

Suicide Announcement on Facebook

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Abstract. *Background:* The media and the Internet may be having an influence on suicidal behavior. Online social networks such as Facebook represent a new facet of global information transfer. The impact of these online social networks on suicidal behavior has not yet been evaluated. *Aims:* To discuss potential effects of suicide notes on Facebook on suicide prevention and copycat suicides, and to create awareness among health care professionals. *Methods:* We present a case involving a suicide note on Facebook and discuss potential consequences of this phenomenon based on literature found searching PubMed and Google. *Results:* There are numerous reports of suicide notes on Facebook in the popular press, but none in the professional literature. Online social network users attempted to prevent planned suicides in several reported cases. To date there is no documented evidence of a copycat suicide, directly emulating a suicide announced on Facebook. *Conclusions:* Suicide notes on online social networks may allow for suicide prevention via the immediate intervention of other network users. But it is not yet clear to what extent suicide notes on online social networks actually induce copycat suicides. These effects deserve future evaluation and research.

Keywords: social network, suicide, Werther effect, Facebook, media

Suicide reports in the media are known to induce copycat suicides, an effect frequently called the Werther effect (Stack 2003; Pirkis, Blood, Beautrais, Burgess, & Skehan 2006), based on Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's 18th-century novel. The Internet can also influence suicidal behavior, albeit in a more complicated and not necessarily enabling fashion. For example, health care professionals may provide assistance to Internet users who seek help online, even while Internet forums and websites dedicated to suicide may actively encourage forum users to commit suicide (Alao, Soderberg, Pohl, & Alao, 2006; Becker, Mayer, Nagenborg, El-Faddagh, & Schmidt, 2004; Harris, McLean, & Sheffield, 2009). Other research indicates that websites and forums dedicated to suicide might counterintuitively serve a preventive role – even in the absence of intervention by health care professionals – via mechanisms of constructive support, empathy, and community belonging (Baker & Fortune, 2008; Eichenberg, 2008). Online social networks are a new forum for information transfer via the Internet, where users can share personal details of their lives online. Here, we report a case of a young man who announced his suicide on the online social network Facebook, and we discuss potential consequences of this new form of suicide note, as it relates to suicide induction and suicide prevention.

Case Details

A 28-year-old male, without prior history of psychiatric illness, drug abuse, suicide attempt, or suicidal ideation, posted his intention to commit suicide online on his Facebook profile as a status update. The man, an otherwise physically healthy mechanic who lived alone, also included the location where he planned to jump to his death, but not the precise time. One of his Facebook friends noticed the post and informed the family and the police. Immediately afterward, the friend went to the site of the planned suicide with the intention of intervening, but tragically arrived too late. Our forensic institute was called, as is the practice in the region, to rule out foul play and to confirm the identity of the deceased. Interviews later revealed that the man had been left by his fiancée 2 months prior to the suicide. Some case details have been altered slightly to protect anonymity, without changing their significance to the case history.

Discussion

Facebook is one of the largest online social networks with more than 500 million active users worldwide

(Facebook Press Room, 2010). The main purpose of Facebook is to maintain contact with friends and to share information about everyday life. Each Facebook user creates an individual profile page, where he or she can upload personal information, photos, and report on his or her status. Users define who may or may not access their profile page by inviting other Facebook users to become their Facebook friends. According to statistics published by Facebook, an average user has 130 friends and spends approximately 1 h on Facebook every day (Facebook Press Room, 2010).

Across the world, several Facebook users have posted suicide notes on their profile page, a trend covered by the popular press, but not yet by the professional literature. For example, a 48-year-old female British expat living in Spain, the alleged victim of abuse at the hands of her fiancé, leapt to her death after posting her suicide note on Facebook (Govan, 2010). In Scotland, a 32-year-old male hung himself and was found 3 h later by the police, who were notified by Facebook users concerned about his most recent postings (Fields, 2009). In New York, a 30-year-old male posted his intention to commit suicide and hung himself hours later in a park (Gendar & Connor, 2009). Finally, in Israel, a police manhunt was initiated after other Facebook users saw a suicide note posted online by their friend, a 44-year-old male, who was found the following day injured but alive in a crevasse (Levy-Stein, 2009). All three men had had a history of relationships recently ended.

Facebook operators reacted to this problem by offering contact information for helplines and services to both individuals with suicidal thoughts and individuals who want to help other users posting suicide notes (Facebook Help Center, 2010). Additionally, Facebook offers a link to report suicidal content on the network. Facebook profile pages of deceased users can be turned into “memorial accounts” by Facebook operators or removed completely, both at the request of family members (Facebook Help Center, 2010). According to the professional literature, media reports on suicides have the tendency to induce copycat suicides (Pirkis et al., 2006; Stack, 2003). This tendency is frequently called the *Werther effect*, after Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s novel “Die Leiden des jungen Werther” (“The Sorrows of Young Werther”). The same tendency can therefore be expected following media coverage of Facebook-related suicides. Moreover, suicide notes on Facebook may create a variation of the Werther effect: Predisposed individuals who read a network users’ suicide announcement on Facebook may also be encouraged to attempt suicide. However, this potential internal effect has not yet been studied, and our literature search revealed no case reports of such a Facebook-induced Werther effect.

If we assume that Facebook has the potential to induce a Werther effect, the lack of reports of such an occurrence could be related to the only relatively recent launch and rise in popularity of Facebook. It might also be secondary

to the relatively small number of friends linked to the average account on Facebook, compared to the much wider reach and distribution of traditional print and television media. Additionally, as Stack points out, media coverage of famous suicides are much more likely to induce a copycat suicide. It follows then that, unless the Facebook user is famous, the impact would be small. Regarding the potential audience of a post, Facebook account privacy settings can be opened to allow any other user to access a profile, potentially creating an audience of millions. With regard to fame and copycat suicides, the closer connection between Facebook friends (versus knowledge of a celebrity’s or a stranger’s suicide) could play a role in moderating copycat behavior from Facebook suicide notes, although this has not, or not yet, been evaluated.

Besides these effects, which may encourage or enable suicide, there also seems to be a positive effect related to suicide announcements on Facebook. Different from traditional suicide notes, the suicide notes posted on Facebook are instantly available to a large number of individuals. This provides an opportunity for other network users to intervene directly or to seek help from health care professionals and emergency medical services. As the case presented illustrates, Facebook users do indeed actively intervene to prevent suicide attempts of other network users. The potential for intervention also exists before full-blown suicidal ideation and/or planning occur, when an individual is depressed or perseverating on a trigger issue, and therefore may prevent the downward spiral of emotion in a vulnerable individual before a suicide note is posted or plans are enacted.

Conclusions

Posting suicide notes on online social networks like Facebook is a recent phenomenon. Health care providers need to be aware of this new type of suicide announcement and its possible consequences. To date, it is unclear if the overall effect of such notes will in fact lead to greater encouragement of suicide or to greater opportunities for suicide prevention. Careful evaluation of these competing factors is necessary in the future, given the widespread use of online social networks.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors have no personal or professional conflicts of interest to disclose.

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