The Copycat Effect: An Analysis of Suicides Emulated from Non-Fictional and Fictional Media

"To what extent does the "copycat effect" explain similar suicide occurrences subsequent to mass media coverage on non-fictional and fictional suicides?"

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Introduction

The "copycat effect" is defined as "the power of the mass communication and culture to create an epidemic of similar behaviors" (Coleman, 2004). This term is most closely associated with the emulation of violent or suicidal behaviors publicized by mass media. A debated topic by sociologists and media alike for decades, the first systematic investigation of its ramifications was conducted in 1974 by David P. Phillips in *The Influence of Suggestion on Suicide.* In his examination, he dubbed the copycat effect of suicide as the "Werther Effect" after the main character of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, a story about a young man who commits suicide because he cannot bear the unrequited love of a woman engaged to someone else. After the publication of this novel, so many young men throughout Europe with a copy of the book committed suicide by the same means as Werther while wearing the same clothes that it was banned in Italy and parts of Germany and Denmark. Phillips' research found a positive correlation between the number of publicized suicides and the increase of similar suicide reports thereafter, bridging the first connections between media and its copycat effect on suicide (Phillips, 1974).

In a society where media coverage is rapidly expanding and becoming increasingly influential, it is paramount to study the irreparable consequences that mass media can have. As the years progress, news of copycat suicides and suicide clusters have erupted following coverage of authentic incidents and popular entertainment, prompting serious concerns on whether the media is precipitating these suicides. By understanding the extent to which the "copycat effect" is responsible for subsequent suicides, effective preventative measures can be designed and implemented in media and entertainment- such as modifying the way and amount of times a suicide case is presented- to curtail suicide contagion from occurring.

The foundation of the "copycat effect" can be explained by two prominent theories of psychology: the Social Learning Theory and the theory of Differential Identification. The Social Learning Theory asserts the role of imitation through observation of a model as the primary method of the acquisition of behavior. For the acquisition and modeling of behavior to be most effective, the mechanisms of attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation must be present (Bandura, 1969). The presence of mass media and its tendency to engage in sensationalism, in consequence, creates a scenario where persons susceptible to suicidal thoughts or behaviors are highly influenced by publicized suicides, which serve as instructions or a template to execute their own attempt. The theory of Differential Identification is defined as the probability a person pursues similar behavior "to the extent that he identifies himself with real or imaginary persons from whose perspective his behavior seems acceptable" (Glaser, 1956). In other terms, the extent to which an individual identifies with the person of the original suicide impacts their susceptibility to imitation. Understanding the basis of the "copycat effect" allows for better recognition and evaluation of its repercussions in the cases presented.

Since the investigation led by Phillips, further research on the impact of non-fictional and fictional media on copycat suicides has led to no conclusive answer. Some studies report findings similar to that of Philips' while others report no instance of contagion effects. Other studies, still, find validity of the copycat effect when reporting only non-fictional events, or gather ambiguous results for both. However, within the past twenty years, research on this topic has shifted from qualitative reviews to quantitative ones, strengthening the relationship of previous studies to more reliably prove or disprove a hypothesis. Therefore, considering the results of various studies on the impact of non-fictional and fictional media, as well as the degree to which factors make someone more or less susceptible to the effect of media sensationalism,

this essay will be examining "**to what extent does the 'copycat effect' explain similar suicide occurrences subsequent to mass media coverage on non-fictional and fictional suicides."**

Foundation of the Copycat Effect

In order to fully comprehend the extent to which the "copycat effect" lends an explanation to the suicide contagion caused by media, the framework and explanation ratifying its existence must be understood first.

The underlying basis of the "copycat effect" is built upon Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which supports the notion that behaviors are acquired through observation, imitation, and modeling when the observer is able to identify with the model. Identification is essential to the process of observational learning as it determines whether an observer will replicate what they have observed or not. In the case of the "copycat effect", the extent to which an individual is influenced to commit suicide because of publicized accounts in media is determined by the extent to which the individual identifies with the person or situation depicted. If this were not the case, then every individual exposed to cases of suicide would attempt to replicate it, which is fallacious. According to Bandura (1969), the sub-processes required to influence the degree of observational as mentioned above learning are attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation.

It is necessary that an individual is able to distinguish key features and characteristics of the modeling stimuli to be able to reproduce the observation. Simply exposing a person to a stimulus gives no guarantee that they will adopt the behavior. Even then, an individual will only give attention to the most relevant stimuli out of the entire stimuli unit. Given this information, it can be rationalized that mass media coverage and media sensationalism plays a big role in the

likelihood of copycat suicides. The large, bold headlines in newspapers, magazines, television, and social media where suicide stories are glorified in a way to provoke public interest is certainly more likely to catch the attention of the audience, thus strengthening the chance of imitative behavior. Media also increases the likelihood of attention in people who are frequently surrounded by it and is more widely covered when the individuals depicted are largely recognized. This lends to the hypothesis that the "copycat effect" is largely dependent on the audience of the media and the celebrity status of the original suicide.

Identification and reproduction are also contingent on the level of retention in the minds of the observers. Retention allows for the observer to acquire behavior patterns that even though rarely applied, can be utilized when the situation is actualized or deemed necessary by the individual. According to Bandura (1969), long-term retention is produced when an individual is exposed to stimuli for extended periods of time. Given this information, it can be inferred that the quantity of copycat suicides would depend on the amount of time suicidal events were depicted in the media as well as the type of media it was seen on. Therefore, an article in a newspaper would generate better long-term retention in observers as opposed to a 3-minute televised news segment because the observer is able to process the information at their own speed and analyze the contents as many times as they please.

Reproduction processes "involve the utilization of symbolic representation of modeled patterns in the form of imaginal and verbal contents to guide overt performances" (Bandura, 1969). Essentially, performance of acquired behavior at the motoric level is dependent upon the clarity in which the model provides a basis for instruction and replication. When an observer can follow a clearly identifiable pattern or set of instructions, the replicated response is deemed to be employed at a higher rate. Thus, individuals highly susceptible to suicidal thoughts and

behaviors who are exposed to suicide in the media are essentially being given instructions on how to commit suicide if they choose to do so, increasing the impact of the "copycat effect".

Arguably, motivation is the key factor in actualizing learned behaviors. Without motivation, behaviors that are learned, retained, and reproducible will not be executed. Therefore, it can be assumed that copycat suicides due to media coverage are not caused by the media itself, rather, it acts as a catalyst to facilitate the execution of suicide in those who are already suicidal. Moreover, Bandura suggests that motivation is hardly induced due to negative sanctions and lack of positive reinforcement. However, suicide results from an excess of positive definitions over negative definitions (Stack, 2005). Positive definitions of suicide in media include sensationalizing the incident and glorifying the deceased (focusing on their positive aspects). Particularly, rationalizing the cause of suicide- such as stating it was due to divorce or depression- can legitimize the act. This influx of positive definitions on suicide in the media therefore can be assumed to result in increased influence of the "copycat effect".

Bandura's Social Learning Theory may explain the extent to which observational learning occurs, but Glaser's theory of Differential Identification explains the initial process that causes an individual to identify with a model. An offshoot of Edwin Sutherland's theory of Differential Association, the theory of Differential Identification focuses on the interaction in which an individual *chooses* their model based upon their ability to identify with them and their ability to rationalize their conduct. There are two types of identification: vertical and horizontal identification (Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2009). Vertical identification is the concept that people tend to identify with those who they deem to be socially superior to them. Given this information, the "copycat effect" can be assumed to be more influential in cases of a celebrity suicide, such as Marilyn Monroe's or Kurt Cobain's. The concept of horizontal identification

describes how people tend to imitate the behavior of those who are socially similar to them, such as gender and age. This suggests that the likelihood of copycat suicides occurring among individuals socially similar to the individuals of the original suicide.

These theories are vital in understanding the extent to which the "copycat effect" explains suicide contagion from different forms of media because they provide a key explanation for the varying results of the scientific papers discussed next. The process of identification within an individual is inherently a difficult subject to quantify or predict. Even with the correct criteria for differential identification and observational learning to occur, several other variables unaccounted for may take place, causing different results than expected according to solely the guidelines of the theories mentioned above. In fact, recent literature reviews (Pirkis and Blood, 2001a; Stack, 2005) suggest that the type of story investigated (non-fictional or fictional) correlates to the likelihood of finding a copycat effect, as individuals will more likely be able to identify with the situations of real people as opposed to fictional characters. Therefore, to better analyze the true extent to which the copycat effect plays a role in suicides subsequent to media coverage, it is imperative to critically analyze the several scientific papers dichotomized by non-fictional and fictional media that take these variables into account.

The Copycat Effect in Non-Fictional Media

Given the vast array of variables that influence the degree to which an individual identifies with suicide presented by non-fictional media, the general standard to which the following scientific studies measured the influence of the "copycat effect" are as follows: type of media (newspaper or television), the amount of coverage, media presence of the model, and audience (age and gender groups).

Among the scientific papers that researched the "copycat effect" in the type of media (Bollen and Phillips, 1982; Horton and Stack 1984; Philips, 1974; Pirkis and Blood, 2001a; Stack, 1987; Wasserman, 1984) the general conclusion can be made that between newspaper and television coverage, overall, articles in the newspapers were more likely to produce a copycat effect. Phillips (1974) examined the frequency of suicides in the United States in the months containing front-page coverage of a suicide and compared that with the frequency of suicides in the months where no such news occurred. His findings showed a significant increase in the amount of suicides following front-page newspaper coverage, specifically 51.3 times more after the stories were publicized in both *New York Times and New York Daily News* (newspapers with the largest circulation and most popularity, respectively). This is in accordance with Bandura's observational learning sub-process of attention, as the attention garnered due to the papers' popularity and widespread circulation contributed to a significant increase in the amount of copycat suicides. Wasserman (1984) and Stack (1987) replicated this study using more refined methods, such as a multivariate time-series technique that corrected for seasonal effects, national unemployment rates, and war (Pirkis & Blood, 2001a). Both studies replicated Phillips' findings that increased publicity in the newspaper correlated positively with the amount of copycat suicides thereafter, however not due its location on the front page. Regarding television, Bollen and Phillips (1982) searched the Vanderbilt Television News Archive for suicide stories aired on two or more of the evening news programs (ABC, CBS, and NBC) between 1972 and 1976 and discovered an increase in the national suicide rate up to ten days following the aired story. However, more methodologically sound studies using refined analysis methods that better controlled for level of exposure, seasonal changes, and levels of unemployment released by Kessler et al. (1988) and Horton and Stack (1984) shows no significant relationship between

televised suicides and the rate of subsequent suicides. Bandura's sub-process of retention confirms this finding, as the length of exposure, and thus observational learning, is reduced when watching news as opposed to reading it. Because of the consistency of data and its agreeance with psychological foundations, the "copycat effect" is strong in explaining subsequent suicides with regards to type of media and amount of exposure.

Within the scientific studies that examined the media presence of the model (Niederkrotenthaler, et al., 2009; Phillips, 1974; Stack, 1987; Wasserman, 1984) all research fully agreed that increased media presence correlated with the increase of copycat suicides. For example, Phillips' (1974) study showed that the suicide of Marilyn Monroe in August 1962 led to 303 additional suicides that month, an increase of 12% - the largest copycat effect recorded to date. There are several factors explaining this major spike. First, given her celebrity status, the news of her suicide was given more coverage which led to a greater chance of the "copycat effect", as mentioned in the paragraph above. Second, an influx of positive definitions making the headlines- calling her "Hollywood's brightest star" and listing her stellar accomplishments- contribute to her glorification, which legitimizes suicide as being a positive concept. Third, many fans idolized her and wanted to be like her, as explained by Glaser's vertical identification. Therefore, her suicide sparked imitation within her demographic: women in their 30s (Phillips, 1974). Finally, the mentality among suicidal people that they should commit suicide if even Monroe, who lived a lavish and adored life, could not tolerate life is another factor that contributed to the high number of suicides following hers. This pattern can be explained for several copycat suicides, suicide attempts, or suicidal thoughts following the announcement of a celebrity's, such as Kurt Cobain's in 1994. More recently, the suicide of Robin Williams in

2014, which led to record high number of phone calls to the suicide-prevention hotline- almost threefold the usual number of 3,500 calls a day- supports this argument.

When examining the age and gender of the audience (Motto, 1970; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2009) middle aged individuals (30-64 years) and females were regarded as more susceptible to the effects of suicide contagion. Although some research suggests women's brains are more likely to signal empathy than men's brains, therefore explaining the pattern suggested by horizontal identification, most studies varied in how nonfictional media affects copycat suicides by age, rendering these results inconclusive.

It is important to note, however, the methodological inconsistencies among the listed scientific studies. For one, early ecological studies should be scrutinized for their quasi-experimental approach, in which the frequency of suicides in an "experimental" period is compared to that of previous and subsequent periods in order to determine a result. Pirkis & Blood (2001a) states that this method is unreliable when examining time-series data, in which the multivariate regression analyses adopted in the studies of Wasserman (1984) and later are adopted. Even the ecological studies produced later on must take into account the difficulty to detect exposure-outcome relationships at the individual level. Moreover, in order to synthesize much of the results of the various scientific studies, literature reviews using largely qualitative techniques have been used. This poses a problem as the nature of the method is too subjective and can lead to the possibility of drawing false conclusions. Furthermore, why the results may differ from study to study are not aptly explained, but rather provide a "vote-count" to how many studies prove or disprove a hypothesis. In order to balance this, findings from Stack's (2005) review must be included to further understand the prevalence of the "copycat effect".

Stack's (2005) meta-analysis gives a more rigorous review as it provides "a single statistic that summarizes the strength of the X-Y relationship across studies". In his study, a total of 419 findings from 55 studies on non-fictional media depictions of suicides were examined using a logistic regression analysis. From his findings, it is reported that findings based on television coverage of suicides as opposed to newspapers were 79% less likely to uncover copycat effects, agreeing with the previous studies. Furthermore, studies measuring the media presence of a suicide-committer found the effect of an entertainment or political celebrity to be 5.27 times more likely to elicit a copycat effect, again, agreeing with previous studies. However, Stack's research concluded that studies regarding the age of the individual committing the copycat suicide produced significantly less than the total population when researching young and middle-aged persons and provided no significant change when studying the elderly, disproving the claim made by Niederkrotenthaler et al. Additionally, Stack uncovered that research studying the media presence of suicide with negative definitions were 99% less likely to uncover a copycat effect. However, overall, 269 of 419 (64.2%) studies analyzed reported no occurrence of the "copycat effect" when combining all factors.

Conclusively, media platform, amount of publicization, and celebrity status were all deemed significant factors influenced by the "copycat effect" in non-fictional media, even though the "copycat effect" did not play a significant part in explaining the reason for suicide in general. The results concur with the Social Learning Theory and the theory of Differential Identification as newspapers and increased publicization both amount to better observational learning, and the influence of celebrity status concurs with the vertical identification theory that people better identify with those they deem more superior to themselves.

The Copycat Effect in Fictional Media

From what was observed in research of the "copycat effect" in non-fictional media, two of the most significant factors determining risk of copycat suicide were celebrity status and amount of coverage. However, these factors do not apply in the case of fictional media (television, plays, or books). Given that the deaths in fictional media (celebrity or otherwise) are illegitimate, there is doubt of whether its contagion effects would be as powerful as a real celebrity suicide, if even existent at all. Furthermore, most exposure to fictional media is limited to only one or two types of platforms, such as a book with a movie adaptation. This poses a considerable setback for exposure in comparison to nonfictional media, which is often emitted through several platforms of newspaper, television news, social media, and radio. Additionally, a review of 43 studies indicated that suicides caused by non-fictional media were 4.03 times more likely to be caused by the "copycat effect" than fictional media (Stack, 2003). Given these circumstances, it is important to consider how adept the "copycat effect" is in explaining suicides due to fictional media as well.

One factor in determining the effects of contagion is comparing the method of subsequent suicides to the original ones. In *Suicide and the Creative Arts*, Stack mentions increased reports of teenage suicide by jumping in front of a train in Germany for over 70 days after the release of a West German movie depicting suicide by train (Stack & Lester, 2009). A similar situation occurred in New York City after the publication of *Final Exit*, a book by Derek Humphry suggesting asphyxiation by a plastic bag or lethal doses of prescription medicine as the best method of suicide (Marzuk, et al., 1994). As the book reached number one in the hardcover advice category of the New York Times bestseller list, suicide by asphyxiation rose by 313% - from 8 deaths the year before to 33 deaths the year after. Poisoning also reached a 65% increase.

Of the 144 cases studies, at least 15 people were thought to have encountered the book. Interestingly, the overall rate of suicide in New York faced no such increase. This suggests that although fictional media can influence the reproduction of suicide, it does not affect motivation. In other words, the "copycat effect" in fictional media only affects those who are already suicidal. It is likely that had *Final Exit* not been published, those influenced by it would have still committed suicide using different methods.

Additionally, research shows that youth are particularly vulnerable to the "copycat effect" of suicide regarding fictional media. Gould and Shaffer (1986) underwent research studying the effects of four American movies depicting suicides. All four movies portrayed adolescents committing, attempting, or speaking about suicide. Gould and Shaffer discovered that the mean number of suicide attempts among youth in New York hospitals significantly increased in the two-week period following each movie release compared to the two-week period before its premiere, complying with the idea of horizontal identification. Replications of this study (Pirkis & Blood, 2001b) did not find an increase in the total rate of youth suicides. However, a more recent meta-analysis of 26 studies (183 findings) supports this conclusion as it reports contagion among the youth to be 4.39 more likely to uncover copycat effects (Stack & Lester, 2009). This outcome is likely due to adolescents being highly impressionable and not fully integrated into society yet (having a stable job and community involvement), which causes vulnerability.

Apart from these significant factors, research concludes the "copycat effect" in fictional media to be equivocal at best, producing existent yet inconsistent findings (Gould & Shaffer 1986; Pirkis & Blood, 2001b; Stack & Lester, 2009). Conclusive answers could not be found regarding effect of contagion in gender, platform of media, or rate of suicide. However, it is important to note that further research must be done as technology continues to improve. New

platforms of digital media, such as streaming services like Netflix, make it possible to save and re-watch media in the future, but no study has explored long-term effects of suicide-triggering media to date. As the Internet becomes more accessible and widely embraced, such research must be updated. For instance, concerns have ignited regarding the release of the Netflix series, *13 Reasons Why*, based on its eponymous book about a teenage girl who commits suicide and leaves behind tapes detailing thirteen reasons why she ended her life. After its 2017 release, 23-year-old Peruvian Franco Alonso also committed suicide, leaving behind tapes naming those who drove him to end his life. Two other families have also blamed the Netflix series for their daughters' deaths thus far. Based on this research, the series' tendency to romanticize and vividly depict scenes of suicide, coupled with its target towards impressionable youth, is likely the cause for these copycat suicides. These cases demonstrate the impact of the "copycat effect" on fictional media.

Conclusion

In order to examine **to what extent the copycat effect explains similar suicide occurrences subsequent to mass media coverage on non-fictional and fictional suicides**, the Social Learning Theory, the theory of Differential Identification, and qualitative and quantitative reviews were examined. Given the analysis of the several studies regarding copycat effects in non-fictional and fictional media as well as the breakdown of each significant variable by qualitative and quantitative methods, it can be concluded that while the "copycat effect" may not play as significant of a role in explaining suicides subsequent to similar portrayals in media, its existence is definitive and should be regarded as such.

Broadening the scope of this research, by understanding the extent to which the "copycat effect" influences the rate of suicides, stricter guidelines for media coverage can be created and

implemented into society. Already, World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines direct media to avoid sensational journalism (Wasserman et al, 2001). However, in order to curb the effects of suicide contagion effectively, as research suggests, the form of media in which the story is presented, the extent to which the story is publicized, and the amount of negative definitions given should be strictly regulated, especially in the case of celebrity suicides.

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