Celebrity suicide and its effect on further media reporting and portrayal of suicide: An exploratory study

Devavrat Harshe, Sagar Karia, Sneha Harshe, Nilesh Shah, Gurudas Harshe, Avinash De Sousa
Department of Psychiatry, D. Y. Patil Medical College and Research Centre, Consultant Psychiatrist, Dhanvantari Mind Care and Nursing Home, Kolhapur, Department of Psychiatry, Lokmanya Tilak Municipal Medical College, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India

ABSTRACT

Background: Suicide is a grave mental health problem in India, and suicide rates in India have risen over the past decades. Suicide reporting by the media is a common cause for spurts of suicides that may occur from time to time. The aim of the present study was to assess the change in trends in media reporting of suicide after a celebrity suicide.

Methodology: Suicide by the renowned actor Robin Williams was selected as the reference case. The top three Indian daily newspapers published in English having the highest circulation as per the Registrar of Newspapers, Government of India report were selected to be scanned in the study. These were the Times of India – Mumbai edition, Mumbai Mirror, and the Daily News Analysis – Mumbai edition. The authors screened all news stories in the three newspapers within a 6-month period (3 months prior and 3 months post the date of the reference suicide case), and these news reports were evaluated as per the suicide reporting guidelines for media laid down by the Indian Psychiatric Society. The data were analyzed using Chi-square test and descriptive statistics where appropriate.

Results: A total of 708 newspaper articles were identified on the basis of the guidelines mentioned above. Nearly 88% (n = 623) of the articles directly covered suicide while 4.09% (n = 29) focused on suicidal threats and 7.91% (n = 56) focused on parasuicide behavior. There was a significantly greater increase in the total number of articles printed after the celebrity suicide (n = 409) for all article types except teasers as compared to that before the celebrity suicide (n = 299). There was a significantly greater increase in front page news on suicide after the celebrity suicide (P = 0.0016), description of the method of suicide (P = 0.0221), and the mention of the suicide notes (P = 0.0002). Most articles after the celebrity suicide placed the blame on someone or the environment for the act (P = 0.0001).

Conclusions: A change in media trend toward reporting suicide was noted post a celebrity suicide, and it is important that media follow guidelines stringently when reporting a serious problem like suicide.

Key words: Celebrity suicide, media, newspaper, suicide, suicide attempt, suicide note

INTRODUCTION

Suicide is a very grave mental health problem in India, and suicide rates in India have shown a rise in the past few decades. Suicide prevention is a global mental health
priority worldwide, and the print and electronic media have a huge role in suicide prevention programs. The media and its effect on suicide is a double-edged sword. On one hand, media reporting of a suicide particularly that of a celebrity may lead to a spurt of suicides that follow the often-called copycat suicide and the phenomenon is known as the Werther effect. Media may also through diligent and intelligent reporting help people in alleviating their suffering and provide alternate means to cope rather than suicide, thereby reducing suicide rates, a phenomenon referred to as the Papageno effect. The World Health Organization has drawn up guidelines for the media with regard to reporting and portrayal of suicide-related news in the print media. The Indian Psychiatric Society too has come up with similar guidelines for media reporting in India with regard to news related to suicides, but they are often not followed to the core. These guidelines encompass multiple areas of suicide reporting and range from an unbiased, nonglorified, nonvilifying, and nondramatized reporting of suicide, not giving much prominence to the suicide story, avoiding gory details of the suicide act, and creating an awareness through their stories on the causes, precipitating factors, and options available for the treatment and management of suicidal behavior. It is thus of vital importance in suicide prevention to monitor the media portrayal of suicides after a celebrity suicide. The present study was thus planned with the aim of studying the media portrayal and reporting of suicide news after a celebrity suicide.

**METHODOLOGY**

The study followed a retrospective review design. The study did not involve interviewing human beings, and no confidential information of psychiatric patients was accessed. All data for the study were acquired from the public domain and it involved a screening of newspaper reports and articles. The study design being a media evaluation was discussed with 5 senior psychiatrists (2 were authors of the study – author 4 and 5) and three were external and independent to the study. All of them had over 25 years of experience in the clinical practice and with research in psychiatry. Their suggestions and comments were considered before drafting the final protocol. A celebrity suicide case was selected within a 2-year period (July 1, 2013–July 31, 2015) as per an operational definition based on a previous study, and after discussion with the five senior psychiatrists. Suicide by the renowned actor Robin Williams on August 13, 2014, was selected as the reference case. The top three Indian daily newspapers published in English having the highest circulation as per data provided by the Registrar of Newspapers, Government of India, were selected to be scanned in the study. These were the Times of India – Mumbai edition, Mumbai Mirror, and the Daily News Analysis – Mumbai edition. Considering the date of the celebrity suicide as a reference point (August 13, 2014), the authors screened all news stories in the three newspapers within a 6-month period (3 months prior and 3 months post the date of the reference suicide case). The period of 3 months before and after was determined, as studies have shown the Werther effect from a celebrity suicide to last from 6 to 9 weeks. Suicide reports that were reported along with the suicide of the celebrity on the same day (August 13, 2014) were excluded from the study. The inclusion criteria for newspaper articles in the study was that the article or news report must cover a suicide event or an event where there is an attempt to commit suicide. The news stories were analyzed for content based on the guidelines given by the Indian Psychiatric Society. The guidelines were included in the analysis of news stories and were described as follows:

**Prominence**

This included the presence of a special box for the news item in the paper, the news having being printed on the front page, and the word “suicide” in the headline.

**Excessive details**

These details included the method of suicide being described in the headline, the mention of a suicide note, the suicide note being quoted, detailed description of the method of committing suicide, reference to past suicides, references to prior suicide attempts by the same person, and detailed interviews of survivors.

**Sensational and trivialized reporting**

This included using of catch phrases and adjectives, the word suicide in the headline, the photograph of the victim, the location photograph, the use of an illustration and graphic in the description, blame being put on an isolated event, and suicide being portrayed as the coping mechanism.

**Awareness**

This included the warning signs are mentioned, the role of psychiatric illness was mentioned, the treatment options and preventive methods described, the pain and grief of the family members described, and the role of a suicide helpline and alternative methods of coping with the same stress discussed.

**Suicide as a crime**

The word “success” or “failure” being associated with the suicide, the word “committed” or “attempted” being used, and the police officers and their views being quoted in the paper.

All the authors read all the articles and confirmed adherence of the articles in relation to the guidelines mentioned above. Each of the variables mentioned above was converted into a yes/no question. All news items were numbered and then further read in detail randomly by a computer randomization list by any of the two authors and were rated on all the variables as mentioned above. In case
of any dilemma, a third author’s opinion was taken. The data were then collected and analyzed using descriptive statistics and Chi-square test where needed.

RESULTS

A total of 708 newspaper articles were identified on the basis of the guidelines mentioned above. Nearly 88% (n = 623) of the articles directly covered suicide while 4.09% (n = 29) focused on suicidal threats and 7.91% (n = 56) focused on parasuicide behavior. Nearly 45.9% (n = 325) were news reports while 13.9% (n = 99) were editorials and 18.07% (n = 128) were reference to previous suicides. The other news items were either small items or teasers. In 26.69% of the articles (n = 189), the method of suicide was not mentioned, and in 119 news reports (16.81%), the suicide attempt was that of hanging. Various other methods such as jumping from a height, suicide bomber, drowning, burns, slashing of the wrist, drug or poison overdose as well as shooting formed the types of suicide methods. In 213 news items (30.08%), the occupation of the victim was not mentioned while the suicide attempts covered in the newspapers had victims from diverse occupations with suicide bombers (n = 99, 13.9%) and students (n = 101, 14.27%) forming the highest group.

There was a significantly greater increase in the total number of articles printed after the celebrity suicide (n = 409) for all article types except teasers as compared to that before the celebrity suicide (n = 299) (χ² = 33.46, P < 0.0001). Table 1 lists all the parameters evaluated on the press articles before and after the celebrity suicide. As shown in Table 1, there was a significantly greater increase in front page news on suicide after the celebrity suicide (P = 0.0016). There was also an increase in the description of the method of suicide (P = 0.0221) and the mention of the suicide notes (P = 0.0002). Most articles after the celebrity suicide placed the blame on someone or the environment for the act (P = 0.0001). Suicide in many of the post celebrity suicide articles was portrayed as a coping mechanism (P = 0.0001) with the word mental illness being very commonly associated with suicide (P = 0.0005) [Table 1].

DISCUSSION

The clinical, biological, psychosocial, and epidemiological aspects of suicide have been assessed in multiple research studies across the Indian subcontinent.[8,12,13] This paper is to the best of our knowledge the first project evaluating the impact of a celebrity suicide on the media portrayal of suicide in India. Celebrity suicides have been implicated in

---

**Table 1: Details of suicide-related reporting in the newspaper articles before and after the celebrity suicide**

| Parameter                               | Before (n=299), n (%) | After (n=409), n (%) | χ²   | P       |
|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|------|---------|
| Prominence of news                      |                       |                      |      |         |
| Word suicide in headline                | 79 (26.42)            | 124 (30.31)          | 1.099| NS      |
| News printed on the first page          | 10 (3.34)             | 40 (9.77)            | 9.941| 0.0016* |
| News printed inside a box               | 48 (16.05)            | 49 (11.98)           | 2.054| NS      |
| Provide excessive details regarding the victim |                  |                      |      |         |
| Mention of method in the headline       | 82 (27.42)            | 81 (19.80)           | 5.238| 0.0221* |
| Mention of suicide note                 | 41 (13.71)            | 72 (17.60)           | 1.671| NS      |
| Quote suicide note                      | 11 (3.67)             | 48 (11.73)           | 13.643| 0.0002* |
| Method described in a step-by-step manner | 42 (14.04)            | 169 (41.32)          | 60.118| 0.0001* |
| Reference to other suicides at that location/situations | 42 (14.04) | 125 (30.56) | 25.231 | 0.0001* |
| Mention of prior attempts by the victim | 12 (4.01)             | 11 (2.68)            | 0.588| NS      |
| Sensationalization or trivialization of the news |                  |                      |      |         |
| Interviews of bereaves                  | 73 (24.41)            | 96 (23.47)           | 0.041| NS      |
| Catchphrase/adjective to describe suicide| 54 (18.06)            | 108 (26.40)          | 6.353| 0.0117* |
| Photograph of the victim                | 48 (16.05)            | 83 (20.29)           | 1.788| NS      |
| Photograph of the location              | 27 (9.03)             | 49 (11.98)           | 1.276| NS      |
| Graphical illustration to depict suicide/location | 26 (8.69) | 59 (14.42) | 4.839 | 0.0278* |
| Blame placed on someone/environment     | 108 (36.12)           | 245 (59.90)          | 38.131| 0.0001* |
| Suicide portrayed as an obvious coping mechanism | 81 (27.09) | 56 (13.69) | 20.498 | 0.0001* |
| Creating awareness about mental illness |                       |                      |      |         |
| Warning signs of mentioned              | 9 (3.01)              | 16 (3.91)            | 0.190| NS      |
| Pain/grief/shock of survivors mentioned | 46 (15.38)            | 39 (9.53)            | 5.054| 0.0246* |
| Mention of mental illness as a possible cause | 46 (15.38) | 109 (26.65) | 12.170 | 0.0005* |
| Mention about the availability of treatment for mental illness | 21 (7.02) | 44 (10.75) | 2.459 | NS      |
| Mention of a suicide helpline           | 15 (5.01)             | 33 (8.06)            | 2.085| NS      |
| Mention of prior attempts by the victim | 12 (4.01)             | 11 (2.68)            | 0.588| NS      |
| Stories of overcoming suicidal thoughts | 10 (3.34)             | 2 (0.48)             | -    | 0.0055**|
| Criminalization of suicide              |                       |                      |      |         |
| Use of words “successful/failed”        | 4 (1.33)              | 5 (1.22)             | -    | NSv     |
| Use of word “committed”                 | 119 (39.79)           | 182 (44.49)          | 1.374| NS      |
| Using quotes from police/law enforcement| 127 (42.74)           | 168 (41.05)          | 0.088| NS      |

*Significant (P<0.05); Chi-square test used in the calculation, *Fischer’s exact test used in the calculation. NS – Not significant
causing a spurt of suicides, and the impact of such an effect may last longer than expected if the celebrity was very well known and liked by many. It is not just the content of the news story, but its placement and prominence have also been linked to copycat suicides. Nearly 9.77% (n = 40) of the stories post celebrity suicide in our study were placed on the front page. Prior studies have found this rate to range from 4% to 7%. A slight increase in our rates could stem from the fact that media in India may sensationalize such stories to enhance sales of their newspapers. We found more news stories printed prominently after the celebrity suicide as compared to before the celebrity suicide. Studies have linked front-page suicide news with an increase in the suicidal rates within 30 days of publication. Other factors, which add undue prominence to the suicide news, are news items being placed inside a box, news items located on the upper half of the page, and the word suicide in the headline. We found no significant difference in our study made by the word “suicide” appearing in the headlines. Guidelines thus advise the suicide news story to be placed in the inside pages and in the lower half.

Guidelines also mention that the news story should be published in a nonbiased, nonjudgmental, and nonsensationalized fashion. It is also vital that the suicide story is not trivialized and generalized. Previous studies have found as high as 37% of the news stories with inappropriate language, whereas research in Australia showed more than 20% news stories having exaggerated headlines or using out-dated language. Sensational reporting imparts stress on the details of suicide and creates visual cues for the psychologically vulnerable. Trivialization of suicides is equally counterproductive. Trivialization of the suicide is where suicide is portrayed as the next obvious step or the only coping mechanism in a situation. Such reporting may imply that suicide is the only and obvious way out from such a predicament. In our study, the number of graphical illustrations in suicide news increased significantly after the celebrity suicide. This may lead to an increase in suicide attempts if vivid graphics demonstrate or focus on the spot, method, and details of suicide. Suicide helplines are a valuable crisis intervention tool in an acute suicidal state and it was not highlighted as a method where help may be sought in most reports. The media must report that help is available at hand and that suicide is not a valid method of coping with one’s problems.

Literature exists to show that positive coverage of suicide in media can lower the suicide rates. Despite this, <12% of the news stories in our study mentioned the role of psychiatric illnesses and even lesser reported availability of treatments for the same. It was interesting to find that the percentage of news stories mentioning about suicide helplines was similar to our figure of 8% as that reported in media studies in New Zealand as well as the United States of America. The celebrity in focus in our study was Robin Williams, a renowned and known Hollywood actor. His psychiatric illness (bipolar disorder), parkinsonism, and substance use were well known and that might have been the key which led to news stories with better mental health awareness profiles. However, news stories showed a rise in sensationalism, providing excessive and undue information about the suicide and portraying suicide in a negative and criminal manner. Therefore, we found a mixed result, with some betterment and some downfall in the patterns of media reporting of suicide after the celebrity suicide. The study only looked at three commonly read English dailies and that too within a 3-month period post and prior to the celebrity suicide. In India, we should have looked at multiple daily newspapers as there are many regional newspapers read by the common man, and these regional papers often may present the news in rather sensational manner with the aim of boosting their own sales. Another limitation that does come up is the fact that we chose a suicide case by a Hollywood actor rather than a Bollywood actor as our index case. This was due to the fact that the celebrity though from Hollywood was well known and his suicide was well reported by Indian media. Another fact was that there was no major Indian celebrity suicide at the time of planning this suicide. We do plan to compare the results of the current study with a study on focusing on an Indian celebrity suicide that may happen in the future. Media reporting of suicide in India is still quiescent when it comes to following guidelines, and further studies and attempts to stringently impose these guidelines are needed.

CONCLUSIONS

We evaluated the trends in media portrayal of suicide in an urban setting in India after a celebrity suicide. We found that sensationalization, attributing undue prominence and providing excessive details about the suicide increased significantly in news stories after the celebrity suicide. News stories mentioning the possibility of a mental illness in victim showed an upward trend as well. These findings need to be explored after suicide by an Indian celebrity.

Financial support and sponsorship
Nil.

Conflicts of interest
There are no conflicts of interest.

REFERENCES

1. Vijayakumar L. Indian research on suicide. Indian J Psychiatry 2010;52 Suppl 1:S291-6.
2. Vijayakumar L. Suicide and its prevention: The urgent need in India. Indian J Psychiatry 2007;49:81-4.
3. Hittner JB. How robust is the Werther effect? A re-examination of the suggestion-imitation model of suicide. Mortality 2005;10:193-200.
4. Niederkrotenthaler T, Voracek M, Herberth A, Till B, Strauss M, Etzersdorfer E, et al. Role of media reports in completed and prevented suicide. Werther v. Papageno effects. Br J Psychiatry 2010;197:234-43.
5. Pirkis J, Blood RW, Beaurepas A, Burgess P, Skehans J. Media guidelines.
Harshe, et al.: Celebrity suicide and media coverage of suicide

on the reporting of suicide. Crisis 2006;27:32-7.
6. Ramadas S, Kuttichira P. The development of a guideline and its impact on the media reporting of suicide. Indian J Psychiatry 2011;53:224-8.
7. Ramadas S, Kuttichira P, John CJ, Isaac M, Kallivayalil RA, Sharma I, et al. Position statement and guideline on media coverage of suicide. Indian J Psychiatry 2014;56:107-10.
8. Patel V, Rasamundarathettige C, Vijayakumar L, Thakur JS, Gajalakshmi V, Gururaj G, et al. Suicide mortality in India: A nationally representative survey. Lancet 2012;379:2343-51.
9. The Registrar of Newspapers for India. Press in India 2013-14. 58th Annual Report. Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India; 2013.
10. Kim JH, Park EC, Nam JM, Park S, Cho J, Kim SJ, et al. The weather effect of two celebrity suicides: An entertainer and a politician. PLoS One 2013;8:e84876.
11. Fu KW, Chan CH. A study of the impact of thirteen celebrity suicides on subsequent suicide rates in South Korea from 2005 to 2009. PLoS One 2013;8:e53870.
12. Sudhir Kumar C, Mohan R, Ranjith G, Chandrasekaran R. Gender differences in medically serious suicide attempts: A study from South India. Psychiatry Res 2006;144:79-86.
13. Rajkumar AP, Brinda EM, Duba AS, Thangadurai P, Jacob KS. National suicide rates and mental health system indicators: An ecological study of 191 countries. Int J Law Psychiatry 2013;36:339-42.
14. Niederkrotenthaler T, Fu KW, Yip PS, Fong DY, Stack S, Cheng Q, et al. Changes in suicide rates following media reports on celebrity suicide: A meta-analysis. J Epidemiol Community Health 2012;66:1037-42.
15. Jeong J, Shin SD, Kim H, Hong YC, Hwang SS, Lee EJ. The effects of celebrity suicide on copycat suicide attempt: A multi-center observational study. Soc Psychiatry Psychiatr Epidemiol 2012;47:957-65.
16. Gould MS, Kleinman MH, Lake AM, Forman J, Midle JB. Newspaper coverage of suicide and initiation of suicide clusters in teenagers in the USA. 1988-96: A retrospective, population-based, case-control study. Lancet Psychiatry 2014;1:34-43.
17. Wang X. Media guidelines for the responsible reporting of suicide: A review of effectiveness. Crisis 2012;33:190-8.
18. Corbo AM, Zweifel KL. Sensationalism or sensitivity: Reporting suicide cases in the news media. Stud Commun Sci 2013;13:67-74.
19. Pirkis J, Machlin A. Differing perspectives on what is important in media reporting of suicide. Br J Psychiatry 2013;203:168-9.
20. Ju Ji N, Young Lee W, Seok Noh M, Yip PS. The impact of indiscriminate media coverage of a celebrity suicide on a society with a high suicide rate: Epidemiological findings on copycat suicides from South Korea. J Affect Disord 2014;156:56-61.
21. Radhakrishnan R, Andrade C. Suicide: An Indian perspective. Indian J Psychiatry 2012;54:304-19.
22. Machlin A, Skehan J, Sweet M, Wake A, Fletcher J, Spittal M, et al. Reporting suicide: Interpreting media guidelines. Aust J Rev 2012;34:45-56.
23. Lee J, Lee WY, Hwang JS, Stack SJ. To what extent does the reporting behavior of the media regarding a celebrity suicide influence subsequent suicides in South Korea? Suicide Life Threat Behav 2014;44:457-72.
24. Chandra PS, Doraiswamy P, Padmanabha H, Philip M. Do newspaper reports of suicides comply with standard suicide reporting guidelines? A study from Bangalore, India. Int J Soc Psychiatry 2014;60:687-94.
25. Luxton DD, June JD, Fairall JM. Social media and suicide: A public health perspective. Am J Public Health 2012;102 Suppl 2:S195-200.
26. McKenna B, Thom K, Edwards G, Nairn R, O’Brien A, Leary I. Reporting of New Zealand Media: Content and Case Study Analysis. Centre for Mental Health Research, University of Auckland, New Zealand; 2010.
27. Romer D, Jamieson PE, Jamieson KH. Are news reports of suicide contagious. A stringent test in six US cities. J Commun 2006;56:136-54.