

Social Factors in Celebrity Suicides: A Content Analysis of South Indian Online News Reports

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Abstract

Background: The reasons for celebrity suicide are multifaceted and often involve a complex interplay of mental health challenges, intense public scrutiny, and the pressures associated with fame—this content analysis aimed to explore the social factors contributing to celebrity suicides in South India. By examining the prevalence of specific factors, the research seeks to provide valuable insights into the dynamics of these tragic incidents. **Methods:** In this content analysis study, five leading Indian online news portals (i.e. Times of India, Indian Express, India Today, NDTV, and the Week) were meticulously chosen for a retrospective analysis. The focus was on English-language news. The study incorporated variables such as age, place of suicide, suicide date, reasons for suicide, and other identifying factors to establish patterns. After eliminating repetitions, a final dataset of 17 unique reports was assessed. **Results:** The findings underscored the complex interplay of demographic, contextual, and societal factors contributing to celebrity suicides. The study identified the significant influence of specific news portals, prompting contemplation on media's potential impact on public perception. Utilizing a word cloud approach, the research has elucidated contributing factors such as depression, love failure, financial problems, mental health issues, relationship challenges, despair, and deprived opportunities. **Conclusion:** This frequency content analysis offers valuable insights into the social factors of celebrity suicides in South India, providing a foundation for further research and collaborative efforts. Addressing mental health challenges within this population necessitates a holistic approach, encompassing media responsibility and targeted interventions.

Keywords: Celebrity; Suicides; Social factors; Content analysis.

Introduction

Every year, more than 0.7 million individuals lose their lives due to suicide, with countless others grappling with the challenges of attempted suicide (World Health Organization, 2023a). Each suicide represents a profound tragedy, resonating across families, communities, and entire nations, leaving enduring effects on the individuals left behind. The repercussions extend beyond the immediate loss, casting a long-lasting effect on the lives of those affected (Kabir et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2022).

Suicide stands as a growing and significant public health concern in India. Nevertheless, it is preventable through timely, evidence-based, and often cost-effective interventions. In 2016, the suicide mortality rate per 100,000 populations was recorded at 16.5, underscoring the urgent need for targeted efforts in prevention and mental health support (World Health Organization, 2023b). The suicide of a celebrity is frequently a widely publicised occurrence in India. Throughout the investigative process, the reputations of numerous individuals connected to the celebrity undergo scrutiny, leading to the unwarranted exposure and discussion of their private and personal details across electronic, printed, and social media platforms (Singh, 2020).

Three emotions can serve as triggers for individuals contemplating suicide: firstly, a profound sense of hopelessness, secondly a feeling of helplessness, and thirdly a pervasive sense of worthlessness (Misra & Srivastava, 2021). The risk of suicide tends to rise as levels of happiness decrease (Vinnakota et al., 2021) (Koivumaa-Honkanen et al., 2003). Recently, people have found themselves perplexed and deeply affected by situations in which celebrities and accomplished individuals, who outwardly appeared content, made the heart-breaking decision to end their lives. Tragically, this trend is not new, with notable figures like legendary actor

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Guru Dutt in 1964, filmmaker Manmohan Desai in 1994, model-turned-actress Kuljeet Randhawa in 2006, film actress Jiah Khan in 2013, famous TV actress Pratyusha Banerjee in 2016, and numerous others having experienced similar fates (Misra & Srivastava, 2021).

The reasons for celebrity suicide are multifaceted and often involve a complex interplay of mental health challenges, intense public scrutiny, and the pressures associated with fame (Kar et al., 2020) (7). Celebrities may grapple with internal struggles, such as depression, anxiety, or substance abuse, exacerbated by the demanding nature of their careers. Personal and relationship issues, coupled with financial uncertainties, can further contribute to the vulnerability of celebrities. Additionally, the stigma surrounding mental health within the public eye may hinder access to necessary support and treatment (Valenti & Paris, 2023).

South India is the southern part of the peninsular Deccan Plateau in India, encompassing the states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Telangana, occupying 19.31% of India's area and 20% of India's population (Wikiwand, 2023).

Rationale for the study

Celebrities' suicides not only have profound implications on the mental well-being of individuals but can also exert a considerable influence on public health, potentially leading to suicide contagion. The potential for suicide contagion, commonly referred to as the 'Werther effect,' poses a significant risk, particularly among vulnerable individuals (Menon, Arafat, et al., 2020). The intricate relationship between media coverage of celebrity suicides and the subsequent rise in suicide rates underscores the need for responsible reporting practices and comprehensive mental health support to mitigate the adverse effects on public health (Colman, 2018). South India's distinctive cultural context necessitates a nuanced examination of how cultural factors intersect with the experiences of celebrities, guiding the development of culturally sensitive interventions (Sinha & Kumar, 2004). Moreover, the media's role in shaping public perceptions and contributing to the stigma surrounding mental health requires scrutiny for the formulation of responsible reporting practices.

A comprehensive understanding of the social factors influencing suicide, particularly among celebrities, holds the potential to play a pivotal role in prevention efforts. Notably, there is a significant gap in existing literature, as no comprehensive report has been published on celebrity suicides, specifically in South India. The insights gained from this analysis can inform targeted interventions, mental health support systems, and awareness campaigns tailored to the unique challenges faced by celebrities in South India. This content analysis aimed to systematically examine and understand the social factors contributing to suicide among celebrities in South India.

Methods

This section outlines the structured approach employed to extract insights from textual data, shedding light on the unique challenges faced by celebrities in the South Indian cultural context. By employing content analysis, this research aimed to identify the social factors contributing to suicidal patterns and provided a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics surrounding celebrity suicides. Through a meticulous process, this methodology sought to uncover patterns, themes, and relationships of celebrities' suicides.

Research question

Research question for this frequency content analysis was formulated using PEO (Population, Exposure, Outcome) framework (Table 1).

Research question: How do various social factors contribute to the frequency of suicide among celebrities in South India?

Data collection

In this study, five prominent Indian online news portals, namely Times of India, Indian Express, India Today, NDTV, and the Week, were meticulously selected for retrospective analysis. Focusing specifically on news related to celebrity suicides among South Indian celebrities, the search was conducted in English, the country's official language. The selection of these portals was informed by a comprehensive background search, emphasizing their prominence and popularity in delivering news content. The search term "Celebrity suicide" was utilised for the retrospective analysis, concentrating on the circularity and reach of the chosen portals. The selection of online

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portals for this study was driven by their accessibility and feasibility for conducting a retrospective analysis of suicide reports. Online portals offer a rich repository of readily available content, facilitating efficient data collection and analysis. The digital nature of these platforms ensures a comprehensive and timely compilation of suicide-related information. This approach enhances the practicality and efficiency of conducting a retrospective examination of celebrity suicides among South Indian celebrities, allowing for a thorough investigation of patterns and trends in the reporting of these incidents. To ensure data integrity and eliminate repetition, instances where the same celebrity suicide was reported across multiple portals were treated as duplications. Such duplications were carefully identified and consolidated to prevent redundancy in the dataset.

Table 1: PEO framework

PEO	Description
Population	Celebrities in South India
Exposure	Social factors such as mental health factors, public expectation, professional competition, relationship challenges, financial crisis, substance abuse, physical violence, online harassment, cultural expectations.
Outcome	Suicide among celebrities

The analysis included variables such as age, place of suicide, suicide date, reasons for suicide, and other identifying factors to identify and document patterns and repetitions. The study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how these major online news portals covered and reported celebrity suicides among South Indian celebrities.

Following the removal of repetitions, the final dataset comprising a total of 17 unique reports was inputted into Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS, version 26) and Microsoft Excel version 2018 software for thorough assessment and analysis. These statistical tools were utilised to conduct a comprehensive examination of the variables, allowing for a rigorous analysis of patterns and trends related to celebrity suicides among South Indian celebrities. "Atlas ti" software was used to get word cloud.

Inclusion of news

News content explicitly indicating a case as "celebrity suicide" was included in the analysis. News reports pertaining to celebrity suicides within the geographical boundaries of India, with a specific focus on South India, were included. News articles published from 2019 to 2023 were considered for retrospective analysis. Examining news articles from the past four years keeps the analysis current. It captures the latest shifts in social, economic, and political dynamics, offering insights that are relevant to the present situation. By applying these inclusion criteria, the study aimed to capture and analyse relevant and recent information on celebrity suicides within the specified geographical and temporal parameters, providing a focused examination of the chosen online news portals' coverage.

Variables

The study incorporates the following variables for analysis: the age of the celebrity, the gender of the victim, the date of publication, the leading cause of suicide (if known), and the location of the incident. These variables have been selected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the patterns and contextual details surrounding celebrity suicides among South Indian celebrities.

Ethical approval

No formal ethical clearance was deemed necessary for this study as the data was exclusively comprised of previously published information that was accessible online. The research protocol received approval from the ethical committee of Anglia Ruskin University. The retrospective nature of the analysis, utilizing publicly

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available data, ensures compliance with ethical standards while contributing valuable insights into the reporting patterns of celebrity suicides among South Indian celebrities.

Results

The comprehensive analysis of newspaper reports from January 2015 to November 2023 across designated news portals has yielded noteworthy insights. The mean age of respondents, averaging 34.29 years and ranging from 21 to 66 years, offers a comprehensive overview of the age distribution within the studied cohort. Among the 17 reports, 47.06% involve individuals in the 20-30 age group, indicating a considerable prevalence among this demographic. Furthermore, 29.41% fall within the 31-40 age bracket, and 23.53% are 41 years and above, reflecting a varied distribution across age categories.

Table 2: Distribution of demographic data of the celebrities who committed suicide in south India reported in five Indian online news portals (n=17)

Age in years	Frequency(n)	Percentage (%)
From 20-30	8	47.06
From 31-40	5	29.41
40 years and above	4	23.53
Gender		
Male	8	47.06
Female	8	47.06
Transgender	1	5.88
States		
Kerala	6	35.29
Karnataka	4	23.53
Tamil Nadu	4	23.53
Telangana	1	5.88
Andhra Pradesh	2	11.76

An exploration of gender distribution reveals a balanced representation, with 41.06% identifying as male and an equal percentage as female. Additionally, a notable 5.88% of respondents identify as transwomen, highlighting the importance of recognizing diverse gender identities within the context of celebrity suicides.

Turning attention to the online news portals, a nuanced analysis showcases the reporting patterns among major platforms. The Times of India emerges as a prominent contributor, reporting 35.29% of celebrity suicide cases, followed closely by India Today at 29.41%. Other significant contributors include Indian Express, The Week, and NDTV, each accounting for 11.76% of the reported cases. These variations in reporting frequencies emphasize the need for a comprehensive understanding of media dynamics and their role in shaping public perceptions.

The distinctiveness of the year 2021 is pronounced as a critical period, characterized by the highest reported suicide rate, standing at 29.41%. This temporal trend, visually depicted in Figure 1, accentuates the dynamic nature of celebrity suicide rates over the years. The notable spike in 2021 prompts a deeper exploration into the underlying factors contributing to this peak. The temporal analysis invites further inquiry to understand the unique circumstances, societal dynamics, or external influences that may have contributed to the heightened incidence of celebrity suicides during this specific year.

The distribution of various factors influencing celebrity suicides is visually depicted through word clouds (Figure 2, and Figure 3). These illustrative representations highlight the prevalence of specific themes associated with these tragic incidents. Common reasons discerned from the word clouds include depression, love failure, financial problems, mental health issues, problems with partners, despair, and deprived opportunities. The prominence of

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smaller proportion, 5.88%, involves the method of slash vein. This breakdown, detailed in Table 3, underscores the prevalence of hanging as the primary method employed in the studied cases.

Table 3: Method of suicides done by celebrities in South India

Method	Frequency(n)	Percentage (%)
Hanging	13	76.47
Poison	3	17.65
Vein slashing	1	5.88
Total	17	100

The study of celebrity suicide reports spanning January 2015 to November 2023 reveals observations. Notable demographic aspects include a diverse age range of 21 to 66 years, with a concentration in the 20-30 age group. Gender distribution shows a balanced representation, with 41.06% male, 41.06% female, and 5.88% identifying as transwoman. Contributing factors, as indicated by a word cloud, encompass prevalent themes such as depression, love failure, financial problems, mental health issues, relationship challenges, despair, and deprived opportunities. Media portrayal analysis underscores the influence of prominent news portals, with The Times of India and India Today reporting most cases. Temporal trends reveal a peak in suicides in 2021, prompting further exploration into potential external influences. Regarding suicide methods, hanging emerges as the predominant choice at 76.47%, followed by poisoning (17.65%) and slash vein (5.88%).

Discussion

Suicide is a tragic act wherein individuals intentionally harm themselves with the objective of terminating their own lives, ultimately leading to their death (Kabir et al., 2023). The escalating incidence of suicide is evolving into a profound public health concern (Ponnudurai, 2015). The rising prevalence of this tragic phenomenon underscores the urgency and gravity of addressing the multifaceted factors contributing to self-harm and the loss of precious lives (Soomro & Kakhi, 2015). The intricate interplay of mental health challenges, social determinants, and various stressors accentuates the need for comprehensive strategies and interventions to mitigate the impact of suicide on individuals, families, and communities (Menon, Padhy, et al., 2020).

A current study reported that depression, love failure, financial problems, mental health issues, relationship challenges, despair, and deprived opportunities were the main reasons for suicide among South Indian celebrities. (Menon, Padhy, et al., 2020) also reported that celebrity suicides are often driven by a persistent sense of despair, depression, substance misuse, and a myriad of personal and financial stressors. Justification for this alignment can be attributed to the universal nature of certain stressors and challenges that celebrities face. Issues such as depression, love failure, financial problems, mental health struggles, and relationship challenges are pervasive and can affect individuals from all walks of life, irrespective of their public status. The shared prevalence of these challenges highlights the commonality of human experiences, even within the unique context of celebrity life. Moreover, the persistence of despair and the multifaceted nature of stressors underscore the complex interplay of factors that can lead celebrities to contemplate suicide (Levi-Belz et al., 2019).

The predominant age group observed in the celebrity suicides examined in this study fell within the range of 20 to 30 years. This aligns with the findings of a study conducted by Myung et al (2015), which indicated a significant likelihood of suicide victims being in the age range of 20 to 39 years. The convergence of results between these studies underscores a critical pattern in the age demographics of individuals affected by suicide. The emphasis on the age bracket of 20 to 30 years in celebrity suicides and the broader 20 to 39 years range in the study by Myung et al., (2015) suggests a vulnerability or heightened risk during these developmental stages of life. This consistent trend across studies warrants careful consideration when formulating targeted preventive measures and intervention strategies.

The current study's observation of equal frequencies between genders may reflect variations in factors such as sample demographics, cultural influences, or the timeframe of the study. Contrary to this, a study by Vijayakumar, (2015) reported that that females are more prone to suicide than males. These disparities underscore the importance of considering context-specific factors and the evolving nature of suicide patterns. It also emphasizes the need for continued research to explore the intricate interplay of gender-related vulnerabilities and societal influences on

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suicide rates (Nowotny et al., 2015). The study reported an important finding, indicating that one transwoman also experienced suicidal behaviour. This observation highlights the vulnerability of transgender individuals to mental health challenges, including suicidal thoughts and actions. Transgender individuals often face unique stressors related to societal stigma, discrimination, and challenges associated with gender identity (Smith et al., 2018).

In comparison, a study conducted by Lim et al., (2014) reported a divergence in suicide methods between suicide attempters and completers. Among individuals attempting suicide, the most frequent method was drug poisoning. However, among those who completed suicide, hanging emerged as the most common method. This contrast in methods between suicide attempters and completers highlights the complexity of suicidal behaviours and the importance of understanding distinct patterns within different groups. The findings from both studies collectively contribute to a nuanced understanding of suicide trends, emphasizing the need for tailored strategies that consider the unique factors influencing suicide attempts and completions, particularly within the celebrity population. Biddle et al., (2010) reported that the consideration or adoption of hanging as a method for suicide is often influenced by two primary factors: the anticipated nature of the death resulting from hanging and the accessibility of this method. Hanging is often viewed as a method that can result in a relatively rapid and decisive outcome, which might be appealing to those seeking a specific type of closure or an end to their suffering (Tousignant et al., 2005).

The demise of celebrities, particularly through suicide, has been associated with a phenomenon known as the "celebrity suicide contagion effect." This effect suggests that the publicized suicides of well-known individuals, especially those in the spotlight, can potentially lead to an upsurge in population suicide rates (Pirkis et al., 2006; Tousignant et al., 2005). The impact of media reporting on the suicides of entertainment celebrities is often associated with an imitation effect, commonly referred to as the 'copycat' phenomenon. This effect becomes more pronounced when there is extensive media coverage of the suicide, especially when the method is explicitly detailed and reports are glamorized and sensationalized (Hawton & Williams, 2005; Yip et al., 2006). These insights are critical for informing targeted preventive measures and mental health interventions, emphasizing the need for a tailored approach to address the unique challenges faced by celebrities.

Strengths of the study

The study conducts an in-depth examination of the contributing social factors, providing a comprehensive understanding of the complexities surrounding celebrity suicides. This depth allows for a nuanced exploration that goes beyond surface-level observations. The current study is socially relevant and sensitive, addressing a significant and often overlooked issue. By shedding light on the social factors involved in celebrity suicides, the research contributes to a broader understanding of mental health challenges within the celebrity community. Furthermore, adopting a multifaceted approach, particularly by using a word cloud to illustrate contributing factors, adds depth to the analysis. This method captures the diverse and interconnected nature of the reasons associated with celebrity suicides, offering a holistic perspective. Additionally, the identification of the prevalent method of suicide, explicitly hanging, provides practical information that can inform targeted preventive measures and mental health interventions. This aspect of the study has practical implications for mental health professionals and policymakers.

Limitations of the study

Despite its strengths, the study also has inherent limitations. Firstly, there is a challenge in generalizing the findings beyond the South Indian context. The study's region-specific focus may limit the applicability of its results to broader cultural or geographical contexts. Additionally, the reliance on online newspaper reports introduces potential bias. Editorial decisions in selecting and presenting news articles may influence the study's findings, potentially overlooking certain cases or emphasizing others.

While the study identifies contributing factors, it may not fully capture the complex interplay and causation of these social factors leading to celebrity suicides. Individual cases are inherently unique, and the study may not fully grasp the depth of these complexities. The study acknowledges the media's role but may not thoroughly delve into the nuanced impact of media portrayal. Sensationalism or misrepresentation in media coverage may influence public perceptions and attitudes, a fact that the study might not fully explore.

Conclusion

This frequency content analysis of celebrity suicide online newspaper reports spanning offered valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of these tragic incidents. Contributing factors, elucidated through a word cloud, emphasize recurrent themes such as depression, love failure, financial problems, mental health issues, relationship challenges, despair, and deprived opportunities. The media's role, evident in the prominence of specific news portals, prompts contemplation on its potential influence on public perception.

Temporal trends highlight a significant surge in suicides in 2021, raising questions about external factors or systemic issues. The prevalent method of hanging underscores the need for targeted preventive measures and mental health interventions. Considering these findings, it becomes evident that further research and collaborative efforts are indispensable. Formulating effective preventive measures and support systems demands a deeper exploration of the identified factors. Such endeavours should be rooted in a comprehensive understanding of celebrity mental health complexities, paving the way for informed strategies that address the root causes and foster a supportive environment. The integration of media ethics, targeted mental health interventions, and collaborative research initiatives is paramount for forging a path toward mitigating the prevalence of celebrity suicides and providing meaningful support to those in need.

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