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A Gendered Understanding of School Shootings on Screen

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Defined as an attack against the institution itself (see Newman et al. 2004), school shootings have increased in prevalence since the 1990s. Illustrating this, during the lockdown of schools in March 2020, the United States experienced its first month without a school shooting in almost twenty years (Vallejo 2020). In line with this, films and television shows have sought to further understandings about this type of mass violence. Reflecting real life trends about school shooters, representations in *Excursion*, *One Tree Hill* and *Run, Hide, Fight* have positioned disgruntled male students as the attackers. In direct contrast to this, female students have been represented as the heroes fighting back against school attacks in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Run, Hide, Fight*. Since it has been argued that "any approach to understanding school shootings must take *gender* seriously" (Kimmel & Mahler 2003: 1440), this paper will critically assess the portrayal of perpetrators, heroes and victims in film and television through a gendered lens. Also examined will be the portrayal of suicidal ideation in these fictional representations of school shootings.

Introduction

Theorists have described the rampage school shooting phenomenon, whereby a mass shooting is carried out in a school or school-related location (e.g. a school dance), as an attack on the institution itself in retaliation for a perceived wrong (Farr 2018; Harding, Fox & Mehta 2022; Kalish & Kimmel 2010; Newman et al. 2004). Within the public sphere, there are numerous competing definitions of what constitutes a mass shooting. Most of the distinctions centre on death tolls, with some definitions centring on four or more deaths (Lankford 2016); whilst others include shootings where a minimum number of people are injured (Silva & Capellan 2018). In some cases, the definition only includes shots being fired at a school (for example, Farr 2018). For the purposes of this paper, the definition used will be the one utilised by Harding, Fox and Metha (2022): that the attack must include a minimum of four or more deaths (excluding the shooter) at a school or school-related location. Importantly, this definition excludes shootings for other motivations, e.g. gang-related violence.

Almost all rampage school shootings are committed by males, making it a gendered phenomenon (Farr 2018; Kalish & Kimmel 2010; Kimmel & Mahler 2003; Klein 2005). The rampage school shooting has been described as a 'potential solution' to solve problems, appealing to a 'depressed young male who has been socialised to use violence to assert his masculinity' (Kalish & Kimmel 2010: 459).

Although scholars (e.g. Ash & Saunders 2018; Bender & Broderick 2016; Linder 2014) have begun to explore fictional representations of school shootings, this field of literature remains relatively new. In order to address a gap in the current literature, this paper will focus on four case studies of fictional representations of school shootings: the films, *Run Hide Fight* (2020) and *Excursion* (2013); and particular episodes of the television shows, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) and *One Tree Hill* (2003–2012). I will argue that these case studies are subversions of the traditional school shooting trope, challenging understandings of the phenomenon. The case studies span a broad timeline from 1999 through to 2020. Aside from the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* episode, the case studies were all made after the infamous 1999 Columbine tragedy in which twelve students and a teacher were killed. This incident became the standard bearer of a 'feared epidemic of rampage school shootings' (Farr 2018: 74).

Examining these case studies, the gendered nature of school shootings will be examined in terms of the male perpetrators, their behaviours and motivations, and the significance of stereotypical perceptions of masculinity. Further, the portrayal of female heroes and their alignment with stereotypical femininity will be analysed. Since school shootings tend to culminate in the shooter(s) dying by suicide (Kalish & Kimmel 2010: 463), I will also evaluate the presence of suicidal ideation in the fictional perpetrators.

School shootings – the gendered phenomenon

Murder is predominantly a male phenomenon (98% of worldwide murders are committed by men), with violence being perceived by some as a way to resolve damage or denial of masculine identities (Kennedy-Kollar & Charles 2013). Likewise, mass murder in a school context perpetrated by a student is known as a 'rampage school shooting' and is almost always committed by males (Kalish & Kimmel 2010; Kimmel & Mahler 2003; Klein 2005). In contrast, it is very rare for women to perpetrate mass shootings (Silva & Schmuhl 2022). Moreover, the motivations and circumstances around female mass shootings are notably different. For instance, in their study of twenty female mass shooters, Silva and Schmuhl (2022) found that they often target the workplace, are motivated by workplace problems and are more likely to work as part of a duo. In terms of school shootings, the rare female perpetrator shoots at specific targets, such as rivals or bullies, rather than trying to 'take down' the whole school (Lieberman 2008: 219).

Despite this, the significance of gender in school shootings has been overlooked, with American news media using broad terms such as 'teenage violence' to describe these incidents (Kimmel & Mahler 2003; Klein 2005). This is also true for school shootings occurring outside of the US: for example, the *Ecole Polytechnique University* shooting which occurred in Montreal, Canada in 1989. The fourteen victims of the school shooting were all female and the perpetrator was motivated by an anti-feminism stance. Despite this, news coverage after the shooting only focused on his mental health problems (Danner & Carmody 2001). The 2014 Isla Vista shooting, taking place at a college town adjacent to the University of Santa Barbara, gave salience to the issue of "Incels" and, subsequently, inspired similar mass shootings. In these attacks, females are often targeted, since they are blamed by incels for all their problems (see Kerr 2021a). Considering all of this, any approach to understanding school shootings should address the role of gender (Kimmel & Mahler 2003: 1440, 1442).

Since school shooters are said to possess 'fragile *male* identities' (Langman, 2009: 147; emphasis added), a good starting point for analysis is looking at identity construction as a process shaped by social forces (see, for example, Erikson 1968). During adolescence, factors like cognitive changes, greater awareness of social roles, the need to develop future academic and career plans, puberty, all coalesce to create what Erikson calls the central 'crisis' of identity development. This does not necessarily need to be negative. By contrast, if adolescents are able to experience a 'developmental moratorium' to reflect upon and experiment with who they are, their journey to adulthood is likely to have enhanced possibilities for long term success and health (Sadowski 2021). In their search for a new identity in the period between childhood and adulthood, adolescents 'define, over-define and redefine themselves and each other

in often *ruthless comparison*' (Erikson 1968: 87; emphasis added). Whilst this 'ruthless comparison' also occurs in the 'adult world', it is important to note that most adults have a more stable sense of identity and more definitive markers to allow them to compare: occupation, income, lifestyle and so forth.

Adolescents tend to have factors like school status to allow them to compare themselves to others (Newman et al. 2004: 358). An important point made by Sadowski (2021) is that everyone goes through adolescence at a different time, so the factors impacting upon identity construction will change. For instance, this generation of adolescents have lived through a global pandemic. This will undoubtedly have had an impact upon their sense of self. Another recent contributing factor is social media, with this providing a context for identity formation during adolescence (Perez-Torres 2024).

With the amount of time adolescents spend there, school is a key influencer in their identity formation (see Sadowski 2021). Notably, the construction of gender takes place within institutional and cultural contexts, including school which typically reinforces the traditional gender dichotomy (Connell 2023). For girls in school, the markers of status are being a 'cheerleader', wealth, personal attractiveness and maintaining friendships with other 'popular' girls (Edler 1985: 158). The advent of social media has exemplified this, with 'likes' and comments for posts indicating approval (Perez-Torres 2024). This is of particular importance for personal images, which are likely to conform to idealised conceptions of feminine beauty (Baker, Ferszt & Breines 2019). This aligns with the theory of meta-reflection, viewing oneself through the lens of others (Sadowski 2021).

In a similar vein, schools are said to be 'active players' in forming conceptualisations of masculinity via the mechanisms of sport, discipline, curriculum division and students themselves (Connell 2023). The five traits boys must possess to possess cultural capital are: ability to prove his manhood; athletic prowess; social saviour faire; sports ability over academic success and higher socioeconomic class (Klein 2006: 55). Paralleling this, Farr (2018) conceptualised a model called 'Adolescent Insider Masculinity' with the following categories: being cool by embracing guy activities, mannerisms, etc., proving heterosexuality, repudiating femininity and being tough. Boys are also "rewarded" with popularity for displaying other typically prescribed "masculine" traits: toughness, challenging authority and dominance over others. Those who do display 'feminine' behaviour including crying are more likely to be marginalised, subordinated and referred to in derogatory terms (Adler, Kless & Adler 1992: 174; Farr 2018: 76; Parker 2000: 127, 129).

Notably, some studies (Farr 2018; Harding, Fox & Mehta 2002; Kalish & Kimmel, 2010; Kimmel & Mahler 2003; Klein 2006; Klein & Chancer 2000) have found that several school shooters lacked 'cultural capital' traits which would bestow them

status in the school hierarchy (Klein 2006: 55). Furthermore, over half of school shooting cases studied suggested that the shooter had suffered a romantic rejection of some kind (Kimmel & Mahler 2003; Klein 2005). Additionally, they also occupied lower-statuses in the school hierarchy and were bullied and ostracised. For example, Kimmel and Mahler (2003) pose a link between masculinity, homophobia and violence in schools. They analysed media reports on random school shootings from 1982–2001 and found that nearly all the perpetrators had been "gay baited". As there is no evidence to suggest that the shooters actually were gay, it can be deduced that they were instead called that because they were not considered to be 'masculine' enough (Kimmel & Mahler 2003: 1440).

As a motivating factor, however, being bullied alone is not enough. Bullying is prevalent amongst high school students. In 2021, Humphries and colleagues found that around 25% of students were bullied. Similarly, with data obtained from the "Youth Risk Behavior Survey" totalling 72,605 high school students, the rates of victimisation were found to be 19.74% for traditional and 15.38% for cyberbullying, with an overlap of circa 60% between the different types of bullying (Li et al. 2020). A systematic review of literature pertaining to the impact of bullying victimisation found that it resulted in negative psychosocial and academic outcomes over both the short and long term. This effect, however, was greater for victimised females, with them being more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation (Halliday et al. 2021).

In terms of other motivating factors for school shootings, a recent study looking at 173 targeted mass attacks in public spaces from 2016–2020 found that over half of attackers experienced mental health symptoms, including depression, psychotic symptoms and suicidal thoughts. Many attackers experienced stressful life events, including family and romantic relationships and other personal issues (National Threat Assessment Center 2024). Similarly, in a study of the eleven mass shootings with the highest death toll in the US, three of which took place at schools, Kerr (2021b) grouped these incidents by the following categories of possible motivations: grievances, mental health symptoms, ideological beliefs, fame/notoriety and unknown. The greatest influencing factor was found to be grievances, with more than half related to this including two of the three school attacks. Fame/notoriety was a possible influencing factor in two mass shootings, one in a school. The presence of mental illness was evident in two of the mass shootings, both of which were the school attacks.

Similarly, using a broad definition of school shooting where shots were fired at two or more people (including at least one student) at an elementary, middle or high school by a current or former student, Farr (2018) grouped a sample of attacks from 1995 through to 2015. The groupings were as follows: Psychiatric disorder (Psych), Family Turbulence (Family) and Situational Volatile (Volatile) There were some overlaps: for

example, students categorised as 'Psych' who were also living in a dysfunctional family situation. Those who tended to have problems with girls/girlfriends were categorised in the 'Psych' grouping, exhibiting symptoms consistent with psychosis or psychopathy. Other traits included expressions of homicidal and hate-filled rage, a fascination with weapons and referencing other mass shootings and anti-heroes. Those in the 'Psych' grouping tended to shoot and kill more people than the other categories: 'Volatile' shooters who had long-standing problems with anger and 'Family' shooters who came from dysfunctional households (Farr 2018: 87−93).

Whilst the motivating factors around school shootings are multifaceted and complex, there is a compelling argument around the role fragile male identities play. According to several research studies, school shooters were bullied, ostracised and occupied low status within school, which further exacerbated their masculinity crisis. There is a caveat to this, however. Some school shooters did possess a degree of 'cultural capital' and were indeed bullies themselves. For example, a study by Kerr (2025) examined the myths and misinformation around Columbine, with the competing narratives around the perpetrator being "normal", having success with girls, possessing friends and loving families; yet also being described as loners, odd and victims of bullying.

Fictionalised representations

In his text *Television Culture*, Fiske (1987: 93) described television as 'the site of struggle for meaning.' Television exists as a polysemic, open text, allowing for multiple interpretations (Moore 1993: 17). Hall (1980) also emphasises that social situations influence interpretations, with audiences modifying their reading to relate to their own situation. Fiske (1987: 65) suggests this model may be expanded so there is not a single dominant reading but that some meanings are more preferable than others within the text. He further argues that social factors categorise readings of texts, e.g. women would have "feminine" readings.

In this paper, four case studies are discussed. Two of these are films; the remaining two are episodes in television shows. Whilst there are commonalities in terms of films and television shows both being able to tell stories via moving images, the storytelling techniques in each are significantly different. Feature films tend to be longer than episodes of television shows, making them self-contained stories. By contrast, television shows mostly tell stories serially over the course of several episodes (Thompson 2003: x−xi, 1). The continuity of television series means that characters have greater scope to repeatedly change via plot structure and their actions (O'Meara 2015).

The first case study is an American television series entitled *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1996–2003). It is a fantasy show, where the main protagonist, Buffy, is imbued with supernatural strength to allow her to fight off vampires, demons and other mythical threats. A Slayer is always female, so the show received praise for featuring a strong female character. The show is considered a cult classic more than twenty years later (da Silva 2023). It has also attracted academic attention, with its own journal: *Slayage: The International Journal of Buffy+*. The episode reviewed for this paper is a stand-alone story in Season 3 of the show, focusing on Buffy and her friends trying to track down someone who made a threat against the school. This episode was due to air in 1999 in the time immediately following the Columbine school shooting, in which twelve students and a teacher were killed, and was postponed (Reid 2016).

The second case study *One Tree Hill* (2003–2012) is also a television series set in the US. Most of its characters are young people so it is primarily marketed as a 'teenage show,' albeit with a broader appeal. It is a more realistic show with no fantasy elements. Storylines focus on the friendships, rivalries and romances between the main and supporting characters. The episode selected for this paper is set in Season 3 of the show when the main characters are still in High School and looks at what happens when a student brings a gun to school. It is a pivotal episode resulting in the death of a main character.

The third case study is a short feature film of around twenty minutes focusing on a school shooting. Unlike the rest of the case studies which take place in the US, this film is in an Australian setting. Its creators describe a 'near obsessive fascination' with the motives of school shooters in the media, including in fictional depictions. In an attempt to negate this, *Excursion* redirects the emphasis from the perpetrators to the choices and actions of the victims and survivors of a school shooting. In contrast to films like *Elephant* which devotes a lot of its running time to the build-up to the shooting and the daily lives of the shooters, *Excursion* deliberately does not show the shooters before the incident (Bender & Broderick 2016: 1). The film focuses on the incident itself as well as the aftermath, with fictional recordings from the survivors.

The final case study is a feature film entitled *Run Hide Fight* about a teenage girl who fights back against a group of four school shooters. Notably, money to make the film had to be raised independently because Hollywood backers who were interested in the film ended up withdrawing from it after the 2018 Parkland school shooting. One of the producers described it as a 'socially relevant and articulate project'(Grater 2019). Drawing on a range of research, the analysis of these case studies will show the extent to which these fictional representations of school shootings mirror reality and explore how student shooters and victims are constructed in these texts.

Disgruntled White Males

Aside from being male, there are other common demographics for school shooters. In 2018, Farr found that for the majority of school shooting incidents in the US from 1995−2015 that met her specific identified criteria[1] − defined in this context as cases where a student shot at two or more people in the school, regardless of deaths − the perpetrators were White (81%), male (100%) and heterosexual (97%). In the words of Farr (2018: 74), this means that the greater majority of school shootings are 'bearers of triple privilege from birth.' It should be noted, however, that Farr's definition does not align with other common definitions of rampage school shootings; therefore, the data she reviewed varied to some degree from other research.

Stefan (2021: 4−6) pointed to the absence of race from the school shooting narrative. The argument is advanced that the daily victims of gun violence, the majority of which are racial minorities, are portrayed as a distinct category from school shootings in which the perpetrators and victims are mostly white. This dichotomy is taken further with the separation between urban gun violence, with cities predominantly occupied by racial minority communities, and school shootings mainly occurring in suburbs with a majority population of white people. Although there are exceptions to this, such as the 2005 Red Lake school shooting taking place at the Red lake Indian Reservation, Minnesota; as well as the more recent 2022 Robb Elementary school shooting in Uvalde, Texas, where the shooter and most of the victims were Hispanic. It is further argued that a racist result of this separation is that the predominantly white victims of school shootings become signifiers for the 'idealised child' in America; something which does not occur with racial minority gun violence victims. Mirroring real life, all four case studies in this paper have white male perpetrators at the centre of the narrative. Similarly, the majority of victims or potential victims are white, middle-class students in a suburban school. This is in direct contrast to the study by Ash and Saunders's (2018) about young adult books about school shootings, whereby the portrayals of shooters and victims differ from real-life. It may be the case that televisual portrayals of school shootings have less scope to differ from expectations about these attacks, their perpetrators and victims.

The first case study chronologically is a 1999 *Buffy the Vampire* episode entitled 'Earshot'. In this episode, Buffy obtains the ability to hear people's thoughts. One of the thoughts she hears whilst at school is 'This time tomorrow, I'll kill you all!' Buffy

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[1] Attacked school was a elementary, middle or high school; shooter was a current or former student aged under 21 years; shooting took place at school or school event; shooter shot at two or more people, including at least one student; at least one person shot or shot at was not a specifically-targeted victim.

and her friends search for the killer to try to stop an attack on the school. Her friends chat about the threat, making reference to school shootings in the process.

> Xander: I'm still having trouble with the fact that one of us is just gonna gun everybody down for no reason.
> Cordelia: Yeah, because that never happens in American high schools.
> Oz: It's bordering on trendy at this point

The sarcastic response from Cordelia and the description of it as 'bordering on trendy' by Oz highlight the prolific nature of school shootings. Notably, this episode was produced before the 1999 Columbine attack and is reflective of the stream of high-profile school shootings that occurred in the late 1990s, including Pearl High School (1997), Westside Middle School (1997) and Thurston High School (1998). This trend only intensified after the Columbine shooting, with the number of copycat threats increasing exponentially (Kerr 2018, 2021b).

The attempts to track down the person making the threats are unsuccessful. In the end, Buffy sees the presumed perpetrator, Jonathan, is up in the bell tower with a rifle. This visually references a real-life school shooting, the 1966 University of Texas Tower shooting (Kerr 2021b). Similar to the other school shooters, as found in a number of studies (e.g. Kalish & Kimmel 2010; Kimmel & Mahler 2003; Klein 2005), Jonathan is ostracised, made to feel worthless in school and lacks romantic success. When Buffy confronts him, his response is angry:

> Jonathan: Stop saying my name like we're friends! We're not friends! You all think I'm an idiot! A short idiot!
> Buffy: I don't. I don't really think about you much at all. Nobody really does. Bugs you, doesn't it. You have all this pain, all these feelings and nobody's really listening.

To convince him that he's not alone in his pain, she explains to him that her own life is difficult at times. Their discussion and her argument that 'everyone out there [at the school] has their own pain to deal with' convinces Jonathan to hand over his weapon. The plot twist in the episode is then revealed: Jonathan only intended to kill himself and is not actually a potential school shooter. The person who made the threat is revealed to be the Lunch Lady, who is lacing the food with rat poison and attacks Xander with a knife when he catches her doing this. Buffy intervenes and subdues her. This episode sets up an "expected" school shooter who adheres to the attributes of a likely perpetrator, only to subvert this narrative by showing the young white and socially ostracised male in a sympathetic light and a female school employee as the real threat.

The next case study is the 2006 *One Tree Hill* episode 'With Tired Eyes, Tired Minds, Tired Souls, We Slept.' This episode subverts many of the known characteristics of school attacks. For instance, rather than it being a carefully planned attack, the shooting is portrayed as impromptu and escalatory in nature. There is a degree of pre-mediation in bringing a weapon to school; yet the shooter, Jimmy, never explicitly intended to carry out a shooting spree. Jimmy says: 'Does this [shooting] feel well-planned to you?' It ends up as a hostage situation, with the perpetrator hiding amongst the other students until his identity as the shooter is revealed. Once identified, Jimmy reveals that he has recently experienced a personal disappointment in not getting into his university of choice because of a lack of extracurricular activities. This aligns with research by Harding et al. (2002) around the key influencing factors of school shootings, which included individual problems and failure of social support systems. Jimmy confronts the others asking whether they have ever treated others badly or spread gossip about them It is also revealed that Jimmy used to be friends with several of the main characters, who have since befriended more popular people in the school. He later says: 'I just wanted them to like me.'

Here the perpetrator is portrayed in line with research findings about masculinity and school shootings. Farr (2018) found that shooters experienced social isolation and teasing, particularly by male peers. Emasculation can cause feelings of shame and humiliation in boys. The consequence of this can be 'aggrieved entitlement' against those who are perceived to have wronged them (Kalish & Kimmel 2010: 452).

In the case of Jimmy, he pulls out a weapon and fires a shot in response to teasing from athletic males at the school. The act of weapon carrying in response to bullying aligns with research about real-life youth behaviours. For instance, Pontes and Pontes (2019) found a significant association between bullying victimisation and weapon carrying amongst students, especially male students. Jimmy's behaviour could be seen as an attempt to negate 'adolescent insider masculinity' model related failures through a perceived display of toughness (Farr 2018: 85). In this model, masculinity is secured through activities like physical prowess, proving heterosexuality and being tough. Jimmy both entrenches and challenges this model, with his displays of toughness and anger contrasted with later outbursts showing upset and regret for his actions.

As it transpires, the shot Jimmy fires hits glass doors in the corridor and inadvertently injures one of the main characters, Peyton, in the process. Although it is initially thought it was a shard of glass that hit her, it is later revealed to be a bullet. The following exchange with another main character, Keith, shows Jimmy's reaction to learning he has injured Peyton:

Keith: Would you please, please just believe me? It gets better.
Jimmy: It won't! Not after this. I can't take this back! I can't erase this!
[Jimmy starts to cry]
Jimmy: She's [Peyton] gonna die.
Keith: You don't know that.

Jimmy's distressed reaction to his fear that he has killed Peyton may have been one of the factors that contributed to his decision to end his own life. This is exemplified in his statements: 'I can't take this back' and 'I can't erase this.' It is notable that he also lets Peyton be carried outside to receive treatment for her gunshot wound. Another display of empathy comes when Jimmy lets a hostage leave the room because she is diabetic and in need of insulin. In addition to the empathy shown by Jimmy, another factor contributing to sympathy for the shooter is what transpires after he dies by suicide. The show's main antagonist, Dan, picks up the shooter's gun and kills his brother, Keith, who had been trying to help Jimmy. The events unfold in the following way:

Jimmy: I'm sorry. [Places the gun to his chest and shoots himself]
Keith: No! [Bends over Jimmy's body to check for a pulse]
Dan wordlessly picks up the gun that Jimmy left.
Keith: [looks up at Dan] He's dead.
Still saying nothing, Dan points the gun at Keith.
Keith stands up.
Dan fires the gun at Keith's chest. Keith falls to the ground.

With Keith now killed by a gunshot wound to his chest, the audience are left with the knowledge that Jimmy will get blamed for this death, with people presuming that he killed Keith and then died by suicide. The truth about Keith's death does not come out until a later season of the show. This scene complicates representations of the school shooter, painting an ambivalent, nuanced and complex picture in terms of its representations of victims, perpetrators and masculinity more broadly.

The short film *Excursion* (2013) covers a shooting incident by two perpetrators at a school library. It is unclear what their motives are; however, desire for notoriety is alluded to. One of the shooters opens his laptop and creates a live stream in the library lobby area prior to firing the first shot. Pictures are taken of certain victims, with no explanation provided as to why those bodies are captured. Kellner (2008: 15) spoke about late 20th century 'celebrity shooters,' encompassing serial killers, political assassins and mass shooters, who were subject to intense media focus; this, in turn,

may have influenced future attackers. The advent of social media has likely intensified this, with several recent mass shooters researching other incidents, as well as choosing posting plans for their attacks online, e.g. the Stoneman Douglas High School attack (Kerr 2021b).

Shooter 1 seems to derive pleasure from the act of killing, smiling after shooting, taking pictures on his phone and looking dazed at one point when he is covered in blood. Shooter 2 gives him a shake and tells him to 'f**king get it together.' Similar to the other case studies, hegemonic masculinities prescribing power, control and aggressiveness (Oliffe et al., 2015: 474) are present here – perhaps even more so in this example because the shooters are not given any background and do not display any empathy or remorse. Despite this, there is an incident where Shooter 1 spares two students:

> Scene: Library
>
> [We see the body of a woman lying on the ground]. Shooter 1 positions himself in front of her and takes a picture on his phone. A smile crosses his face. He positions himself once again and takes a picture. Although the audience does not see the body, it is clear there is another one in the library stacks.
>
> The camera cuts to the two girls who are crying. One has her hand over her mouth to stifle any screams. Ominous music plays as we hear snaps on his phone. The camera cuts back to the two girls. They look over to the end of the library stacks. Shooter 1 looks directly back at them. He pauses for a few moments. The two girls look terrified but do not say anything.
>
> He turns his head forward and walks away. The girls gasp in relief, with one putting her hand over her mouth again.

No explanation is given as to why those two students are spared.

The film *Run Hide Fight* (2020) involves four school shooters: three males and a female. It is evident the plan is being spearheaded by one of them, Tristan, whose motive appears to be gaining fame and recognition. At one point he asks 'Are we famous yet?' He is delighted that live streams of the attack are being taken by other students and orders the person with the most viewing figures to be responsible for filming. Due to this, he describes everyone watching as 'culpable,' saying 'You all post and tweet and you share.' Similar to *Excursion* and the mythology around the Columbine shooting (see Cullen 2009), Tristan asks a student if she believes in God. Tristan also makes a teacher take her top off for his own sexual gratification. In the case of Tristan, the connection between guns as a means to execute violence and ideologies of hypermasculinity are shown to allow him to feel powerful (Klein & Chancer 2000: 143).

As with the Columbine shooters (Twenge & Campbell 2003), narcissism may be present in Tristan, exemplified in some of the statements he makes. For instance, he says to the Sheriff 'I am an agent of change. Midwife of truth. I am an embodiment.' It is significant that the term 'midwife' is used here, with this being a predominantly female profession and one that serves women. Moreover, he describes the students as the sheep, with him being the shepherd and executioner. With these types of behaviours, it could be argued that he fits the traits of a grandiose narcissist who is extraverted, socially bold; as well as possessing feelings of superiority, entitlement and arrogance (Jauk et al. 2017).

The other shooter, Kip, cites bullying and a humiliating incident in middle school as his motivation. In this case, Kip felt shame and humiliation and his attack represented 'revenge against those who have wronged you' (Kalish & Kimmel 2010: 454). The main protagonist, Zoe, confronts him:

Kip: Tristan called it a reckoning.
Zoe: A reckoning? For what? You're a kid!
Kip: I'm eighteen!
Zoe: You're pathetic is what you are.
                             AND
Zoe: That's what this is about?
Kip: Don't.
Zoe: Oh sorry. Have I belittled your motivation for cold-blooded murder?

She points out that people who were not related to the bullying incident have been killed. Her reasoning works on him and he expresses remorse; she then decides to put enough trust in him to return his weapon to him and he confronts the other shooters to atone for what he did. This brings to mind Oliffe and colleague's (2015) argument that the linkages between murder-suicide and masculinities can be amenable to prevention strategies. Clearly, the prevention strategy worked in this case, as he ends up shifting allegiance to protect her and other students in the school. He is killed by Tristan in the process.

These four case studies all show disgruntled white males who feel aggrieved by society and are using guns to 'solve' their problems. In many ways they adhere to research finding about 'real' school shooters, though as discussed above some subvert, complicate and challenge ideas about victimhood, masculinity and responsibility in their representations of school shooters.

Female Students as Perpetrators and Heroes

Research into female perpetrators of school shootings is sparse, probably due to the simple fact that female-perpetrated mass shootings are rare (see Silva & Schmuhl

2022). The case studies for this paper are perhaps not reflective of reality, given half of them involve a female killer. In the *Buffy* episode, the plot twist is that the Lunch Lady is one who made the threat to kill everyone at school No concrete motive is ever presented for this. Furthermore, it is implied that the Lunch Lady may be mentally unstable, with Buffy saying to her at one point 'I don't see this being settled with logic.' This portrayal mirrors the findings of Silva and Schmuhl (2022) where female mass shootings attacks involve some level of planning, mental illness is present, predominantly occur within the workplace and were motivated by workplace problems.

The other case study involving a female perpetrator is *Run Hide Fight*, in which one of the four school shooters is a girl. This portrayal fits the real-life results of Silva and Schmuhl (2022) whereby most female mass shooters work with others to perpetrate their attacks. Of the four shooters, she is the most underdeveloped character and is killed first out of the four shooters. She has a sexual relationship with Tristan and is the sister of one of the other shooters, Chris. Although no other insight is provided into her background or motives, it could be inferred that she may also desire fame and notoriety like her male counterparts since she engages in the livestreaming of the shooting. She also taunts students and kills people, including a security guard, so it is unlikely she has been coerced.

In two of the case studies, female students are constructed as 'heroes' in contrast to male perpetrators. In *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the main character has been described as a gender hybrid, transgressing what are perceived to be traditional gender stereotypes with her conventionally feminine appearance and possession of physical prowess and strength (Jackson 2016: 14–16). Further to this, her warrior abilities of heroism and strength are said to be concealed through the 'camouflage' of her gender (Buttsworth 2002: 189).

The same could be said of the female protagonist, Zoe, in *Run Hide Fight.* She is heroic in that she has the opportunity to escape the school shooting but instead chooses to return to the school in order to warn people and get them to safety. Although she does not have the superhuman strength of a slayer, she has similarities to the character of Buffy in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* with her active physical prowess and her proficiency in weapons. The physical prowess of the characters and their heroism means *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Run Hide Fight* serve to challenge traditional stereotypes around gender roles and promote female empowerment.

Suicidal Ideation

A notable feature of school and mass shootings more generally is that the perpetrator intends to die after the incident, most often through suicide (Kalish & Kimmel 2010; Oliffe et al. 2015). Even prior to the shooting, Far (2018: 79) found in her sample that

the majority of perpetrators repeatedly experienced suicidal ideation and/or attempted suicide in their lives (Farr 2018: 79). In the case studies, suicidal ideation is prevalent. In the first example of the *Buffy* episode, the twist in the episode is that the presumed school shooter, Jonathan, actually only intends to kill himself. The discussion with Buffy convinces Jonathan not to go through with his plan to die by suicide and he willingly hands over his gun. He is then horrified when Buffy mentions mass murder and says he would never hurt anyone:

> Jonathan: [He hands his gun over to Buffy] I just wanted it to stop.
> Buffy: Yeah, well, mass-murder, not really doctor recommended for that type of pain. Besides, prison, it's a lot like high school, only instead of noogies–
> Jonathan: [interrupts] What are you talking about?
> Buffy: Actions having consequences. You know, stuff like that.
> Jonathan: I– I wouldn't evert hurt anybody., I came up here to kill myself.

The *One Tree Hill* episode involves the school shooter only killing himself; although he does inadvertently wound a girl. Another character, Keith, shares that he also has been in that situation. 'I've bought the gun and I planned on using it, okay? I've been there. And I want to tell you something. It gets better.' He continues to try to get through to Jimmy:

> Keith: That pain in your stomach, that pain in your heart, it goes away. That voice in your head that's saying there's no way out, it's wrong, Jimmy. Would you please, please just believe me it gets better.
> Jimmy: I just– I wanted– I wanted them to leave me alone. I just– I wanted them to like me.
> Keith: I understand, son. It's what we all want. That's all any of us wants.
> Jimmy: I'm not here. I'm not here.
> Keith: Jimmy, please. It's going to be okay, son. It's gonna be okay.

Keith's understanding tone during this scene, as well as his uses of Jimmy's name and the term 'son' all serve to show he is desperately trying to help. Despite this, Jimmy is inconsolable. He repeats the line 'it hurts' and pounds his chest; then his final words are 'I'm sorry' before he dies by suicide. In direct contrast to the *Buffy* episode, however, the discussion with someone else who also shares his pain does not deter the shooter from suicide. Perhaps the fact that in the *One Tree Hill* episode, the situation is arguably more serious for the shooter in that he has held students hostage, fired a shot, and believes this shot may have fatally wounded Peyton. The fact he says that 'I can't take this back! I can't erase this!' to Keith during their conversation buttresses this point.

In *Run Hide Fight*, none of the four perpetrators die by suicide. The main shooter, Tristan, fakes his own death in an explosion in order to escape; he is then mortally wounded by the main protagonist, Zoe, and left to die. Two of the other shooters, Anna and Chris, are killed by Zoe and her father, Todd, respectively; whilst the remaining one, Kip, is killed by one of the other shooters. It remains unclear whether the shooters intended to kill themselves at the end of the film, had they not been killed by others. What is noticeable about all of these deaths is all of them are caused by guns. The main protagonist, Zoe, and her father, Todd, are both proficient in using firearms; whilst the shooters use guns to carry out their attack. It could be argued that this links to the ideals about masculinity which are entrenched in gun usage in the US (Carlson 2015; Lankford 2016).

It is noticeable that in the *Excursion* film, one of the shooters is confronted by a teacher, who has already killed the other shooter in self-defence. When the teacher aims his gun at him, the shooter takes the decision to end his own life. It is unclear whether these shooters planned to die after their rampage or not. The act of the shooter taking his own life before he can possibly be shot by the teacher is his final act of control. This parallels the trend of these types of events where the shooter dies either via suicide or "suicide by cop" by provoking someone else, mainly law enforcement, to shoot them. For instance, in the four mass shootings that took place in educational institutions in the U.S. in 2022, one shooter died by suicide, two were killed by law enforcement and the remaining one was apprehended by law enforcement (National Threat Assessment Center 2023: 13). With the exception of the *Run, Hide, Fight* film, the remainder of the case studies present suicide as an instrumental behaviour for disenfranchised males. In this sense, the behaviour is thought to avenge the perceived wrong in a way that is believed by the shooter to entrench masculinity (Kalish & Kimmel 2010: 459).

Conclusion

Rampage school shootings appears to be a gendered phenomenon perpetrated by disgruntled males as a way to avenge perceived wrongs (Farr 2018; Harding Fox & Mehta 2022; Kalish & Kimmel 2010; Kerr 2021b; Newman et al. 2004). There are other influencing factors such as mental illness, personal problems and the lack of a social support system (Harding, Fox & Metha 2022; Kerr 2021b; Threat Assessment Center 2024). Further to this, these attacks tend to culminate in the perpetrator dying by suicide (Kalish & Kimmel 2010: 463). The four case studies critiqued in this paper further understandings about fragile male identities (see Farr 2018; Kimmel & Mahler 2003) and suicidal ideation (see Kalish & Kimmel 2010) in school shooting incidents.

Paralleling Harding, Fox and Mehta's (2002) model about the five influencing factors of school shootings, weapon availability is present in all case studies given all the perpetrators can access firearms. Individual problems, failure of social support system, adherence to a cultural script and shooter's perception of their world was present to varying degrees in the case studies. The television shows could be said to portray these factors more accurately. This is likely due to the serial nature of television offering greater scope to develop characters (O'Meara 2015; Thompson 2003).

The 1999 Columbine school shooting has become infamous in discussions of this phenomenon (see Cullen 2004), including those taking place on screen. Two of the case studies in this paper, *Run Hide Fight* and *Excursion*, share parallels with the Columbine incident: multiple perpetrators; the shooters seemingly being motivated by a need for fame; a high number of deaths.

Mirroring real-life trends, all the case studies in this paper all feature white, male school shooters; although there are some caveats to that. Firstly, *Run Hide Fight* does feature a female shooter working in tandem with three male shooters; however, her character is killed early in the film and is thus rather underdeveloped. Secondly, in the *Buffy* episode 'Earshot' the presumed school shooter is revealed to be planning to kill only himself; whilst the real potential mass murderer is a female staff member. Third, the school shooter in the *One Tree Hill* episode 'With Tired Minds, With Tired Minds, With Tired Souls, We Slept' kills only himself.

The presence of female student heroes in two of these case studies complements the focus on male perpetrators. The lead characters in the *Buffy* episode and *Run Hide Fight* could be described as empowered females, demonstrating bravery and physical prowess/marksmanship. Given this field is underdeveloped, the role of females is something which requires further exploration in school shooting literature.

Suicidal ideation by students is also prevalent in the case studies. With the exception of *Run Hide Fight* where all the perpetrators are shot and killed by others, the case studies feature a shooter that dies by suicide or has the intention of doing so. This also ties in with gendered perceptions of self-violence, whereby 'explosive suicide remains a distinctly masculine trope' (Kalish & Kimmel 2010: 463).

Future research in this area might examine fictional school shootings with different motivations (e.g. *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, 2011). Comparisons could be drawn with representations of mass shootings by adult perpetrators in non-school locations (e.g. *The Frighteners*, 1996); and school shootings covered from the perspective of those outside the school to see how that affects the portrayal of such incidents in texts focused on students (e.g. *The Desperate Hour,* 2021).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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