

Factors Associated with Assistance and Baiting in Response to Threat of Suicide in an Online Forum

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Abstract

Online forums for potentially suicidal individuals are intended to provide peer help and support but may also lead to harassment and baiting. Factors associated with assistance (concern, suggesting seeking medication or treatment) and with baiting (taunting, encouraging self-harm) were investigated in an archival study of the Reddit *r/sad* forum during 2 months in 2023, in which $N = 175$ posts flagged suicidal ideas and intent. Assistance was offered in 158 cases (but suicide methods were also suggested to 11 cases), and no response proffered to 17 cases. Offers of assistance were more likely when the suicidal individual did not report substance abuse ($r = 0.20$) and had a larger audience ($r = 0.22$). Baiting was more likely when a suicidal person indicated a suicide method ($r = 0.27$), was receiving more audience responses ($r = 0.21$) and audience downvotes ($r = 0.36$). While assistance was much greater than baiting, the incidence of baiting (~ 5 percent) and the potential for harm is a concern. Even moderated online forums may present a risk for potentially suicidal people.

Keywords: assistance, baiting, indifference, online forums, suicidal ideation

Introduction

The Internet now provides suicide prevention services.^{1,2} Many emotionally distressed and suicidal people turn to the Internet.³⁻⁷ Online forums enable depressed individuals to discuss concerns, receive social support, and learn new ways of coping.⁸⁻¹¹ However, offers of assistance may depend on specificity of request,^{12,13} absence of substance use,¹⁴ audience size,¹⁵ and overcoming technical problems providing remote assistance.¹⁶ Unfortunately, some online forums report examples of abuse and destructive suggestions,¹⁷ which could promote or provoke suicide.^{7,18-20} In sum, the Internet environment like the face-to-face environment produces the best and worst in human conduct.

Assistance, baiting

Mann²¹ studied large anonymous crowd's deindividuated²² responses to public suicide attempts. Mann analyzed newspaper reports of 21 cases. In 10 of the 21 cases (47.6 percent), the individual was *baited* (denigrated and urged to suicide) by onlookers. In a replication study, Smith, Dzik, and Fornicola²³ examined 152 newspaper reports of public suicide threats and found crowd baiting in 51.3 percent of episodes and reported that crowd frustration triggered baiting. Phillips and Mann²⁴ considered 26 cases of online suicide threats reported in the media from 2014 to 2017. Baiting occurred in 11/26 (42.5 percent) of cases. However, 88 percent of cases were also *assisted* (at least one audience

member tried to soothe and dissuade the suicidal individual). Phillips and Mann²⁴ found that baiting was more frequent in larger online audiences when the victim was intoxicated. Previous research has linked baiting to audience size and frustration, episode duration, and victim intoxication.^{21,23,24}

The present study

Extending previous studies of online baiting,²⁴ we examined audience responses on an online discussion board when a person flags their suicidality, and there are indicators of a posts' audience size (as number of audience responses) and audience approval/frustration (as percentage upvote/downvotes). The suicidal person's post can also be analyzed for suicide risk factors, such as a selected method of suicide,²⁵ and reported substance abuse²⁶ and history of self-harm.²⁷

We hypothesize that offers of assistance on online discussion boards will be more forthcoming for people who do not frustrate^{23,28} smaller audiences.^{12,13} We hypothesize that baiting will be more likely when suicidal individuals indicate a specific suicide method²⁵ and reveal a history of substance abuse¹⁴ and when the audience is large²⁴ and makes many comments and downvotes.²³

Methods

Data were collected from Reddit. Reddit is a publicly available platform in which contributors are anonymous and can delete posted content if they wish. Aggregated data from

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the study will be made available to other researchers on reasonable request, but the raw data will not be released to prevent the identification of individuals and ensure anonymity. The discussion board r/sad allows sad and depressed people to post their thoughts online and invite comments and responses from forum members. For indexing purposes, posted messages require a keyword (flair) on r/sad. Users can flag the keyword “Suicidal” on r/sad. We searched for r/sad posts flagged “Suicidal” in the period June–July 2023, indicating suicidality. We downloaded posts and audience responses for content and statistical analysis. Length of the suicidal post was measured by word count. The first two authors examined the main clause of the original poster’s (OP’s) message and associated audience comments, reaching 100 percent consensus on eight categorizations as to whether they contained presence or absence of mention of (1) OP’s prior self-harm; (2) OP’s substance abuse; (3) OP describing suicide method; (4) audience offering assistance; (5) audience recommending mental health services; (6) audience recommending medication; (7) audience suggesting suicide method; and (8) audience encouraging suicide. We recorded all discussion board comments and noted the percentage of upvotes Reddit provided, but deleted posts and comments by Automoderators (automatically providing links for further assistance) were excluded from analysis.

Assistance and baiting

Responses to the suicidal message were examined for *assistance*—messages of concern and offers of assistance, including those discouraging the would-be suicide and suggestions to seek out mental health services and take medication; and for *baiting*—messages of contempt, disparagement, advocating suicide, suggesting a suicide method.

Results

There were 175 incidents when the OP indicated suicidality on Reddit r/sad. Their posts averaged 146 words (Standard Error (SE) = 11.84). Twenty-nine (16.6 percent) reported a history of self-harm, 13 (7.4 percent) reported a history of substance abuse, and 29 (16.6 percent) indicated a suicide method. Their posts elicited an average of 9.03 comments (SE = 0.96) and were upvoted 91.1 percent of the time (SE = 1.10). There were 540 unique commentators who commented an average of 2.07 times (Standard Deviation (SD) = 4.95) and another 15 commentators who deleted their identities.

Assistance was offered to 158 (90.3 percent) OPs, with 72 (41.1 percent) suggesting the OP seek treatment from mental health services and 10 (5.7 percent) advising medication. However, audiences also suggested suicide methods in 11 cases (6.3 percent) and baiting occurred in 8 cases (4.6 percent) when the audience encouraged the OP to commit suicide. Both baiting and assistance were offered to seven cases, but one case was baited and not assisted.

Table 1 reports correlations between study variables. Suicidal individuals making posts with greater word counts on the discussion board were less likely to elicit comments. However, audience members were more likely to downvote (an indication of audience disapproval) and suggest suicide methods when the suicidal individual outlined a specific suicide method.

TABLE 1. PEARSON CORRELATIONS BETWEEN STUDY VARIABLES WHEN ORIGINAL POSTER FLAGS SUICIDALITY

	Post word count	Number of comments	Downvote percentage	OP history self-harm	OP history substance abuse	OP history describes method	OP encourages suicide	Audience suggests method	Assistance offered	Mental Health (MH) services	Audience suggests medication
N = 175											
Multiple incidents	0.00	0.05	-0.04	-0.05	0.01	-0.08	0.02	-0.06	0.01	0.01	0.10
Audience suggested medication	-0.13	0.20**	-0.01	-0.11	-0.07	-0.04	0.18*	-0.06	0.08	0.19**	
Audience suggested MH services	0.02	0.34**	-0.10	0.03	0.07	-0.06	0.15*	0.07	0.27**		
Assistance offered	0.03	0.22**	0.09	0.04	-0.20**	-0.01	-0.02	0.09			
Audience suggests method	-0.11	0.12	0.36**	-0.05	-0.07	0.20**	0.17*				
Audience encourages suicide	-0.09	0.21**	-0.01	-0.02	0.04	0.27**					
OP describes method	0.04	0.02	0.15*	0.13	-0.01						
OP history substance abuse	0.18*	-0.06	-0.12	-0.01							
OP history self-harm	0.16*	0.11	0.03								
Downvote percentage	-0.08	0.13									
Number of comments	-0.18*										

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01.

OP, original poster. MH, Mental health.

Assistance

We examined three indicators of assistance: offers of support and assistance; suggestions that the OP seek mental health services; and suggestions that the OP take medication. Multiple regression was used to examine the factors associated with assistance. The predictors in the regression equations were as follows: (1) number of comments on the discussion board; (2) percentage of downvotes received; (3) OP reports a history of substance abuse; (4) OP reports a history of self-harm; (5) OP specifies a suicide method; and (6) multiple incidents. A multiple regression with 6 and 168 degrees of freedom provided an 80 percent chance of detecting an f^2 of 0.08 at a 0.05 level of significance.²⁹

Offers of assistance were made in 90.3 percent of cases. A significant proportion of the variance in offers of assistance could be explained by multiple regression analysis ($R^2 = 5.4$ percent) [$F(6,168) = 2.64, p = 0.02$] (see Table 2). Assistance was more likely offered to OPs who did not report self-harm [$t(168) = -2.45, p = 0.02$] and received more discussion board comments [$t(168) = 2.66, p = 0.01$].

Mental health services were suggested in 41.1 percent of cases. Multiple regression explained a significant [$F(6,168) = 4.61, p < 0.001$] proportion of ($R^2 = 11.1$ percent) of the variance in suggesting mental health service treatment. OPs who received more comments [$t(168) = 4.94, p < 0.001$] and were downvoted less often [$t(168) = -1.74, p = 0.09$] were more likely to be recommended mental health services (see Table 3).

Medication was recommended in 5.7 percent of cases. As shown in Table 4, discussion board members recommended medication ($R^2 = 3.9$ percent) [$F(6,168) = 2.17, p = 0.05$] when the OP received more comments [$t(168) = 2.72, p = 0.01$] and had no history of substance abuse [$t(168) = -1.67, p = 0.10$].

Baiting

Two indicators of suicide baiting were considered: suicide encouragement and suggested suicide method. Multiple regression analysis was used to examine factors associated with suicide baiting. The predictors entered in each regression equation were the OP's reported substance abuse, self-harm, proposed suicide method, multiple incidents, number of comments on the discussion board, and percentage of downvotes.

A suicide method was suggested by the audience in 6.3 percent of cases. Multiple regression explained a significant proportion of the variance in audience suggestions of suicide methods [$R^2 = 14.0$ percent, $F(6,168) = 5.70, p < 0.001$]. Audiences were more likely to suggest a specific suicide

TABLE 2. PREDICTORS OF AUDIENCE OFFERING ASSISTANCE TO THE ORIGINAL POSTER

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Number of comments	0.005	0.002	0.199	2.659	0.009
Downvote percentage	0.001	0.002	0.038	0.503	0.616
OP history self-harm	-0.206	0.084	-0.183	-2.449	0.015
OP history substance abuse	0.015	0.060	0.019	0.257	0.797
OP describes method	-0.023	0.060	-0.029	-0.385	0.701
Multiple incidents	-0.029	0.049	-0.045	-0.597	0.551

OP, original poster.

TABLE 3. PREDICTORS OF AUDIENCE SUGGESTING MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Number of comments	0.014	0.003	0.359	4.935	<0.001
Downvote percentage	-0.004	0.002	-0.128	-1.735	0.085
OP history self-harm	0.148	0.136	0.079	1.093	0.276
OP history substance abuse	0.005	0.096	0.003	0.048	0.962
OP describes method	-0.066	0.097	-0.050	-0.674	0.501
Multiple incidents	-0.026	0.079	-0.024	-0.335	0.738

OP, original poster.

method if the OP had been downvoted [$t(168) = 4.38, p < 0.001$] and had already suggested a specific method [$t(168) = 2.12, p = 0.04$] (see Table 5).

Suicide baiting occurred in 4.6 percent of cases and could be explained by a combination of variables [$R^2 = 10.1$ percent, $F(6,168) = 4.27, p < 0.001$]. The significant predictors of baiting were OP suggesting a suicide method [$t(168) = 3.15, p = 0.002$] and the number of audience comments [$t(168) = 3.93, p < 0.001$] (Table 6).

Discussion

We examined factors associated with assistance or baiting when a troubled individual makes posts indicating suicidality in an online forum. We found that expressing suicidal ideation and intent was more likely to elicit assistance than baiting. Unlike previous studies of threatened suicide,^{21,23,24} we found assistance far more frequent than baiting. This may reflect audience characteristics. A discussion forum may consist of individuals with "lived experience,"⁹ whereas a suicide attempt in a public place attracts a random, unsympathetic sample of the community.

Audience size

Although baiting has been linked to larger online audiences,²⁴ others have found no effect of audience size in offline incidents.²³ The present data indicate that larger audiences increase the likelihood of any reaction-assistance or irresponsible behavior. Conceivably, the greater number of comments increases the likelihood that an audience member reacts positively or negatively.

Frustration

Audience frustration has contributed to baiting.²³ Suicide attempts that blocked pedestrian access or traffic have

TABLE 4. PREDICTORS OF AUDIENCE RECOMMENDING MEDICATION

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Number of comments	0.004	0.001	0.206	2.723	0.007
Downvote percentage	-0.000	0.001	-0.031	-0.404	0.687
OP history self-harm	-0.061	0.066	-0.069	-0.925	0.356
OP history substance abuse	-0.079	0.047	-0.126	-1.674	0.096
OP describes method	-0.007	0.048	-0.011	-0.141	0.888
Multiple incidents	0.054	0.039	0.104	1.379	0.170

OP, original poster.

TABLE 5. PREDICTORS OF AUDIENCE SUGGESTING SUICIDE METHOD

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Number of comments	0.002	0.001	0.087	1.212	0.227
Downvote percentage	0.005	0.001	0.317	4.381	<0.001
OP history self-harm	-0.022	0.066	-0.024	-0.340	0.735
OP history substance abuse	-0.062	0.047	-0.095	-1.328	0.186
OP describes method	0.100	0.047	0.153	2.118	0.036
Multiple incidents	-0.037	0.038	-0.068	-0.956	0.340

OP, original poster.

increased the likelihood of baiting. This study used downvotes as an indicator of audience frustration, finding increased baiting when an audience was downvoting a victim.

As the general purpose of r/sad is to engender support rather than discussing methods of committing suicide, this is likely to be one of the reasons that certain suicidal individuals were downvoted. Suicide methods are “off-topic” on r/Sad. Alternatively, suicidal individuals may also be lacking in the requisite social skills²⁸ that attract more positive reactions.

Substance abuse

Individuals who admitted to substance abuse were somewhat less likely to receive offers of assistance. As substance use is a personal choice, it tends to elicit attributions with an internal locus of control,^{30,31} and there is a tendency to blame the substance abuser when problems arise.¹⁴ Nevertheless, as substance abuse is a risk factor for suicidality,²⁶ it is a concern that substance abuse could reduce offers of assistance from the general community.

Self-harm

Although there are relationships between self-harm and suicidality,²⁷ it has proven difficult to determine how suicidal ideation progresses to suicide attempts.³² This uncertainty may cause problems for laypeople assessing the likelihood of an attempt.³³ Unfortunately, the present data indicate that a history of self-harm can discourage offers of assistance.

Study limitations

As we examined suicidal posts on a prolife forum, such findings could vary upon “troll sites” such as 4chan.²⁴ However, online studies can provide greater documentation of audience responses³⁴ than typically afforded during spontaneous offline suicide attempts.^{21,23} Nevertheless, the data on

TABLE 6. PREDICTORS OF AUDIENCE ENCOURAGING SUICIDE

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Number of comments	0.004	0.001	0.230	3.153	0.002
Downvote percentage	-0.001	0.001	-0.077	-1.039	0.300
OP history self-harm	0.038	0.058	0.048	0.656	0.513
OP history substance abuse	-0.048	0.041	-0.085	-1.166	0.245
OP describes method	0.163	0.042	0.291	3.930	<0.001
Multiple incidents	0.002	0.034	0.004	0.053	0.958

OP, original poster.

audience reactions are somewhat limited as not every audience member actually contributes to online forums,³⁵⁻³⁷ and their motivations for contributing may not be clear.³⁸ In addition, posts may be deleted by individuals and moderators.³⁴ Nor do we have data on whether the online episode ended in suicide or a nonfatal suicide attempt.^{39,40} Unlike Mann,²¹ it was not feasible to examine victim demographics, location, gender, and incident times. Posts on discussion boards are usually anonymous, and location of origin is disguised by Virtual Proxy Networks. Further research with larger samples across a range of forums is warranted.

Conclusion

Online self-help forums can be helpful or harmful. An encouraging finding is that assistance was far more likely than baiting in the online environment that we studied. The study points to the importance of examining individual and audience factors associated with assistance and baiting. This study offers insights into factors promoting assistance that were not observed in previous studies^{21,23,24}; however, individuals who express suicidality are also at risk of being baited and encouraged to commit suicide in an online forum. The risk is greater if the individual refers to a suicide method and reports a history of self-harm to a large audience and receives many downvotes. When suicide methods are selected, it risks directing conversation to harm, and this requires automatic redirection to trained professionals rather than well-meaning amateurs or Artificial Intelligence (AI),⁴¹ which may encourage suicide or provide methods.

The Reddit forum r/sad is intended to provide peer support or “therapy” for troubled individuals. Discussion of suicide methods is banned; however, while online assistance exceeded baiting by a factor of 10, we are concerned that baiting still occurred that could have triggered fatal impulses. The capacity to document risk and the somewhat limited therapeutic efficacy of such forums have led some to be taken down.⁴²

Authors’ Contributions

J.G.P.: Conceptualization, supervision, formal analysis, software, writing—original draft, writing—review and editing. P.T.: Data curation, formal analysis, investigation, writing—original draft. L.M.: Writing—original draft, writing—review and editing.

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