails supporting his claims. He also begins working with classmate Alana Beck on a social media campaign to keep Connor's memory alive, which goes viral online after Evan speaks at Connor's memorial event. His father's abandonment and mother's busy work schedule result in Evan building a close bond with the Murphy parents, and he later begins a relationship with Connor's sister, Zoe Murphy. As the show progresses, Evan's relationships begin to fracture, as he fails to accept his own identity as a nerd in contrast to his newly found recognition from his peers.

The production has become a global hit and won multiple awards, but its real success has occurred through its social media engagement and connection with younger audiences, generating conversations about mental health, loneliness, anxiety, self-acceptance, and inferiority in the era of social media, online personalities, and fake news. *Evan Hansen* joins a long line of musical theatre productions that have highlighted societal and civic issues of their respective time. These musicals have often covered hard-hitting subjects yet maintained emotional diversity, functioning as a safe space for those that have felt marginalised by society, whilst simultaneously providing rich entertainment to the audience. *Rent* (1996) highlighted the HIV/AIDS epidemic in New York City during the late 1980s, and *Falsettos* (1992) depicted LGBT relationships and non-traditional family structures during the same period.

There is still limited literature available discussion *Dear Evan Hansen* academically. Quick (**2019**) used dramatist and postmodern theory to analyse the song 'Waving Through a Window' in relation to teenage vulnerability and anxiety, whilst Doherty (**2020**) discussed *Dear Evan Hansen*'s fan engagement on social media to evaluate Generation Z's participatory spectatorship. This paper looks to build upon this existing literature by discussing the show's lyrics and narrative more comprehensively and considering audience positionality beyond a generational lens, utilising various psychoanalytical approaches and incorporating existing literature to understand the subject matter in a real-world context. This is achieved by first working through the lyrics and narrative of the show to consider how contemporary cultural issues of loneliness, anxiety and validation are presented against the backdrop of social media and the internet. Secondly, *Dear Evan Hansen's* production

design will be discussed in its contribution to the audience's emotional response and engagement whilst uniquely incorporating them as critical characters in the performance.

The Characterisation of the Nerd through the Lens of Mental Health

Out of the darkness, a laptop screen lights up. From his bed, Evan writes his daily letter. His assigned task, supplementing further professional treatment — including counselling and medication — is to discuss why today will be a good day. Instead, he lists ways in which he should be something other than himself. Self-penned therapeutic journaling and the writing of traumatic or stressful events have noted psychological benefits (**Pennebaker, 1997, 2018; Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005**). The intention of therapeutic journaling is to help the individual express their full emotions and reactions to difficult or traumatic life events. For Evan, who has been unable to share his mental struggles with his busy mother or friends, his daily letters of encouragement are written as a form of self-validation in lieu of approval or endorsement from his peers.

On a surface level, the musical at its beginning appears to characterise Evan as a nerd, an outsider within the school setting, one who struggles to fit in and yearns for acceptance by his peers. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines a nerd as 'a person devoted to intellectual, academic, or technical pursuits or interests' or 'an unstylish or socially awkward person' (**2021**). At first glance, we associate this label with Evan due to his behaviour and appearance. One of his main interests is in trees and his elective response is to minimise social contact with others. We learn more of his general feelings of isolation and social anxiety in his first solo performance, *Waving Through a Window:*

> *I've learned to slam on the brake*
>
> *Before I even turn the key,*
>
> *Before I make a mistake,*
>
> *Before I lead with the worst of me…*
>
> *…On the outside always looking in, will I ever be more than I've always been?*
>
> *Cause I'm tap, tap, tapping on the glass, I'm waving through a window* (**Pasek & Paul, 2016a**)

These lyrics form the impression that his loneliness stems from his general negative bias of himself as opposed to a difficulty in forming and maintaining social relations (**Amichai-Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, 2003**).

Instead of nerd, the term loser, as 'a person or thing that loses, especially consistently' and 'a person who is incompetent or unable to succeed' (**Merriam-Webster, 2021**) is more advertently insinuated, again highlighting Evan's negative self-perception. He expects the worst in social situations, which leads to his withdrawal from society, though he simultaneously desires the attention of those on the other side of the 'glass'. The line, 'can anybody see, is anybody waving back at me?' underpins Evan's feelings of isolation and loneliness. From the outset, we see the factors that contribute to his belief that nobody would be there if he tried to reach out - the lack of attention from his crush, Jared's insistence that they are merely 'family friends', and no supportive community in his 'nerdy' interests just further add evidence to his fears. His negative outlook is presented strongly in the line 'will I ever be more than I've always been?' implying low confidence in his future. This negative outlook, along with low self-esteem, are key indicators among adolescents with suicidal ideation globally (**Overholser et al., 1995; Nguyen et al., 2019**). His desolation reaches a peak with the line:

> *When you're falling in a forest, and there's nobody around*
>
> *Do you ever really crash or even make a sound?* (**Pasek & Paul, 2016a**)

First sung in a low voice, opposed against the instrumentation and belting voice of the previous bars, the line is repeated over and over, louder each time. His rumination of loneliness, — a noted symptom of those with depression and other mental health conditions (**Barlow, 2002; Nolan-Hoeksema, Wisco & Lyubomirsky, 2008**), — functions as both a narrative and lyrical foundation, with its motifs and references being alluded to throughout the musical. Though the lyrics literally refer to Evan's fall from a tree which results in his arm being in a cast for a large portion of the show, it metaphorically calls attention to his belief that living has purpose only if somebody is there to validate it.

Up to this point, we have seen that Evan's self-identification has centred around feelings of expected failure or incompetence, and that his general outlook is that it is better not to try at all than to try and fail. Yet, the intersection of the figurative and metaphorical appear in aftermath of his fall, his nerdy social awkwardness unmistakeable, as he fails to joke away his loneliness when recalling the accident to Jared:

> *Evan: Well, except it's a funny story, because there was a solid ten minutes after I fell, where I just lay there on the ground waiting for someone to come get me. Any second now, I kept saying to myself. Any second now, here they come.*
>
> *Jared: Did they?*

> *Evan: No. Nobody came. That's the, that's what's funny about it.* (**Pasek & Paul, 2016b**)

Evan's cynicism here shows us why he was perhaps first assigned to write his letters, as he is unable to share his true emotions and reactions with those that are around him. He instead tries to make light of the issue, to lessen the emotional strain on both himself and Jared.

Similarly, as he meets with the Murphy family for the first time and sees Cynthia Murphy's need for validation that Connor was good, Evan decides to rewrite both his and Connor's histories and revise the circumstances of his own accident. In *For Forever*, he sings of Connor coming to rescue him after the fall. Perhaps unknowingly, Evan begins the task of rewriting his history and past trauma, a technique used to help build one's narrative identity and mental health development (**Adler, 2012 & 2015**). However, this ultimately leads to a fractured understanding of his later popularity, as he sees 'popular' Evan as a fictional character, rather than believing that people like him for his authentic self.

Sincerely, Me is one of the few upbeat songs during the performance of the musical. It features comedic choreography and presents the activity of Evan and Jared faking emails as game-like, glossing over the seriousness of their evidence manipulation. This gives power to Evan, whose fixation of reinvention highlights his preoccupation with being someone else, yet simultaneously reinforces his conflicting self-identity. His imaginary friendship with Connor not only draws attention to his desperation to disassociate himself with his self-assigned 'loser' attribute but also attempts to validate his own 'nerdy' interest in arboriculture by sharing his enthusiasm with someone else. However, Connor subsequently becomes a constant addition to Evan's consciousness, repeatedly functioning as a constituent of conscience and an unimpeded view into Evan's genuine mental temperament.

The song *Disappear*, in contrast, underlines Evan's true loneliness through the voice of Connor. Lines such as 'guys like you and me, we're just the losers who keep waiting to be seen', and 'when you're falling in a forest and there's nobody around, all you want is for somebody to find you,' channels Evan's own 'loser' mentality onto his self-manifested image of Connor. As Connor sings lines such as 'no one deserves to be forgotten' and 'even if you've always been that barely in the background kind of guy, you still matter', Evan's mindset transitions from his earlier negative bias to one of finding purpose. Though Evan is hearing these lines from Connor, he is saying them to himself as some form of self-affirmation.

Lewis. Exchanges 2022 9(3), pp. 84-103

89

This realisation spurs the theme of being found, which appears once more in the final song of the first act, *You Will Be Found:*

> *Have you ever felt like you could disappear?*
>
> *Like you could fall, and no one would hear? …*
>
> *…Even when the dark comes crashing through*
>
> *When you need a friend to carry you*
>
> *When you're broken on the ground*
>
> *You will be found* (**Pasek & Paul, 2016c**)

As this song draws the first act to a close, Evan appears to have achieved it all. His reinvention has garnered him recognition from his peers and his crush, becoming united with his classmates through a common goal of memorialising Connor. However, Evan's battles with self-worth reappear throughout the second act, as he constantly attempts to justify his new relationship with Zoe Murphy and validate his friendships.

His newly found popularity and public persona are founded on his false relationship with Connor and the focus of keeping Connor's memory alive becomes the crux of Evan's personality, much to Zoe's disdain. As everyone eulogises the image of a misunderstood teen, Zoe is the only character who recalls Connor as a monster. Despite the prevailing circumstances, she does not challenge the lionisation of Connor, and instead attempts to negate Evan's feelings of unworthiness in *Only Us,* singing 'try to quiet the noises in your head'. This is ironic, considering the audience's awareness that much of Evan's headspace is now taken up by Connor. Evan responds with another call of longing to be seen and the need for validation of his 'true self':

> *But if you really see me*
>
> *If you like me for me and nothing else*
>
> *Well, that's all that I've wanted*
>
> *For longer than you could possibly know* (**Pasek & Paul, 2016d**)

Here, Evan is desperate to have someone close to him love him just for who he is. His belief that the Murphys are an ideal family pushes him further away from his own mother, the person that has loved him from the start. But in *Good for* You, Evan's mother turns against him when she finds out he spends all his time with the Murphy family. She tells him that he 'got a taste of a life so perfect, now you say that you're someone new,' directly attacking the new version of himself Evan had attempted to create. These two lyrics challenge one another; though Evan can recognise

Lewis. Exchanges 2022 9(3), pp. 84-103

90

he has reinvented himself, he seems unable to resolve his old and new 'identities' into one whole individual. Just as Evan's mother and Alana challenge his new 'true self', even the imaginary Connor becomes increasingly accusatory, asserting that Evan's confession would ruin Larry and Cynthia. As they argue, his revilements culminate in the question 'how did you break your arm Evan? …Did you fall? Or did you let go?' This is a breaking point as we learn that even the earliest references to Evan's fall from the tree had been fictionalised. Evan cements his position as an unreliable narrator who has evaded the truth out of self-preservation. His lies have become compounded, and the various versions of Evan have become so entwined that he is not able to acknowledge the severity of his mental health in the moments surrounding the accident. Connor walks away, and Evan now stands on stage alone, without even an imaginary friend.

In a desperate bid to raise money for The Connor Project and justify to himself that his lies were only for the good of the Murphys, Evan falsifies Connor's suicide note, which circulates online, resulting in a torrent of abuse, harassment, and threats towards the Murphy family. The stress causes them to verbally attack and blame one another for Connor's death before Evan emotionally breaks down and confesses to the truth. Evan seeks to justify his behaviour to the Murphys, citing the absence of his parents and his longing for acceptance; but they, like Connor, walk away. In many ways, Evan's life reaches a level of self-fulfilling prophecy. Though he made references to being a stereotypical nerd, there was nothing in his actual daily life that suggested he was completely alone. From the outset we saw his interactions with his mother and people from school. Instead, it was his desperation to shed his perceived misnomer as a nerd that led to its reinforcement and to one of the few situations in which Evan was left truly alone.

Finally, he acknowledges his faults: the hopelessness and longing to be seen, the strain of maintaining a public persona, and lastly, the actions that resulted in him causing pain, sadness, and fractured relationships. In Evan's final song, *Words Fail,* he sings:

> *No, I'd rather*
>
> *Pretend that I'm something better than these broken parts*
>
> *Pretend I'm something other than this mess that I am*
>
> *Cause then I don't have to look at it*
>
> *And no one gets to look at it*
>
> *No, no one can really see…*

…Cause what if everyone saw?

What if everyone knew?

Would they like what they saw?

Or would they hate it too? (**Pasek & Paul, 2016e**)

His fear of being rejected for his true self instead results in being rejected for faking being someone else. Thus, it is only in accepting his authentic self that his relationships were salvaged, and peace was found, as he speaks in the *Finale*:

Dear Evan Hansen:

Today is going to be a good day and here's why: Because today,

Today at least you're you, and that's enough (**Pasek & Paul, 2016f**)

The conclusion generates the overall message of the musical through its return to its starting point. Evan is alone on stage once again, his final line mirroring his first, but he stands at Connor's memorial, amongst newly growing trees, a clear metaphor of new personal growth. Evan's interest in trees that he imagined sharing with Connor not only becomes reality but that place has become one of shared hope across the community. In both scenes, he is himself, but this final scene highlights the importance of self-acceptance in developing a positive and mindful outlook.

Suicide, Memorialisation, and Mental Health in the Online Age

Dear Evan Hansen is certainly not the first musical theatre production to utilise an unidentified mental health struggle as the basis for character development. Terry (**2014**) refers to a slew of previous musical theatre productions, such as *Sweeny Todd* (1979), *Miss Saigon* (1989), or *The Who's Tommy* (1992), that function around mental health, with 'threats of suicide and self-destruction' lingering 'over all of these characters'. In their individual respective struggles to 'find their way back to a type of normal', as Terry further highlights, each character is 'neither fully devastated nor fully healed, in need of closure and support to have a chance of recovering and returning to a sense of normalcy (**Ibid: 130-131**).

When Evan meets with Zoe at Connor's memorial, he admits to taking a year out before college and works at a *Pottery Barn*. This is the only instance in which the repercussions of Evan's actions are addressed alongside a positive development of his mental health. Though he is positively presented as taking some time for himself to decide who he is and what he wants to do, he is also not presented as a hero who has moved on without an issue. The stereotype of the male protagonist in

Lewis. Exchanges 2022 9(3), pp. 84-103

92

musical theatre often displays traits of toxic masculinity but is still presented as a plausible romantic lead. This stands in contrast to Evan's character creation as an intentionally flawed protagonist. His nerdy demeanour, social awkwardness, and desire to change, counterposes the strength of the female characters who present as self-assured, and deviates from the image that female characters need guidance or saving.

We can see that all the characters of the show, regardless of age, class, or status, are suffering in their own way, underscoring the ubiquity and proliferation of mental health in society. Each character hides behind a mask, trying to pass as normal: whether this it is within Jared's sarcasm, Alana's cheerfulness, or even in Connor's disaffectedness. Though we understand how their struggles explain their actions, these are not intended to excuse their behaviours. The characters instead provide glimpses into the different mental struggles and present a rawness that helps the audience to find relatability to those on stage. However, the lack of representation of Connor's struggles that led to his death draws attention to a common criticism of *Dear Evan Hansen,* concerning its romanticisation of mental illness and glorification of suicide. It is only after death that Connor becomes seen, heard, and validated as an individual, an implication that his power and influence exist solely because of his death.

This proliferation of mental health and suicide-driven narratives has spanned across various media forms, such as the novel-adapted television series *13 Reasons Why* (2017-2020) or *Euphoria* (2019-Present). Though the appearance of mental health in popular media directed towards young people certainly helps open discussion on the taboo topic, the characters' mental illnesses within these forms are often presented as one of their leading traits. In addition, these characters are often presented as the 'other', the 'loser', their personal attributes are seen to be 'nerdy' and therefore in some way undesirable, making them unable to, or unworthy of, existing amongst others. The resulting risk is not only an internalised romanticisation of mental health amongst young people but a withdrawal from social structures and groups that would help to alleviate these feelings. These young people run the risk of becoming lost in the system and failing to get the help that they need, which often results in tragic outcomes.

Dear Evan Hansen has utilised social media with great success and its recognisable hashtags, such as '#youwillbefound'. The positive result of its campaigns has opened a space for fans to share their own mental health stories. Nevertheless, the romanticisation of mental illness across popular culture risks the advancement of epistemic bubbles, where relevant voices may have been accidentally excluded, and echo chambers, where these voices are actively discredited or excluded. Members of these groups are

Lewis. Exchanges 2022 9(3), pp. 84-103

93

often unaware of, or are unable to, engage with knowledge and critical reasoning to remove themselves from these groups. Nguyen (**2018**) notes that in epistemic bubbles, voices are not heard, a direct contrast to the overall message of *Dear Evan Hansen*.

The recognition that Connor's tragic outcome of his loneliness could have so nearly been Evan's becomes the key driver of his future choices. Knowing of Evan's suicide attempt, it is this relatability between these two characters that keeps them connected. In Evan's mind, Connor flits between a character of conscience and harsh self-realisation, but for everyone else, he is barely remembered at all. He instead becomes only what people need him to be for themselves, formed from their own misremembered perspectives of him. Thus, the public image of Connor becomes both idealised and idolised. The Connor of Evan's conscience perpetuates the illusion of being a good guy. For others, his prior negative or violent social interactions are ignored or justified, and he is remembered instead as a troubled teen or as someone who was never really seen or understood. Such importance is placed on Connor's ghost that his true story and struggles remain ignored. Even the circumstances of his death are never discussed, despite being the event that drives the entire narrative. Connor's death is an example of online memorialisation and moralisation through social media. Specifically, for those who have been lost to suicide, Bailey et al. write that a common refrain of the bereaved is to utilise the deceased's social media presence to make the child's death meaningful (**2015: 77**). Particularly in cases of suicide, bereaved families often become stigmatised, deprived of social support from friends and the community. Thus, social media becomes an essential tool in overcoming this isolation (**Ibid: 73**). Through the school population and the larger online community, Connor's memory and manifestation on stage continue through being seen and remembered.

Amongst the Murphy family too, their genuine grief and pain of both his existence and loss are hidden away. In *Requiem*, as they each sing of their own memory of Connor, they sing alone. They each remember him differently. Whilst Zoe recalls him as a monster: 'don't say it isn't true, that you were not the monster that I knew', Larry in contrast sees his son as a missed opportunity: 'I gave you the world, you threw it away.' Finally, Cynthia is almost incapable of honestly acknowledging the loss of her son: 'I hear your voice, I feel you near…and now I know that you are still here.' Rather than being united in their mourning, their grief is rarely acknowledged or discussed in front of one another. Gilbert wrote of grief as 'a process of reconceptualisation' and 'the loss of security in knowing that reality can be trusted to be "real"' (**1996: 271**), mirroring the simultaneous actions of Evan's reconceptualization of his reality. The differences in the Murphys' grief processes are formed because of their

Lewis. Exchanges 2022 9(3), pp. 84-103

94

own cultural conditioning and lived experience (**Rosenblatt, 2008**), which causes their failure to share and acknowledge each other's personalised memories of Connor, resulting in arguments when his name is brought up. While 'The Connor Project' is largely presented as an outward display of memorialisation online, it does ultimately help the Murphys in processing their grief, as the final scene reveals that the orchard (that was built through larger community donations), becomes a place where the Murphys bond and heal as a family.

Social Belonging in the Age of Social Media

Before 'The Connor Project', Evan's distance from social media is noticeable, given its substantial narrative function within the musical. Considering Evan's age, it would be reasonable to infer that he may be intentionally avoiding it due to his ongoing mental health conditions. Whilst recent studies, such as O'Reilly et al. (**2018**), have suggested that adolescents view social media as dangerous to their mental health, the widespread public assertion that social media actively contributes to adverse mental health has not yet been proven as entirely accurate (**Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Orben 2020**). This opinion has most likely developed mainly from increased reporting and social acceptance of mental health over the same period where social media and technological engagement have also increased. Around 70 per cent of teens now access social media daily, including 16 per cent who use it 'almost constantly' and a further 22 per cent who access it multiple times per hour (**Common Sense Media, 2018: 8**). The use of the internet is related to experiences of loneliness and social isolation (**Kraut et al., 1998; Stoll, 1995; Turkle, 1996 & 2011**). However, scholarly discussion on the matter also suggests that social media plays a heightened role amongst teens with low social-emotional wellbeing experience (SEWB) but with a more positive effect, with 39 per cent reporting it makes them feel less lonely (**Common Sense Media, 2018: 11**). Social media can particularly allow individuals to interact with others who share an enthusiasm for even the most niche of interests. Evan's new engagement with social media has both positive and negative elements to consider. Notably, his relationships and popularity develop alongside the growth of 'The Connor Project', as he becomes more active in creating content for social media, gains confidence in public speaking and begins to lose the nervous ticks that were prevalent at the outset of the musical. Over time though, he becomes physically and emotionally exhausted from sustaining his public image amidst constant media engagement, and struggles to control his lies during increasing public scrutiny.

Lewis. Exchanges 2022 9(3), pp. 84-103

95

In the era of social media, a major ongoing issue has become comparative behaviours and feelings of self-value in an edited reality. The 'Instagram vs Reality' trend draws attention to the normalisation of only an individual's best moments or features being shared on social media via actual unedited images and accurate anecdotes. Uploaded pictures are often chosen as the best out of hundreds taken, or extensively edited to remove perceived flaws. This constant erasure of any perceived negative, whether omitting negative life experiences from one's story, or presenting an idealised version of one's physical form, risks detrimental effects to users' life satisfaction, self-identification, and mental health. Social media differs from traditional media forms in that its content is generated by peers and is interactive (**Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2019**), and the focus on how many shares and likes content from 'The Connor Project' generates is a direct example of this. Adolescent years are particularly intense in identity formation, as teenage individuals rely on peers for both influence and validation (**Yau & Reich, 2019: 196**). The constant engagement for young people on social media causes the dilemma that whilst they are able to receive instantaneous influence and validation from their peers and larger society, they are unable to receive validation for their authentic selves due to the normalised conduct of life and image editing. Social media success is often limited to those who are in some way above average in the eyes of society, but the prevalence of social media 'influencers' results in individuals resetting the bar to unattainably high levels to match with what they see on their timelines.

At this juncture, we understand the struggles of several characters, most notably Evan and Alana. Alana Beck's first arrival on stage showcases this as she speaks with Evan about their summer breaks:

> *Mine was productive. I did three internships and ninety hours of community service. I know: wow…Even though I was so busy, I still made some great friends. Or, well, acquaintances, more like.* (**Pasek & Paul, 2016b**)

Combined with her engagement with 'The Connor Project', it is reasonable to see her character as merely success driven. Though she appears as engaged and continuously active in achieving her goals, her positive persona on social media belies the true nature of her feelings of loneliness, which come to a head when she confronts Evan:

> *Because I know what it feels like to feel invisible, just like Connor. To feel invisible and alone and like nobody would even notice if you vanished into thin air. I bet you used to know what that felt like, too.* (**Pasek & Paul, 2016b**)

For Evan, 'The Connor Project' creates popularity and attention from which he cannot remove himself, instead balancing on a precipice between popularity and loneliness. In desperation and fear of losing his new relationships, he forges Connor's suicide note and shows it to Alana, who immediately posts it on social media against his wishes. Alana finds comfort from Connor's letters knowing someone shared her feelings and believes the letters may help someone else. Yet her need for overachievement and for 'The Connor Project' to succeed results in hindered judgement and the use of shock value to engage audiences. A predilection for shock and sensationalism in media posts encourages social media influencers to risk dangerous behaviours, knowing the possibility of their followers attempting to recreate their conduct. More concerningly, there is evidence that globally, media coverage of both celebrity and non-celebrity suicides triggers copycat cases (**Stack, 2002; Niederkrotenthal et al., 2009; Choi & Oh, 2016**), a risk that Alana fails to recognise when she publishes the letter. While she hopes that others will find unity in reading, the outcome of the publication is instead a torrent of online abuse directed towards the Murphy family:

> *He wrote his suicide note to Evan Hansen because he knew his family didn't give a shit.*
>
> *His parents, by the way, are insanely rich…*
>
> *Maybe they should have spent their money on helping their son…*
>
> *Zoe's a stuck-up bitch; I go to school with her, trust me…*
>
> *Larry Murphy is a corporate liar who only cares about…*
>
> *Cynthia Murphy is one of those disgusting women…*
>
> *Fuck the Murphys…*
>
> *Their house is at the end of the cul-de-sac with the red door, Zoe's bedroom is on the right. The gate to the back is completely unlocked.* (**Pasek & Paul, 2016b**)

This is the first reference we see of social media risks to real world safety. The combined knowledge of social media users makes it easy to identify others, and some may take advantage of this to spread misinformation about people, or even put people's safety at risk.

The outcome of the letters publishing is the opposite of Alana's intention. Instead of the readers finding comfort, the cyberbullies make assumptions to attack the Murphys. The attacks are often based on the belief that only those in objectively bad situations, mainly financial, have the validity to complain about their circumstances. Those who are in the media limelight are expected to accept online harassment and bullying as part of their

duties within their role as a public figure. Celebrities' mental health is often overlooked because they 'have everything', often leading to tragic ends. As much as the internet becomes united when they first share The Connor Project's message, they are quick to turn on the Murphys, before ultimately forgetting the whole incident and moving on. These faceless individuals become the only true villain of the play, unaware of the circumstances of their victims or the power their words wield.

Social Media and Audience Engagement

The key song of the musical, *You Will Be Found*, begins whilst Evan is giving a speech to his school in remembrance of Connor. He stands front and centre of the stage, stammering and jumbling his words before dropping his cue cards. He drops to the floor to collect them and looks out to the audience in horror. At that moment, the theatre audience is immediately repositioned; they are no longer passive consumers, but instead have become active actors. They are not just the silent observers of Evan's life but also the voices of judgement that Evan has feared. They are suddenly and unexpectedly high school students watching their classmate in an assembly. The audience's emotions in watching him as he falls to the ground is compounded, as it combines both the experience of watching a fellow student struggle in public, with the audience's insider knowledge of his struggle with anxiety and unsteady mental health.   As the audience find their new positioning, Evan finds peace and now embraces the audience as his schoolmates. He stands tall and composed, his message now focused directly on the audience members. As he sings 'if you only look around, you will be found,' he is speaking directly to the hundreds of people brought together that night in the theatre to hear the show's message of togetherness and community. In this vital scene that highlights *Dear Evan Hansen's* message of hope is made clear that the audiences' function as main characters within the musical positions them both with the shared feelings of loneliness, yet also hope among each one of them. Viewers share Evan's message, both figuratively at that moment, but also literally, through their online engagement outside of the theatre, on *Twitter*, *Instagram*, etc. Steven Levenson, the playwright for Dear Evan Hansen, speaks out that:

> *If we tried to tell our story today without cell phones and social media, there would be a real inauthenticity to the show. And at the same time, we wanted to be sure we're using social media as a storytelling device and we were never interested in exploring social media as a theme or as an idea.* (**DiLella, 2018**)

From the outset of the musical, a bombardment of mobile phone ringtones plays out across the amphitheatre to request audience members to silence their phones during the performance. Many young users

recognise the problems that social media causes and feel connected to the characters of the performance for sharing their experiences. It is perhaps ironic that these same users must then be reminded to turn off their mobiles before a performance and immediately light up their screens once again after the final curtain has fallen.

Though the audience is united as a positive figure, as social media users, they too are the antagonists. The users that speak of hope and share Evan's message are the same who turn on the Murphys after the release of Connor's suicide note. As the narrative darkens in the second act, the opportunity arises for self-reflection. The performance evokes affect as it causes the audience to reflect on what they choose to show on their social media accounts, how they respond to others, and how they treat people online. By allowing themselves to judge Evan's behaviours and the other characters, both imaginatively online and in-person, the audience must also allow themselves to be judged. The online engagement of *Dear Evan Hansen* with fans allows for the fleeting emotions of the audience to continue long after the performance. Doherty writes that fans of the show take to social media to 'seek out the utopian performatives in their personal connections to Evan' whilst others are 'still seeking to achieve the moments that they experienced within the performance moment, in that they are still hoping to "be found"' (**2020: 6**).

Conclusion

Critics of the show argue that *Dear Evan Hansen* focuses more on the insecurity of the outsider, the nerd's stereotypical angst, and the teenager yearning for acceptance, over discussing the important ramifications of Evan's choices. However, the musical has created a substantial and long-lasting impact by creating a large online community of fans discussing all aspects of the show, including mental health, loneliness and belonging. The figure of the nerd, such as Evan's characterisation, has so often been imbued with negative connotations that separate those with less mainstream interests. What *Dear Evan Hansen* has accomplished, along with the industry of musical theatre in general, is to develop spaces of inclusivity for those who have previously felt alone, whether that loneliness has stemmed from mental health, or the prejudice placed upon them for reasons such as their personal interests.

Dear Evan Hansen has helped to engage young audiences and share their mental health struggles when it has been a taboo topic for so long. As much as social media features in the show, it also plays a role in the audience's emotional processing in the aftermath of the performance as they turn to various social media channels to talk about what they have just watched and how it has resonated with them. It has created openings of stories and discussion as people share their own experiences of mental

Lewis. Exchanges 2022 9(3), pp. 84-103

99

health hardship or share their creativity and artwork that has been inspired by the show. The musical teaches us about hidden emotion and the extent to which young people today feel they must live up to the impossible standards set upon them in the age of social media and the internet. Nevertheless, whilst social media so often is treated as a hostile entity, a place of bullying and harassment, it is also a place for people to share, come together, build a community, and lift each other. Evan is a flawed hero but has become an accessible and relatable protagonist for many. His motives become understood in a society where it is so easy to be invisible. And that is the real message of *Dear Evan Hansen*: you are seen, and you are not alone.

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100

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101

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102

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103