ADOLESCENTS' EMOTIONAL RESPONSES TO A SUICIDE ATTEMPT SHARED ON SOCIAL MEDIA: INSIGHTS FROM COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE

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Abstract

Adolescents' use of social media has created spaces for identity expression and social interaction, but it has also highlighted challenges related to mental health and emotional well-being. This study examines how adolescents emotionally respond to a suicide attempt shared on social media, considering the impact of individual and group phases of response. The objective was to explore the polarity, subjectivity, and emotional concordance within these responses, emphasizing potential risk factors and support dynamics. Using text analysis tools such as Voyant Tools and Meaning Cloud, the study analyzed responses from adolescents to identify key emotional patterns. Voyant Tools enabled a word correlation analysis, while Meaning Cloud assessed sentiment metrics, including polarity (positive or negative), subjectivity, and emotional agreement. Data were analyzed across seven phases to observe emotional evolution and variability. The results revealed that the majority of responses displayed positive polarity, characterized by empathy and calls for professional help. Strong correlations emerged between terms related to support, such as "help" and "psychologist" (0.99, p<.001). However, a subset of responses contained negative polarity, including ridiculing the victim or reinforcing suicidal behavior. Correlations highlighted the diminished perceived role of parental figures, with "parents" negatively associated with terms like "support" and "divorce" (-0.25, p<.01). Additionally, references to bullying and self-objectification were frequent, reflecting adolescents' awareness of the social pressures linked to mental health struggles. The findings underscore the dual role of social media in providing both support and risk. While many adolescents demonstrated an understanding of the situation and offered constructive advice, others reflected a lack of empathy or even harmful behavior. The study also highlights the role of community dynamics, where individuals acted as either supporters ("lifeguards") or instigators ("trolls"), influencing outcomes in the online space. This research highlights the need for educational interventions that enhance digital literacy and emotional resilience among adolescents. Training programs should aim to foster empathetic online interactions while equipping young users with tools to identify and mitigate harmful behaviors. Platforms should also incorporate mechanisms to promote positive engagement and provide immediate access to support resources.

Keywords: *Emotional response, adolescent mental health, social media behavior, suicide prevention.*

1. Introduction

The contemporary adolescent experience is deeply intertwined with social media, serving as a key space for identity construction, emotional expression, and peer interaction. This summary synthesizes findings from recent literature, offering a multi-faceted perspective on adolescent behaviour in digital environments.

Adolescents engage with platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Kampal not only for communication but as a mechanism to build and project identity (Boyd, 2014). Popularity metrics (e.g., likes, followers) intensify self-presentation anxieties, often resulting in behaviours such as social grooming and chronic impression management (Utz et al., 2012). Adolescents strive to align with classroom social norms, applying them within anonymous or semi-anonymous digital contexts (Bravo et al., 2024), potentially generating contagion effects (Marks et al., 2012).

Despite a proliferation of theoretical frameworks since 2010, empirical research remains scarce regarding the emotional tone of most-consumed content (Murillo-Borjas, 2022). Positive-valence content (e.g., lifestyle, travel, body image) dominates adolescent engagement (Peres et al., 2020; Lozano-Blasco et al., 2023), while negatively polarised content (e.g., depression, loneliness) correlates with psychological vulnerabilities (Balakrishnan & Griffith, 2017; Kumar et al., 2019).

Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) provides a lens through which frequent self-objectification among adolescents, particularly females, can be understood. Prolonged exposure to appearance-focused posts fosters body surveillance, body shame, and internalisation of an observer's perspective (Gioia et al., 2020; Boursier et al., 2020a, 2020b). This is particularly concerning given the association with psychological distress (Arroyo & Brunner, 2016; Trekels et al., 2018).

Digital platforms like Reddit exemplify both the empowering and dangerous facets of adolescent participation. Framed by the concept of the "prosumer" (Ritzer et al., 2012), adolescents act as both content creators and consumers, often navigating sensitive themes like mental health and suicide. While peer support in closed groups (e.g., Facebook communities) can foster resilience (Lerman et al., 2017), unregulated exposure to suicidal ideation online can have contagion effects, akin to the Werther phenomenon (Moir et al., 2023; Fratini & Hemer, 2020).

Individuals with suicidal thoughts may avoid official resources due to perceived coldness, instead favouring anonymous forums where engagement is immediate and human (Biddle et al., 2020). These platforms, however, are unpredictable. Community responses can either deter (lifeguards) or reinforce (trolls, enablers) suicidal ideation. Trolls, defined as users who deliberately provoke or escalate distress (Westerlund et al., 2015), often play a decisive role in outcomes, especially when individuals fear public shame if they "back down" from suicidal posts (Fratini & Hemer, 2020).

Engagement in high-visibility digital activities (e.g., viral challenges, influencer followership) may mimic addiction symptoms (Velozo & Stauder, 2018). Adolescents influenced by certain online figures are more prone to anti-social behaviours such as aggression and deceit. Additionally, excessive digital involvement, particularly driven by boredom, may foster compulsive patterns and digital dependency (Stockdale & Coyne, 2020).

2. Objectives

The primary aim of this study is to examine the polarity, subjectivity, and emotional alignment of adolescents' responses to mental health-related content on social media. By analysing linguistic and emotional patterns through digital text analysis tools, the research seeks to identify both risk indicators and supportive dynamics within these online interactions.

3. Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods digital discourse analysis to examine adolescent responses to a simulated suicide attempt posted on social media. The emotional and lexical content of these responses was analysed using two advanced tools: Voyant Tools, for lexical correlation analysis, and MeaningCloud, for sentiment analysis. The aim was to evaluate polarity (positive/negative), subjectivity, emotional agreement, and ironical tone across seven distinct phases representing individual to group-level interactions.

Data were drawn from open-ended responses to five experimental questions, presented across the seven phases. Voyant Tools enabled the detection of word co-occurrences and intensities of associations, while MeaningCloud allowed the classification of emotional orientation, providing insights into both individual empathy and collective sentiment dynamics.

4. Results

The analysis revealed a predominance of positive polarity across most phases, indicating empathetic engagement from adolescent participants. Terms such as "help", "support", and "psychologist" showed strong positive correlations ($r = 0.99$, $p < .001$), particularly during early phases.

Conversely, negative polarity was present in a minority of responses, often involving ridicule or reinforcement of suicidal ideation. Notably, the term "parents" was negatively correlated with words like "support", "divorce", and "autolesionarse" across multiple phases, suggesting a perceived emotional distance or lack of involvement from parental figures (e.g., $r = -0.25$, $p < .01$).

Strong thematic associations emerged around concepts of mental health, bullying, and self-objectification. For instance, "bullying" was highly correlated with "mental" and "incite", and "autolesionarse" with "school" and "sadness".

In early phases, participants frequently expressed concern and offered constructive advice (e.g., "she" + "help her", r = 0.89, p < .001). Later phases reflected greater emotional nuance and references to digital risks, privacy, and community responsibility. Roles resembling "lifeguards" and "trolls" were identified, echoing findings by Fratini & Hemer (2020) on online suicide reactions.

5. Conclusion

The findings illustrate the dual role of social media in adolescent mental health discourse—functioning both as a supportive environment and a potentially harmful space. While many adolescents displayed emotional awareness, empathy, and prosocial intentions, a smaller but concerning group demonstrated insensitivity, moral disengagement, or reinforcement of suicidal thoughts.

Negative sentiment and the minimised role of parental figures point to the need for improved emotional communication channels within families. The study underscores the importance of educational interventions, particularly in digital literacy, empathy training, and crisis response awareness, tailored for adolescents engaging in online peer interactions. Furthermore, the emotional dynamics observed suggest that platforms should integrate real-time support mechanisms to counter harmful behaviours and foster protective community responses.

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