Patterns of Social Dynamics Surrounding Suicide Notes on Facebook Platforms: A Netnographic Approach

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Abstract

Background: Suicide is a global public health concern with multifaceted risk factors, necessitating exploration through qualitative methodologies. Meanwhile, studies have shown that netnography offers a promising avenue for understanding suicide-related discourse on social media platforms like Facebook.

Objective: This study aims to address the gap in literature by examining suicide-related discourse on Facebook through a netnographic approach, focusing on emotional vulnerability, communication of pain and need, and the role of online communities.

Methods: Using content analysis of two case studies, this study explores themes emerging from suicide notes shared on Facebook. Participants were observed within relevant Facebook groups, and data were collected through direct participation, archival data, and field notes. Ethical considerations were prioritized, including informed consent and anonymity.

Results: The analysis revealed themes of emotional vulnerability among respondents, expressions of suffering and necessity, and the significance of supportive responses within Facebook platform online communities. The results highlighted the importance of targeted social network support systems and the role of empathy via Facebook online platforms in suicide prevention and the alleviation of grief among the families of the affected persons.

Conclusion: The findings underscore the need for targeted e-intervention programs and the fostering of supportive online communities. Methodological reflections emphasize the value of netnography in understanding suicide-related discourse on social media platforms and informing future research and interventions in this critical area.

The background of the study

Globally, a staggering annual death toll of approximately 800,000 individuals has been a reoccurring phenomenon since 2019 due to suicide. The World Health Organization (WHO) identifies several key risk factors associated with suicide, including mental or physical illness (especially chronic conditions), substance abuse, a history of violence, acute emotional distress, significant life changes such as unemployment or relationship breakdowns, and often a combination of

these factors (WHO, 2012). Studies have widely acknowledged that suicidal behavior is influenced by a complex interplay of biological, genetic, psychological, social, contextual, and situational factors (Olaseni et al., 2021; Oguntayo, 2023). While existing studies predominantly adopt an epidemiological approach, there is a recognized need for research that encompasses diverse perspectives and sources, particularly qualitative methodologies.

One promising avenue for qualitative exploration is netnography, which involves the observation of social networks to study phenomena. This methodology leverages online platforms, including social media networks, as channels for understanding various aspects of suicide-related discourse (Costell et al., 2017; Pan et al., 2018). Notably, netnography has emerged as a valuable tool for examining the opinions and experiences shared by individuals online, offering insights distinct from those obtained through analyses of suicidal acts (Kozinets, 2010; Pan et al., 2018).

Research focusing on social networks has revealed how users, including peers within Facebook groups, demonstrate social empathy, offer attitudinal suggestions, and discuss intervention strategies aimed at preventing suicide (Pan et al., 2018). This body of work underscores the potential of social media as a platform for psychosocial interventions targeting mental health issues like suicide (Kolavuz-Onal & Vasque, 2013; Kozinets, 2010). However, it is important to note that the existing literature in this area remains limited, indicating the need for further inquiry and exploration.

In contemporary society, social media has become an integral aspect of communication, with Facebook emerging as the predominant platform, boasting nearly three billion users (Behera et al., 2020). This expansive digital landscape facilitates diverse forms of human interaction, allowing individuals to freely express themselves and selectively present behaviors, including those considered undesirable (Venegas-Vera et al., 2020). Notably, a recent phenomenon has surfaced wherein individuals publicly announce their intentions to commit suicide on Facebook (Islam et al., 2021).

Research indicates a growing trend among young individuals who engage in self-harm to utilize the Internet, particularly social media platforms, as avenues for expressing distress, with a notable increase in instances of suicide following public posts on such platforms (Cero & Witte, 2020). Some users openly declare their suicidal intentions on social media before proceeding to take their own lives, a pattern that has been documented in multiple cases (Behera et al., 2020).

Scholarly investigations suggest that expressing suicidal thoughts on social media may serve as an unconventional plea for assistance, prompting researchers to explore the potential of social media in suicide prevention efforts (Seward & Harris, 2016). However, despite users' willingness to offer support, there is a recognized lack of knowledge and expertise among them. Initiatives aimed at empowering social media users, such as establishing rescue or support groups, could cultivate a supportive and inclusive online environment (Shoib et al., 2022; Westerlund, 2013). Moreover, employing artificial intelligence-driven methods for suicide prediction holds promise for enhancing the capacity to identify individuals at risk of self-harm or suicide, potentially leading to life-saving interventions (D'Hotman & Loh, 2020).

Despite the multifaceted psychosocial dimensions linking suicidal behavior and social media, empirical research on this topic remains scarce, lacking a comprehensive synthesis of the available evidence in the literature. Currently, there is a dearth of data regarding the percentage of suicides associated with Facebook announcements and the extent of social media's detrimental effects in this context. Consequently, controversies persist regarding the role of social media in

predicting and preventing suicidal behaviors.

Our study aims to address this gap by examining factors related to suicide announcements, live-streamed suicidal behavior, grief in response to suicide, and suicide prevention on Facebook. Through an exploration of socio-cultural implications, audience dynamics, and preventive strategies, we seek to elucidate the complex interplay between social media and suicide. Given Facebook's extensive reach and distinct online culture, our focus on this platform promises valuable insights into this pressing issue (Chou & Edge, 2012; Oguntayo & Gutiérrez-Vega, 2024).

Suicide remains a global issue that warrants further exploration, particularly concerning the comprehension of individuals who discuss suicidal behaviors. Researchers have identified the phenomenon of suicide notes shared on Facebook as a potential avenue for gaining insight. However, some scholars argue that delving deeper into the associated dynamics, motivations, and impacts through quantitative analyses could offer valuable insights, particularly within the online community, for mental health experts (WHO, 2012; Olaseni et al., 2021). This entails examining the content, patterns, and interactions surrounding suicide notes posted on the social media platform especially Facebook, as well as exploring social support networks and the potential for intervention. As a result, this study has identified a significant gap in the existing literature concerning crucial aspects related to the pressing issue of suicide notes shared on Facebook:

Content Analysis: There is a lack of research utilizing content analysis to understand how individuals explore the nature of suicide notes shared on Facebook, including examining the language used, emotional expressions, and topics discussed. This type of analysis aims to reveal the underlying reasons, triggers, and emotions expressed within these notes.

Pattern and Theme Observation: Similarly, there is a dearth of studies observing patterns and recurring themes within suicide notes to gain insight into common experiences, challenges, or circumstances faced by individuals contemplating suicide. This analysis could illuminate factors contributing to suicidal ideation or the influence of social and personal pressures.

Social Dynamics Description: Research on the interactions, responses, and support networks within the online community discussing suicide notes on Facebook is lacking. This includes understanding how community members engage and support distressed individuals, as well as identifying instances of potential normalization or contagion.

Intervention Opportunities: Evaluating potential intervention or prevention strategies within the online space is also lacking. This involves identifying existing support systems or crisis response mechanisms and assessing their effectiveness, as well as exploring opportunities for targeted interventions to provide assistance to those at risk.

Platform Analysis: There is a need to examine the role of Facebook as a platform in the visibility, dissemination, and response to suicide notes. This analysis should explore design elements, algorithms, or policies that may inadvertently contribute to the proliferation or normalization of self-harm content, with recommendations for platform improvements or user interventions.

By employing a netnographic approach to address the issue of suicide notes on Facebook, researchers can gain a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon, including its cultural, social, and psychological factors. This understanding

can inform the development of effective prevention strategies, support systems, and policy interventions to address the problem effectively. Therefore, this research question was used to gauge out a netnographic regarding suicidal issues on Facebook platforms thus:

What are the contents, patterns, and social dynamics surrounding suicide notes shared on Facebook, and how can this knowledge inform interventions and support systems for individuals at risk?

Study Objective

The objective of this research is to examine the nature of suicide notes, identifying recurring patterns and themes, understanding the social dynamics within the online community, and leveraging this understanding to suggest interventions and support mechanisms.

Methods

Netnography is a research method that involves the systematic study of online communities and interactions (Kulavuz-Onal et al., 2013). Its goal is to understand the culture, behaviors, and motivations of individuals within these communities. In the context of studying suicide notes on Facebook, a netnographic approach was used to analyze the content and communication patterns within the platform to gain theoretical understanding. Netnography is participant observation research, and data can take three forms (Kulavuz-Onal et al., 2013): (a) The researcher collects data directly; (b) Data is generated through capturing and recording online community events and interactions; and (c) The researcher outlines field notes as data (Kozinets, 2010)**.** Similar to ethnography, in a netnographic study, data comes primarily from four sources: archival data, extracted data, interviews, and field notes (Kozinets, 2010). Using a netnography approach, this study was carried out in six overlapping steps, similar to the stages of ethnographic research: (i) develop a research plan; (ii) establish an entry; (iii) data collection and triangulation; (iv) analyze and interpret data; (v) ensure ethical standards; and (vi) report research results and associated knowledge.

Social Networks and Netnography

Similar biases affect social media research as they do any other type of investigation. Kozinets (2010) asserts that "these social groups have a 'real' existence for their participants and therefore have consequential effects on many aspects of behavior, including consumer behavior." Social media communities provide members with numerous opportunities to share information and influence one another regarding their lives and experiences (Kozinets, 2010). Both clients who commission and purchase research results on social media and researchers themselves tend to align with either the quantitative or qualitative camp. Similar to numerous qualitative investigations, the objective of netnography is to examine cultural information, symbolic and perceived meanings, online consumer consumption patterns, and other relevant aspects within the social milieu of digital environments (Kozinets, 2010). Additionally, netnography is employed to investigate social and psychological phenomena that occur online, including cyberbullying, suicidal behavior prior to and

subsequent to the occurrence of survivors, and other scenarios involving the exchange of information (Lamy & Zourou, 2013).

Participants, sampling and procedure

To start, researchers identify relevant Facebook groups, such as those called "Suicide Notes" and "Survivor Warriors." The researcher used 'participant observation' for 2 hours every day for three months, which was between November 2023 and January 2024. By participating in the group platform and adhering to the group rules, the author observed and recorded the conversations, posts, and comments made by people in these spaces. This process involves qualitative data collection methods such as screenshots, text mining, or direct observations. Researcher analyze the collected data using content analysis, which involves identifying recurring themes, patterns, and categories within suicide notes. This analysis includes aspects such as emotional tone, reasons or triggers mentioned, expressions of despair or hopelessness, and any references to external factors such as relationships, mental health, or social pressures.

The netnographic approach also involves paying attention to social dynamics and interactions within the online community (Kulavuz-Onal et al., 2013; Islam et al., 2021). Therefore, the researcher explored the responses and support provided by other members, as well as any attempts to prevent self-harm or offer help. This analysis involved shedding light on the role of social support networks, the impact of online communities on suicidal ideation, and the potential for intervention or prevention strategies. Additionally, the researcher examined the structural features of Facebook itself, including design, layout, and features that make it easier or more difficult to communicate suicide notes.

This analysis helped identify how the platform may inadvertently contribute to the visibility or normalization of self-harm content and inform recommendations for platform policies or user interventions. It is important to note that studying suicide notes on social media platforms requires ethical considerations and sensitivity. Therefore, researchers prioritize the well-being of at-risk individuals and adhere to research ethical guidelines by seeking informed consent from members and protecting their privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality with free participation and exit, as well as targeting populations. of vulnerable groups.

Information collected

This study used two Facebook posts and cases to explain the forms of people's content, expressions, social supports, and social suicide prevention methods:

Case study 1

A participant in a Facebook group shared this: "I do a lot of stupid things that I regret very few of, and not the rest," he says of himself. He talks about not expressing his emotions and being emotionally hurt by people around him, saying, "I have no feelings anymore, and I can't love any woman anymore." He stated that the so-called lady of his heart, whom he trusts so much, has broken his heart, and he believes that life is no longer worth living, and that there are people who have made him feel that way (particularly his partner and family).

However, he blames himself for his current situation, saying, "But I don't want to blame them because it's really my fault.". "I was too weak to control my situation; therefore, I am a failure," said the young man. The young man also expresses his desire to be understood and helped by the group's experts by saying, "I hope someone reads this and tries to help me because I am in a lot of pain and I don't know how to heal myself except to end everything soon and allow the lovers who don't love and the friends who said they loved but don't want to be. I want them to have fun when I'm dead and to give them a break." He further said, "I simply want someone to listen to me, or then I will go to rest, failing that, in another world. Thank you for accepting me into this group," said the young man.

Responses from the Facebook community

"I understand how you feel," said one of the group members. "I wish I could give you a hug! Why can't you seek help from professionals? But I like your courage. Please be strong and don't commit suicide." and mine. "Why is it like this? Also, I keep asking myself the same question; I just can't imagine how much pain you are going through, but committing suicide should not be an option. Just read, relax, and don't be alone—that's the only way! The administrator of the group asked him to read a particular book and movie to realize how man can reshape his pain and turn it into opportunity.

The administrator further said, "Do not confuse the experience of greatness with pain so that opportunity does not turn into anguish," and asked his contact to talk to him more. One member sympathized with the poster, saying, "I think we are living in a life and year of distraction. Please don't get distracted because committing suicide will make you a coward, so please don't try; be strong; you are a warrior." I'm so sorry for your pain, said a woman. Please never blame yourself." A man also encouraged him: "It breaks my heart to see these pains in you. Please have a modified and strong mind to handle them and be masters of your lives. The poster said after everyone who responded posted that many of you had tried, and now I am relieved and my heart goes out to you. I am beginning to see my strength and my desire to live and face these pains. Thank you.

Case study 2

On March 3, 2023, a woman posted on her Facebook page to share her grief with friends in a group: "This is my son Aric; he died on December 17, 2022, and my life has never been the same since. I feel so much guilt for not acknowledging the pain he was feeling—he never talked about it, but he had become more withdrawn the year before, which I attributed to him simply being a moody teenager adjusting to the start of high school. Dream more! I thought I had these thoughts! I loved him with all my heart, and I will always love and miss him. Part of my heart is missing, and the only things keeping me alive are his two older brothers and his father. Thank you for allowing me to express my pain; however, I can leave soon to join him."

Responses from the Facebook community

People's reactions: "I wish I could give you a hug right now. I'm deeply sorry for your loss." "I'm so sorry you're going through this nightmare of pain and hurt," says another. "I'm praying for you and sending you lots of love," says another

Facebook friend. The grieving woman responded to her friends' words of strength and encouragement by saying, "I'm still in denial in some ways. I know it in my head; I just can't wrap my head around it. One member responded, "Your son is a big part of their life; take your time and don't let anyone tell you how to cry. You will heal, but suicide is not an option." I have had a similar experience; my daughter was still in 8th grade when she intentionally took poison. It is tragic that they believe this is the only way to cope with their pain. Be strong and show that you "My mind is wrong; life is worth living, please. I love you."

One woman who expressed sympathy said, "My son was only in high school and was 13 years old at the time! He turned 14 just five days before he died! His loss has left me inconsolable. Please lift yourself up from the pain and don't be depressed. Just remember that you are not alone; God is with you! said one mother. Another mother said, I'm so sorry..."It breaks my heart that we are all trapped in this. My daughter, who was 14 at the time but in eighth grade, was my best friend. My world was changed forever; everything's fine. Please keep going. Another member said, "I'm so sorry for your loss!" It breaks my heart that more and more young people are dying as a result of this. a hug at this moment.

Please don't blame yourself or become a victim, but a survivor. One lady said: I don't think any of us who have been through this have realized the fact that it hurts when your efforts are lost, but remember that the situation also makes one pray for a child who is dead, so take heart. The group administrator finally empathized and used people's ideas to discredit the poster's guilt and guilt formation. He asked for her contact information and admonished her to see other children as assets and the dead as distractions for the living. The poster sent an emoji of cheers, appreciation, and boldness.

Analysis of Results

The fact that the majority of people in this Facebook community reacted to the suicide note posts is surprising. In Case 1, the community urged him to find meaning in his life and believe that God loved him. "I know where you're going because I once thought that way," another individual added. A member of the group added, "Life is worth living, and he encourages you not to refer to yourself as a failure." So did the administrator who psycho-educated the poster by informing him that disappointment is a natural part of life.

In example 2, the community sympathizes with the poster and advises him to move on and accept the circumstances as temporary and that better days are near after these difficult times. As a result, both suicide letter posters sent an emoji symbolizing relief and acceptance. Others on the Facebook page also encouraged them to cheer. A community member suggested that the poster offer his phone number so he could call and check on it periodically, which made him very happy. People's responses to the suicide notes on those two posters caught my interest in both cases.

The community responded to their post by encouraging them to be strong, to fight their problems, and to never "run away from their problems" by killing themselves, as a coward would do, but to fight them and stand up as heroes. They advised people contemplating suicide not to do so and offered options from many perspectives. These encouraging posts increased the posters' chances of anger and relief, which further encouraged the posters' happiness and relief. Clearly, the community's good attitude toward notes signs saved this young man's suicide attempt. Here is a summary of the three

content analysis themes that were created to address the research question formulated based on the two case studies provided:

Theme 1: Emotional Expressions: Both case studies exhibit intense emotional expressions, such as feelings of regret, emotional pain, hurt, guilt, and sadness.

Theme 2: Triggers and Contributors: Case study 1 highlights a broken heart, feeling unloved, and blaming oneself for the current situation. Case study 2 reveals the shock and guilt of not acknowledging the pain the individual was suffering.

Theme 3: Desire for Help and Support: In both cases, there is a clear desire for understanding, support and help from the Facebook community. Case Study 1 explicitly requests assistance and expresses pain, while Case Study 2 seeks a platform to express pain and receives words of strength and encouragement.

The patterns of suicidal expression that were discovered are in three subthemes:

a. *Emotional vulnerability* – Both cases reflect emotional vulnerability and the struggles people face in dealing with their emotions and circumstances.
b. *Communication of pain and need:* Both individuals express their pain and need for understanding, support, and validation from others.
c. *Attribution of Responsibility:* Case Study 1 blames self, while Case Study 2 expresses guilt for not recognizing the signs.

Patterns of Social Dynamics of intervention discovered:

a. *Supportive Responses:* In case study 2, friends respond with words of empathy, sympathy, and love, providing emotional support to the grieving woman.
b. *Community acceptance:* Both cases indicate a sense of acceptance and belonging within the Facebook group, as people express gratitude for being able to share their experiences.

Discussion and implications

In the discussion section of this study, author addressed the identified gap in the literature regarding crucial aspects related to suicide notes shared on Facebook, building upon the background information provided. Through the research, author aimed to fill this gap by conducting a comprehensive netnographic examination of various dimensions surrounding suicide notes on Facebook, including content analysis, pattern observation, social dynamics description, intervention opportunities, and platform analysis.

The study's themes—emotional vulnerability, expression of suffering and necessity, and the significance of encouraging reactions from virtual communities—illuminate crucial elements of suicidal conduct as they pertain to social media platforms such as Facebook. The implications of these themes for suicide prevention initiatives and the development of support systems for at-risk individuals are substantial.

Feelings of Vulnerability: The initial motif underscores the profound emotional susceptibility demonstrated by users who publicly declare suicidal ideation or intentions on Facebook. This vulnerability is characterized by a range of emotions, including hopelessness, despair, guilt, sorrow, and emotional anguish, as demonstrated in the provided case studies. The identification and resolution of emotional vulnerability is of paramount importance in the realm of suicide prevention, given that it denotes the fundamental anguish that individuals who are suicidal are experiencing (Chou et al., 2012; Pan et al., 2018).

Efforts to prevent suicide ought to prioritize the identification and resolution of emotional vulnerability by means of targeted interventions that foster resilience, emotional well-being, and coping mechanisms. It is imperative that individuals undergoing emotional distress have easy access to mental health support services, including therapy and counseling, in both physical and digital environments (Oguntayo et al., 2024; Shoib et al., 2022).

The second theme underscores the significance of individuals openly expressing their suffering and requiring assistance within virtual communities such as Facebook. By means of their online discourse and remarks, individuals articulate their challenges, beseech comprehension, and solicit assistance from their fellow members of the community. Communication in times of crisis is an essential means of expressing distress and requesting assistance (Kolavuz-Onal & Vasque, 2013).

Online communities should be conducive to open and supportive communication regarding suicide prevention, allowing members to freely express their emotions and seek assistance without apprehension of criticism or social disapproval. By providing resources for mental health support, instituting guidelines for supportive interactions, and training moderators to effectively assist individuals in distress, platforms such as Facebook can facilitate this (D'Hotman et al., 2020; Fernández - Cabana et al., 2015; Westerlund, 2013).

The significance of supportive reactions: The importance of supportive responses from members of online communities in addressing suicidal behavior is emphasized in the third theme. Both case studies involved peers providing individuals with words of encouragement, practical advice, and words of empathy. These actions significantly mitigated the distress of the participants and fostered a sense of support and belonging (Lamy et al., 2013; Pan et al., 2018).

Suicide prevention initiatives ought to prioritize the establishment and maintenance of online communities that offer practical assistance, validation, and empathy to those who are suicidal at risk. Peer support groups, crisis helplines, and online forums provide individuals in distress with a sense of community and connection, which are all valuable resources (Kozinets, 2010; Oguntayo et al., 2024).

In the context of suicide prevention, the themes identified in this study underscore the intricate dynamics between emotional vulnerability, the expression of suffering and necessity, and the significance of encouraging reactions within virtual communities (Kolavuz-Onal et al., 2013; Seward et al., 2016). Through a comprehensive examination of these themes and their ramifications, stakeholders can formulate enhanced approaches to assisting those who are susceptible to suicidal ideation and advancing psychological welfare in digital environments.

Overall, this research contributes to advancing the understanding of suicide-related discourse on social media platforms,

particularly Facebook, and underscores the importance of qualitative methodologies, such as netnography, in exploring complex psychosocial phenomena in digital environments. This study contributes to the ongoing efforts to prevent suicide and promote mental well-being in online communities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the content analysis of the case studies provided offers valuable insights into the patterns and dynamics surrounding suicide notes shared on Facebook. Common themes such as emotional vulnerability, communication of pain and need, and the importance of supportive responses from the online community emerged from the analysis. These findings underscore the significance of targeted support, awareness, education, and the pivotal role of online support communities, particularly Facebook groups, in interventions and support systems for individuals at risk of suicidal behavior.

Based on these findings, several recommendations can be made to enhance suicide prevention efforts and promote mental well-being in online environments:

1. **Develop targeted e-intervention programs:** Mental health experts should design intervention programs tailored to address emotional vulnerability, provide support, and promote emotional well-being using Facebook pages or similar online platforms. These programs may include counseling services, mental health awareness campaigns, and easily accessible resources for individuals at risk of suicide. Improved mental health education and awareness on online platforms are crucial for recognizing signs of emotional distress and facilitating timely interventions.
2. **Foster supportive online communities:** Online platforms like Facebook can serve as crucial spaces for providing support to individuals in distress. It is imperative to create and maintain mental health-focused online communities where individuals can share their experiences, find support from peers, and access relevant resources. Implementing clear guidelines and effective moderation mechanisms is essential to ensuring the safety and well-being of community members within these online spaces.

Additionally, it is pertinent to acknowledge the learnings and discoveries gained from employing techniques such as content analysis, network exploration, and netnographic observation in studying the phenomenon of suicide notes on Facebook. These methodologies offer valuable tools for understanding the complex dynamics of suicidal behavior in online environments, providing insights into the underlying factors, patterns, and social interactions involved.

Furthermore, addressing methodological and epistemological aspects relevant to the study contributes to enhancing the rigor and validity of the research findings. Reflecting on the contributions of these methodologies, including content analysis, network exploration, and netnographic observation, can enrich our understanding of suicide-related discourse on social media platforms like Facebook. By leveraging these techniques, researchers can gain deeper insights into the cultural, social, and psychological factors influencing suicidal behavior in online communities, ultimately informing more effective strategies for prevention and intervention.

In summary, the findings from the content analysis of suicide notes shared on Facebook highlight the importance of targeted support, awareness, and the role of online support communities in suicide prevention efforts. By implementing recommendations such as developing targeted e-intervention programs and fostering supportive online communities, stakeholders can work towards creating safer and more supportive online environments for individuals at risk of suicidal behavior. Additionally, acknowledging the contributions of methodologies such as content analysis and netnographic observation enhances the understanding of suicide-related discourse on social media platforms and informs future research directions in this important area of study.

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