Case report

SUICIDE COMMUNICATIONS ON FACEBOOK

Suicide communications on Facebook as a source of information in suicide research: A case study

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Abstract: Social networking sites such as Facebook, have become one of the major platforms for global communication and information exchange. This modern many-to-many communication pattern has raised concerns for suicide prevention professionals that a variation of the Werther effect and cybersuicide can increase youth suicides. However, the positive aspects of social networking sites in suicide prevention are less discussed. This case study illustrates how social media and online communications can reflect and even impact the suicidal behavior of a young Chinese girl. The case and related materials were identified from the Coroner's Court file in Hong Kong. The girl's suicide notes, diary, online communications in a pro-suicide group on Facebook, and browsing history in her computer were investigated for potential violation of the Hong Kong Ordinance. This case study sheds light on the practicability of using suicide communications posted on social media and browsing history as a data source to enhance the understanding of young people's suicide.

Keywords: Suicide, case study, Hong Kong, Facebook, secret suicide group, non-engaged youth

The rapid development of the Internet has great impacts on human psychology and behavior, especially on our modes of communication and information exchange (Ogburn, Messias, & Buckley, 2011; Wong et al., 2013). Social networking sites shift the communication pattern from traditional point-to-point conversations to modern many-to-many communications (Manago, Taylor, & Greenfield, 2012).

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People with common interests easily gather and form communities to support each other, share experiences and exchange information on the Internet (Eysenbach et al., 2004; Li, Xu, & Chau, 2017).

This new form of communication pattern, however, has raised concerns for healthcare professionals and suicide prevention researchers (Mok, Jorm, & Pirkis, 2015). It is worried that an evolution of the Werther effect, a phenomenon that describes an increase in completed or attempted suicide incidents following the portrayals of an individual's suicide in the media, may be spread through social networking sites among potential suicidal individuals (Ruder, Hatch,

Ampanozi, Thali, & Fischer, 2011). The cybersuicide phenomenon, wherein two or more people interact online and agree to meet in real life in order to commit suicide together, has also attracted the attention of the media, researchers, and governments since the early 2000s (Starcevic & Aboujaoude, 2015).

It is noteworthy that studies on social media and suicide are limited, possibly because of the limitation of data collection. A study by Ruder and colleagues (2011) reported a case of an individual who announced his suicide plan on Facebook and the authors discussed potential effects of suicide notes on Facebook on suicide prevention and the Werther effect. They urged healthcare professionals to pay attention to this new type of suicide announcement and its possible negative consequences. In addition, using social media as a research tool to understand suicidal behavior has received even far less discussion (Cheng, Chang, & Yip, 2012; Robinson et al., 2015). Analysis of the deceased's online documents is important for examining the "thinking" of the deceased, and can yield detailed information on various domains linked to suicide, especially in examining the leading events that occurred days before the death (Li, Chau, Yip, & Wong, 2014; O'Dea, Larsen, Batterham, Calear, & Christensen, 2017). Accordingly, this case study aims to illustrate how examining the communications and information collected from social media websites, i.e., Facebook and YouTube, visited by a young girl who died by hanging could enrich the depth of our understanding of her suicide, in addition to the usual death investigation conducted by the police and the Coroner's Court. Most importantly, it is hoped that this case study would illustrate the usefulness of utilizing information from social media as an adjunct data source to enhance the understanding of an individual's suicidal mind and action.

Method

The case study and the related materials were identified from the Coroner's Court. Hong Kong follows the British coronial system under which every suspected suicide death, prior to being assigned a verdict of suicide by the Coroner, is investigated by forensic pathologists and police officers. The role of the Coroner is to determine the cause of death and the role of the police is to investigate the possibility of the presence of any criminal activity surrounding the death. The Coroner's Court's files of suicides generally include socio-demographic information; circumstances of the death collected through witnesses and families

of the deceased; acute and chronic life situations; autopsy and toxicology reports; police investigation records; medical and psychiatric reports; suicide notes and insurance policies (Wong et al., 2009). The file also included interview transcripts of individuals being interviewed by the police during the investigation. In this case, the parents and sisters of the deceased were interviewed by the police as part of the death investigation.

Results

The background
The deceased was a 22-year-old female. She suffered from early psychosis since she was 13 years old and had attempted suicide twice by overdose and by jumping from a height. She was an out-patient at the time of death but had stopped taking prescribed medicine for six months prior to her death. She had several part time jobs after completing her high school but she quitted her job a year before her death. During this non-engaged time period, she spent most of her days in her room playing computer games, watching online videos, and Facebooking. In the Coroner's Court file, the deceased was described as having no friend and being quiet at home without communicating with others. It was reported that the deceased refused/declined to talk with her family members and lost her temper easily in the last few days of her life. She finally hanged herself in the washroom with a nylon string while her parents and sister were not at home.

Deceased's diary and suicide notes
A diary that contained her entries for about a year was included in her death file. In her diary, the early entries were about her feelings of staying at home and also some of her feelings when she saw her friends whom she had met when she was an inpatient in a psychiatric ward. She described that she had tried to live a meaningful life and be a problem solver. She also described a short trip to China with her father and her eagerness to return to Hong Kong to see her mother and friends. She then described that she became very unhappy and stopped writing the diary about six months prior to her death. Her last entry was found to be very different from the former entries. The last entry indicated that the deceased was looking for ways of killing herself but had yet to make up her mind. This might had been the first time she documented her suicidal ideation:

"*Life is meaningless. I really want a comfortable way to kill myself. I thought about using drugs, but after doing some searches on the web, it is pretty*

hard to die by drug overdose. I look uglier and uglier. I have no hope for the future. I have no courage to kill myself by jumping. I do not have the motivation, and eagerness to have a life as I had had before. I WANT TO DIE (bolded and enlarged by the deceased)."

The deceased wrote two suicide notes before her death but dates of these notes were not mentioned. Both of them contained self-blame messages "*I am worse than a piece of rubbish*", instructions of how to dispose her possessions "*No funeral, just cremate me*", and to let her parents know that she is a useless daughter and a burden to the family.

Police investigation

The police later found that (reasons not mentioned in the death file) the deceased had joined a secret group on Facebook named as "Suicide Group" and frequently visited YouTube for suicide information. It seemed that the deceased was not asocial completely, and she was communicating with others on the Internet. According to Facebook, non-members of secret groups cannot find these groups in searches or see anything about the group, including its name and member list. The name of the group will not display on the timelines of members. To join a secret group, individuals need to be added by a member of the group. According to the Hong Kong Ordinance's CAP212 Offences against the person ordinance's 33B dealing with criminal liability for complicity in another's suicide: "A person who aids, abets, counsels or procures the suicide of another, or an attempt by another to commit suicide, shall be guilty of an offence triable upon indictment and shall be liable on conviction to imprisonment for 14 years." Hence, the police looked into the hard-disk of the deceased's computer and found some of the communications between the deceased and the group members of the secret suicide group. The police also investigated the deceased's most recent search history on YouTube. For the sake of illustrations in this case study, parts of the information collected by the police from social media websites visited by the deceased were translated into English from traditional Chinese by one of the authors and agreed by another author to ensure the accuracy of the translation.

Deceased's writings on the secret suicide group's page on Facebook

After the last entry in her diary, the deceased did not write more about her suicidal messages in the diary but she started to share her thoughts in the virtual world. In the document that contains message exchanges in the group, we found 56 posts in the group almost a month before her death. Out of the 56 posts, there were 28 posts expressing negative emotions and distress, five posts mentioning self-harm, six posts showing suicidal ideation, six posts supporting group members and arranging a gathering, nine posts for group administration, one post sharing another suicide group, and a suicide note from another member. The most appearing comments on these posts were pro-suicide and pessimistic statements. The deceased was not an active member in the group as only a few entries by her were documented. Below are the messages she posted on the secret suicide group on Facebook in response to another group member's negative writings about life:

"*I also want to kill myself, the sooner the better! I feel like I am a piece of trash. I have not left my room for a few months!*

Although people keep saying that suicidal individuals should always think about the pain that they can bring to their family members after they have died, but to people like us, the meaningless and the worthless ones, and the tasteless in lives are just too overwhelming.

I have thought about killing myself with alcohol and sleeping pills, but the information from the Internet said its lethality is low. Also, if I failed, there will be plenty of side-effects (will bring more pain to the families). I have heard that jumping from a height is highly lethal, but I am scared. Dying by charcoal-burning seems to be the most ideal one. I want to die with others who also want to kill themselves by charcoal-burning somewhere. Too lonely to die alone. Anyone care to join me? (It's difficult to do it at home, will be intervened very easily).

No one knows what life will be like after death, but I have no meanings in life to live for.

I really want to die. I wish this "Group" can meet and die together.

You can MSN me (xxxxxx@hotmail.com). I have plenty of time."

Reply from the group members:

"*If you really want to die, you should not be scared.*"

"*I am (also) afraid of the process, but if that passes by quickly, we can reach Nirvana (together).*"

"*I am not afraid of dying, I am afraid of losing the ability to live.*"

YouTube Videos accessed by the deceased

According to the deceased's browsing history of YouTube seven days prior to her death, she accessed a number of videos that were related to suicide. Their Chinese names were "Hanging suicide", "Suicide", "A song that killed 547 people",

"Wrist-cutting at the age of 15, a 21-year-old Korean Model died by drug-overdose", "A beautiful air-hostess hanged herself". We visited those videos retrospectively when we obtained the file and found some of the comments left by the viewers including *"I don't know why YouTube suggested this to me, and I only have a vague understanding of Chinese, and I'll never get those 30 seconds of my life back, but I now have the greatest mystery of all to unravel: what the xxxx did I just watch?"*, "Crazy", "Stupid", and "Scary" etc.

Discussion

Prior to the Web 2.0 era, if a retrospective case review of death record with examination of deceased writings and interviews with the next-of-kin of this young girl were to be conducted, a brief conclusion of this death was very likely to be - "A young girl suffered from psychosis since 13 with two prior suicide attempts. Possibly due to the side effects of the antipsychotic drugs, especially, weight gain which affected her appearance, she decided to stop the medication against medical advice. Her unemployment, lack of social contacts with friends and family members, loneliness, and hopelessness were the crucial factors that contributed to her death. However, her reasons for choosing to hang herself as a way to kill herself, and recent events that led to her death remained unknown because she had little to no contact with anyone shortly prior to her death".

Consequently, one would hastily suggest suicide prevention interventions for youth with severe mental illness should include better rehabilitation of those with mental illnesses, strengthening referral system for youth who have exhibited suicidal ideation and related behavior, early identification of suicidal risk education for family members, and limiting access to suicide means. These conclusions and recommendations would be justifiable if the deceased was part of a territory wide psychological autopsy study that was used to establish that psychopathology or psychiatric diagnosis as a major contributory cause of suicide.

However, the information collected by psychological autopsy can only present the "portrayals" of the young girl depicted by her parents and sisters but not much about the young girl's lived experience. Apart from recall bias or other information bias which may affect the reliability and validity of the data derived from the interviews, the informants of the young girl may have different perspectives about the suicide and even have limited knowledge about the girl.

When we are eager to get a closer understanding of the suicidal process of this young girl or even to address the issue of causation about her death, there are still many questions left unanswered. For instance, "What was she doing when she had mostly locked herself in the room? ", "Since she had two suicide attempts by overdose and jumping from a height, why did she choose to hang herself this time?", "Why did she stop taking prescribed drugs suddenly after all the years she had been diagnosed?". The extra information gathered from the "communications" left on the social networking sites may provide information that might not be available prior to the Web 2.0 era because many offline communications by traditional means, i.e., face-to-face, were not documented unless extra efforts were made to document them. In the Web 2.0 era, all of the on-line communications are documented, this is also named as "digital footprint", unless extra efforts are made to not document them like Snapchat and Telegram which are self-destructing message apps that are capable of sending messages that delete itself after a certain period of time and leave no trace or history.

After studying her communications on Facebook and the videos she accessed through YouTube, it is known that, at least: 1) this young girl did communicate her suicidal wishes with someone in a context of hopelessness stimulated by the sense of loss in physical and mental health; 2) while she was contemplating of her death, her suicidal wish and feeling might have been reinforced by her reading about the pessimistic and negative messages of the group members posted in a closed secret group; 3) while she was refusing to take the prescribed drugs for her psychosis, her behavior was also probably reinforced by the group members as some of them were also posting about the same issue; 4) while she was searching for a desirable way to kill herself, she was indecisive until she had watched a number of videos about jumping from a height; and this might have "enhanced" her scared feeling towards using jumping as a way to kill herself and had chosen hanging instead other suicide means.

The Internet was the channel through which the girl connected to the outside world while she was mainly home-bound. The extra information may explain the girl's thoughts and feelings in her life and the reason why she chose to hang herself as a way of suicide. Besides, although she was suffering from psychosis at the time of death, her thinking was not illogical as shown in the development of her suicidal thinking to suicidal plan and act. We believe that the young girl's attitudes and desires can be found in other young suicides by

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documenting and analyzing their online behaviors and suicidal communications.

Advancement of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has indeed changed our lives. There is a paucity of study on Internet and suicide, and the existing studies tend to focus on the negative impact of the Internet. Very little has been written about the positive side of utilizing ICT in the study of suicide. In this case study, the added value of analyzing a young girl's suicidal communication on social networking sites has been illustrated. While social networking sites have become significant communication platforms among the youth, if their peers are better equipped to respond constructively to their friend's suicidal communication, they may have a potential and viable means of intervening effectively (as a gatekeeper) with their suicidal friends and achieving suicide deterrence or prevention among those at risk. Having said that, the closed nature of the "Suicide Group" makes the provision of intervention very challenging. The group was invisible to the non-members and thus making it impossible to intervene in the suicidal processes of the group members since this group is apparently pro-suicide. In fact, the most recent Blue Whale suicide game (Mok, 2017) appears to have become a world concern, which may become another form of cybersuicide probably with the additional issue about cyberbullying and aiding and abetting the suicide of another or attempt to commit suicide. In this case, social networking service providers in collaboration with the local law enforcers can act as gatekeepers by timely identification and referring helping professionals to engage with those at-risk group members. It is indeed encouraging to learn that Facebook announced in May 2017 that additional people will be employed to monitor inappropriate, including suicide materials, posted to the social network.

In Hong Kong, because a person who assists the suicide of another shall be guilty of an offence under the Hong Kong Ordinance's CAP212 Offences against the person ordinance's 33B; hence, the Hong Kong Police can also be involved in the incidents. Crisis negotiators in particular are one of the key gate-keepers in suicide prevention and intervention when an individual discloses his or her imminent suicide act using social platform. Training and research in the area of cyber crisis negotiation can be further explored in the international crisis negotiator community. Additionally, the helping professionals may also think about proactive ways of engaging at-risk or suicidal young people using various forms of ICT. One good local example of e-engagement of prolonged socially withdrawn young people who have almost no opportunities to be reached to by professionals in the real world is to engage these youth through online gaming websites (Li and Wong, 2015). We believe that with the emergence of ICT, there are new challenges in suicide prevention but the validity and reliability of the traditional suicide study methodology can also be improved, and more understanding on suicide will eventually lead to suicide prevention.

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