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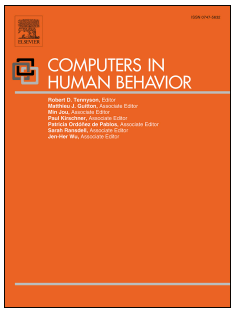

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Suicide Baiting in the Internet Era

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Comparison of Baiting and Non-baiting audiences online

Factor	Baiting (N=11)	Non-Baiting (N=15)	*p*
Audience size			
less than 10	1	11	
around 100	4	2	
more than 200	6	0	.001
Episode duration			
Minutes	0	6	
around an hour	4	5	
more than 2 hours	6	2	.020
Method of Suicide			
Gun	0	5	
Hanging	6	4	
Drugs	4	1	.027
Drug involvement			
No drug use reported	5	13	
Drugs reported	6	1	.014
Assistance			
Audience not helped	3	0	
Audience helped	8	15	.063
Attempt outcome			
not gone through	0	2	
injured	2	2	
died	9	11	.444

Abstract

This study examined a sample of 26 cases from 2001-2017, in which remote online internet audiences witnessed a disturbed person's threat over a webcam to commit suicide. In almost all cases (92%) the would-be suicide went through with the threat. Baiting or jeering (encouraging the suicide attempt and/or denigrating the victim) occurred in 11 of 26 cases (42%). However assistance (attempts to discourage the suicide threat) also occurred in 88% of cases. This study of online baiting extends Mann's (1981) archival study of crowd baiting in episodes of suicide threats from buildings and bridges. Analysis of accounts of the 26 online episodes in our study revealed consistent with Mann (1981) that larger internet audiences witnessing the suicide threat and also episodes of longer duration were more likely associated with suicide baiting. We also found audience baiting was associated with apparent drug use by the suicide threatener. Audience anonymity, victim stigmatization, and a belief the victim is "playing" the audience might contribute to online baiting behavior. The high lethality associated with online suicide threats (92% in our sample) reinforces the importance of professional intervention and rapid response in episodes of online suicide threats.

Introduction

Researchers have attempted to understand anti-social behaviors (e.g. trolling, cyberbullying, cybersuicide) associated with the internet (Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2016; McDonald, Horstmann, Strom, & Pope, 2009; Phillips, 2015; Suler & Phillips, 1998; Willard, 2006). While some online forms of antisocial behaviour could simply be considered disruptive (Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2016; Suler & Phillips, 1998), other behaviours are more serious for users and service providers (Sigala, 2017). The present study examines extreme cases of antisocial behaviour online, specifically the phenomenon of suicide baiting of a disturbed person by an online audience.

Episodes of threatened and actual suicides have been broadcast in real time on webcams (Polder-Verkiel, 2012; Seko, 2016; Senft, 2008; Westerlund, Hadlaczky, & Wasserman, 2015). Rather than assist the victim (Polder-Verkiel, 2012), many of the witnesses to these online suicide attempts have actually jeered and denigrated the victim instead, encouraging them to perform the act (Polder-Verkiel, 2012; Seko, 2016). As incitement to suicide is illegal in many jurisdictions (e.g. Pirkis, Neal, Dare, Blood, & Studdert, 2009) some witnesses have been sought by police, and most witnesses have subsequently deleted their contributions to discussion boards following the suicide baiting episode (Westerlund, Hadlaczky, & Wasserman, 2015). In other instances the hosts of such episodes have either taken down the website (Smith, 2010), or sought further protective options (Guynn, 2017). To better understand the phenomenon of online suicide threats and audience baiting and to begin consideration of preventative and protective measures the present paper analyses a sample of 26 cases for factors associated with and contributing to the online baiting phenomenon.

In the first social psychological study of suicide baiting, Mann (1981) examined 21 cases of threatened suicide in public by jumping from ledges, towers or bridges in front of a

crowd. In 10 of 21 cases (48%), bystanders in the crowd jeered and urged the person to jump. Mann (1981) analysed factors that might contribute to the baiting phenomenon, including crowd size, cover of night-time, season, and physical distance between crowd and victim. The anti-social behavior of baiting crowds was thought to be due partly to anonymity, noise, arousal, diffusion of responsibility -- all factors associated with deindividuation, a psychological state of diminished identity and self-awareness (Zimbardo, 1969). Mann (1981) found that crowd size, cover of darkness and substantial physical distance between crowd and victim (all factors contributing to anonymity) were associated with baiting behavior. Other contributing factors were warm weather and longer duration of the episode. We now take some of the factors in crowd baiting identified by Mann (1981) and consider whether they might also be factors in online baiting of would-be suicides.

Theoretical background and research hypotheses

Mann (1981) considered several factors associated with crowd baiting behavior in his analysis: Crowd size; Cover of darkness; Physical distance between victim and crowd; Duration of episode; and aversive temperature. Mann (1981) found larger crowds under the cover of darkness were more likely to bait victims. In the online environment the absence of an immediate collocated audience may promote disinhibited behavior (Lapidot-Leffler & Barak, 2012; Suler, 2004; Suler & Phillips, 1998). The absence of a physical audience and identifiers removes opportunities for face to face censorship (Kollock, 1999; Lapidot-Leffler & Barak, 2012). The absence of such controls may encourage predisposed individuals to engage in deviant behavior (Cheng, Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, & Leskovec, 2015). Hence we now ask whether the factors Mann (1981) found contributing to suicide baiting are also valid in an online context. This will provide new insights into factors associated with online baiting in the internet environment.

As the present study sought to replicate and extend Mann (1981), we considered similar factors to those of Mann (1981), specifically: Audience size; Time of episode; Episode duration; and Season. However, as suicide threatener and audience are linked on a computer screen, not physically separated on a city street, we note that cover of darkness (night time), physical distance between audience and victim, and aversive temperature may be less meaningful in online settings.

In contrast with Mann (1981), the online victims do not jump off ledges and towers but threaten other ways to suicide - such as by hanging, shooting, knifing, poison (cf. Fisher, Overholser, & Dieter, 2015). Also in contrast with Mann (1981), observers/witnesses to an online suicide threat are a remote distributed audience while bystanders (literally) at a public suicide threat are a collocated crowd of people in close proximity and interaction and can see the victim.

We therefore also consider the means of threatening and committing suicide; evidence of drug involvement, and victim characteristics relating to audience baiting (e.g. gender of victim). We will also analyse evidence of audience prosocial behavior (expressions of concern and offers of assistance). It will also be important to consider the influence of audience baiting upon any assistance rendered and eventual outcome of the suicide threat – whether carried out or not.

Audience Size

The technology that is used to broadcast suicide threats online, can convey such communications on a one-to-one basis, or on a one-to-many basis (Schatz, Wagner, Egger, & Jordan, 2007). Audience size may contribute to online baiting behaviors. Studies of online Discussion Forums have revealed that around 3% of users may eventually be banned for trolling behaviors (Cheng, Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, & Leskovec, 2015). The tendency for

people to "lurk" and be silent in larger audiences (Preece, Nonnecke, & Andrews, 2004) can convey a sense of indifference and thus reinforce emerging antisocial norms (Cheng, Berstein, Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, & Leskovec, 2017). In addition if individuals sense many silent people are watching there could be a diffusion of responsibility that leads to baiting. Accordingly, we predict that baiting will be associated with larger audiences.

Episode Duration

Mann (1981) observed that some crowd members could have suspected a suicide was "not for real" and that the suicide threatener was playing a game. The virtual world is susceptible to manipulated and altered images that create difficulties in assessing the veracity of online information (Kim, Jeong, Kim, & So, 2011; Webber, 2000). The absence of a range of proximal cues reduces the capacity to interpret reality and causality of unfolding events (Cohen, 1979), making it difficult to determine degree of risk in online environments (Goh, Phillips, & Blaszczynski, 2011; Phillips, Ogeil, & Blaszczynski, 2015). Such uncertainty may increase the likelihood some audience members doubt the sincerity of a suicide threat. Finally as the episode unfolds more antisocial elements may hear about and be attracted to watch online. Hence, we predict that baiting will be associated with episodes of longer duration.

Season and Time of Episode

Mann (1981) found baiting occurred more often in the summer months when heat contributes to crowd discomfort and frustration. The seasonal temperature is probably less of a factor in online environments although warm temperatures in the home may contribute to irritability and frustration. We will test whether, as found by Mann (1981), online baiting is associated with warm temperatures (i.e. Summer).

Mann (1981) also found that baiting ocurred more often in nightime under the cover of darkness. Again time of day is probably less of a factor in online environments. Cheng, Berstein, Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, and Leskovec (2017) examined whether mood is a predictor of trolling behaviors. Negative mood is associated with trolling behaviors (Cheng et al, 2017). Mood is known to fluctuate during the day, more positive earlier in the day and on weekends. (Golder & Macy, 2011). Mood may also vary with length of the day (Golder & Macy, 2011). Accordingly we will test whether online baiting is associated with time of day.

Way of Committing Suicide

Our study cannot be a direct replication of Mann's (1981) study of crowds witnessing someone threaten to leap off a ledge or tower. In online environments the suicide threat is broadcast using a live feed from a webcam typically in the person's home or garage and involves threats of hanging, shooting, knifing, and drug overdose (Fisher, Overholser, & Dieter, 2015; Simon & Hales, 2012, p. 532). Indeed, a range of methods to threaten and commit suicide are sourced from the internet (Alao, Soderberg, Pohl, & Aloa, 2006; Becker, Mayer, Nagenborg, El-Faddagh, & Schmidt, 2004). We make no predictions, but will test whether online baiting is associated with the method of threatening to suicide.

Victim characteristics (Gender; Intoxication)

Mann (1981) posited the stigma attached to a person's mental condition is another factor in suicide baiting. The "blame the victim" tendency is associated with belief in a "just world" (Lerner, 1980). There is a tendency to reject and blame potential victims when there are cues and labels that allow stigmatization. Mental ill health is a stigma and therefore anyone who threatens to kill themselves regardless of method, is highly vulnerable to stigmatisation. Greater hostility is likely when the stigma is associated with a condition

presumably under the victim's control (Crocker & Major, 1989). For instance, Hammock and Richardson (1993) found in a scenario study that intoxicated victims were more likely to be blamed than sober victims, and male victims more than female victims.

There is concern for people with mental health problems that disclose the stigma of mental disturbance online (Nosko, Wood, & Molema, 2010) as it may elicit negative comment (Singleton, Abeles, & Smith, 2016) and could contribute to online baiting. For instance, Discussion Forum users that exhibit viewpoints that diverge from the topic or the group norm are more likely to attract censure (Cheng, Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, & Leskovec, 2015). It is anticipated that victims that are male or have taken substances (displaying weakness) are more likely to be baited by audiences.

Assistance

Physical distance between audience and victim also allows psychological separation and dehumanization that could increase baiting tendencies (Milgram, 1965; Zimbardo, 1969). Computer mediated communication reduces many of the cues normally used during face to face social interaction. The absence of face to face interaction may reduce altruistic (Weinberger, 1981), and cooperative behaviors (Bos, Gergle, Olson, & Olson, 2001; Bos, Olson, Gergle, Olson, & Wright, 2002; Jensen, Farnham, Drucker, & Kollock, 2000). Indeed, it has been argued it could be unrealistic to expect people to be able to render assistance under such circumstances (Polder-Verkiel, 2012).

As the internet allows mental health service providers to overcome the problems imposed by physical/geographical separation and time zone, it is not clear who is immediately and ultimately responsible to render assistance (Polder-Verkiel, 2012), or pay when assistance is provided (Barak, 2007). Indeed setting a bad example may encourage other individuals to behave similarly (Cheng et al, 2017; Hsueh, Yogeeswaran, & Malinen,

2015). This feature of online distance and physical remoteness may weaken responsibility to intervene and assist and contribute to bystander apathy (cf. Darley & Latane, 1968; Markey, 2000) and even the baiting tendency. Hence we expect less assistance to be rendered when baiting has occurred.

The Present study

With the emergence of suicide threats and attempts in front of webcams, it is important to examine episodes of online suicide baiting to understand the factors and hopefully prevent or reduce the phenomenon. The online suicide threat can involve different forms of social media: Discussion board, Chat room, Facebook, Twitter. The suicide threat can be relayed with varying degrees of fidelity by means of text, audio or video. Other considerations in an episode of suicide threat include the availability of a "return path" (Jensen, 1998) to respond to the disturbed person. If an online suicide threat is announced, but the audience has no opportunity to communicate with the vulnerable individual, we cannot infer suicide baiting. To provide some comparability with Mann's study of suicide threats in public, we focus upon instances of online suicide threat where a live webcam feed was involved and seek similar context.

If the person has been subjected to a sustained and systematic pattern of harassment prior to the online suicide threat attempt, we believe that constitutes cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010), a different phenomenon to spontaneous suicide baiting (Phillips, Diesfeld, & Mann, in press). The legal penalty commensurate with spontaneous catcalls of "jump" during a public (offline) incident appears to be that of public nuisance (Manganis & Leighton, 2011), whereas the penalty associated with sustained in public (offline) bullying can be manslaughter (Martin, 2009). In an attempt to maintain comparability with Mann (1981) we exclude instances where audiences were clearly implicated as a contributing factor

prior to the victim announcing their suicide attempt. Hence, in keeping with Mann (1981), we are interested in studying the spontaneous audience response that follows *after* a suicide threat or intent is announced.

To replicate and extend Mann's (1981) study of suicide baiting into the internet era, the present archival study examines media reports of suicide threats and attempts in front of a webcam, and considers factors contributing to the baiting behaviors of audiences. We are interested in audience characteristics (size; duration of episode), victim characteristics (gender; means of suicide threat e.g. by hanging, gun, or drug use), and reactions (baiting or non-baiting) *after* a vulnerable individual announces intent to commit suicide over a webcam broadcast to an online audience which can make responses received by the victim in real time.

Method and Procedures

In an archival case analysis, the present study examined a sample of 26 online media reports of episodes of threatened suicide involving an online audience. We obtained the sample by repeated searches of the internet over the period 2014 to 2017. Episodes without an audience or with insufficient information were not included in the study. Details of each incident (name of victim and time and place of incident) were cross checked to ensure no case was duplicated. The anonymised sample of 26 cases reported in the public media of threatened suicide involving webcams or live streaming in the period 2001-2017 are listed in Table 1. Where a survivor is identifiable, we have attempted to report sources that disguise their identity.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Research sample

To obtain our research sample of 26 online suicide baiting and non-baiting audiences we searched online media reports of suicides over the internet with an audience of one or more people. We used search terms such as “suicide”, “suicide attempt”, “crowd”, audience”, “webcam”, “skype”, and “livestream”, separately and in combinations. Episodes where there was no evidence of an audience, or no opportunity for a remote audience to respond in real time, or no evidence of an actual audience, or obvious pranks with no suicidal intent, or where details were unclear or disputed, were discarded. Episodes with insufficient information about time and whereabouts of the incident were also excluded.

A range of online activities can contribute to suicide (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Simon & Hales, 2012; p. 532). Episodes indicating pre-threat harassment or obvious premeditation by the audience were not included in the sample. Cyberbullying, invasion of privacy, and blackmail are qualitatively different from spontaneous audience baiting behavior and draw different, more severe, legal penalties (Manganis & Leighton, 2011; Martin, 2009; Phillips, Diesfeld, & Mann, in press). Altogether 45 cases were not included in the research sample due to insufficient data or disputed details, the episodes were hoaxes, or cyberbullying, or there was no evidence of an audience.

We then analysed the 26 episodes for information about name and gender of victim, means of threat or attempt, outcome, drug involvement, audience size, date and place of episode, time of day, season, and any other identifying factors to ensure separate cases (see Table 1). Given our non-inclusion criteria we had 100 per cent agreement on cases reported.

Baiting Responses

We content analysed media reports of internet audience responses *following* a signified threat or intent to attempt suicide for evidence of baiting or jeering. Baiting was deemed to have occurred if reports indicated the victim was denigrated or encouraged to commit suicide. Some examples: during Case "G"s suicide threat she was called an "attention whore", Case "C" was called a "retard", Case "D" was called a "stupid fuck" and "faker" and told "carbon monoxide rules". Case "J" was told that "a 'real man' would have killed himself more quickly". Case "E" was taunted with "Auschwitz", and Case "F" was encouraged to "take a thousant!" pills by Discussion forum users. The reports were also analysed for indications of assistance, that is whether audience members sought to discourage the suicide attempt or assist the victim.

We coded the following variables in each episode : Audience size – less than 10, around 100, more than 200; Time of day – before 6pm, after 6pm; Season – winter or summer according to Northern or Southern Hemisphere. Duration of episode – minutes, around one hour, more than two hours. Indications of drug involvement or use (e.g. recreational substances; prescription medications; alcohol) were noted when reported by the media. Inter-rater coding reliability was obtained by having two Coders independently analyse and then resolve details reported in each episode. Due to the exclusion criteria we achieved 100 percent agreement in identifying baiting versus non baiting and in coding variables.

Data analysis

The coded and collated data were analysed by SPSS using Fisher Exact Tests (one-tailed tests of significance) for 2x2 tables and Chi-Square tests for 2x3 tables (two-tailed tests of significance) (Siegel & Castellan, 1988).

Results and Discussion

The 26 cases were all from the North Hemisphere between 2001 and 2017. Twelve cases were from the USA, 3 from India, 2 each from the UK, France and Turkey, and 1 each from Canada, Russia, Sweden, Japan and Thailand. There were 18 males and 8 females and of these 16 males and 4 females died.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Baiting

Online baiting occurred in 11 of 26 cases (42 percent). This compares with Mann's 1981 study, in which crowd baiting occurred in 10 of 21 cases (47 percent). Although years apart, the incidence of baiting is strikingly similar across the two different contexts.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Outcomes: suicide

In Mann's 1981 study a minority - 7 of 21 (33%) carried out the threat and jumped. However, in our study a majority of suicide threateners 20 of 26 (77%) went through with the threat and suicided. This finding speaks to the lethality of online suicide threats and also the problem for mental health services of being alerted and effecting in-time intervention and prevention when there are online suicide threats.

Audience size

Mann (1981) observed a trend for larger crowds to engage in baiting, but his audiences varied in size from 50 to 4000. In the present study the size of reported audiences

varied from single individuals to as many as the server could support (e.g. 200 to 1500), and we found the audience size was significantly associated with baiting (χ^2(2df, N=24)=14.937, p<.001). This finding is exemplified in episodes with more than 200 audience members. In all 6 cases there was baiting, while in almost all cases (11 of 12) of audiences with fewer than 10 members there was no baiting (see Table 2).

Why do we get an effect from audience size even though the audience is not in physical proximity? There is a greater likelihood in larger audiences of one or two impulsive (Cheng et al, 2015; Erreygers, Pabian, Vandebosch, & Baillien, 2016), or aggressively predisposed individuals. Another factor is the possibility that the word gets around that someone is threatening self-harm. And this attracts the more callous, anti-social individual to join the spectacle (Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014). For instance, Case "C" would have had a larger audience, but 200 was as many as the server could support. A silent majority (Preece, Nonnecke, & Andrews, 2004), within a context of others making half-joking derisory comments can further trigger jeering and baiting in an online audience (Cheng et al, 2017) (see also duration of episode).

Time of episode

Mann (1981) found more baiting episodes occurred at night under cover of darkness and protection of anonymity. While the indoor setting in which people use the internet should make time of day irrelevant for responding to online suicide threats, there remained a trend for baiting to occur more frequently in episodes at night in the location where the suicide threat was being enacted (see also Cheng et al, 2017). Consistent with Mann (1981), in the present study more cases of baiting occurred after 6 pm (8 baiting of 15 episodes = 53%), than before 6pm (2 baiting of 9 episodes =22%) (see Table 2). However the association

between time of day and online audience baiting was not significant. (Fisher Exact Test, p= .134).

Duration of Episode

Mann (1981) reported that episodes of *longer duration* were associated with suicide baiting. This is also the case in the present study, (χ^2 (2df, N=23)=7.853, p<.02). All episodes longer than 2 hours had baiting, whereas all episodes of only a few minutes had no baiting. In longer episodes some audience members might conclude they are "being played" even though the victim is mentally disturbed and visibly distressed (e.g. Case "E"), but it is also likely that brief episodes do not afford the audience sufficient opportunity for consideration. In several instances the intent to commit suicide was followed almost immediately by an attempt (e.g. Cases "T", "V", "X").

Season

Mann (1981) found more baiting episodes occurred in summer. Unlike Mann's (1981) study of would be jumpers, the webcammers and their audiences were more likely to be indoors and this could lessen the potential for hot weather to generate irritability and aggression (but see Cheng et al, 2017). In the present study audience baiting was not significantly associated with the season (χ^2 (1df, N=26)= 0.794, p=.373) (Fisher Exact Test, one-tailed p=.346). Nevertheless, it is important to note that the present study observed 21 of 26 suicide attempts occurred in Winter, whereas Mann (1981) found only 5 of 21 attempts occurred in Winter.

Gender

Males are more likely to attempt suicide (Värnik, 2012), and this can be observed in the present study. Online suicide threats are more a male than female phenomenon. There were 18 male and 8 female suicide threateners and 16 of the 18 males (89%) and 4 of the 8 (50%) females died. Conceivably a male victim (e.g. Case "J") might be ridiculed and baited for showing weakness (Hammock & Richardson, 1993). However the association between baiting and gender was weak. Instead females were somewhat more likely to be baited (4 of 8 = 50%) than males (7 of 18 = 38.9%), but the association was not significant (Fisher Exact Test, p=.46).

Way of commiting suicide

We examined whether the method involved in the suicide threat (i.e. guns, drugs or hanging) was associated with baiting. Suicide episodes involving guns are likely to be quicker and messier. There was a significant association between the method selected and incidence of baiting (χ^2 (2df, N=20) = 7.20, p=.027). None of the 5 victims using a gun were baited (possibly because the episode was quicker), whereas 4 of 5 victims threatening drug overdose were baited, and 6 of 10 victims threatening hanging were baited (see Table 2).

Threats to take a drug overdose were associated with more instances of baiting than other means of threat combined (Fisher Exact test p=.014). Perhaps the more ambiguous forms of suicide threat elicit baiting. It can be unclear for an audience whether a drug overdose victim is sleeping (e.g. Case "B"), and there have been online hoaxes involving hanging. People do not question the threat when a gun is involved, as it is the most common means of death depicted on television. Drug overdoses and hanging are less "available" in the media.

Substance abuse often leads to stigmatization (Hammock & Richardson, 1993; Crocker & Major, 1989). Victims using drugs take longer to die, and therefore provide a greater opportunity for a larger audience to develop, and accordingly the likelihood of at least one "troll" or callous baiter in the audience (Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulus, 2014; Cheng et al, 2015). Further research would help determine whether duration of the episode or some other factor contributes to suicide baiting when there are different methods of suicide threat.

Assistance

Audience reactions to suicide threat are actually mixed. The audience in online suicide threat episodes is not altogether a taunting and callous bystander "crowd" quite indifferent to the person's anguish and vulnerability. While baiting occurs in 42% of audiences, not everyone is involved in baiting and in 88% of audiences at least some people offer to assist and call for the person to not self harm. Mann (1981) also reported that spectators in close proximity to the person on the ledge attempted to prevent the suicide.

As there are concerns that helping and cooperative behaviors might reduce in online environments, cases were checked for indications that audience members sought to dissuade the victim from their suicide attempt. Non-baited victims (15 of 15 helped =100%) were more likely to receive assistance than baited victims (8 of 11 helped =72.7%), the association between baiting and assistance approached significance (χ^2(1df, N=25)=4.625, p=.032) (Fisher Exact test p=.063). A baiting online audience may also contain some altruistic individuals, but there seems to be a reduced rate of assistance when a baiting example has been set, as the callous appear to inhibit the caring (Cheng et al, 2017; Hsueh, Yogeeswaran, & Malinen, 2015).

Attempt outcome

The baiting of a potential suicide is a callous act. Indeed in online environments this may contravene the law in specific jurisdictions. In Mann's 1981 study, 3 of 10 baited suicide threateners (30%) jumped, while 4 of 11 non-baited individuals (36 %) ended up jumping. Accordingly there was no evidence that baiting was the contributing factor in the suicide. In the present study, of the 11 people that were baited 9 took their own lives and 2 were injured. However, to put this in perspective, almost all non-baited people also took their lives (11 of 15) or were injured (2 of 15). Only 2 of 15 (13 %) emerged unharmed. In brief, while we find a miniscule association between non-baiting and positive outcome (χ^2(2df, N=26)=1.62, p=.444), essentially the conclusion, as in the Mann 1981 study, is that internet baiting is an concomitant rather than key contributing factor to the subsequent suicide. But another conclusion is that online suicide threat is a highly lethal behavior and without assistance (see below) victims are highly likely to take their own lives.

Indeed, the potential importance of assistance can be illustrated by the impact of police or emergency services. There was a significant association between the arrival of police or emergency services and outcome (χ^2(2df, N=26) = 9.652, p=.008). About half (4 of 9=44.4%) the victims survived if the police or emergency services arrived, whereas most (16 of 17=94.1%) victims died without such assistance.

General Discussion

Previous studies of suicide threatened in front of a webcam have discussed the feasibility of helping the victim (Polder-Verkiel, 2012), the dynamic nature of audience responses (Westerlund, Hadlaczky, & Wasserman, 2015), or the motivations of the victims (Seko, 2016). As a replication and extension of Mann (1981), the present study considered

the circumstances surrounding the suicide attempt, and the likelihood that the victim would be baited by an audience *after* suicidal intent had been announced.

As with Mann (1981) the size of the online audience and the duration of the incident contributed to the likelihood of suicide baiting. Although, unlike Mann (1981), neither the time of day or the season seemed to contribute to suicide baiting. However, the opportunity to stigmatise the victim may also contribute to baiting behaviors. Several notable instances of suicides in front of a webcam (e.g. cases "B" and "C") involved drug use. It is unlikely that these constitute a "cluster" (Robertson, Skegg, Poore, Williams, & Taylor, 2012) caused by behavioral contagion (Haw, Hawton, Niedzwiedz, & Platt, 2013; Stack, 2005), as they all occurred years apart. Instead the data suggest there could be differential audience responses to those attempting suicide by jumping or drug overdose.

We expected a greater tendency towards baiting online, but there was little evidence this was the case. Mann reported a baiting rate of 47.6% in his 1981 study of jumpers. The present study obtained a baiting rate of 42.3%. Accordingly there is little evidence that baiting is more frequent online. This may be because there are guidelines governing media reporting (Bohanna & Wang, 2012; Maloney et al, 2014) and laws prohibiting the reporting of suicidal content online in specific jurisdictions (Pirkis, Neal, Dare, Blood, & Studdert, 2009). Conversely, there have been suggestions that the media sensationalizes suicide over the internet (Thom et al., 2011). In either instance, this has implications for archival studies (Shaughnessy, Zechmeister, & Zechmeister, 2011). As there can be a potential selectivity in reporting of online suicides (O'Donnell, Farmer, & Catalan, 1993), it might be difficult to interpret different baiting rates (Shaughnessy, Zechmeister, & Zechmeister, 2011). Nevertheless the rate of suicide baiting occurring in the present study is comparable to that reported by Mann (1981), indicating that this specific behavior is not being over-reported (at least compared to media reports of jumpers).

It has been suggested that the absence of a physical audience creates disinhibited behavior (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012; Suler, 2004) and exaggerated evaluation (King, 2001) online. The observed rates of suicide baiting in the present study do not support such a position. Instead of exacerbating deviant tendencies (Suler & Phillips, 1998) it would appear that the internet simply serves to document these suicidal behaviors and record them for posterity (Morahan-Martin, 2005). It appears the internet serves to provide another setting and opportunity for disturbed individuals to threaten and carry out suicide and for others to watch (Luxton, June, & Fairall, 2012). The internet also provides an opportunity for the callous and aggressive in the audience to vent deviant tendencies and this may influence the likelihood that an audience will render assistance (see Cheng et al, 2017). Even so, in the majority of instances (88%) members of the audience attempted to render assistance.

Although we observe comparable rates of baiting, the relative lethality of suicide attempts online seems higher than that reported by the media by Mann (1981). Seven of 21 cases in Mann (1981) jumped, whereas 20 of the present 26 webcammers died and four were injured, suggesting that a suicide attempt in a public place is more likely to receive assistance than an attempt in a private domicile. For instance, police in India claimed they were unable to enter the flat where Case “L” lay bleeding as Indian laws prevented them from breaking into the flat. Assistance had been rendered to many of these webcammers (e.g. Cases “Q“ and “R“) but the required technical skills and expertise would seem to be beyond most internet users (Polder-Verkiel, 2012), arguing for specialised services trained to assist people online (Amichai-Hamburger, Klomek, Friedman, Zuckerman, & Shani-Sherman, 2014; Barak, 2007). Indeed Facebook is apparently developing artificial intelligence and sentiment analysis systems to detect and aid suicidal individuals (Guynn, 2017).

Although anonymity and deindividuation has been proposed as the mechanism promoting suicide baiting, it is noteworthy that several of the cases that were baited

announced their intent on insult (e.g. case "A") or "troll" sites (e.g. cases "C" and "D"). It would be reasonable to anticipate that the announcement of suicidal intent (i.e. "do an hero") on such sites would be greeted with derision and baiting. Pro-suicide sites are of concern (Baume, Cantor, & Rolfe, 1997; Becker, Mayer, Nagenborg, El-Faddagh, & Schmidt, 2004; Biddle et al, 2012), and while many jurisdictions seek to control such activities online (e.g. Pirkis, Neale, Dare, Blood, & Studdert, 2009), others do not (Masuda, Kurahashi, & Onari, 2013) and can normalise deviant or inappropriate behavior (Mann, 1986; Martin, Coyier, VanSistine, & Schroeder, 2013; McDonald, Horstmann, Strom, & Pope, 2009).

Limitations

The present sample of webcam suicides covering 2001-2017 is small, but that is because the behavior under consideration is fortunately rare. Accordingly, we must be cautious in drawing conclusions about the effects of an audience in episodes of online threatened suicide. But as noted in the introduction, many reports we found of online suicides and threats to suicide were not included in the study because of insufficient data, unclear details, or specifically involved cyberbullying.

Other studies have used both archival and experimental studies to study antisocial online behaviors such as trolling (Cheng, Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, & Leskovec, 2015; Cheng, Bernstein, Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, & Leskovec, 2017), and while such an approach is laudable, the suicidal behavior we consider in the present paper is beyond the purview of the law. Witness comments and associated videos are typically taken down by servers and users (Seko, 2016; Westerlund, Hadlaczky, & Wasserman, 2015), and we sincerely doubt a simulation study would be acceptable to most ethics committees. As such, our study complements the studies of less severe antisocial behavior observed online by others (e.g.

Cheng, Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, & Leskovec, 2015), but does not allow a more systematic examination of the interplay of factors contributing to baiting.

Conceivably a consideration of suicides conveyed live over other media may confer different findings. Text (e.g. SMS, Twitter, Chat) has also been used by victims to document their suicides online. As text based interactions can be asynchronous this may limit the capacity for audience reaction (Jensen, 1998). And though, text based interactions are known to elicit less helping behaviors (Bos et al, 2001; 2002; Jensen et al, 2000), this tendency can be offset when requests are directed towards specific individuals (Barron & Yechiam, 2002; Markey, 2000).

Conclusions

The present study has considered audience response to announced suicidal intent online. Duration of incident, drug use, and size of audience contributed to the likelihood of baiting, but other factors promoting deindividuation (e.g. cover of darkness) seemed less likely to operate in online environments.

The threat and act of suicide occurs in both public settings and online environments (cf. Simon & Hales 2012). The phenomenon of baiting a vulnerable disturbed person who threatens suicide is rare but real in public places and in online environments. Suicide threats made online by disturbed people are serious and there is a high risk they will actually commit suicide. The high lethality associated with online suicide threats (92% in our sample) underlines the importance of professional intervention and rapid response in episodes of online suicide threats.

We found audience responses to online suicide threats covered the range from baiting and jeering but also concern and offer of assistance, and calls to emergency services. In sum, the audience in online suicide threat episodes can be a concerned and caring audience and not

only a baiting or indifferent audience, as found in Mann's 1981 study of baiting crowds. A key to understanding and perhaps predicting audience response is the duration of the episode, which as the drama unfolds and the audience grows in numbers produces both callous antisocial responses and also caring prosocial responses. Our study of audience response to online suicide threats adds to archival and experimental studies that study deviant online behaviors such as trolling (Cheng et al, 2015; 2017). To conclude, observers of an online suicide threat are a mixed audience, which over time and in accord with size and duration, comprise the callous and antisocial (who bait the victim), the caring and prosocial (who discourage the victim), the indifferent and apathetic (who watch and say nothing), and possibly others too paralysed to know how to respond.

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Table 1. Details of instances of online suicide attempted in front of a webcam.

ID	Date	Place	Baiting	Duration	Time of Day	Audience Size	Gender	Outcome	Drug use
A	Mar. 2007	UK	Baited	2 hours	9pm	Around 50	Male	Died	None
B	Nov. 2008	USA	Baited	12 hours	3am	1500	Male	Died	Opiates Benzodiazepines
C	Dec. 2013	Canada	Baited	40 minutes	6.16pm	200	Male	Injured	Booze Pills
D	Oct. 2010	Sweden	Baited	1.5 hours	11.51am	638 posts	Male	Died	Dexofen Paracetamol
E	Nov. 2010	Japan	Baited	Over night	Hung at 5.30am	170	Male	Died	Drunk
F	Jan. 2003	USA	Baited	2 hours	4am	10+	Male	Died	Marijuana Alcohol prescription drugs?
G	Jul. 2001	USA	Baited	around an hour	After 6pm	1000+	Female	Multiple seizures	3 bottles of pills Seroquel, Wellbutrin, Celexa
H	May 2016	France	Baited	4.5 hours (series of videos)	1pm	1000s	Female	Died	None
I	Jan 2017	USA	Baited Bullied by mother	About 3 hours	3am	100s	Female	Died	None
J	Sept 2014	Russia	Baited	Unknown	Unknown	Dozens	Male	Died	None
K	Dec. 2016	USA	Baited	42 minutes	9.24pm	At least one	female	Died	None
L	Nov. 2011	India	Not baited	10+ hours	11.20am	At least one	Male	Died	None
M	Aug. 2008	USA	Not baited	Around an hour	daytime	girlfriend	Male	Died	None
N	Dec. 2010	Thailand	Not baited	Around an hour	3.30pm	Boyfriend and others on Camfrog	Female	Died	None
O	Mar. 2008	India	Not baited	40 minutes	evening	girlfriend	Male	Died	None
P	Nov. 2011	France	Not baited	Minutes	Around noon	At least one	Male	Died	None
Q	Dec. 2008	USA	Not baited	Around 90 minutes	Around 2.30am	A Texas man and a good samaritan	Female	Rescued	None
R	Feb. 2009	USA	Not baited	More than 7 hours	10.30pm	At least one	Male	Injured	None
S	Jul 2009	USA	Not baited	Unknown	9am	At least one	Female	Rescued	None
T	Dec. 2017	UK	Not baited (negative comments later)	30 seconds	3.30am	Unknown	Male	Died	None
U	April 2017	USA	Not baited (Some cyberbullying prior to incident)	8 minutes	5am	Many friends and loved ones	Male	Died	None
V	Oct 2016	Turkey	Not baited	37 seconds	3pm	Many friends	male	Died	None
W	Jan 2017	USA	Not baited	Unknown	5.30am	unknown	Male	Died	None
X	Oct 2017	Turkey	Not baited	1 minute	5pm	Friends and relatives	Male	Died	None
Y	May 2017	USA	Not baited	30+ minutes	7.30pm	Multiple friends	Female	Injured	Pills
Z	Apr 2017	India	Not baited	30 minutes	6.15pm	Some friends	Male	Died	None

Table 2. Comparison of Baiting and Non-baiting audiences online.

Factor	Baiting (N=11)	Non-Baiting (N=15)	Fisher Exact Test *p*	Chi Square *p*
Audience size				
less than 10	1	11		
around 100	4	2		
more than 200	6	0		.001
Time of episode				
before 6pm	2	7		
after 6pm	8	7	.143	
Episode duration				
minutes	0	6		
around an hour	4	5		
more than 2 hours	6	2		.020
Season				
summer	3	2		
winter	8	13	.346	
Gender				
Male	7	11		
Female	4	4	.457	
Way of Committing Suicide				
Gun	0	5		
Hanging	6	4		
Drugs	4	1		.027
Drug involvement				
No drug use reported	5	13		
Drugs reported	6	1	.014	
Assistance				
Audience not helped	3	0		
Audience helped	8	15	.063	
Attempt outcome				
not gone through	0	2		
injured	2	2		
died	9	11		.444

Highlights

- We analysed the contexts of 26 suicide attempts occurring in front of webcams
- 42% of audiences baited (jeered, denigrated) suicidal individuals
- 88% of audiences sought to assist suicidal individuals
- Larger audiences tended to bait drug using victims over longer duration incidents