

Googling Suicide: Evaluation of Websites According to the Content Associated with Suicide



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SUMMARY

Objective: The Internet is increasingly being used to acquire information about personal experiences and health, but the credibility of this information is debatable. It has been reported that methods of suicide and access to suicidal means are explicitly discussed in some of the websites, with users being encouraged to attempt suicidal acts in some cases. Access to web content with pro-suicidal features is monitored in many countries. In Turkey, the frequency of people visiting these websites is unknown. Moreover, a program has not been established that targets online users. This study aims to provide information about the information that a person may come across after searching online for suicide and suicide methods in Turkish language.

Method: After searching for particular suicidal phrases (i.e., “suicide methods,” “painless suicide,” “guaranteed suicide,” “killing yourself” and “how can I die”) in the Google search engine, three psychiatrists evaluated the results independently, according to the content.

Results: 42 of the 100 websites (42%) were found to have properties that are pro-suicidal, whereas 13 of them (13%) were found to have content that may be considered protective against suicidal thoughts and actions. Among the websites that were reported to be protective, none had any kind of supervision or guidance from mental health professionals.

Conclusion: Suicidal content, as well as the possibility of content generated on the Internet, should be taken into account while planning suicide prevention programs. Further studies are needed to determine which risk factors and protective features of the Internet affect suicidal behavior among individuals.

Key words: Internet, suicide, suicidal ideation

INTRODUCTION

The ease with which the Internet can be accessed in addition to its widespread use necessitates questioning of the reliability of information available. This topic is particularly important regarding health because the Internet is increasingly being reported as a primary reference source in terms of health problems (Tang and Ng 2006). Since suicide is not culturally and socially acceptable, *anonymity* is an attractive feature of the Internet for this topic (Suler 2004 and Boyce 2010).

Household Internet use is reported to be 43% among households and projections indicate this percentage to increase. So, it is reasonable to consider that people who have mental disorders and/or who are suicidal might be using the Internet to

gain information (*Hane Halkı İnternet Kullanım İstatistikleri*, Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu, 2011).

It has been reported that some websites provide information explicitly about “fast and certain” methods of suicide, even obtaining methods utilizing drugs or toxic compounds (Recupero and Harms 2008). Others describe suicide as a “romantic” solution by providing examples of famous people who have committed suicide (Boyce 2010, Biddle et al. 2008). Message and chat groups have also been reported to host conversations that lead and encourage people who are contemplating suicide (Becker & Schmidt 2004). Moreover, the Internet has been reported as a guide for mass suicides (Recupero & Harms 2008). Social media is a very easy way to gather groups of people; users may rapidly organize and

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commit suicide for a particular cause. For instance, the Internet was used as a medium for the spread of the hydrogen sulfide associated mass suicides that occurred in Japan in 2008 (Chang and Page 2011).

Many organizations that work in suicide prevention have considered these risks. Governments have implemented prevention programs targeting Internet users who “google” suicide related terms. For instance, any suicidal encouragement through the Internet has been deemed as a crime by the criminal code in Australia since 2006 (Recupero & Harms 2008). Similarly, there has been a comprehensive suicide prevention program targeting online suicidal users in Israel (Barak, 2007). Web content has been constantly monitored in England (Recupero and Harms, 2008), and access to pro-suicidal content has been blocked in Japan (Hagihara et al. 2011) and Korea (Mishara, 2007).

Some religious organizations collaborate with the World Health Organization and provide support lines in more than 50 countries (Befrienders Worldwide, 2010). Together with prevention programs, there are “ring” sites that provide a space for gathering. On these sites, people who have similar thoughts and ideations come together and encourage each other to call for professional help (Prasad, 2001). Some of these websites may provide preventive content for people who google “suicide.”

The development of suicidal behavior can be broken up into periods of contemplation, calls for help, decision and action. It is reasonable to think that a user might use the Internet during any of these periods (Sonneck et al. 1993). There have been anecdotal reports that suicidal people “google” this topic (Alao et al. 1999, 2006); (Becker and Schmidt 2004). Furthermore, two systematic studies have reported an association between the incidence of suicide in the community and the frequency of googling “suicide methods” (Hagihara et al. 2011, Sueki 2011). It is not clear what kind of data information is provided to these individuals, and after googling, to what extent the people that contemplate suicide are affected.

Studies have yielded remarkable findings on this topic. Using five popular engines, Recupero and Harms (2008) searched for four suicide related terms: “suicide,” “how to commit suicide,” “suicide methods,” and “how to kill yourself” and grouped the results into three categories: “suicide-neutral,” “pro-suicide,” and “anti-suicide.” The results of the study showed that 115 websites were found to be “suicide-neutral,” 109 were found to be “anti-suicidal,” and 41 were found to be “pro-suicidal.” Even though the number of “pro-suicidal” sites was lower than the other two categories, the authors have addressed the need for taking precautions on this topic. In a similar study using four search engines (a) suicide; (b) suicide methods; (c) suicide sure methods; (d) most effective methods of suicide; (e) methods of suicide; (f) ways to commit suicide; (g) how

to commit suicide; (h) how to kill yourself; (i) easy suicide methods; (j) best suicide methods; (k) pain-free suicide; and (l) quick suicide terms were searched. Two independent researchers categorized the first ten websites as “pro-suicidal,” “information site,” and “against-suicide.” Half of the websites were encouraging, meaning they either promoted or facilitated suicide (Biddle et al, 2008). A study conducted in Japan revealed that Internet searches for specific Japanese suicide-related terms are related to the incidence of suicide among 20- and 30-year-old individuals in Japan (Hagihara et al. 2011). The authors have recommended stricter regulation of these websites to reduce the incidence of suicide among young people.

Several studies have been conducted in numerous countries and risk and protective factors have been determined and even intervention and prevention programs have been planned. Unfortunately, the situation in Turkey is unclear. The aim of our study is to provide preliminary data about what kind of content one comes across after searching for suicide and suicide methods in Turkish, and to call the attention of other researchers to this topic.

METHODS

Three independent researchers searched five different keywords on different days in September and October 2011. Searches were made on different days to consider the possibility of a change in the results. The reason Google was used as the search platform was based on a report that indicated the predilection of Google. Google was used about 98.84% of the time among Turkish Internet users (*Lead Generation and Internet Marketing in Turkey*, 2011).

We selected keywords by considering previous related studies (Biddle et al. 2008); (Recupero & Harms 2008) and the results of a pilot questionnaire. We asked 18 people for their opinions about “what and how to search if they had suicidal thoughts.” We listed the results according to their frequencies. Also, after taking into account previous research, we generated five different keywords: “suicide methods,” “painless suicide,” “certain suicide,” “killing yourself,” and “how can I die” (“*intihar yöntemleri*,” “*acısız intihar*,” “*kesin intihar*,” “*kendini öldürme*,” ve “*nasıl ölebilirim*” in Turkish). Three independent researchers categorized the content of the first two search result pages. The reason for selecting the first two pages (i.e. 20 web sites) was because the results of a study that reported that during searching, users rarely go beyond the second page (Eysenbach & Köhler 2002). Therefore, the first two pages for each of the searches for every keyword (i.e. 100 websites for five searches) were assessed. During assessment, investigators initially categorized the website according to whether it was suicide-specific. If the investigator had the opinion that all of the content accessed was genuinely about

suicide, the site was categorized as suicide-specific. Secondly, the sites were categorized according to their content: whether it had pro-suicidal or anti-suicidal features. After categorization, a meeting was held to discuss websites that at least two researchers disagreed about the category. After the meeting, researchers made a final decision about the category. The site was categorized as “pro-suicidal” if it was explicitly providing information about suicide, leading to suicidal means and giving information about obtaining suicidal means; representing suicide as a “choice,” “preference,” “solution,” or as an “attractive behavior;” or had provocative content (e.g. *saying one is not brave enough or capable of committing suicide*) that may lead users to suicide. Sites that had content highlighting that suicide is not a solution, leading users to professional help, supporting emotional expressions, providing support by modeling oneself or having dissuasive content with the help of religious terms were categorized as “anti-suicidal.” If the site had both pro-suicidal and anti-suicidal messages, it was coded as “conflictual.” The same coding algorithm was also applied to both suicide-specific and suicide-nonspecific sites. Suicide-nonspecific sites were also classified as “pro-suicidal,” “anti-suicidal,” or “conflictual.” This method of classification was made by reconciling the methods of two previous studies (Biddle et al. 2008); (Recupero & Harms 2008). Additional important findings were also reported.

RESULTS

Grouping was based on the 100 sites that were reached and they were grouped according to their possible status of whether they had *anti-* or *pro-*suicidal features. Independent of having specific content for suicide, 40 sites (40%) published content that may be pro-suicidal, whereas 13 (13%) sites published content that may be viewed as anti-suicidal. The “conflictual” label was given to 47 sites (47%). Suicide specific content was noted in 58 (58%) websites, whereas 42 (42%) did not have suicide specific content. Among the 58 sites that had suicide-

specific content, 36 (62.1%) were grouped as pro-suicidal, 8 (13.8%) were grouped as anti-suicidal and 14 (24.1%) were grouped as conflictual. Among the 42 sites that did not have suicide-specific content, 6 (14.3%) had pro-suicidal content, 5 (11.9%) had anti-suicidal features, and 31 (73.8%) were grouped as “conflictual”. These findings are presented in Table 1.

During the searches, the search engine recommended an additional search using the phrase: “101 ways to kill yourself.” This recommendation was based on previous searches and provided by Google to make the search process more practical. Since it provides additional information data to the Google user and might have pro-suicidal features, this finding was considered important.

At the top of the search results page for three of the five search keywords, an attention grabbing ad was noticed, featuring the phrase: “Don’t make a mistake, my friend!” After clicking, the link redirected visitors to a religious website. At several of the websites visited, we came across some information explaining rare suicide methods such as “*spilling cyanide to ear.*” The vast majority of the news sites reporting suicides were grouped as “conflictual.” Very easy access to pesticides was noted among these sites. Purchasing these materials online was very easy and there were not any restrictions for the trade. In many other websites, suicide was presented as a notion of “courage,” and even provocatively, some emphasized that “real suiciders” don’t tell their thoughts and act directly.

The agreement rate of the category for at least two researchers was 83% for the first assessment.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to provide information about the content information that a person comes across after searching for suicide and suicide methods in Turkish. Our results indicate

Table 1. Results of the evaluation of websites according to their pro-suicidal and/or anti-suicidal features after googling suicide keywords

Search keyword	Might be pro-suicidal		Might be anti-suicidal		Conflictual	
	Content is suicide-specific	Content is not suicide-specific	Content is suicide-specific	Content is not suicide-specific	Content is suicide-specific	Content is not suicide-specific
“İntihar yöntemleri” ¹	13	1	-	1	4	1
“Acısız intihar” ²	14	-	2	1	2	1
“Kesin intihar” ³	4	2	3	-	2	9
“Kendini öldürme” ⁴	2	1	-	1	4	12
“Nasıl ölebilirim” ⁵	3	2	3	2	2	8
	36	6	8	5	14	31
SUBTOTAL	42		13		45	
TOTAL	100					

* Quotation marks were not used in searches.

¹: suicide methods, ²: painless suicide, ³: guaranteed suicide, ⁴: killing yourself, ⁵: how can I die

that about half of the results after googling for suicide may be pro-suicidal. The rate of the websites that might be protective against suicide was only 13%.

The main difference between our findings and the findings from previous research was the relatively low number of preventive sites (Recupero & Harms 2008); (Biddle et al. 2008). Moreover, literally *none* of these websites was professionally prepared for suicide prevention. Among the sites that “might be protective against suicide,” suicidal messages were replied to supportively and were trying to lead the users to treatment, or were aiming to stop the user from acting or emphasizing that suicidal behavior is not acceptable in religion. Even though these websites were grouped as “anti-suicidal,” none of these websites had professional content targeting people contemplating suicide. This finding highlights the inadequacy of our suicide prevention programs, in terms of providing professional Turkish content for handling online suicidal users.

Another difference of our study from previous research was labeling websites that had both pro-suicidal and anti-suicidal features as “conflictual,” rather than “neutral,” because users may have been affected by the content according to their mood at that moment. For instance, one person with a high tendency to commit suicide may be sensitive to pro-suicidal content, whereas another person with a low tendency might be more sensitive to anti-suicidal content.

Our study is the first report assessing online content that users come across after googling for suicide in Turkish through the perspective of a psychiatrist. Two of the researchers are specialist psychiatrists; one is a final-year psychiatry resident. Websites were independently assessed and categorized by three researchers, and a meeting was held to discuss the websites where at least two researchers disagreed about the category. However, it should be kept in mind that this method is not entirely objective. There is no supportive research data for labeling the sites *pro-suicidal* or *anti-suicidal*, and we are not sure that these websites genuinely have these properties. Moreover, it should be considered that these results are cross-sectional and specific to the time that the study was conducted. It should also be noted that predicting previous or future conditions is difficult. Nevertheless, since there is no study on this topic, we believe that our findings could stimulate research and constitute a starting point for establishing online suicide-prevention programs.

After determining websites with pro-suicidal features, suicide prevention and interventions should be well-adjusted so that they take into account both community mental health and the independent nature of the Internet (Biddle et al. 2008). Legislative preventions should consider both national and international values and should not be based on narrow perspectives such as merely “restricting access” (Becker & Schmidt 2004).

In conclusion, googling keywords associated with suicide yields content that may have pro-suicidal features. Suicidal patients may be able to access this content easily. The association between data accessed and actual suicides, as well as risks and protective factors should be studied further. Additionally, the number of sites that were considered as “might be protective against suicide” was very low and their content was uncontrolled. Preparing websites with accurate information and offering professional support for suicide prevention is important. Ease of access to these websites is also important. Our findings provide preliminary data for further studies on this topic.

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