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First do no harm: Cross-sectional and longitudinal evidence for the impact of individual suicidality on the use of online health forums and support groups



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ABSTRACT

Suicide is a leading cause of death worldwide, especially among the young. This study aims to disentangle the presumed causality between the use of online health forums or support groups and suicidality using a representative telephone survey and a two-wave online panel survey containing the same question wording. Cross-sectional data show positive correlations between suicidality and online health forum use, but not limited to the younger. Using longitudinal panel data and autoregressive models, a positive cross-lagged effect of suicidality on internet-based health forum use one month later was revealed. Despite the wide-spread notion that online health forums can increase suicidality the present study provides evidence for the preventive potential of accessible and helpful information online.

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1. Introduction

Suicide is a leading cause of death worldwide for which the media are a recognized risk factor (WHO, 2014). Especially since the triumph of the internet in modern societies, the chances and dangers of online media for individual well-being in general have been controversially discussed: Hence, the role of the internet for individual suicidality is best described as a “double-edged sword” meaning that the internet embraces both protective and harmful influences (Amichai-Hamburger, Klomek, Friedman, Zuckerman, & Shani-Sherman, 2014; Daine et al., 2013; Mok, Jorm, & Pirkis, 2015; Till & Niederkrotenthaler, 2014). Besides face-to-face communication, help-seeking behavior has been associated more and more frequently with computer-mediated communication (Barak, Boniel-Nissim, & Suler, 2008; Bell, 2014; Tanis, 2008). Hence, not only recently, researchers have shown interest in the importance of health forums and online support groups for user's health in general (Houston & Allison, 2002; Sueki & Eichenberg, 2012), often with a special focus on age differences (Bol et al., 2016; Miller & Bell, 2012), and especially for suicidality (Bell, 2014; Chung, 2014;

Daine et al., 2013; Eysenbach, 2004; Horne & Wiggins, 2009; Sueki, 2013). In the context of suicidality, the status quo is best reflected by a “functional paradox” of online health forums and support groups: A “suicide-preventive” as well as a “suicide-inducing function” (Sueki & Eichenberg, 2012, p. 565).

In the present study, we combine a cross-sectional representative sample to examine the extent to which suicidality can be predicted from the use of online health forums or support groups in the general population, and due to the heterogeneous sample, we lay a special focus on the moderating role of age. Moreover, using longitudinal panel data, we examine the temporal causality between suicidality and the use of health forums and support groups and want to add knowledge on this so far unclear issue. Therefore, our study aims at contributing to three major questions that are unanswered so far: 1) Where does it fall short when the discussion about helpful or harmful effects of the internet is limited to younger people (*range of effect*)? 2) Do the positive (suicide-preventing) or negative (suicide-inducing) effects of online health forums or support groups prevail (*valence of effect*)? 3) Is suicidality the driving force for specific internet use or is the use of specific websites the driving force for suicidality (*direction of causality*) (see Sueki, 2013, p. 348)? To address these research gaps this paper draws on a survey that is representative for the German general population ($N = 2002$) and an accompanying large-scale two-wave

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panel survey ($N = 1377$ completed interviews in both waves) in Germany with a different sample that use the same question wording. The first set of data is used to answer the question whether the use of online health forums and its potential effects are mainly confined to younger people. The latter dataset is used to disentangle the remaining two questions on the valence and causality of the media effect.

We begin by reviewing prior research on the effects of online forums and support groups on suicidality and then turn to the body of research that applies the opposite perspective and asks for the effects of suicidality on the use of online health forums and support groups. Although the dataset is surely limited in certain aspects (e.g. the use of health forums or support groups was measured with a single-item about the frequency of use), it offers a unique opportunity to analyze suicidality and the use of specific online media within the German population over 18 and over the course of a month. Moreover, the dataset is remarkable for using a very detailed measure of suicidality that is well-suited for measuring suicidality in the general population.

1.1. The effects of online forums and support groups on suicidality

The relevance of social support through computer-mediated communication for the psychosocial health of its users has been intensively discussed for years (Wright & Bell, 2003). Lately, Daine et al. (2013) presented a systematic review of studies on the positive and negative effects of the internet on the individual suicidality especially of younger people. The study found both positive and negative influences of the internet on its users. Assets and drawbacks of online media such as health forums, newsgroups (Baume, Cantor, & Rolfe, 1997), or chats are often contrasted (Eichenberg, 2008; Fiedler, 2003), while some authors, at the same time, point to the fact that media influences on suicidality should not be overestimated at all (Fiedler, 2003).

Systematic reviews of the literature on the positive or negative effects of online support groups and virtual communities showed no clear evidence for virtual communities harming people (Eysenbach, 2004; Robert, Suelves, Armayones, & Ashley, 2015). Given the fact that most of the online support groups and forums are unmoderated, Eysenbach (2004) concludes that the “true” effectiveness of these resources is not yet sufficiently explored. At heart, this notion is in line with studies on the effects of online support groups showing that these websites can exert negative influences on self-stigmatization only when online support group visits are excessive (Lawlor & Kirakowski, 2014). If so, it is argued that the time spent on these websites is no longer available for social interaction or other social activities.

Overall, empirical studies on this issue are sparse. One exception is a study conducted by Miller and Gergen (1998) who analyzed 232 entries in an online mental health bulletin board with a more specific focus on suicide over eleven months and found that the majority of the entries was positive. More than half of the comments came from less than one quarter of the participants (Miller & Gergen, 1998, p. 195) indicating that while most visitors (actively or passively) use such online message boards occasionally there is a core group that substantially contributes to the board. And amazingly enough, most of all entries were categorized as help-seeking behaviors followed by empathic and encouraging responses (Miller & Gergen, 1998). Maintaining this perspective, we want to briefly discuss the assets and drawbacks of suicide forums and support groups on individual suicidality.

1.1.1. Beneficial effects of online activity on individual suicidality

Online forums about suicidality can have positive effects especially for those who avoid therapeutic treatment and can motivate

them to seek help in the first place (Barak, 2007; Becker, Mayer, Nagenborg, El-Faddagh, & Schmidt, 2004; Gilat & Shahar, 2009). Moreover, online forums can provide emergency aid to those who are in acute danger of dying by suicide and they can also provide social support (Eichenberg, 2008; Gilat & Shahar, 2007). Accordingly, a multi-method study conducted by Winkel, Groen, and Petermann (2005) shows that the users of suicide websites obtained a broad range of social support with a low level of social strain. Forums and support groups can unburden and stabilize its users, provide them with helpful information about where and how to seek help, and can contribute to public destigmatization of suicidality and associated diseases such as depression (Houston, Cooper, & Ford, 2002). That is in line with the observation of Miller and Gergen (1998) who concluded that participants maintain a high degree of respect and care for each other. For clinicians and therapists, online forums can be an important source for after-care, e.g. with regard to people in sparsely inhabited regions or may be helpful in establishing a relationship between patient and therapist in the first place (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2014).

1.1.2. Harmful effects of online activity on individual suicidality

Online forums and support groups can exert negative effects on its users when people use them to exchange means and instructions about how to die by suicide (Alao, Yolles, & Armenta, 1999). Moreover, such online discussions can destabilize vulnerable people and prevent them from seeking professional help. In addition, people can arrange to meet each other to die by suicide together (so called “suicide pacts”) (Becker et al., 2004; Rajagopal, 2004). Whenever information is not professionally moderated or reviewed there is the danger of poor information about suicidality, no quality management or even the possibility of an abuse of the forum to insult other members, even for not being authentically suicidal. Horne and Wiggins (2009) show a paradoxical effect that not being “authentically suicidal” in an online health forum can evoke offensive reactions of other forum members which in turn can enhance suicidal thoughts for those who were originally looking for helpful information (see Horne & Wiggins, 2009). Finally, Alao, Soderberg, Pohl, and Alao (2006, p. 490) summarize that especially young people put themselves in danger when surfing on suicide websites or using chat rooms as the younger “have a higher incidence of risk-taking behavior, co-morbid substance abuse, and depressive disorder”—especially those with only limited social support.

1.2. The effects of suicidality on the use of health forums and support groups

While on the one hand the internet can contribute to triggering individual suicidality (i.e. help and harm; see Durkee, Hadlaczky, Westerlund, & Carli, 2011), the reverse perspective is that individual suicidality can trigger online behaviors in the same way. In this line of research, we find studies that examine specific online behaviors of suicidal persons as well as studies that focus on specific online behaviors of those bereaved by suicide. Lately, Mok et al. (2015) published their literature review on the use of the internet by suicidal people. Taken together, the literature either focuses on individual suicidality engendering either harmful or helpful suicide-related surfing behaviors. It is important to note that there is a wide range of different health-related online forums and websites to which suicidal persons might go to. It were Biddle et al. (2012) who provide an overview of the different websites suicidal persons have turned to find information about suicide. According to their analysis, the websites that were more frequently used by suicidal persons were “those containing professional information and resources (including online chemists), general knowledge sites

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