Journal of Affective Disorders 156 (2014) 56–61

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Affective Disorders

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jad

Research report

The impact of indiscriminate media coverage of a celebrity suicide on a society with a high suicide rate: Epidemiological findings on copycat suicides from South Korea

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 19 August 2013
Received in revised form
21 November 2013
Accepted 21 November 2013
Available online 1 December 2013

Keywords:
Completed suicide
Celebrity suicide
Media report

ABSTRACT

Background: This study examines the extent to which the indiscriminate media coverage of the famous young actress Lee Eun-ju's suicide in 2005 affected suicides overall and in specific subgroups (by age, gender, and suicide method) in a suicide-prone society, South Korea.
Methods: South Korea's 2003–2005 suicide data (n=34,237) were obtained from death certificate records of the National Statistical Office (NSO). Data was analyzed with Poisson time series auto-regression models.
Results: After adjusting for confounding factors (such as seasonal variation, calendar year, temperature, humidity, and unemployment rate), there was a significant increase in suicide (RR=1.40, 95%, CI=1.30–1.51, no. of excess mortalities=331; 95% CI=267–391) during the 4 weeks after Lee's suicide. This increase was more prominent in subgroups with similar characteristics to the celebrity. In particular, the relative risk of suicide during this period was the largest (5.24; 95% CI=3.31–8.29) in young women who used the same suicide method as the celebrity. Moreover, the incidence of these copycat suicides during the same time significantly increased in both genders and in all age subgroups among those who committed suicide using the same method as the celebrity (hanging).
Limitations: It is difficult to prove conclusively that the real motivation of the suicides was Lee's death.
Conclusions: The findings from this study imply that, if the media indiscreetly reports the suicide of a celebrity in a suicide-prone society, the copycat effect can be far-reaching and very strong, particularly for vulnerable people.

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1. Introduction

South Korea's suicide rate has rapidly increased from 10.8 in 1995 to 31.7 in 2011, ranking first among OECD nations from 2003 until now. This increase has been observed in both genders and all age groups. On average, there are 43.6 suicides a day or 1.8 suicides per hour, and suicides have continuously increased, even though the South Korean government has carried out several suicide prevention policies. For instance, the number of people attempting suicide by jumping from platforms in subway stations in Seoul declined 62% from 77 in 2008 to 29 in 2009. The decline came after the installation of screens along many subway platforms that ensure people are unable to get onto the tracks. Despite that sharp decline, suicide attempts from bridges spanning the main Han River in Seoul rose 30% from 83 in 2008 to 108 in 2009 (Nam, 2011).

Many studies have already suggested an association between media reporting of celebrity suicides and subsequent increases in suicide (Cheng et al., 2007a, Chen et al., 2010, 2012; Fu and Chan, 2013; Fu and Yip, 2009; Jobes et al., 1996; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2009; Tousignant et al., 2005; Yip et al., 2006). This phenomenon has been dubbed the "Werther effect" or "copycat effect." However, one unresolved question is whether the copycat effect holds for society as whole or just specific sub-groups. For example, in previous studies, the copycat effect has seemed to differ in strength based on the distribution of demographic variables (e.g., gender and age) in the vulnerable population.

Some studies have shown that copycat suicides increase in the group that is the same gender as the deceased celebrity (Chen et al., 2012; Cheng et al., 2007a; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2009; Tousignant et al., 2005; Yip et al., 2006), whereas other studies have reported no significant effect of gender (Etzersdorfer et al., 2004; Queinec et al., 2011). Some studies have found more copycat suicides in age groups younger than or equal to the celebrity (Chen et al., 2012; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2009; Queinec et al., 2011;

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0165-0327/$ - see front matter © 2013 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2013.11.015

Tousignant et al., 2005; Yip et al., 2006), whereas other studies have found that age was not a significant factor (Cheng et al., 2007a; Etzersdorfer et al., 2004) or that suicide was higher in various age groups, including age groups older than the deceased celebrity (Chen et al., 2012). In a study by Niederkrotenthaler et al. (2012), the strength of the effect and the significance of demographic variables may be influenced by the type of celebrity, the quality of media reporting, and cultural attitudes toward suicide.

The current study is based on the hypothesis that South Korea will show a serious and far-reaching copycat effect among vulnerable people after reports of famous a entertainer's suicide for the following reasons: (1) the media industry in South Korea has covered famous entertainers' suicides in sensational and indiscriminate ways. According to Beautrias et al. (2008), the South Korean print media sensationalize suicide stories and mislead the public about suicide more frequently than the media in Australia, New Zealand, some European countries, and the United States. Furthermore, public attitudes toward suicide in South Korea may be very permissive, as countries with high suicide rates tend to be more accepting of suicide (Dervic et al., 2006; Domini and Takahashi, 1991; Etzersdorfer et al., 1998; Pauliua et al., 2010). To test this hypothesis, this study analyzes the suicide of the famous South Korean actress, Lee Eun-ju.

When 25-year-old Lee Eun-ju killed herself by hanging on 22 February 2005, major newspapers, television news, and websites narrated the details of her suicide to such an extent that the entire nation was caught up in the reporting. Lee Eun-ju was a famous actress who had starred in many television dramas, movies, and commercials. She won the Best Rookie Actress Award from the Daejong Film Awards in Korea in 2001. She teamed up with actor Lee Byung-hun in the 2001 hit film *Bungee Jumping of Their Own*, which was seen by 1,650,000 South Korean filmgoers. She became a Korean-wave star as her dramas were aired in many Asian countries.

Fu and Yip (2009) and Fu and Chan (2013) showed that copycat suicides after the beginning of the media coverage of Lee's suicide occurred among those of the same gender, age, and method. Unlike the earlier studies, the current study analyzes the qualities of the media reporting and the extent to which copycat effect occurred overall vs. specific demographic subgroups (age, gender, and suicide method).

2. Methods

2.1. Data sources and study subjects

We searched the electronic database of the selected media: top three major television channels (KBS: 15.6% market share; SBS: 8.0%; MBC: 7.5%); top three major newspapers (Chosun Ilbo: 22.1% subscription rate; Donga Ilbo: 16.6%; Joongang Ilbo: 16.2%). In order to analyze quantitative aspects of the media reports, reports were retrieved by searching for the Korean word for “suicide” during the same year of Lee's suicide, 2005. This search led to 1101 media reports related to suicide.

Articles for the qualitative part of the study were retrieved from the same electronic databases by searching for Korean keywords (“Lee Eun-ju” and “Lee Eun-ju's suicide” during the 4-week period after her death). South Korean people were much more exposed to media reports related to suicide in the 4-week period after her suicide (from Feb 22, 2005, the day of Lee's suicide) than the other 4-week periods in the same year. There were a total of 220 media reports (television: 76 segments; print newspaper: 14 articles; internet news sites: 130 articles) on Lee's suicide from February 22, 2005 (the day of Lee's suicide) to March 21, 2005.

Suicide records were obtained from 2003 to 2005 ($N=34,237$) death certificate data from the National Statistical Office (NSO) of Korea. Suicide is coded as X60-X84 in the International Classification of Diseases, 10th Revision (ICD-10). By law, all deaths in Korea must be registered on death certificates, with information such as date of death, age, gender, and suicide method coded based on the ICD-10. Foreigners were excluded from our analysis.

Our analysis also took into account the potential confound effects of social environmental factors on the risk of suicide after the news of Lee's suicide. Factors reported to influence suicide rates directly or indirectly include average temperature, average humidity, and weekly unemployment rates. Data on these variables were gathered from 2003 to 2005. We gathered records of temperature and humidity levels from the Korean Meteorological Administration and unemployment rates from the NSO during the same term (2003–2005). The weekly unemployment rate (%) was calibrated based on the monthly rate.

2.2. Measurements and statistical method

A total of 1011 media reports related to suicide were retrieved from the electronic databases of the selected media outlets in 2005. These articles were counted weekly, as shown in Fig. 1. Content analysis for the 220 news articles about the suicide during the first 4-week period was conducted by two trained coders (Ji and Hwang) who assisted with the data-extraction process. One coder was a graduate student majoring in health policy and management, and another coder was a undergraduate student in medicine.

Item quality was rated on a set of seven provisions from the suicide reporting self-mandated guidelines for journalists, which the Korean Ministry of Health & Welfare and Korean Association for Suicide Prevention (KASP, 2013) drew up on the basis of the WHO guidelines for suicide reporting (WHO, 2008). These items are as follows: inappropriate language, glamorous or sympathetic expression, inappropriate headline, inappropriate visual material, detail of method, mental health literacy, and help service information.

To ensure consistency between coders, 22 articles were randomly chosen from the 220 total articles and coded by both coders. Two of seven items showed kappa values of less than 0.8, and thus formal meetings were held to crosscheck their responses and clarify their operationalization of the definitions. After analyzing total subjects with a corrected criterion, kappa values of the seven items ranged from 0.8 to 1, indicating substantial to near-perfect agreement (Landis and Koch, 1977).

A Poisson time series auto-regression model was used to investigate the relative risk of copycat suicides following media reporting of celebrity suicides in the first 4 weeks after the media reporting began. The data from this period were then compared with the data from the remaining weeks between 2003 and 2005. The 4-week time span was chosen because prior studies have shown that, on average, the impact of media reporting on suicide lasts about 4 weeks after the first reporting of celebrity suicide (Cheng et al., 2007a; Tousignant et al., 2005; Yip et al., 2006). For our analysis, we used a timeframe of 4 weeks from the first reporting of the celebrity suicide (Fig. 1).

The weekly counts of suicide from 2003 to 2005 were treated as a Poisson distribution. The models simultaneously controlled for the potential confounding factors of seasonal variation, calendar year, temperature, humidity, and unemployment rates, which have either direct or indirect impacts on suicide rates. Both seasons and calendar years were treated as categorical variables; temperature, humidity, and unemployment rates were treated as continuous variables. A consecutive series of autoregressive order from the first (order 1) to the last 4 weeks (order 4) were included to investigate the effect of past observations on current ones. We tested the model first among the total group of suicides with crude and adjusted

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