Media Influence and Youth Suicide: A Mixed-Methods Study of Risk and Prevention Strategies

ᵃ Maira Tahir, ᵇ Abeera Zahid, ᶜ Madiha Jamroz, ᵈ Maryam Khalil, ᵉ Sana Shabir

Department of Communication & Media Studies, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Pakistan

Corresponding Author: Maira Tahir mariatahir92@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Recently, media's role in copycat suicides has become a matter of great importance in public health. Media influences perceptions of suicide through television dramas, movies, and online and in-person social media that are either positive or negative. There are many studies that have found a link between sensationalist media reporting and suicide rates which is particularly true for young people. The study discussed here is concerned with the multiplicity of influences of media on youth suicide which would include risk factors and possible protective factors. Based on research, the review identifies three areas in media portrayals of suicide focused on and outlined and are; critical area research based on existing scholarship and literature on the impact of media on youth suicide, a second volume of quantitative survey research conducted with university students and is considered as an assessment of how and to what degree the media pictures of portrayals made either by picture or by sources of stress, including social stressors like poverty, gender against women and boys, or no faith support, setting the suicide rate of youth. The study expresses an urgency for sound media processes, educational awareness programs, and public health endorsed preventive plans.

Keywords : Impact, Stress, Performance

INTRODUCTION

The advent of the twentieth century has brought about tremendous growth in the field of media, thereby fundamentally altering the methods by which people receive information, process information, and approach life's occasions. With the growing presence of television, movies, and internet-based media, media has become a major factor in shaping social norms, attitudes, and behaviors within our society.

Media can be seen as a positive driver of awareness and mental health literacy but can at the same time glorify and promote negative behaviors, including suicide. The relationship between media and suicide behavior has been debated in the academic field for several decades. The "Werther effect" - named after Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's novel from the 18th century - describes the iatrogenic phenomenon of imitative suicide following reports of influential suicides, particularly among public figures. On the other end is the "Papageno effect" which suggests media can be protective by showing stories of positive adaptability in crisis, while highlighting access and resources for assistance. In Pakistan, where mental ill-health is a stigmatized topic and professional services are limited and stigmatized, media has the potential to have a major influence. This study aims to explore the extent that media representations are pertinent to youth suicide rates, predominantly in particular to four mediating variables; stress, poverty, religion, and gender discrimination.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Youth suicide has become an important and acknowledged public health dilemma across the globe. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2023) describes suicide as one of the main causes of death amongst those aged 15-29. The causes are complex, and researchers are increasingly exploring media - both traditional and digital - as a possible vehicle for bringing forward ideation and behaviour for the purpose of suicide. This section summarizes the published academic literature exploring the role of media exposure on suicide risk among youth, focusing on psychosocial moderating factors, including stress, poverty, religious guidance, and gender discrimination.

Theoretical Foundations

Two major theoretical perspectives underpin much of the literature on media influence and suicide.

Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) posits that individuals can learn and adopt behaviors by observing others, particularly when those behaviors are portrayed as acceptable, glamorous, or inevitable. In the context of suicide, repeated exposure to self-harm or suicide in films, television, or social media may normalize these behaviors, making them appear as viable coping strategies for distress.

The Vulnerability-Stress Model provides a complementary framework, suggesting that media exposure alone is not sufficient to trigger suicidal behavior. Instead, such exposure interacts with individual vulnerabilities—such as high stress, limited coping mechanisms, or social exclusion—to heighten risk.

Media Portrayals and the "Werther Effect"

One of the most studied phenomena in this area is the "Werther Effect" - named after Goethe's 1774 "The Sorrows of Young Werther" - which purportedly led to multiple copycat suicides among up to 77 young men across Europe. More recent research continues to demonstrate that sensationalized or detailed reporting of suicide may increase the likelihood of copycat rates, particularly those concerning vulnerable individuals (Phillips, 1974; Stack, 2005). A highlighted example is the international debate surrounding Netflix's 13 Reasons Why, which appeared to correlate with measurable increases in suicide rates among teenagers in the United States, according to multiple studies, shortly after 13 Reasons Why was released (Bridge et al., 2019). The controversy associated with portrayals of suicide and suicide in general indicates that while it's essential to raise awareness about suicide, it may be even more important to avoid glorifying it

Social Media and User-Generated Content

In contrast to traditional media, social media permits users to disseminate content quickly and often at a more decentralized and quasi-unregulated level. With the vast reach of Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter it is possible for suicide-related stories, memorials, and self-injury challenges to spread in an unprecedented way. In a study conducted by Marchant et al. (2020), adolescents were more likely to report suicidal ideation if they were engaging along with online suicide forums or repeatedly viewing content related to self-injury. However, social media can also be viewed as a protective factor especially when used as a means to connect someone to a broader support network, peer endorsed encouragement, and mental health resources (Naslund, et al., 2016). This complexity makes the rise of digital media in terms of influencing suicide both hopeful and problematic.

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Stress and Psychological Vulnerability

A considerable number of studies documented the relationship between chronic stress (academic, financial, or relational) and the susceptibility to the negative influence of suicide related media coverage. For example, in a study by Henter et al. (2019) they found that high-stress adolescents were able to identify the suicidal characters within the media and interpret those characters in a relatable way instead of identifying them in an alarming way. When stressed, individuals tend to employ poorer judgment and less adaptive coping strategies that may leave them vulnerable to the modelling of negative behaviour.

Poverty and Social Disadvantage

Socioeconomic disadvantages exacerbate the risk of suicide by limiting educational, health, or mental health opportunities. Patel et al. (2018) note that young people from low-income families often experience high levels of distress before those distress levels are further exacerbated by harmful media influences, as low-income families may lack alternative coping resources. Poverty can also limit a family's access to a variety of media or balanced media sources and force an increased reliance on uncensored online media that spreads harmful media messages more widely.

Religion and Moral Frameworks

Another common theme in literature is the possibility of greater engagement with religion and enhanced moral frameworks as a protective factor. Durkheim (1897) argued in an early sociological work that religious communities provide belongingness and obligation that can protect individuals from self-destructive activity. Recent research has supported this idea, Koenig (2018) found that higher levels of religious or spiritual engagement are correlated with lower rates of suicidal ideation. Therefore, individuals engaged in a religious group may be less likely to internalize harmful media portrayals or at least evaluate them carefully compared to individuals who lack a strong moral framework.

Gender Discrimination and Marginalization

The gendered nature of discrimination is another principal representative of the vulnerability to suicide risk. Research shows those who are subject to discrimination and marginalization by gender - including through traditional gender roles, inequity in the workplace and societal stereotypes - may experience increased levels of distress and hopelessness (Canetto & Sakinofsky, 1998). These individuals are also likely to identify with the hopelessness presented with respect to suicide in these stories.

Protective Strategies and the "Papageno Effect"

Whereas most of the literature has focused on risk, some researchers have highlighted protective strategies, which they refer to as the "Papageno Effect" (named after a character in Mozart's The Magic Flute who contemplates suicide when unable to establish his own identity, but who is ultimately dissuaded from suicide by conversation and support). Media stories that provide an account of coping, recovery, and help-seeking behaviours would mitigate the risk of suicidal thoughts (Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2010). This evidence reaffirms the potential value of media as a preventative means, when told reflectively.

Summary of Literature Gaps

Although existing research provides substantial evidence linking media exposure to suicide risk, several gaps remain. First, much of the literature is Western-centric, with limited studies focusing on cultural contexts such as South Asia, where social norms, religious influences, and poverty play unique roles. Second, the majority of studies investigate either traditional or social media in isolation, rather than examining their combined influence. Finally, there is limited exploration of how protective factors—such as moral guidance and community engagement—can moderate the harmful effects of media exposure.

In summary, the literature reveals a complex interplay between media influence, psychosocial vulnerabilities, and cultural context in shaping youth suicide risk. While media can exacerbate existing vulnerabilities, it also holds promise as a tool for prevention when used responsibly. This duality underscores the need for research—such as the present study—that considers both the harmful and protective dimensions of media influence within a culturally relevant framework.

Research Objectives
To determine the impact of religion on youth suicide rates.
To examine the effect of stress on youth suicide rates.
To analyze the relationship between poverty and youth suicide rates.
To explore the impact of gender discrimination on youth suicide rates.

Research Questions
How does media content influence the mental well-being of youth?
What emotional and behavioral effects follow exposure to suicide-related media content?
Why does inappropriate media content increase suicide rates among young people?
Why do media outlets continue to present explicit suicide scenes?

Research Hypotheses
H1: Lack of religious knowledge is significantly associated with the suicide rate of youth.
H2: High levels of poverty are significantly associated with the suicide rate of youth.
H3: High stress levels are significantly associated with the suicide rate of youth.
H4: Gender discrimination is significantly associated with the suicide rate of youth.

Conceptual Framework

This study conceptualizes media influence as a primary driver of youth suicide, moderated by social and psychological factors such as stress, poverty, religious detachment, and gender discrimination. When sensationalist suicide portrayals intersect with these vulnerabilities, the likelihood of imitative behavior increases significantly.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design
This study adopts a quantitative approach, supported by a review of secondary literature. The primary data was collected via a structured questionnaire.

Population and Sampling

The research population consisted of female students from Fatima Jinnah Women University. A convenience sampling method was used due to time constraints. A total of 100 questionnaires were distributed among students from different departments.

Measurement Instrument

The questionnaire items were adapted from validated studies in suicide and media influence research. Responses were collected using a Likert scale to quantify perceptions and experiences.

Data Collection Procedure

Data was collected through direct distribution of questionnaires to classmates, siblings, and peers. Ethical considerations were observed by ensuring voluntary participation and anonymity.

Data Analysis

The primary objective of the analysis was to determine the extent to which media exposure and selected psychosocial variables—stress, poverty, lack of religious guidance, and gender discrimination—predict the level of suicide risk among young people. The dependent variable was the *Suicide Risk Index (SRI)*, calculated from five Likert-type items assessing thoughts of self-harm, hopelessness, and suicidal ideation.

The independent variables included media exposure to suicide-related content, measured as the average of four items on the frequency of viewing explicit suicide scenes in dramas and films, news reports of celebrity suicides, related social media posts, and method-specific content. Higher scores reflected more frequent exposure. Additional predictors were stress levels, poverty/financial strain, lack of religious guidance (reverse-coded so higher values indicated lower religious involvement), and experiences of gender discrimination. Age, year of study, and daily social media usage were included as control variables.

Before conducting regression analysis, reliability tests confirmed that all multi-item measures had acceptable internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.74 to 0.84. Correlation analysis indicated that all independent variables were positively associated with suicide risk, with the strongest bivariate association observed between lack of religious guidance and SRI, followed closely by stress and media exposure. Poverty and gender discrimination showed smaller but still positive associations.

An ordinary least squares (OLS) regression was carried out in three stages. The first model included only the control variables—age, year of study, and social media usage—which together explained only a small proportion of variance in suicide risk and were not statistically significant predictors. In the second model, media exposure was added, which significantly improved the explanatory power of the model. At this stage, higher exposure to suicide-related media content was associated with a substantial increase in suicide risk, even after accounting for demographic factors.

The third model incorporated the psychosocial variables. In this full model, lack of religious guidance emerged as the strongest predictor, indicating that students with lower levels of religious involvement scored considerably higher on the suicide risk scale. Stress also showed a strong and significant positive relationship, suggesting that higher perceived stress levels contribute meaningfully to increased suicidal tendencies. Media exposure remained significant, though its effect size was somewhat reduced after accounting for stress and religious guidance, indicating partial mediation. Poverty and gender

discrimination retained positive but weaker associations, suggesting that while they contribute to vulnerability, their impact is smaller compared to the other factors.

Additional interaction tests were conducted to explore whether the impact of media exposure varied according to stress levels and religious guidance. The results revealed that stress amplified the harmful effects of media exposure: students experiencing high stress showed a much steeper increase in suicide risk as media exposure increased compared to those with lower stress levels. Conversely, higher levels of religious guidance buffered this relationship, meaning that students with strong religious engagement were less negatively affected by suicide-related media content.

Overall, the regression analysis confirmed that media exposure is an independent and significant predictor of suicide risk among youth, but its effect is intertwined with other psychosocial factors. Lack of religious guidance and stress not only have direct effects but also interact with media exposure to intensify or mitigate risk. Poverty and gender discrimination, while less influential in this dataset, still represent relevant social determinants that should be addressed in prevention efforts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The regression analysis was conducted to assess the relationship of media exposure, the independent variable, to suicide risk in youth, with stress, poverty, lack of religious support and gender discrimination studied as mediating variables. The regression analysis results suggested that, once controlling demographic factors of age, year of study, and daily social media use, media exposure to suicide was a statistically significant and positive predictor of suicide risk. Students who reported exposure, either from television dramas showing explicit suicide scenes, news stories on celebrity suicides, or social media commentary about suicide, scored higher on the Suicide Risk Index (SRI) than students without those exposures. This infers that suicide as represented in and amplified through media is not a neutral experience, but in fact that representation is causing a contagion effect, especially among vulnerable groups.

Once psychosocial factors were introduced into the model, it complicated the move to exploratory mediation. Lack of religious support was clearly the stronger predictor and decreased the risk of suicidal ideation among students who had religious affiliation. This was expected and consistent with Durkheim's classical theory of suicide to an extent in that without religious affiliation or a diminished sense of morality, students may be more susceptible to suicidal ideation contributing to feelings of anomie and hopelessness.

Stress was another strong and statistically significant moderator. Participants reporting high levels of academic, family or social stress were much more likely to report suicidal ideation; stress appeared to amplify the influence of media exposure, suggesting that the generally negative impacts of media content on suicide are enhanced through stress. In lay terms, if someone has been exposed to media contents about suicide and they are under considerable stress, there would be a greater probability of increased negative outcomes than for someone who has not been under stress; hence, the interaction effect.

The negative relationship to poverty and - to a lesser extent - gender discrimination, was also predictive of suicide risk individuals; this says nothing about the degree to which they were a function of suicide risk although it is assumed they resemble more of a risk factor. Poverty implies a suite of related stressors that typically accompany poverty such as academic, social exclusion, lack of mental health resources, and hopelessness which make individuals more prone to social influences, such as media contents about suicide. Gender discrimination more generally has implications to the practice of being

marginalized as well as contributing to having low esteem, which compounds potential vulnerability to suicidal ideation.

Interactions were particularly interesting, especially in one instance where religious guidance may act as a resilience buffer for this population. Students who identify strongly to their beliefs/practices were less influenced by repeated media content about suicide. This supports the notion that moral, spiritual or community resources may enhance resilience to the harmful parts of the media.

Theoretical frameworks such as the Social Learning Theory help to explain these results as people may engage in behaviors they observe in media where they deemed the behavior acceptable or identify with the behavior. Media portrayals of suicide can be adopted as behavior when the individual does not have robust coping strategies to lean into (e.g. stress management skills, social support systems, moral compass). Without reliable coping strategies, such as the previously mentioned, media representations of suicide can be internalized, which is concerning as it suggests that self-harming behaviors can be normalized as one coping mechanism among many.

The study also provided support for a Vulnerability-Stress Model, where discussion of harmful content alone is not enough to trigger suicidal intent but only if examined through the low stress or lack of moral compass can the content dictate sensitive meaning.

In practical terms, the study's results suggest that IPG must do more than censor content in its efforts to prevent suicide in youth. Moreover, responsible reporting of media is a good thing, but it must go beyond that and consider: - Resilience via stress management programs in schools - Positive coping skills through counselling and peer support; and - Moral and ethical grounding via religious or secular communities to give meaning and community.

In conclusion, the findings of this study indicate that the risk of suicide in youth is a complex issue involving media exposure as well as psychosocial influences. Although the media can act as a trigger, its detrimental impacts are largely seen to be more damaging when combined with individual vulnerabilities. Addressing the individual vulnerabilities, such as increased levels of stress and the loss of moral compass, represents a more sustainable approach to suicide prevention than media regulation.

CONCLUSION and RECOMMENDATIONS

The current study aimed to examine the relationship between media exposure to forms of suicide/media suicides and suicide risk in youth, while taking account of other important psychosocial factors such as stress, poverty, lack of religious guidance and gender discrimination. The results show that media exposure to suicide/media suicides are clearly influential on suicidal ideation, but it is much more complicated and there are many types of personal and social vulnerabilities that play a role.

The absence of religious, moral or belief system had the largest effect size as a predictor to suicide risk followed by stress. Both had direct effects and then interacted with media exposure to enhance or buffer risk. Poverty and gender discrimination were not as strong predictors of suicide risk in youth, but increased use of media, like social media (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Tik Tok), and caused enough concern to not ignore for suicide prevention.

The results show that suicide in youth is a complex phenomenon and requires addressing both the environmental triggers (e.g., potentially harmful media representations of suicide and suicide risk) and the psychosocial vulnerabilities. Banning or restricting harmful representations of suicide will reduce

immediate suicide exposure, but it won't address the underlying psychosocial or non-modifiable risk factors that made the youth vulnerable to begin with.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Responsible Media Coverage

Media outlets, film producers and social media platforms should follow established guidelines about reporting suicide. These guidelines include avoiding the use of sensationalism and depiction of graphic content, avoiding descriptions of or glorification of people who die by suicide, while conveying help-seeking behaviors and recovery.

Stress Reduction and Mental Health Supports

Educational institutions should build institutional support that includes stress reduction programs, mindfulness training and access to counseling. Programs to support students in crisis or with high academic demands can be an early intervention

Strengthening Moral and Community Supports

Religious and community organizations can provide proactive support by providing young people with a sense of value, morals and recognition of belonging. Secular moral education could provide this support to young people without formal religions.

Reducing Socioeconomic Disadvantage

Policies aimed at tackling poverty and improving access to education, employment and health care are necessary to address broader social conditions of despair and hopelessness.

Gender Equity Efforts

Addressing gender discrimination through awareness, laws and institutional policies that promote its elimination may reduce stigma and feelings of marginalization thereby addressing the mental health burden**.**

Media Literacy

Education Implementing media literacy programs in schools and post-secondary institutions can help foster students' skills to critically evaluate and interpret content relative to suicide and suicide reporting and help reduce the risk of harmful imitation.

Final Comments This research demonstrates that a multifaceted and comprehensive approach is necessary to address youth suicide prevention. Media can be a significant influence—as a risk factor or as a mechanism of hope and resilience. By addressing the capitalization of the space of reporting, alongside the maladaptive psychosocial vulnerabilities of youth, policy leaders, educators, media

professionals, and community leaders can work together to reduce the risk of suicide and help establish a healthier and more resilient future generation.

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