

## Brief Analysis of Werther's Impact

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### ABSTRACT

A prominent public figure's suicide frequently generates significant and spectacular media coverage. There are always worries over whether or not such reporting influences future suicides. Regarding imitative suicides, Durkheim, Lester, Phillips, and other academics have divergent opinions. Numerous fragments of anecdotal evidence, research, and meta-analyses have already proven the media's representation of suicide as an independent risk factor for additional suicides in society. This phenomena was dubbed the "Werther effect" by Philips, after the protagonist of Goethe's masterpiece "The Sorrows of Young Werther." In this paper, we examine the Werther effect, its hypothesised mechanism, some statistical considerations, the at-risk population, and key variables associated with this phenomena, as well as new media guidelines.

**Keywords:** Werther effect, publicized suicide, imitative suicide.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

David Phillips investigated suicide tales published in British and American newspapers between 1947 and 1968 and discovered an immediate correlation a rise in the amount of suicides. He dubbed this spike in suicides "the Werther effect," after Goethe's protagonist, and linked it to the influence of suggestion. Suicides that receive extensive media coverage, make the front page, or are committed by prominent public personalities are more likely to be copied. In contrast to Durkheim's rejection of the Werther effect on a national scale, Philips thought that the Werther effect manifests on a national and occasionally international scale. Philips determined that media coverage of suicides not only prompts some suicides, but also causes others [6].

Later, in 1985 and 1989, Phillips and his colleagues discovered an increase in both fatal auto accidents and suicides following a highly publicised suicide. He believed these mishaps to be a sort of suicide and termed them "covert imitation," whereas he referred to explicit suicide as "overt imitation" [10].

After the suicide of Indian actor Sushant Singh Rajput on June 14, 2020, there was a spike in internet searches for suicide-related keywords from various regions of India. In addition, numerous instances of copycat suicides were observed, indicating Werther's effect [11].

### Statistics

Since Phillips's study, several investigations have been undertaken in various regions of the world to determine the statistical influence of Werther's effect. In the five months following the suicide death of international celebrity Robin Williams on August 11, 2014, the rate of suicide in the United States increased by 9.85 percent [12].

A recent Indian study indicated that > 5% of following suicides after SSR's suicide were linked to celebrity suicide [13]. Michiko Ueda in Japan investigated the daily suicide counts in Japan from 1989 to 2010 by using the Poisson regression model to 109 high-profile suicides and analysing the daily suicide counts in Japan from 1989 to 2010. On the day of media reports, the total number of suicides climbed by 4.6% on average, and this increase lasted approximately 10 days [14].

After controlling for humidity, temperature, seasonal variation, calendar year, and unemployment rate, Cheng et al. found a significant increase in suicides (relative risk = 1.17, 95% confidence interval [CI]: 1.04–1.31) in Taiwan four weeks after media coverage of the suicide of a famous male television actor. In a separate study, Cheng et al. examined suicide attempters within two months of the aforementioned actor's suicide. They discovered that 89.2% of suicide attempters were exposed to suicide-related media. Approximately 25% of the exposed suicide attempters claimed that media coverage influenced their subsequent suicide attempts [4,5].

A 2012 meta-analysis of 10 research indicated a 0.26 percent rise in suicide rates (suicides per 100,000 population) in the month after a high-profile celebrity suicide [15]. Another meta-analysis of 31 papers published in 2020 found that suicides increased by 8–18% in the month following media coverage of the suicide of a celebrity. The likelihood of suicide by the same technique increases by 18 to 44% following disclosure of the method [16].

### Duration of Effect

The majority of research assumed that this imitation impact was short-lived and only investigated the short-term (2 to 4 week) effect [6,17]. Schmidtke and Schaller called some viewed media coverage of suicide as a natural form of suicide promotion and warned that it could "sow the seeds of suicide in the future" [18]. In addition to the well-known short-term consequences, a population-based household study in Hong Kong found that celebrity suicide may have long-term repercussions on people's suicidal ideation [3].

Stack et al. (2005) found that, compared to studies based on non-celebrity suicides, studies based on celebrity suicides were 5.27 times more likely to have significant results report a consequence of imitation. There was a significant (6.3% in the 10-day post-report period) correlation between high-profile celebrities and an increase in the frequency of suicides [14].

Only the suicides of celebrities from the entertainment and political industries were found to have a significant imitation effect [17]. Kim et al. (2013) discovered that the Werther effect band was longer for entertainment personalities than for politicians, and they attributed this to more significant and positive media attention [19].

In Japan, politicians and economic elites who committed suicide were imitated more than entertainment celebrities [14]. Additionally, adverse life events enhance the chance of suicide after a celebrity suicide [20]. Preexisting mental illness was identified as a risk factor for eventual celebrity suicides in both retrospective and prospective investigations [3,20].

However, a research from India indicated that those without mental illness are at a greater risk of committing suicide following the suicide of a celebrity [13].

After controlling for the variable, Cheng et al. (2007) identified temperature as the most significant factor and attributed it to the increase in suicides from spring to summer.[5,21].The individual's thought process is also a crucial aspect. According to a study, having less reasons to live, more anxiety symptoms, and more irrational values increases the suicidogenic effect of celebrity suicide. On the other side, optimistic thinking, reduced impulsivity, and health concerns are predictors of not experiencing serious suicidal ideation [3].

### **Groups at Risk**

Some studies revealed that teenagers were most affected by a publicised celebrity suicide, while others found that people in the same age range as the celebrity were at increased risk [5,22-24]. Similarly, several research indicated that the Werther effect is more prevalent among females. Some believe that the same gender is more susceptible to suicide, while others could not detect any gender-specific impact on celebrity suicides [5,13,18].

The age-gender impact is not a simple linear stimulus-response relationship, but a complicated interaction. Age and gender of a celebrity's admirers are other crucial factors to consider when analysing Werther's effect. These individuals are more prone to identify with the behaviour of celebrities [5].

### **Mechanism**

Firstly, the media coverage of celebrity suicide magnifies its impact well beyond what it would have been otherwise. Suicide is normalised as an acceptable means of coping with challenges as a result of the media's continued coverage of suicide. 27 Romanticized and sensationalised reporting on celebrities causes the public to view suicide as a glamorous end, with the deceased receiving attention and sympathy they never had in life.

The Werther effect is also explicable in terms of behavioural or social contagion. Some individuals may have a preexisting desire to engage in a particular conduct, but internal constraints prevent them from doing so.

Publicized suicides offer individuals with an example to copy, reducing their internal limitations [28].Suicidal ideation is prevalent, and media coverage of suicide can have a harmful impact on many vulnerable individuals [19].Philips projected that the suicide rate would fall if an option to suicide received more awareness [6]. Furthermore, research indicates that not all accounts of suicide are related with suicide rate rises. Positive coping under adversity, tales of hope and healing may help reduce suicides if they are highlighted in the media.[12,13]

This impact can be observed following the death of musician and guitarist Kurt Cobain. The coverage of Cobain's suicide in the area focused mostly on his family's grief following his death, mental health care, and suicide prevention. In the subsequent months, the local suicide rate decreased as a result. [14]

### **Media Guidelines**

After the establishment of media standards, Austria observed a dramatic decrease in celebrity suicide rates.[15] This prompted the World Health Organization and other nations to develop media rules for reporting on suicide. In general, these rules aim to avoid sensationalism and

prevent content that may act as a suicide trigger or prompt vulnerable persons to commit themselves. Also encouraged is the inclusion of preventive information (e.g., suicide helpline). [12-16] The Press Council of India issued suicide reporting guidelines on September 13, 2019, based on WHO media guidelines. It stipulates that suicide-related stories must NOT be conspicuously displayed or excessively repeated. It must NOT sensationalise or normalise suicide or depict suicide as a helpful solution to problems. In addition, explicit descriptions of suicide methods, site/location information, and the use of images, video, or social media links are strictly prohibited. In India, however, compliance with this rule is far from optimal.

## 2. CONCLUSION

The Werther effect is a well-documented phenomena, and the media's portrayal of celebrity suicide acts as a separate risk factor. However, this influence is likely to be modest yet significant enough to merit special consideration. The news is rapidly disseminated to a wide number of individuals via media reporting. The normalisation of suicide by such broadcasts, the association of certain persons with a celebrity who has committed suicide, and the dissemination of information about suicide methods frequently result in imitative suicides.[23-25] The risk of these copycat suicides is greatest in the short term, but suicidal ideation can sometimes persist for longer. There is a dose-response link between these suicides and the amount of exposure given to the story. Certain individuals, such as those who have had traumatic life experiences or who have preexisting psychiatric problems, are at a greater risk than others.

As a result of the implementation of media guidelines in Austria and the subsequent decrease in suicide rates, other nations, including India, have adopted these restrictions. Nonetheless, there is still a lack of adherence to these principles. Efforts should be made to improve the quality of research in this area, to educate media personnel, and to ensure strict adherence to media norms.

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