Reviewer's report

Title: The Foxconn suicides and media prominence: Is the Werther effect applicable in China?

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Review of: The Foxconn Suicides and Media Prominence: is the Werther effect applicable to China?
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1. Summary. This paper explores several issues regarding the well known case of the 18 suicides/attempts at the Chinese Foxconn plant in 2010. (1) Were these suicides actually a cluster? (2) Was there a copycat effect at the Foxconn plant itself? (3) Did media coverage of the Foxconn suicides lead to copycat effects elsewhere in China? (4) What was the nature of the reports themselves? Five media markets are covered: three in large Chinese cities (Beijing, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen - the city where Foxconn is located, and also Hong Kong and Taiwan. Data are drawn from several sources including a search for newspaper articles on Foxconn in Wise News Database in 20 target newspapers and the Baidu search engine for the number of hits from the public searching for information about the Foxconn suicides. A total of 1,279 newspaper articles about Foxconn were found in the one year searched (2010). The suicide rates being assessed are apparently not defined in the methods section. A statistical test indicated that the Foxconn suicides qualified as a cluster. The degree of reporting, reporting intensities, is assessed (p. 11). There is a very brief paragraph on p. 12 (top) stating that "only 2 variables Beijing coverage amount and real suicide occurrence contributed to suicide occurrence." This strikes me as needing substantial clarification.

2. Critique. The authors have selected a topic which has considerable theoretical and policy relevance to suicide research. They are correct in asserting that there has not been any copycat studies to date in mainland China. Given that it is an Eastern nation and that it lacks freedom of the press, often found in other nations including other Asian nations where copycat studies have emerged, alone, makes it an interesting case to investigate. Further, given its huge population size of over one billion people, and above average suicide rate, China accounts for about 30% of the world's suicides. So, if copycat effects are found in China, suicide prevention efforts in that nation need to respond. Such a response would include media guidelines for the reporting of suicide, which, I believe, do not exist in mainland China. There are additional points made in the paper for the
significance of this pioneering study. There are, however, some ways in which the manuscript could be strengthened. They would improve an already strong paper in terms of its quantitative sophistication and very large database of articles and internet hits. (1) An appendix might be added giving the exact dates of the 18 suicides/attempts at Foxconn, and perhaps the gender and age of the suicide victims. This might help to stimulate future work and checks on the clustering issue. Many previous papers such as those in sociology journals (Kessler, Phillips, Stack, & Wasserman papers in the American Sociological Review in the 1970’s-1980’s period) where a large number (>10) suicide stories were covered provide this information. (2) Multiple cases of publicized suicides. The introduction/conclusion could add a sentence saying that the present investigation follows many previous sociological papers by its incorporation of a large number of suicides in the analysis. Many post 1995 papers have focused on a single suicide - including celebrities in Hong Kong and Taiwan and Canada. The inclusion of many suicides instead of just one, represents a stronger test of copycat effects than papers based on a single case. (3) Copycat effects involving ordinary media role models vs. celebrities. Many of the post 1995 papers in this research stream have explored the impact of media coverage of well known celebrities - often pop singers and well know actors, and a Quebec journalist. While such celebrity effects have been well established in over 30 years of research, the copycat effects based on ordinary common people (like Foxconn workers) have been under-studied. The authors could strengthen their paper by first clarifying/expanding the short paragraph on p. 12, top, on copycat effects. It is not clear if the Beijing copycat effect is based on monthly or daily data. It would help if they clarified if similar regressions were run on each of the two other Chinese cities. Also, were copycat runs on the Taiwan and Hong Kong data also done, and were there no copycat effects found? It would help if they, regardless of the findings, noted that this is a relatively understudied issue in copycat research: do the suicides of noncelebrities trigger suicides? It sounds like the evidence here is that they largely do not. That, although a nonfinding, is quite important since noone has studied the Chinese media’s impact on suicide. . A sentence might be all that is needed. In this vein, it would help to cite the most recent available meta analyses on this issue. For example, Stack, S. 2005. suicide & the media: a quantitative review. Suicide & Life Threatening Behavior, 35, 121-133. .... studies focusing on celebrity suicides in the media are over 5 times more apt than other studies to report copycat effects. The present paper could be strengthened by clarifying what exactly it is finding. At one point a three day lag effect is reported (p 12) , at another point it comes close to stating that no copycat effect was found (p 13). Whichever is true, the results are important. Nonfindings are as important as significant findings in this area and this context (China). In any event, the publicized suicides are NOT celebrity oriented suicides, but just ordinary workers. Not to find a copycat effect is common. Actually, most of the findings reported to date (especially those by Kessler, which are often not cited), do not report a copycat effect. (4) Clarification of Chinese and other Suicide Data. It comes as a surprise on p.16 (near bottom) that there are no daily suicide count data in mainland China. It is unclear what kind of suicide rates were analyzed before, on p. 10 where "linear estimates of the
suicide rate" are referred to. The paper could be strengthened by stating exactly what suicide rates are analyzed- are they for each of the three cities in China as monthly rates? On p. 12, top mention is made of a copycat effect for Beijing. Are there no copycat effects for Taiwan and Hong Kong? Are these daily counts, or rates, or monthly counts or rates? (5) Proofreading. The paper could be strengthened by having someone with English as a first language go through it. For example, p., 17 line 14, Taiwan may not applicable" should be "Taiwan may not BE applicable."P. 13, "As a recent study in Austria proposed potential positive effect" should be As a recent study in Austria proposed, THE potential...."- insert THE. .... also "named as Papageno effect"- should be "named as THE Papageno effect" also on same page13 , "Contrast to the" should be "IN contrast to " (6) Table 1. "Clustering effect of the newspapers' reporting intensities of the Foxconn suicides" It would strengthen the paper to clarify if the clustering effect concerns the clustering of the stories themselves or is the clustering effect on the suicide count or suicide rate. If it is the latter, what is the rate or count? Is it the sum of the suicides in the three cities plus Hong Kong and Taiwan? (7) Table 2 "Interaction between the Foxconn suicides and media prominence" - It would strengthen the paper to clarify what is the dependent variable here- Is this the sum of all stories in all 20 newspapers, or is it the sum of suicide attempts and completions in China, and Taiwan and Hong Kong? I believe the dependent variable refers to news stories, not the suicide rate, but I am not sure. The way that it is currently written, it is difficult at times to understand if the dependent variable is a rate of suicide or a rate of stories appearing in the 20 papers. (8) Figures. The figures may not have printed properly at my end, I see no numbers. The one which has "Suicide Rates, Cases per day" could be strengthened by clarifying what suicides are being counted here. Are they stories about Foxconn, or suicides in the three cities and/or Taiwan and/or Hong Kong. The values peak out at about .15 suicides per day- that sounds very low for a daily suicide count in China or even Hong Kong or Taiwan. .15 suicides/day= .15 X 352 days= 52 suicides a year. This variable needs clarification since it does not square with reality of suicide- for all 5 populations, all have more than 52 suicides a year. . The figure on daily number of news items is very clear, in contrast. I believe these problems could be resolved by clarifying the titles of the charts and/or adding a footnote to each spelling out exactly what the Y-axis represents. (9) Page 6, methods, Suicide Data of the general populations of the five populations. It would greatly strengthen the paper if the author could clarify, at the beginning of the methods section, exactly what data on suicides in the general population of the three Chinese cities, Taiwan, and Hong Kong will be analyzed. At one point later on, the authors report that there are no daily suicide counts for China and so "potential" suicides were assessed. How was that done? The abstract reports that there was a 3 day lag effect of Foxconn suicides on actual population based suicide counts. Where were these counts taken? Taiwan? Hong Kong? I believe the authors mean Beijing. If so, they should state that. The paper would be strengthened by making clear exactly what data were used in assessing copycat effects on actual suicides (not newspaper stories about suicide, but suicides of the general population per se). This section is clear on how stories were located
and how Baidu searches were done. It is not specified, as far as I can tell, what suicide counts (as opposed to suicide story counts) were done (although these are mentioned in the abstract and as a goal for assessing copycat effects of the publicized 18 Foxconn suicides on the suicide completion rate in the real world. On p. 8 the regression analysis refers to a suicide rate, but what suicide rate? Hong Kong? Taiwan? Other. P. 10, last par, line 4- exactly what suicide rate is discussed here? Hong Kong? Taiwan? Beijing? It would strengthen the paper to define what suicide rate is being measured. (11). Mismatch of papers and audiences. It should be clarified how newspapers and cities were matched. It would seem to be desirable to match coverage in Beijing with Beijing suicides, for example. However, on p. 13 the authors state "The Hong Kong and TW newspapers are not distributed in Mainland China so it is not surprising that their influence on the suicide occurrence (in Mainland China???) was not significant." If the authors have not done so already, the paper would be strengthened by clarifying how the papers and cities/nations were matched up. If the analyses reported assume that news coverage in Taiwan would affect Chinese suicide counts, it would be helpful to repeat the analyses where suicides in a place are matched with newspaper coverage in a place. The assumption that news coverage in one nation will affect suicide in another nation is quite speculative and unprecedented in the 110 studies on copycat suicide which I have read to date.

3. Conclusions. This paper represents a substantial amount of work and is the first of its kind based on mainland China. However, there are some ways in which it could be strengthened. Perhaps the authors might respond to some of the queries above. Perhaps the most important ones involve a clarification of exactly what suicide rates are being analyzed, and issues about the appropriateness of mismatches between suicide and suicide news coverage- e.g., the assumption that news coverage in Taiwan would affect suicide in places like Beijing (#11 above).

Level of interest: An article of outstanding merit and interest in its field

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

i declare that i have no competing interests