

WHO IDENTIFIES WITH SUICIDAL FILM CHARACTERS? DETERMINANTS OF IDENTIFICATION WITH SUICIDAL PROTAGONISTS OF DRAMA FILMS

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SUMMARY

Background: Identification with a media character is an influential factor for the effects of a media product on the recipient, but still very little is known about this cognitive process. This study investigated to what extent identification of a recipient with the suicidal protagonist of a film drama is influenced by the similarity between them in terms of sex, age, and education as well as by the viewer's empathy and suicidality.

Subjects and methods: Sixty adults were assigned randomly to one of two film groups. Both groups watched a drama that concluded with the tragic suicide of the protagonist. Identification, empathy, suicidality, as well as socio-demographic data were measured by questionnaires that were applied before and after the movie screening.

Results: Results indicated that identification was not associated with socio-demographic similarity or the viewer's suicidality. However, the greater the subjects' empathy was, the more they identified with the protagonist in one of the two films.

Conclusions: This investigation provides evidence that challenges the common assumption that identification with a film character is automatically generated when viewer and protagonist are similar in terms of sex, age, education or attitude.

Key words: film – suicide – identification – empathy - socio-demographic similarity

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INTRODUCTION

Watching movies is the number one leisure activity in most western societies; people spend more time on watching films than on any other activity, including reading books, newspapers and magazines (Martin 1998, Stack & Bowman 2008, 2012). The effects of fictional stories in films on the audience are partly based on the characters who populate the films and on the viewers' engagement in the process of impression formation in getting to know the respective persona (Hoffner & Cantor 1991). This act can be considered as *identification* of the recipient with a media protagonist (see Hoffner & Buchanan 2005). Several studies provided evidence that identification amplifies media-induced reactions in terms of emotions (e.g. Tannenbaum & Gaer 1965, Till & Vitouch 2012), attitude changes (e.g. Basil 1996, Brown & Basil 1995, Greenwood 2004, Till & Vitouch 2012) and behavior modifications (e.g. Perry & Perry 1976, Phillips 1979, Turner & Berkowitz 1972). A recent study showed that negative film effects caused by exposure to a suicide film, such as the increase of depression, is the greater, the more the viewer identifies with the suicidal character of the film (Till et al. 2010).

However, what exactly is identification? The literature on this cognitive process is very rich and heterogeneous. There is basically no agreement on how this concept is defined and what kinds of identification actually exist (Bandura 1986, Cohen 2001, Hoffner & Buchanan 2005, Zillmann 1994, 1996). A very useful conceptualization was provided by Cohen (2001) who defined identification with media characters as an "imaginative" process through which an audience member assumes the identity, goals, and perspective of a character" (p. 261). It is a mechanism by which audience members put themselves in the place of a protagonist and experience events, as if they were happening to them.

Bandura (1986) suggests that an individual identifies with another person when he or she perceives the model to be similar to him- or herself based on gender, race, age, or physical attractiveness. Burke (1952) refers to a common bond between a media character and an audience member, which is established when the recipient thinks they share the same values and perceptions of reality. People might be attracted to each other because they share similar attitudes, which help maintaining a consistency in cognitive states (Festinger 1954), or because they perceive similarity as rewarding (Thibaut & Kelley 1991).

An investigation conducted by Maccoby and Wilson (1957) involving children watching a 20-minute episode of a serial movie demonstrated a significant link between socio-demographic similarity and identification. However, several researchers report other factors to determine identification, such as status envy (Whiting 1960), the availability of a satisfying self-defining relationship (Kelman 1961), physical attractiveness (Hoffner & Cantor 1991), the possession of rewarding power (Bandura et al. 1963), or empathy and affective orientation (Chory-Assad & Cicchirillo 2005). Especially empathy, defined as a natural ability to adapt to a situation by placing oneself into another individual's position (Zillmann 1991), appears to be a much better predictor for identification than similarity. The present study analyzes the identification of audience members with suicidal protagonists of dramas and investigates its relationships with similarity of attitudes towards suicide, socio-demographic similarity and empathy.

SUBJECTS AND METHODS

Participants

The sample of this study consisted of 60 individuals living in Austria. The sample consisted of 23 men (38.3%), with mean age of 37.65 years ($SD=18.78$), and 37 women (61.7%), with mean age of 43.32 years ($SD=23.06$).

Design and Material

An empirical study was conducted consisting of two groups of participants watching a film drama concluding with the protagonist's suicide: (1) *It's My Party* (U.S.A., 1996) or (2) *The Fire Within* (France/Italy, 1963). Both protagonists are male and similar in age (roughly 30-40) and both are portrayed as well educated individuals. The protagonist in *It's My Party* is a young man who is dying of AIDS. He is increasingly losing cognitive abilities and opts for suicide using a concoction of poisons provided by his closest friends. His homosexual lover rejected him when the infection was discovered, and his father appears rather distant. In *The Fire Within*, the protagonist is a middle aged man who has a strained relationship with his wife. He is addicted to alcohol and lives in an expensive halfway house. He takes his life on the night he is about to be released, partially due to his fears about life on the outside. The protagonist is convinced that his suicide will hurt/traumatize his wife who pays for the hospital costs. In the eyes of the study authors (B.T., A.H., G.S., T.N.), the plot depiction appears more realistic and less overtly emotional than in *It's My Party*.

Measurement

Questionnaires were used to collect data on the subjects' identification, empathy, suicidality and socio-demographics. Identification was measured with a

translated German version of a questionnaire developed by Cohen (2001) using 10 items (statements such as "While viewing the film I could feel the emotions character X portrayed") on a 5-point scale (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.89$). Empathy was measured by a German version of the *Interpersonal Reactivity Index* by Davis (1983) using 16 items (statements such as "I really get involved with the feelings of the character in a novel") on a 5-point scale. However, four items were excluded from the analysis to improve the scale's reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.71$). Suicidality was measured by a questionnaire designed by Stork (1972) using 52 items (statements such as "I can empathize with people who die to join a beloved person in death") answered with *wrong* or *right*. Most items require a scoring of 0 (for wrong) or 1 point (for right), but some items are scored with 0 (wrong) or 2 (right) points, in accordance with the manual of the questionnaire. This scale has been used by numerous scientists in mainly German-speaking countries (e.g. Friedrich et al. 2003, Schmidtke & Rimpau 1979). 13 items were excluded from the analysis to improve the scale's reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.88$). The socio-demographic measures included three single items to survey sex, age, and level of education. The subjects were also asked to indicate the age of the respective movie's main character. Since the protagonist's age was not mentioned or indicated in the films, the median of the viewers' ratings regarding the age of the character was used as a substitute.

Procedure

Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. All subjects gave informed consent to participate in this study. The subjects' allocation to the groups was randomized (30 subjects per group). It was ensured that the participants had not already seen the respective film in the past. Questionnaires on empathy, suicidality and socio-demographics were completed by the subjects before the film. For ethical reasons only participants with a suicidality level below the score of 40 were included. Four individuals were excluded from the study due to suicidality scores ≥ 40 . After the film screening, identification was measured and the rating of the protagonist's age was collected. The study took place in Vienna, Austria and was approved by the Ethics-Committee of the Medical University of Vienna and the Vienna General Hospital - AKH.

Statistical Analysis

Non-parametric tests were applied, since the given set of data did not exhibit a normal distribution.

RESULTS

An overview of the identification scores' means and standard deviations is shown in Table 1. There was a significant correlation between viewers' identification

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of the Viewers' Identification for Both Films Divided into Men, Women, and Both Groups Combined

Film	Men		Women		All	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
It's my party	24.13	6.99	29.93	8.11	27.03	8.01
The fire within	21.00	7.32	25.38	8.46	24.17	8.28

Note: Values are means (M) and standard deviations (SD) of viewers' identification with the respective film protagonist

with the suicidal film character and empathy in the group watching *The fire within* ($r=0.55$, $n=29$, $p<0.01$). The greater the subjects' empathy was, the more they identified with the protagonist. This dose-response relationship was substantial, since about 30% of the respective variance was explained by this factor alone. However, there was no such relationship among the viewers of *It's my party* ($r=0.03$, $n=30$, $p=0.85$).

Mann-Whitney-U-Tests were performed to analyze if men identified more strongly with the main characters of the two films than women. There were no differences between male and female subjects in terms of their identification with the protagonist, neither in the group watching *It's my party* ($U=71.00$, $n=30$, $p=0.08$) nor in the group with *The fire within* ($U=60.00$, $n=29$, $p=0.24$) as stimulus material. Furthermore, Spearman-correlations demonstrated no significant relationship between identification and age similarity (*It's my party*: $r=-0.02$, $n=30$, $p=0.89$; *The fire within*: $r=0.09$, $n=29$, $p=0.60$). There was also no significant correlation between identification and the individually perceived, subjective age similarity based on the individually rated age of the protagonist (*It's my party*: $r=-0.02$, $n=29$, $p=0.88$; *The fire within*: $r=0.04$, $n=59$, $p=0.82$). Furthermore, there was no significant association between identification and similarity in education (*It's my party*: $r=-0.30$, $n=30$, $p=0.09$; *The fire within*: $r=0.14$, $n=29$, $p=0.45$). Finally, there was also no significant correlation between identification with the suicidal film character and the viewers' suicidality (*It's my party*: $r=0.10$, $n=27$, $p=0.60$; *The fire within*: $r=0.27$, $n=29$, $p=0.15$).

DISCUSSION

This study revealed some new and important findings regarding the factors that affect viewers' identification with suicidal characters of a film drama. The viewer's empathy seems to be the most powerful determinant of identification with a suicidal film character. In contrast, other factors that have been hypothesized to be influential – socio-demographic and attitudinal similarity – were not associated with identification in the present study. The tendency to feel into the protagonist correlated significantly with identification in the group watching *The fire within*: The greater an individual's empathy was, the more he or she identified with the protagonist of this film. This association was strong with empathy explaining almost one third of the variance. The findings clearly differed with regard to the film groups analyzed and were

restricted to the viewers of *The fire within*, which constitutes a more realistic and less emotive portrayal of suicide than *It's my party*. It seems plausible to assume that the viewing of less realistic depictions of suicide create a viewing situation in which being empathic is not sufficient to connect with the protagonist on a personal level and to produce identification.

Socio-demographic similarity was not significantly associated with identification: The male audience did not identify more strongly with the men who represented the main characters in the two movies than females. Moreover, there was no significant correlation between identification and similarity in terms of age or education in both film groups. Even when the actual age difference was replaced by the individually perceived, subjective age similarity, no association with identification was found. A finding which needs to be discussed is that viewers' identification was not significantly associated with their suicidality. This may be due to the fact that only persons scoring low on suicidality were included in this experiment. Clearly, more research is needed to investigate the determinants of identification in suicidal viewers. Based on the present results we conclude that the viewers' individual level of empathy is the most appropriate predictor of identification with suicidal film characters in non-suicidal viewers.

This study also has some limitations. First, the protagonists in both films were male and similar in terms of age and education. Thus, the possibility that viewers react differently to suicidal main characters of other sex, age or education level cannot be ruled out. Further, it is apt to assume that there are additional factors besides empathy which determine identification. Positive characteristics of the protagonist such as physical attractiveness or high social status may also have an influence on identification beyond the factors identified in the present study (see Hoffner & Cantor 1991, Whiting 1960). It is also possible that identification is stronger, when viewer and protagonist have similar problems in their lives (e.g. relationship problems, physical disabilities, etc.), which was not explored by the authors of this study. Finally, to prevent methodological problems stemming from previous film exposure, relatively fameless films with relatively unknown actors were used in the present study. However, earlier research has demonstrated that the suicides of entertainment celebrities are the most apt to be associated with copycat suicides in the real world (Stack 2005). Therefore, it is plausible to assume that

the suicide of major film stars might bring out more identification than suicides in most films. It is also important to note, that there are many different motives for suicide in films. Stack and Bowman (2012) found seven different motives: depression, psychopathic traits, physical disability, death of a loved one, social strains, economic strains, and altruism. The suicide in *It's my party* is caused by imminent physical disability, the suicide in *The fire within* is due to a combination of depression and psychopathic traits. Identification with suicidal film characters might be different when other motives are on hand. Therefore, future research focusing on identification with other kinds of suicides is recommended.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite these limitations, the present study provides some new insight into the process of identification with suicidal film characters. The viewer's empathy proved to be an important variable in terms of identification which is concordant with the findings reported by Chory-Assad and Cicchirillo (2005) for film dramas in general. Socio-demographic similarity, which is often used as a proxy of identification in ecological studies on copycat behavior (e.g. Fu & Yip 2009, Niederkrotenthaler et al. 2009, Phillips 1979, Stack 1990), does not seem to automatically generate identification between viewer and protagonist – at least not in a non-suicidal viewer group. Non-fictional media stories on suicide have the potential to trigger copycat suicides, known as *Werther effect* (Phillips 1974), while stories on positive coping in adverse circumstances are associated with reductions in suicide, known as *Papageno effect* (Niederkrotenthaler et al. 2010). Similarly, fictional movies on suicide are hypothesized to increase suicide in the real world, while the portrayal of happy lives after the gloom and doom of a suicidal crisis might decrease suicidal behavior. Considering that identification amplifies film effects (see Till et al. 2010, 2011), more research on identification with suicidal media characters is necessary and recommended.

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