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A comparison of mainstream and social media reporting of suicide between men and women

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Purpose: The Werther Effect describes how suicides increase following publicized stories of suicide death, while the Papageno Effect refers to a decrease in suicides following publicized stories of crisis mastery and survival. A number of features of suicide-related media reporting are putatively harmful and putatively protective. This study aimed to identify differences in these features between media articles about suicide with different gender foci.

Methods: Articles published between 2011 and 2014 from 12 major Canadian publications, as well as social media posts from Twitter published from July 1, 2015 to June 30, 2016 pertaining to suicide were identified. Each article and post were assigned to one of four gender foci: “male”, “female”, “both”, or “neither”. Articles and posts were also coded according to whether they contained each of 54 and 62 variables of interest, respectively. Logistic Regression analyses identified associations between gender focus and variables of interest.

Results: A total of 6,367 suicide-related articles and 787 tweets were examined in this study. Features of mainstream media articles most strongly associated with a male gender focus were mass murder-suicide (OR 83.33), firearm (OR 8.77), and celebrity suicide (OR 4.98). Features most strongly associated with female gender were asphyxia other than by car exhaust (OR 4.75), youth (OR 3.71), and assisted suicide (OR 3.52). The feature most strongly associated with male gender focus tweets was firearm (OR 19.61). Features most strongly associated with female gender were celebrity relations (OR 22.84), victims of aggression (OR 12.27), and self-poisoning (OR 7.94).

Conclusions: More research in this area is needed to clarify the factors that influence how suicide is portrayed in traditional and social media depending on gender.

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Biography

Tina Guo is currently a PGY-3 Psychiatry Resident at the University of Toronto. She completed a Bachelor of Science degree in Biological Sciences, followed by medical school, at the University of Calgary. Her research interests include the Relationship between Media and Suicide, Medical Education and Mentorship, and Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD) in the psychiatry population.

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