

Media and Suicidal Behaviour

for SOCI0067 Crime and the Media

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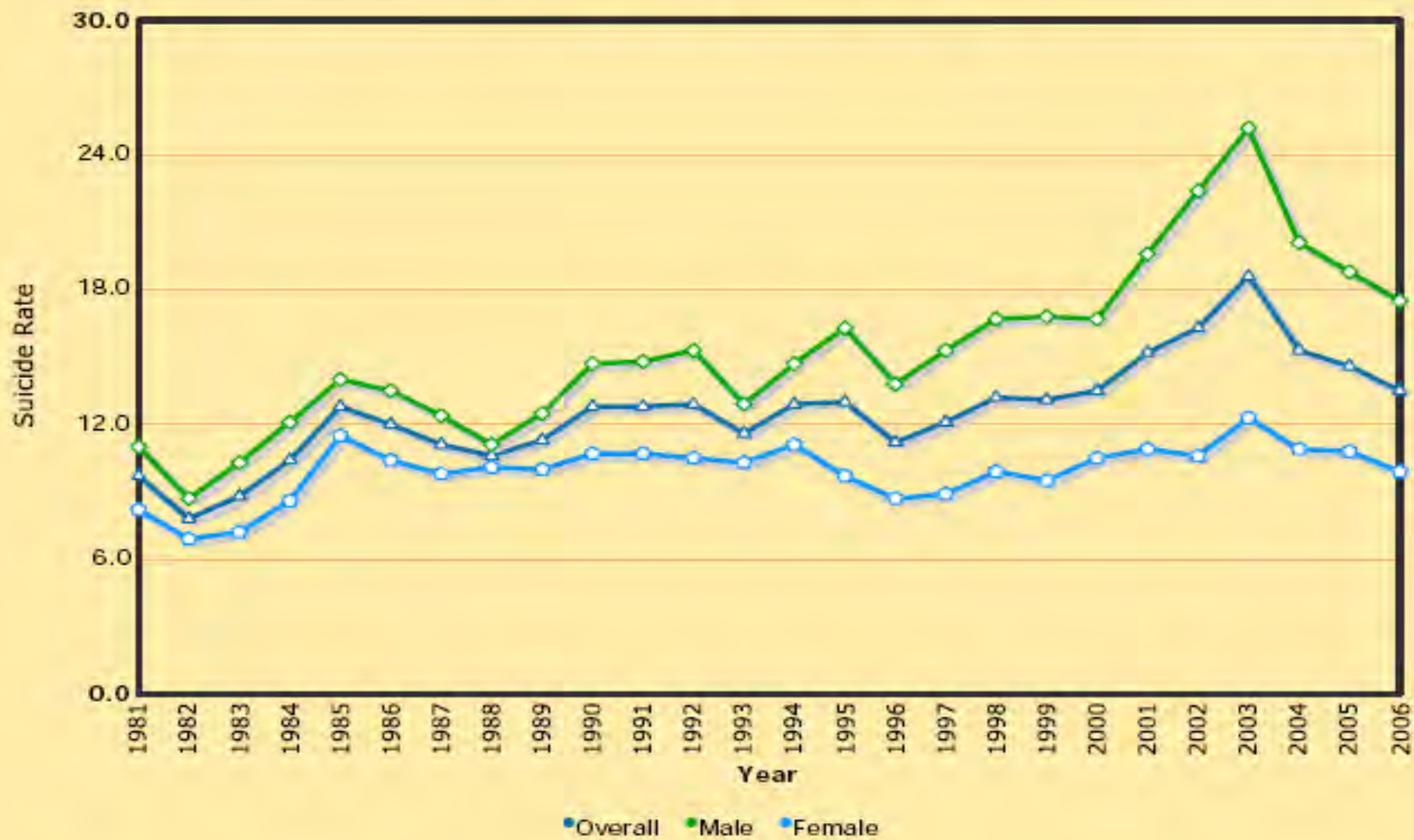
Synopsis

- Suicide in Hong Kong
- Suicide & the Media: conceptual frameworks and theories
- Media reporting in Hong Kong
- Case study: Celebrity suicide and news reporting

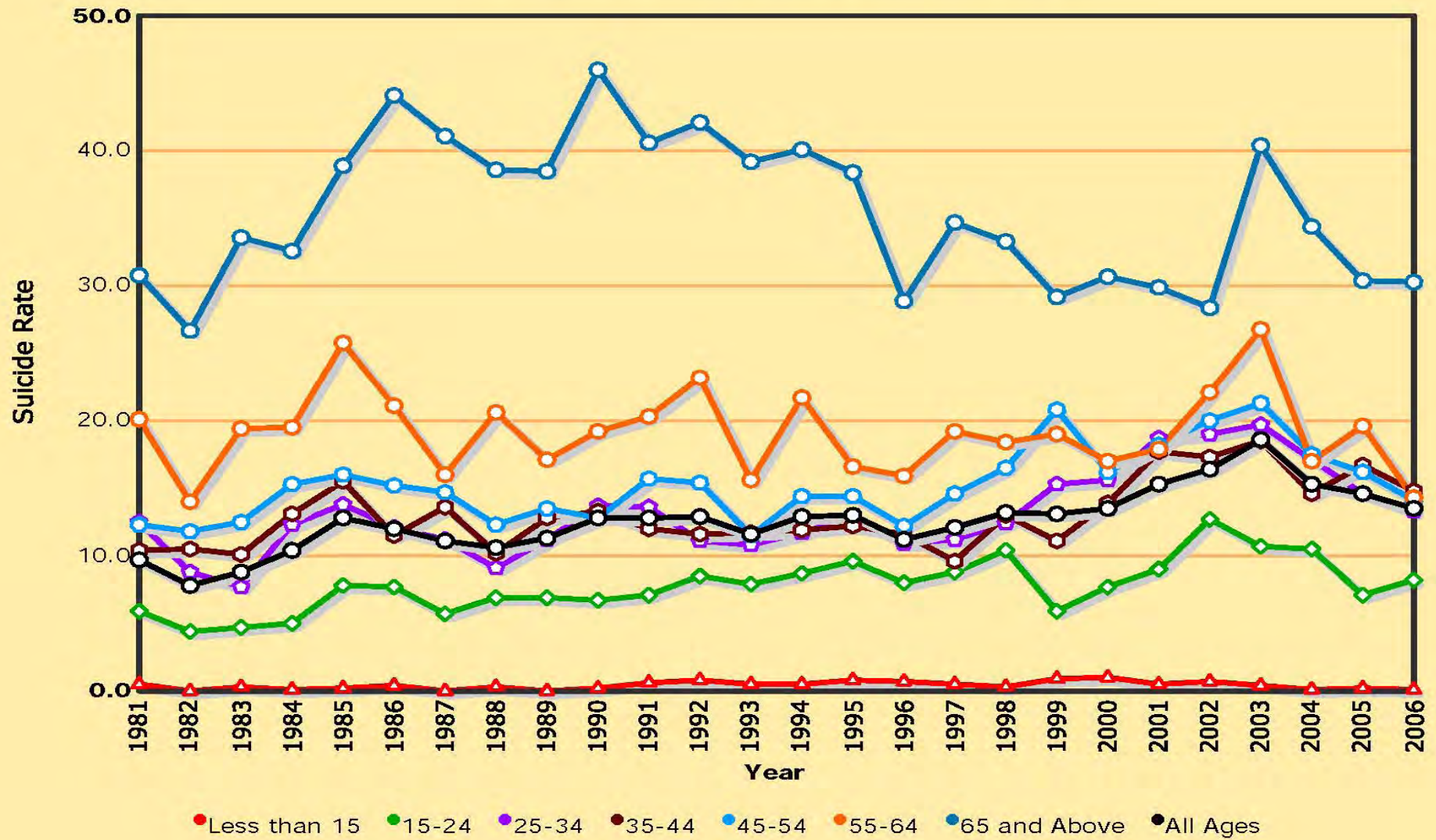
Suicide, Crime and the Media

- The act of suicide was decriminalized in Hong Kong
- But, the acts of homicide-suicide and assisting suicide (e.g. suicide pacts or through media??) are criminal
- Please read
 - OFFENCES AGAINST THE PERSON ORDINANCE - SECT 33A/33B (<http://www.hklii.org>) for details

Suicide rates by gender in HK 1981-2006



Suicide rates by age group in HK 1981-2006



Homicide-Suicide in Hong Kong

- 231 died in 98 episodes, from 1989 to 2005
- The majority of offenders: male (68.7%) and aged 30-49 (62.6%).
- Spouses (46.5%) and children (47.5%) were predominantly the victims.
- The common killing methods: chopping with weapons (33.3%) and charcoal burning (22.2%).
- Four major “classes”: dispute, conflicts in a relationship, altruistic, and mental illness.

Yip PS, Wong PW, Cheung YT, Chan KS, Beh SL., (2009) An empirical study of characteristics and types of homicide-suicides in Hong Kong, 1989-2005., *J Affect Disord.* 2009 Jan;112(1-3):184-92

Media and Suicidal Behaviour

“...There is an onus on media professionals to exercise caution in reporting suicide, and to balance imperatives like the public’s ‘right to know’ against the risk of causing harm.”

Preventing Suicide: A Resource for Media Professionals,
World Health Organization

“Journalists should recognize that gathering and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance.”

Minimize Harm, Code of Ethics,
Society of Professional Journalists

Media and Suicidal Behaviour

“No fact is better established in science than that suicide is often committed from imitation. A single paragraph may suggest suicide to 20 persons.”

- Brigham, 1845

“In short, certain as the contagion of suicide is from individual to individual, imitation never seems to propagate it so as to affect the social suicide-rate. ”

- Durkheim, 1897

Media Influence on Suicidal Behaviour

- Extensive studies on the influence of media portrayal on subsequent suicide rate (Bollen & Phillips, 1982; Durkheim, 1897; Hawton et al., 2000; Hawton et al., 1999; Phillips, 1974; Schmidtke & Häfner, 1988; Stack, 2003; Stack & Gundlach, 1992; Wasserman, 1984; Yip et al., 2006);
- Positive association supported by meta-analyses (Stack, 2000, 2005);
- Some suggest to be “causality” (Hawton & Williams, 2005; Pirkis & Blood, 2001);

Factors contributing to suicide are complex

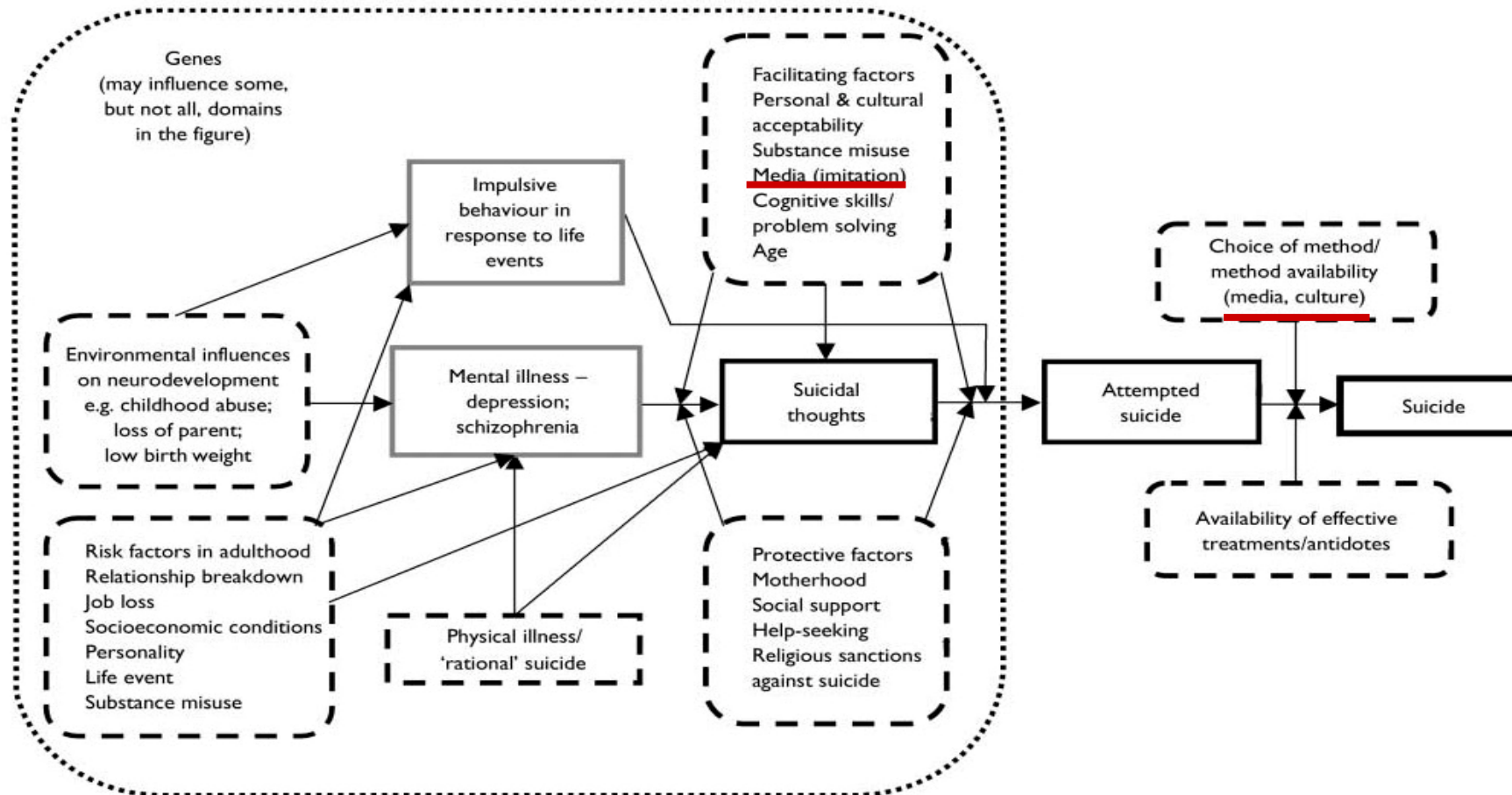


Fig. 1 Life course influences on suicide.

Gunnell, D., & Lewis, G. (2005). Studying suicide from the life course perspective: implications for prevention. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 187, 206-208.

Social Theory of Imitative Suicide

■ Durkheim (1897)

- a process of automatic reproduction of other people's behavior.
- it might exist among few individuals or in small geographical circumstances, these suicides would have happened otherwise in the absence of contagion and thus could not consequently be reflected in the overall suicide statistics

■ Tarde (1888)

- contrasted his view sharply with Durkheim's notion of "sociologism,"
- psychological aspects of human behavior is also one of the basic and essential focuses of sociological inquiry

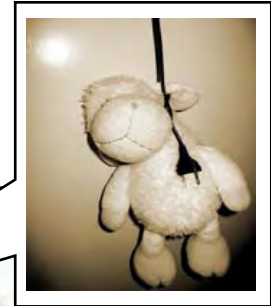
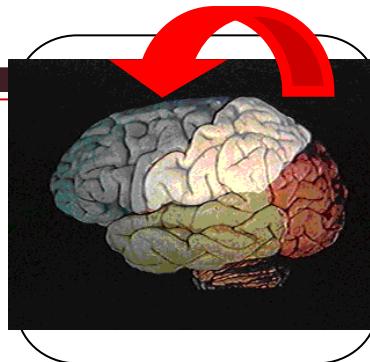
Social Theory of Imitative Suicide

■ Stack (1987)

- Imitation is largely an exercise of inferior copying superior, say famous people of good fame, celebrities or leaders;
- Front-page suicide stories, which represents a power of public opinion, would trigger suicides in the real world;
- The upper class or elite are more apt to be imitated;
- Front-page stories about suicides of elite would have greater impact on imitative suicides
- Theory of differential identification

Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory in Communication

- Attention
- Retention
- Motivation/De-motivation
- Production



Attention seeking?

Problem Solving?

= Pain relieving?

Painful experience?

Fu, Chan & Yip (2009) Testing a Theoretical Model Based on Social Cognitive Theory for Media Influences on Suicidal Ideation: Results from a Panel Study. *Media Psychology*. V12(1)



Media Reporting of Suicide in Hong Kong

Reporting of Suicide News in Hong Kong

- Hong Kong's suicide reporting has been found to be noncompliant with the WHO recommendations or international best practices (Au et al., 2004)
- For examples:
 - 47% of suicide deaths in Hong Kong were found to have newspaper coverage in 2000 (Au et al., 2004), compared to only 1% in Australian newspapers (Pirkis et al., 2007)
 - While the WHO (2000) suggests not to publish photographs, 87.5% of the Hong Kong newspapers contain pictorial presentation (Au et al., 2004), compared to 14% in Australia (Pirkis et al., 2002) and 8% in Switzerland (Michel et al., 2000)

Fu, K. W., & Yip, P. S. (2008). Changes in reporting of suicide news after the promotion of the WHO media recommendations. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 38(5), 631-636.

Media misrepresentation

- Over-reporting of younger age suicides and under-reporting of elderly suicides

- Across Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Guangzhou

	Hong Kong 2006	
	Suicides	Newspaper
Under15	2(0.2%)	10(2.2%)
15 to 24	64(6.4%)	64(14.2%)
25 to 39	259(26.1%)	141(31.3%)
40 to 59	373(37.6%)	141(31.3%)
> 60	295(29.7%)	95(21.1%)

WHO's Preventing Suicide: A Resource for Media Professionals

http://www.who.int/mental_health/resources/suicide/en/index.html

- Take the opportunity to educate the public about suicide
 - Avoid language which sensationalises or normalises suicide, or presents it as a solution to problems
 - Avoid prominent placement and undue repetition of stories about suicide
 - Avoid explicit description of the method used in a completed or attempted suicide
 - Avoid providing detailed information about the site of a completed or attempted suicide
 - Word headlines carefully
 - Exercise caution in using photographs or video footage
 - Take particular care in reporting celebrity suicides
 - Show due consideration for people bereaved by suicide
 - Provide information about where to seek help
 - Recognise that media professionals themselves may be affected by stories about suicide
-

Comparison of the suicide stories before (1/1/2004 to 8/11/2004) and after (9/11/2004 to 30/6/2006) the Program, Both completed & attempted suicide stories

	Before the campaign	After the campaign	χ^2 or t- test (p- value)
Total number of suicide news	2110	3630	na
Average no. of suicide news per day	6.7	6.1	na
Front-page placement	1.9%	1.8%	0.394
Accompanying with photograph(s)	92.0%	90.7%	<0.05
Accompanying with graphical presentation(s)	3.3%	3.3%	0.480
Mentioning suicide method in the headline	89.5%	90.4%	0.166
Mentioning problem encountered in the headline	65.9%	59.6%	<0.000
Containing positive message(s)	4.9%	4.9%	0.526
Number of Chinese characters (mean)	375	386	0.137

Findings

(Fu & Yip, 2008)


- Certain reporting styles were marginally changed in accordance with the WHO recommendations; namely, lessened use of pictorial presentation and headline mentioning the problem encountered by the victim
- But there was no significant change in the other reporting items.
- Most of the changes attributed to the tabloid-style newspapers (Apple Daily, The Sun & Oriental Daily).



Celebrity Suicide

The Effect of Celebrity Suicides

- Evidence shows a surge in the suicide rate or suicide attempt follows the incidents of
 - Celebrity death or suicides (Cheng, Hawton, Chen et al., 2007; Cheng, Hawton, Lee, & Chen, 2007; Hawton et al., 2000; Tousignant, Mishara, Caillaud, Fortin, & St Laurent, 2005; Yip & Fu, 2006)
 - Publicized news stories of celebrity suicides (Phillips, 1974; Stack, 1987; Wasserman, 1984)
 - Higher increases following the suicides of entertainers (Stack, 1987; Wasserman, 1984)
 - Age, gender or method-specific increases (Cheng, Hawton, Lee et al., 2007; Fu & Yip, 2007; Yip & Fu, 2006)
-



Celebrity Suicide in Hong Kong
- The Death of Leslie Cheung

Celebrity Suicide – Leslie Cheung

- Hong Kong's famous pop star Mr. Leslie Cheung, had suffered from depression, died by jumping from a height on 1 April 2003.
- Extensive media coverage of his death.
 - 1243 news articles (2nd to 9th April 2003), compared to 12 news articles in the preceding week (25th March to 1st April)

Findings (Yip et al, 2006)

- An unusual, relatively short lived, rise in suicide cases in April 2003 in males, aged 25–39, who committed suicide by jumping from a height following the suicide death of Leslie Cheung;
- Info from suicide notes and investigation files suggests that celebrity suicide could have a longer-term impact on some people;
- Modeling effect based on the characteristics of the model (male and aged 25-39) and the actual suicide method (jumping);

Information from suicide notes and death investigation files

- 13 cases in 2003 in which the death of Cheung was mentioned in either a suicide note (5 cases) or records of the police investigation (8 cases). In one case there was mention in both sources.
- The cases occurred between April and October 2003.
- Among these 13 cases, nine were male and six of these were aged 25–39 years.
- Four individuals expressed their suicidal intentions implicitly or explicitly by mentioning their desire either “to accompany Cheung” or “to follow his way to exit” (Cases 6, 10, 11 and 12). The remaining three individuals included people with life problems (Cases 8 and 9) and general distress (Case 13).

Info. from suicide notes and investigation files

Case no.	Month	M/F	Age	Suicide method	Explanations in suicide notes	Explanations in case notes
1	Apr	M	25–39	CO poisoning		“Have you heard that Cheung jumped off a building?” and “Yes, even a celebrity like Cheung can choose to die.” he said.
2	Apr	M	25–39	Jumping		“Cheung is so rich and has reputation and social status. But still he chooses to die.” he said.
3	Apr	M	40–59	Jumping		“A rich man like Cheung chooses to die when he is depressed, so a poor man like me can’t live any longer.” he said.
4	Apr	F	40–59	CO poisoning	“A rich man like Cheung is so unhappy and chooses to die.”	
5	Apr	M	40–59	CO poisoning	“A rich and depressed man like Cheung commits suicide. Why not a poor and depressed person like me?”	He was unhappy over his idol’s death. He said he was depressed like Cheung and felt so uncomfortable and painful.
6	May	F	40–59	Hanging	“I think life is so meaningless and Cheung’s act is so brave. Perhaps it is the way of my final exit ”	
7	Jun	F	40–59	CO poisoning		She was discharged from hospital and was disturbed by SARS and Cheung’s suicide. She said even a rich man like Cheung chose to die.
8	Jun	M	25–39	Hanging		The deceased mentioned the death of Cheung in his letter.
9	Jul	M	40–59	CO poisoning		The deceased had kept some newspaper clippings about Cheung’s suicide.
10	Sep	M	40–59	Jumping	“I’ll go to another world. Cheung, I will be there.”	
11	Sep	M	25–39	Jumping		He had mentioned that he would choose the same way as Cheung.
12	Oct	M	25–39	Hanging	“Good bye, everyone. I am going to accompany Cheung. Don’t be unhappy for me.”	
13	Oct	F	25–39	CO poisoning		She was Cheung’s fan. From the beginning of April she was sleepless and crying for no apparent reason.

Source: Yip et al (2006)

Long-term impact on suicidal ideation (Fu & Yip, 2007)

- Face-to-face household survey between 1 December 2003 and 4 July 2004
- Participants – 2,016 people aged between 20 and 59
- Response rate = 62%
- Self-report booklet for sensitive questions
- Lasted for about 45 min to an hour
- Conducted in Cantonese.



Findings

- Longer effective period of celebrity effect;
- Impact of celebrity suicide was associated **INDEPENDENTLY** with people's suicidal ideation, while controlling for some known risk factors for suicide;
- Having depressive symptom, less reason for life and high irrational belief moderated the impact of celebrity suicide on suicidal ideation;
- Positive thinking after celebrity suicide was a strong predictor of non-suicidal. Less impulsivity and having health problem were significant associated factors for positive thinking.

What we want to do in this study

- To examine the impacts of suicides of entertainment celebrities in Asia by
 - analyzing official raw data using a common methodology, indicators, and covariates, and then
 - estimating the combined risk for suicides across incidents through the application of meta-analysis.

Time series plots for suicides in Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea

(The incidents of celebrity suicides of the respective regions are indicated with a vertical dashed line)

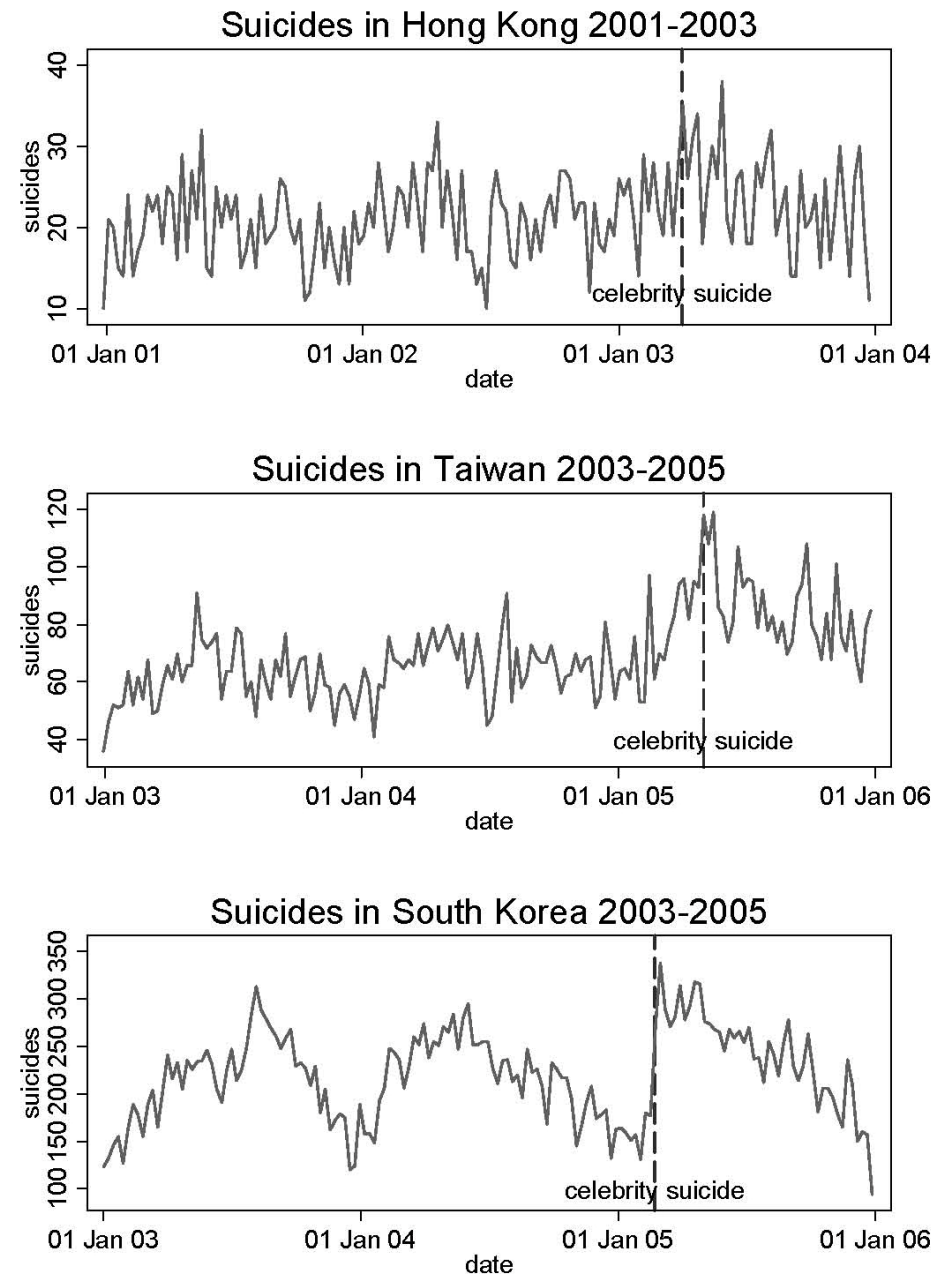


Fig. 1: Time series plots of Suicides in Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea

Results - Increases in suicides in weekly and medium term

- 43% (95% CI: 23%, 66%) increase in risk for suicides in the first week after the incidents, which is consistent across incidents;
- 29% (95% CI: 12%, 50%) increase in suicidal risk in the second week and 25% (95% CI: 8%, 45%) in the third week;
- No longer statistically significant in the fourth, fifth, and sixth week;
- A 14% (95% CI: 8%, 21%) rise in risk was seen and sustained for the following 18 weeks.

Results - Increases in suicides in weekly and medium term (Cont'd)

- All specific analyses demonstrate statistically significant increases in risk for suicide in the first, second, and third week;
- Age-method and age-gender-method specific analyses further show elevations in the fourth week;
- Method-specific and gender-method specific analyses indicate increases throughout the period of 24 weeks after

Findings

- Combined risks for suicide after incidents of celebrity suicide are quantified;
- Specific increases among groups, i.e. same gender or same method, are confirmed, and it strongly suggests the influence of celebrity suicide is likely to be an imitation;
- First three weeks increase in suicides;
- Medium term increase for at least 24 weeks after

Implications

- A scientific generalization of results across three Asian countries and strongly suggests an increasing risk for suicide in the community after celebrity suicide;
- Important information for the public health policy makers to assess the elevated risk for suicide associated with excessive media coverage of celebrity suicide;
- Targeted on preventing same-gender and same-method suicides;
- The first three weeks seems to be crucial time period for such intervention;
- Journalists should be well informed about the potential risk of reporting celebrity suicide and minimize the risk.