

DYING TO SUCCEED: A QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS OF ONLINE NEWS
REPORTS ABOUT AFFLUENT TEEN SUICIDE CLUSTERS

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Title: Dying to Succeed: A Qualitative Content Analysis of Online News Reports About Affluent Teen Suicide Clusters

The media is a social factor influencing suicide clusters. As a result, the AFSP and the CDC established guidelines for journalists in order to prevent suicide contagion and imitation. Compliance has been inconsistent. However, researchers have failed to explore the qualitative nature of how media reports are framed. Furthermore, research has not examined how online news reports may include features unique to the digital environment. One must also consider how other social factors affect the development of suicide clusters. Family, affluence, peers, and education may influence suicide clustering, especially amongst teens and young adults. Psychological factors, like imitation and contagion, should also be considered.

This research examined online media reports and appended comments pertaining to three point suicide clusters involving teens and young adults (Cornell University 2009-2010 and Palo Alto, CA 2009-2010/2014-2015). Eighty-two online news articles and 2,500 comments were analyzed. The researcher conducted discourse analysis and a comparative case study using domains and themes derived from the data. Articles were checked for compliance to the preventative guidelines, and the qualitative nature of violations was explored. Descriptive statistics and timing of publication were used to

describe the relationship between media framing and the development of suicide clusters. Comments were examined for both reflexive and oppositional responses to media frames. Data was also open coded for the consideration of other domains and themes.

Findings suggested that while the media often failed to adhere to prevention guidelines, the online news reports do not seem to be a large factor in the growth of the point clusters under investigation. Instead, findings suggested that these online reports offer protective features including hyperlinks to prevention resources and scientific facts, as well as public comment spaces for coping and the creation of a collective will. Findings also suggested that other social factors including the affluent family, peer groups, and education might be equally influential. These factors alter levels of social integration and normative regulation, sometimes in an interactional manner. The researcher argued that social factors might lead community members to experience egoistic, fatalistic, and/or anomic suicidal tendencies. Furthermore, both imitation and contagion may be at play.

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DEDICATION

For the victims of the suicide clusters in Palo Alto, CA and at Cornell University:
May you rest in peace, and may your community find the strength to improve the social conditions of the environment you once inhabited so that others may thrive in your wake.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the United States has experienced a sharp increase in suicidal deaths amongst teens (Stockard and O'Brien 2002; Bearman and Moody 2004; O'Brien and Stockard 2006; and Levine 2007), which raises concern about the social influences of suicide. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC 2008; 2015), suicide is the third leading cause of death for individuals aged 10-24. Death by suicide amongst teens and young adults has reached epidemic proportions resulting in 4,600 deaths per year (CDC 2015). This number is up from 4,500 in 2008 (CDC 2008). An additional 157,000 documented attempts also occur annually (CDC 2015). This is up from 149,000 annual documented attempts in 2008 (CDC 2008).

While popular literature on suicide tends to focus on individual, psychological components of suicidal behaviors (Bourke 2003), this research emphasizes a more social approach to understanding suicide. Surely, suicide is the *act* of an individual. However, the causes take root in the social environment, and the repercussions of an individual suicide have the potential for far reaching social consequences. Roen, Scourfield, and McDermott (2008:2089) argue, "If we were to step away from a mental-health frame of understanding, and approach suicide as a psycho-social phenomenon that occurs within cultural contexts and impacts on whole communities, we might be in a better position to understand how suicide possibilities appear to young people." Understanding the social factors is a major step that is necessary for prevention. This research seeks to understand the social factors influencing teen suicide, specifically those suicides occurring in clusters.

Depending on geographical location within the U.S., 1-13 percent of all teen suicides occur in clusters (Gould, Wallenstein, Kleinman, O'Carroll, and Mercy 1990; Gould, Jamieson, and Romer 2003). Suicide clusters occur in two forms: point and mass. This research is focused on point clusters, which are defined as multiple suicides occurring within a relatively small geographical area in a relatively narrow span of time (Joiner 1999). Victims usually share some sort of social relationship beyond geographic proximity. This paper examines three cases of suicide clusters amongst teens and young adults. Locations include: Palo Alto, CA (2 separate clusters) and Ithaca, NY. A fourth cluster was examined, but due to a lack of data, limited findings have been placed in the appendix. The fourth cluster involved three different cities (Needham, Wellesley, and Nantucket) in or near Norfolk County, MA.

This research largely focuses on the social influences of suicide. The social factor most examined herein is the institution of media. Multiple theorists (see Phillips 1974; Bollen and Phillips 1982; Stillion, McDowell, and May 1989; Gould 2001; Gould et al. 2003; Hittner 2005; Romer, Jamison, and Jamison 2006; and Hagihara, Abe, Omagair, Motoi, and Nabeshima 2014) have studied what is referred to as "The Werther Effect." The Werther Effect suggests that media reports of suicide can negatively impact consumers and could result in clustering, especially through imitation and contagion. Other researchers (Dunlop, More, and Romer 2011) argue that online media sources such as social networking sites and online forums may also lead to increased suicide ideation, especially amongst vulnerable populations most directly impacted by the publicized suicide. What role does the media play in the three clusters under examination? Should (further) preventative measures be put in place to decrease the influence of media? Or,

does the media serve other purposes that could potentially benefit community members by decreasing risks associated with suicide clusters? For example, does the publication of scientific fact and/or the creation of public discourse pertaining to problem solving act as a social buffer for future suicides? This research seeks to understand the relationship between the media and suicide clustering and go beyond the causal claims made by other researchers.

As a result of the above mentioned research, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP 2011; 2015; and 2016) and the CDC (1988; 1994) have established guidelines for the prevention of suicide through media regulation. These guidelines were established in 1994 (CDC 1994; Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention 2004). Essentially, these are “framing guidelines” used to encourage journalists to consider how media framing affects readers. These guidelines are very specific, and they suggest to journalists and media outlets how they could reduce suicide contagion by framing the news report in specific ways. These recommendations are disseminated to media outlets on an international level. The purpose of these guidelines is to prevent the spread of suicide contagion, imitation, and ideation after the publication of reports pertaining to death by suicide. Furthermore, they are intended to prevent the publication of misinformation that could be harmful to the general public (AFSP 2015). Research suggests that initiation of a campaign to encourage media compliance to these recommendations resulted in an 80 percent drop in attempted suicides six months following the start of the campaign (Sonneck, Etzersdorfer, and Nagel-Kuess 1994) Other research (Etzersdorfer and Sonneck 1998; Niederkrotenthaler and Sonneck 2007; Thom, McKenna, Edwards, O’Brien, and Nakarada-Kordic 2012) confirms the effectiveness of

implementation. However, several researchers (Pirkis, Blood, Beautrais, Burgess, and Skehan 2006) argue that the evidence from evaluations of media guidelines is too limited to gauge the impact of reports on suicide. While this research does not seek to measure specifically how these publications directly affect readers, it does question whether or not media sources reporting on these suicide clusters reflect an understanding of these guidelines. Do online media outlets abide by the recommendations for prevention established by the CDC and the AFSP?

Limited research has been conducted examining media's adherence to the prevention guidelines (see Tatum, Canetto, and Slater 2011; Easson, Agarwal, Duda, and Bennett 2014). However, what little research has been done has focused entirely on quantitative content analysis. The data used in these studies suggests a lack of coherence, but it does not explore what these "violations" of those guidelines looks like qualitatively. In other words, they do not reveal how the media frames the issue of suicide in news reports. These studies have also failed to explore the relationship between dates of publication and the growth and/or demise of specific suicide clusters. How do journalists write about the issue of suicide clusters? In what ways do they frame the issue in accordance to the guidelines provided by the AFSP and the CDC?

This research seeks to understand how the frames produced by online news reports align with the frames (prevention guidelines) recommended by the CDC and AFSP. Furthermore, it seeks to qualitatively understand how any sort of violation or lack of adherence to the recommended frame appears in these online news reports. This project examines not only the quantitative rate of adherence (through the use of descriptive statistics), but it also explores the wide range of sources that can fail to adhere

to guidelines. It also examines dates of publication in relation to each suicide within the cluster in order to better understand the relationship between media reports that violate said guidelines and the development of each specific cluster under examination. How does the timing of these failures to adhere to prevention guidelines relate to the wax/wane of the suicide clusters under investigation?

The reason why a qualitative analysis of media content is so important is because media framing can influence public discourse, especially when reporting on tragedies such as suicide. It does this in several ways. First, the media (willingly or unknowingly) frames an issue, such as suicide, in a way that will likely evoke specific public discourse. For example, an article that sensationalizes the victim's death by suicide could illicit critical responses from consumers. However, it may also bring people together because it has the potential to evoke emotion and elicit conversations about the victim, the type of person they were during their lives. An aspect of that framing, and the other way in which it influences social discourse, is through the use of disseminating factual information. Research (Cummins-Gauthier 2003) suggests that the media has a responsibility to disseminate factual information during tragic events. They claim that these publications encourage public discourse where the public can share personal, social, religious, and political views in order to formulate a collective response to the tragedy. Research on media framing, public discourse, and tragic events suggests that there may actually be a benefit to publishing stories about suicide, including those that may elicit an emotional response from readers, i.e. those that violate suicide prevention guidelines.

This research seeks to better understand the relationship between the media framing of suicide clusters and public discourse. Does the public response to these news

reports reflect shared values amongst the readers and with the journalist(s)? Do individuals responding to the journalist(s) challenge the way they have selected to frame the issue? Or, does their response reflect agreement? Furthermore, what kinds of discussions are derived from these media frameworks? Does the public strategize on how to prevent further suicides within the cluster? Is it possible that factual information printed by journalists could aid in public problem solving?

Because much of the historical research on media contagion focuses mainly on print and television media, there is a gap in the understanding of how online media, such as online news reports, social media sites, public blogs or forums, etc. may influence both suicide contagion and public discourse. Online news reports offer a unique environment for the consumer. First, online articles often include hyperlinks to other articles on similar topics. Hyperlinks may pose a unique threat to the consumer given that they can click through multiple stories of suicide in one sitting quite rapidly. Second, online articles often contain comment sections where readers of the article can pose questions, debate the issue, and suggest solutions; in short, they can create public discourse in direct response to the media frame/report. Finally, unlike more traditional forms of media, online news media can be shared easily and quickly. Consumers may share, email, or post the news reports to their social media accounts¹. They can also easily share the news reports with others within their milieu. This research seeks to understand how prevalent these online news media features are in online news reports of teen suicide clusters.

This research examines the specific comment sections that are attached to the online published news reports on the suicide clusters under investigation. Do these

¹ This is an important feature of online news media. However, an examination of sharing the specific news reports used as data is outside the scope of this project.

comment sections offer a unique setting for the public to discuss the issue of suicide and suicide prevention? And, what purpose, beyond responding to the journalists, do these comment forums provide? Do they become spaces for the creation of public discourse? Are these comment sections unique from print and television media in their ability to allow for user-to-user comments?

With the advent of the Internet and online news reports, media has shifted routes of communication. What used to be one directional communication (journalist to consumer) has now broadened to multi-directional communication. Not only are journalists communicating to consumers, but also comment sections open up communication between consumer and journalist and between consumer and consumer. This new form of interactive communication could have unique effects on suicide clusters, especially if it creates public discourse that focuses on solving the social issue or forming a collective will within the communities.

Considering the above, this raises some important questions. First, what kind of public discourse is created in response to the online media framing? By examining the comment sections (interfaces) directly associated with the original news reports, this research will suggest how individuals respond to specific media frames created by journalists, especially in reference to the framing guidelines outlined above. Second, how do individuals interact (create public discourse) with each other in response to the media framing? This research argues that these forums have the potential to provide a public space for problem solving, creating collective will, and dealing with tragic events such as suicide. But, there could also be some risk involved.

Distinction between the online news articles and the comment sections is important. Because it is more likely that journalists are aware of prevention recommendations due to dissemination practices of the CDC and the AFSP, content of the news report should be analyzed and criticized in more depth. However, due to the format of online news media (often comment sections are located directly below the end of the article), an examination of public comments in relation to those said guidelines is also important. Do readers make potentially harmful comments that may expose other vulnerable readers and increase risks of contagion? Do they also fail to adhere to (possibly unknowingly) the recommendations for the prevention of suicide outlined by the AFSP and the CDC? If so, what do these failures look like qualitatively? Do readers appear to understand these guidelines? If so, do they criticize the media for violating these recommendations for prevention? In other words, do they take an oppositional stand towards the journalists who fail to adhere? The media websites also have the ability to moderate comments for inappropriate content. Do they practice moderating the public comments in light of prevention suggestions? An examination of the relationship between these two forms of communication is important, and thus will be conducted within the scope of this project.

Another aspect of public discourse that is important to consider is how readers make sense of suicides. This research focuses solely on online news articles published by established and reputable news sources at both the local and the national level. Therefore, one can examine the public discourse created in these public spaces to understand how readers make sense of suicide, not only within their communities, but also at the national

level². How do individuals talk about the social issue? What institutions are they examining and/or blaming? How do they talk about the individual victims of suicide? What solutions do they suggest for ending the cluster or altering the social environment where the clusters occur? Is it possible that the public discourse created through online news media could lead to the implementation of social changes that bring about the end of a suicide cluster?

Prior research (Roen et al. 2008) suggests that teens and young adults make sense of suicide through public discourse (including discourse created by media) on suicide. They suggest that teens make sense of their peers' death(s) using at least one of four different frameworks. These include: a process of othering the victim (social distancing), coming to accept suicide ideation as "normal," rationalizing the death (in hindsight), and making connections between personal relationships and suicide, i.e. coming to know their own value within their social circles. Given these findings, it is also important to examine public discourse created by (self-identified) teens and young adults within these public forums. This project seeks to understand how readers, especially self-identified teens and young adults, make meaning/sense of the suicide(s) they are reading about. Do they rationalize the behavior? Can they identify with the victim(s) or do they "other" them? What role do they think their relationship with the victim plays/played in the suicidal behavior? And, how has their outlook on suicide changed as a result of reading these reports?

² Several of the sources received comments from individuals who do not live within the local vicinity. Furthermore, some of these news reports made national news and received comments from people across the country.

Durkheim ([1897] 1966) established suicide typologies based off of varying levels of integration and regulation. He proposed four types of suicide. Two types are linked to social integration: egoistic and altruistic. The other two types are linked to social regulation: fatalism and anomic. The suicide typologies are said to be the result of either too little or too much of the specific social factor. Understanding these social forces is imperative to understanding high rates of suicide found amongst teens and young adults. While this research does not set out to typify the various suicides outlined herein³, it does seek to understand what social factors could be contributing to the teen suicide clusters under examination. Using public discourse created in online news media forums as data, this project seeks to understand the public's lived experience within these communities. Are there social conditions at play that result in an imbalance of either social integration or social regulation? Can these suicide clusters, at least partially be explained by Durkheim's theory of suicide? How do individuals describe these communities, and what do these descriptions reveal about the type of social environment they may be living in (egoistic, altruistic, fatalistic, or anomic)?

Both Durkheim ([1897] 1966) and Marx ([1846] 1999) discuss multiple social institutions that can affect rates of suicide. Since the institutions of society are largely responsible for regulating human behavior through social constraint (social regulation) and creating social cohesion (integration), an analysis of those institutions (and the potential effects they have on integration and regulation) is important. While this research does not directly study those institutions, it does examine how members participating within the institutions come to understand and interpret the social environment. Through

³ Durkheim ([1897] 1966) actually cautions readers against efforts to map individual suicides onto these suicide typologies.

the use of data collected from the media sources, this research also considers how other institutions and social factors, such as the family, peer groups, the education system, and one's socio-economic class may play a role in regulating social integration and social regulation according to public commentary. Support for these claims are found not only amongst the qualitative data derived from public discourse (comment sections), but also by considering the social demographics of each community under investigation.

This project accomplishes this in two ways. First, it offers an in-depth examination of several factors/demographics that have been shown to increase rates of suicide (socio-economic class, education levels, and individualism). This project examines these factors within each of the locations where a cluster has occurred. By examining demographic information about each of these communities, a clearer picture of societal-level risk factors emerges. Both the city and the schools where the suicides are occurring will be investigated. This analysis is performed through direct research on each geographical location using school reports and data from the U.S. Census Bureau. Are there similarities between the communities where these teen suicide clusters occurred? In other words, is there a pattern of geographical or communal risk factors stemming from the data? What "social ills" do these specific locales experience? How might these factors influence regulation and integration?

Secondly, this project examines the public discourse created through the online forums. One question worth examining is how consumers/responders feel about fault and/or blame. Does public discourse reflect micro-social or individual blame (selves, peers, families)? Or, does public discourse reflect blame towards macro, structural factors such as the education system and/or socio-economic class? In other words, does the

public understand some of the known social factors that lead to suicide, and do they discuss the altering of institutions and societal practices in order to prevent further suicides? Does the public have a general understanding of the socio-historical circumstances that could be contributing to the creation and growth of a suicide cluster? And, if so, what solutions do they propose?

This dissertation is structured in a traditional manner. Chapter II begins with an introduction to suicide as a social issue, as opposed to a strictly psychological issue. It then introduces social clustering, defines the two types of suicide clusters, as well as theories that explain the development of said clusters. It then discusses the risks associated with adolescence and clustering. The next section introduces theories that discuss the role media plays in suicide clustering. Chapter II also focuses on how media framing creates public discourse that may have a social influence on suicide rates, especially amongst teens and young adults. The chapter continues with a review of the literature on how public discourse is created in relation to tragedies, specifically suicide. A brief discussion of how teens and young adults make sense of suicide through media framing and public discourse follows. The next section of chapter II discusses more contemporary research that examines several social factors related to suicide including the family, socio-economic class, peer groups, and education. The chapter then introduces some of the more classical theories of suicide produced in sociology, namely those of Emile Durkheim and Karl Marx. The chapter continues on with both an examination and a critique of both classical (Tarde) and contemporary micro sociological and/or psychological theories on the imitation and contagion of suicide. Chapter II

concludes with a summary of how the literature applies to the research questions to be answered by the analysis.

Chapter III offers a more detailed exploration of the research questions that will be addressed and answered in chapters IV and V. This section also offers a brief definition of the methods used for analysis. This project uses a comparative case method to examine public discourse. By using public content as “transcripts,” this project may also be described as cyberethnography. Chapter III also discusses the selection criteria used for inclusion of data, as well as the process used to code and analysis the texts referred to as domain and theme analysis. Chapter III ends with a discussion of ethical concerns and research limitations.

Chapter IV reveals the findings of the data analysis. The chapter is organized in three parts. Part I introduces the communities under study. It also provides the demographics of the clusters being analyzed. Part II describes the sources used for data analysis. Part III explores the findings that answer the research questions posed by this project. Furthermore, it includes the comparative analysis of the cases under investigation. Findings for the articles are presented first, followed by findings for the comment sections.

Chapter V offers a thorough discussion of the findings. This chapter attempts to address the theoretical perspectives outlined in chapter II. It links findings to supportive social research. It also presents findings that challenge some of the theories outlined in chapter II. Thus, it also reveals voids within the literature that are filled by the findings herein. Finally, chapter V concludes with “social autopsy” of the clusters under investigation.

Chapter VI concludes the dissertation. It reviews the aims of the research project while also exploring the answers to the research questions posed in both chapters I and III. It reiterates the connection of the findings to the literature. Chapter VI also discusses how the findings could translate into raising awareness and/or creating social change within these communities.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Suicide, otherwise referred to as “voluntary death,” is usually viewed by society as the act of the individual. Victims leave behind notes or clues, assumptions are made, and reasons for committing such an act appear to be extremely personal. Each case can be justified by the life experience and psyche of the individuals who succeed at committing this lethal form of violence against him or herself.

With this individualist view of suicide, a grouping (or cluster) of suicides could be explained as nothing more than the collective of multiple psychological, individual acts. However, there are specific social conditions that can affect an individual’s decision to die by suicide. In fact, one could argue that the decision is dominantly social. Durkheim ([1897] 1966:46) suggests:

Instead of seeing in them only separate occurrences, unrelated and to be separately studied, the suicides committed in a given society during a given period of time are taken as a whole, it appears that this total is not simply a sum of independent units, a collective total, but is itself a new fact *sui generis*, with its own unity, individuality and consequently its own nature—a nature, furthermore, dominantly social.

Suicides are social and often the result of a culmination of social factors that ultimately drive a person to take his or her own life. Durkheim ([1897] 1979:299), also states:

The social suicide-rate can be explained only sociologically. At any given moment the moral constitution of society establishes the contingent of voluntary deaths. There is, therefore, for each people a collective force of a definite amount of energy, impelling men [and women] to self-destruction. The victim’s acts, which at first seem to express only his [or her] personal temperament are really the supplement and prolongation of a social condition, which they express externally.

Suicide Clusters and Demographic Characteristics

The earliest tales of cluster suicides date back to ancient Grecian time. Since then, few geographic areas have found themselves immune to the damages of this social phenomenon (Davidson, Rosenberg, Mercy, Franklin, and Simmons 1989). A suicide is considered a part of a “cluster” under several social conditions. According to Stillion et al. (1989:90) a cluster is defined as, “a phenomenon in which a group of people who are similar demographically and live in the same general geographic location will commit suicide over a relative short span of time” (see also Centre for Suicide Prevention 1999). Clusters often spread like disease through a population, and are viewed as an epidemiological phenomenon. Davidson et al. (1989:2687) describe clusters broadly as, “a closely grouped series of events or cases of a disease or other health-related phenomena with well-defined distribution patterns, in relation to time or place or both.” Davidson et al. (1989) also explore how suicide clusters have peaks and valleys, much like other diseases within a community. Furthermore, like other illnesses and epidemics, suicide clusters must end, and they do so only after they have infected the most susceptible hosts; in this case, individuals with a pre-existing potential for suicide.

There are two types of clusters found in society: point and mass. According to Joiner (1999), point clusters occur locally within a relatively small geographic area. They often involve individuals with mutual interests and/or compatible qualities, and they are most commonly found within institutional settings such as hospitals, schools, and prisons. For example, Brent, Kerr, Goldstein and Bozigar (1989) investigated a point cluster that happened at a high school with 1,500 students. Findings suggested that two students committed suicide within four days of each other. Furthermore, during an 18-day span an

additional seven students attempted suicide while suicide ideation increased for at least twenty-three students. Brent et al. (1989) argue that suicidal risk (attempted or idealized) was highest amongst students who were close to the victims.

Joiner (1999:92) suggests that point clusters are like viral epidemics; individuals, possibly already at risk, are exposed to an external agent and fall victim to clustering due to a lack of protection (in his case, social support). For example, Haw (1994) examined a suicide cluster occurring within a psychiatric unit. In this particular case, a vulnerable population came together (in the ward), they were all exposed to the same social pressures (lack of agency and suicidal peers), and all lacked necessary social support systems. According to Beautrais, Gould, and Caine (2010), social protective factors may include religious ties, family support, and/or participation in social groups that promote proscription against suicide. This culmination of the above social conditions could allow suicide ideation to spread like a virus throughout the vulnerable population.

Occasionally, point clusters occur in a specific location with historical ties to previous suicides. Beautrais et al. (2010) refer to these locations as “hotspots.” They state, “A ‘suicide hotspot’ is a term that is loosely defined but typically used to describe a specific site, usually in a public location, which is used frequently as a location for suicide, has easy access, and which gains a reputation and media attention as a place for suicide” (p. 9). Examples of popular iconic hotspots include the Golden Gate Bridge and the gorges of Ithaca, NY where Cornell University is located. These public locations become known for previous *successful* suicides. And, media appears to play a role in the production of these hotspots through their reporting of the iconic site. Other influences include the beauty or aesthetic appeal of the location, the cultural or social meaning of the

setting, and the hazard the suicide would pose to the public if committed in that particular location. According to Beautrais et al. (2010:9), “The symbolism and romanticism associated with an iconic or symbolic suicide site appear to play a decisive additional role for those who choose to jump from such sites.”

Mass clusters differ from point clusters; although they occur within a given time period, they do not necessarily occur within a given space. Mass clusters are usually portrayed as a substantial increase in suicides across a range of geographic areas in response to some stimuli such as the suicidal death of a celebrity. Unlike point clusters, they are considered to be only a media-related phenomenon (Joiner 1999). For example, Phillips and Carstensen (1986; 1988) discovered an increase in the suicide rate amongst broad populations exposed to stories of suicide (either true or fictional) in both television and print media sources.

The above distinction is critical to this analysis. All clusters in this analysis are strictly point clusters. This research does not attempt to analyze the mass effect of the suicide reports under examination. Although mass clusters are more likely the result of media contagion, the media is often at least partially to blame for the continuation of point clusters (Beautrais et al. 2010). This project aims to examine this association by focusing on the content of the media, the public’s response, and the timing of publication in relation to the wax and wane of the teen suicide clusters selected for analysis. Furthermore, given the methodological approach to this project, an analysis of mass clusters is not possible.

A modern, and particularly important form of clustering occurs amongst teens and young adults. Adolescents aged 15-19 are one of the most likely age groups to be a part

of a suicide cluster (Gould et al. 1990). In fact, the majority of clusters reported to the CDC have involved teens and young adults (Gould and Davidson 1988). Clusters within this age group, especially amongst individuals from the same school (point cluster), can occur for multiple reasons. First, students within a given educational institution are exposed to many of the same social conditions. According to Durkheim ([1897] 1966:133), cluster suicides “within a single region may well spring from an equal diffusion of certain causes favorable to the development of suicide, and from the fact that the social environment is the same throughout the region.” Also, an extremely negative event, such as the first suicide, can act as a stimulus to future suicides. Teens and young adults who are exposed to a peer’s suicide are at increased risk for emotional problems, which in turn puts them at increased risk for suicide (Joiner 1999; CDC 2008).

The above literature on suicide clusters and hotspots was used to support how the researcher operationalized suicide clusters within this research. Furthermore, this literature helps to distinguish between mass and point clusters, which was an important distinction used as inclusion criteria for this research project. Finally, the literature describing a hotspot will be used to analyze how and why victims within these clusters under investigation may have been drawn to specific locations for death by suicide.

Media’s Influence on Suicide

The research on suicide contagion and imitation suggests media reports on suicide, both on television and in print media, results in increased local suicide rates, especially amongst teens (Bollen and Phillips 1982; Gould et al. 2003; Hagihara, et al. 2014; Phillips 1974; Romer et al. 2006; Stillion et al. 1989). The “Werther effect,” as it has come to be known, is the occurrence of imitative suicides following media stories

(Phillips 1974; Gould et al. 2003). New research (see Dunlop et al. 2011) suggests that online media sources, including social networking sites and online forums may increase access to examples of suicide, which could then lead to an increase in suicide ideation and contagion (see also CDC 2015).

According to Romer et al. (2006:253), there are at least two underlying mechanisms that cause contagion by media accounts. First, the suicide account offers consumers of media an effective method for ending their lives. Furthermore, exposure to the suicide method encourages imitation in vulnerable populations (Fekete and Macsai 1990). When detailed descriptions, photos, or references to the exact location of the suicide accompany media accounts, these risks increase (Sonneck et al. 1994). Revealing the location can also increase the risk of point clustering because others learn about a particular location's success rate for the completion of suicidal behaviors.

The second underlying mechanism described by Romer et al. (2006:254) is the reduction of preexisting restraints on a behavior already known to the victim. Suicide is a taboo or "proscribed" behavior. Reading about others engaging in this deviant act releases those who are already contemplating suicide from social constraints. Furthermore, contagion and imitation are thought to occur, in part, due to the romanticizing of suicide and its victims in local news stories (Davidson et al. 1989; Fekete and Schmidtke 1995; and Gould et al. 2003). This romanticization and glorification has the potential to create an environment where community members become fascinated and preoccupied with the death, resulting in future suicides (O'Carroll 1990). Those already at risk may be more likely to engage in the activity because others before them have successfully done so and have been recognized publicly for it.

Media reporting on suicide may play a crucial role in teen and young adult contagion, imitation, and clustering. Romer et al. (2006:265) examined youth under the age of twenty-five and claim, “the effects of news reporting are disproportionately greater amongst those exposed in this age group.” Although youth consume less television and print media, they appear to respond more negatively to suicide reporting, resulting in ideation of, attempted, or completed suicides (Romer et al. 2006).

The above literature is used herein in order to better understand the role that media framing may play in the spread of suicide clusters amongst teens and young adults. This analysis considers how suicide is presented in the media. Is it glorified and/or romanticized by journalists? Does it offer information about the location and/or method of suicide that could result in the creation of hotspots? Given how prior researchers have attributed suicide contagion and imitation to the framing of suicide, this research seeks to better understand how publicizing these types of details aligns with the development of the clusters under investigation.

Media Guidelines for the Prevention of Suicide Contagion and Imitation

Given the above findings, media recommendations for the prevention of suicide become necessary in an attempt to reduce suicide imitation and contagion amongst youth.

According to Gould et al. (2003), guidelines for media reporting of suicide should include avoiding sensational headlines focusing on suicide, avoiding prominent placement of reports on suicide, and avoiding detailed descriptions of suicide methods. Recommendations were published in 2001 and disseminated widely to media outlets (Tatum, Canetto, and Slater 2011). Also, presentations and publications were produced by the Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC) to help raise awareness of these

guidelines amongst journalists (Jamieson 2002; Jamieson, Jamieson, and Romer 2003). Other nations around the world (Switzerland, Hong Kong, and Australia) have examined the effects of implementing similar policies (Tatum et al. 2010) and discovered they effectively decreased suicide rates (Sonneck et al. 1994; Etzersdorfer and Sonneck 1998). Therefore, responsible reporting on the issue of suicide could prevent unnecessary imitative or contagious suicide, especially if the media were to focus on preventative measures instead.

According to Easson et al. (2014), imitation and contagion could be reduced if the media chose to focus more on the reporting of research evidence about risk factors and effective prevention methods and programs. Media outlets could publish information about the likely causes of suicide, warning signs, and improvements in treatment. Furthermore, online communities can provide a widening social support network, which is often anonymous, for youth at risk when local resources fall short or are unavailable (Dunlop et al. 2011). This approach, however, would require the media to use a more scientific approach to reporting on suicide (Brown 2009). If media outlets focused more on making factual claims (supported by evidence), emphasized stigma reduction, and publicized public prevention resources and programs, then the articles reporting on individual cases could both prevent suicides and promote communal well being. As a result of these findings, the AFSP (2016) recommends that journalists include factual information about warning signs, treatment options, and local/national resources where readers could find treatment.

To date, very little research has been conducted in the United States analyzing the adherence to these suggested guidelines. Tatum et al. (2010) examined over 950

American newspaper articles from 2002-2003 and concluded adherence is inconsistent. These findings confirm other research performed by Jamieson et al. (2003), which examined media representation of suicide in the 1990s prior to the implementation of media guidelines for the publication of suicide stories. These studies suggest not much had changed over the course of a decade, despite the continued promotion of recommendations made by national mental health organizations.

The above literature provides an understanding of how the media guidelines may influence future suicides within a cluster. These guidelines are, essentially, framing guidelines to be used by the media. Do online media outlets adhere to the suicide prevention recommendations disseminated by the CDC and the AFSP? Using these guidelines as an analytical tool, this research project seeks to understand the number of violations, their qualitative attributes, and how the date of the violation relates to the growth within a particular cluster. Furthermore, since very little research can be found on the qualitative analysis of these violations, this research project hopes to address this void in the literature. Through this analysis, a clearer understanding of what violations look like (qualitatively), and how those relate to the growth of the cluster, will be developed.

Online News Media and Youth Consumption Habits

In 2016, the AFSP published additional guidelines for the prevention of suicide contagion specifically targeted at online media sources. The AFSP (2016) is most concerned with the ability for suicide reporting to “go viral” on the Internet, i.e. they are concerned about the share-ability of such reports. They state, “The potential for online reports, photos/videos and stories to go viral makes it vital that online coverage of suicide follow site or industry safety recommendations” (p. 2). The AFSP (2016:2) seems mostly

concerned about “citizen journalists” and “public commentators” who may respond to media reports of suicide within online forums (like comment sections).

Online media outlets provide a unique research perspective due to the hypertextuality and interactivity of these mediums (Oblak 2005). Hypertextuality describes the seemingly endless access (through hyperlinks) to additional media resources found on websites. For example, unlike print media or television news reports, online news articles often provide hyperlinks to other available articles and/or videos on similar topics. According to Dunlop et al. (2011), 25 percent of teens learn of suicide stories through the use of social networking sites. Social networking sites, like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter all allow for the inclusion of hyperlink activity.

The term interactivity refers to the interactive nature of the Internet. Schultz (2000:214) states:

Online forums increase the interactivity of the mass media overall by widening opportunities for reader-to-reader communication...One can expect that the discussions will be related to the content of the mass medium. This can ensure that people share some basic knowledge and background, and the discussions have a better chance to achieve a certain coherence.

Many online news articles offer comment interfaces where the public can discuss, debate, ask questions about, and propose solutions to social problems in a reader-to-reader or reader-to-journalist interaction. According to The Project for Excellence in Journalism (2009), 31 percent of online sites associated with “legacy” media include this type of comment forums (also see Rosenberry 2011). The Internet has ushered in a new form of communication consumption. Instead of being a one-to-many exchange, like print or broadcast, Internet news offers a unique participatory environment. Examining online media leads to a better understanding of the effects these modern forms of

communication have on the representation of suicide in media and issues of contagion and imitation.

Chapple and Ziebland (2011) argue that the Internet and online communities may offer consumers an environment through which they can mitigate feelings of isolation and intense grief (in the situation of suicide). Interactions in the media serve as an extended social support group that occurs outside the individual's immediate social circle. In this way, the Internet may actually protect against depression, anxiety, and complicated grief (Vanderwerker and Prigerson 2004). "The Web has transformed some aspects of the experience of bereavement by suicide. These [transformations] include telling others about the death; making sense of the events, and gaining support from an Internet community of others who have been similarly bereaved" (Chapple and Ziebland 2011:178).

The Internet also has the potential to provide an interactive environment that allows users to remain anonymous. Anonymity is not likely available with in-person communication. This allows for consumers of media to share personal experiences and details about themselves that they may not otherwise share (Connolly, Jessup, and Valacich 1990). According to Chapple and Ziebland (2011), users are freer to communicate their feelings without fear of judgment. Users in their study discussed how uncommon bereavement over suicide was. This can make discussing the subject more difficult face-to-face, especially because of the social stigma attached to both victims and their close associates. Furthermore, the Internet offers 24-hour access to this form of communication. Therefore, if someone was struggling "after hours," the Internet allots them a space to communicate with others as needed, when needed.

Finally, the interactivity of the Internet is also linked to share-ability. Share-ability is linked to the dissemination of information through one's own social networks. For example, online news reports can be shared, liked, tweeted, etc. This type of "social circle" share-ability poses new challenges to both journalistic authority and professional values (Netzer, Tenenboim-Weinblatt, and Shifman 2014). It also influences the speed at which news reports meet digital audience members.

This research could be especially valuable to the study of youth suicide and contagion. According to Zickuhr (2010), approximately 93 percent of young Americans aged 12-17 and 95 percent aged 18-33 are online. Furthermore, Lenhart, Purcell, Smith and Zickuhr (2010) claim that 62 percent of teens and young adults get news about current events and politics online, while over half of young adults aged 18-24 have mobile Internet access through cell phones and laptops. More specifically, when surveyed, teens claimed they received 44 percent of suicide stories from Internet news sources (Dunlop et al. 2011). These facts raise concerns about media-induced suicide contagion and suggest that the speed and accessibility of online sources have the potential to increase exposure to news stories about suicide. It may also have the increased power to act as a support system leading to the prevention of further suicides within point clusters.

The above literature will aid the researcher in better understanding how online news media features may differ from more traditional forms of media such as newspapers and television reports used to analyze suicide clustering in the past. Given the anonymity of the Internet, how does online news media provide an outlet for individuals to discuss topics that would be considered taboo (such as suicide) in a face-to-face interaction? How

much do people interact in response to published stories of suicide? Also, how hypertextual and/or interactive are these online news media sources? How might this affect vulnerable populations, especially if those who comment may be unfamiliar with the guidelines for discussing suicide in the media that the CDC and the AFSP have disseminated?

Media Framing

Media framing is, “the process whereby a frame determines which aspects of reality are selected, rejected, emphasized or modified in the production of a media text and, at the same time, provides the audience with a context and suggested meaning” (Van Gorp 2004:16). According to Goffman (1974), a frame is a specific way of explaining to the audience what is going on while also determining what is salient during a particular event or experience (also see Gamson and Modigliana 1987). In this way, framing can structure an individual’s perception. The frame helps them to construct a general statement regarding the structure or form of experiences individuals have at any moment of their social life (Goffman 1974).

According to Van den Bulck and Claessens (2013:72), framing allows for the analysis of the interplay between multiple levels of reality production. These include the textual level (where media framing occurs), the cognitive level (where the audience reads and perceives), the extra-media level (where discourse is created), and the macrostructure (where shared cultural ideas are derived from). Although Van den Bulck and Claessens (2013) refer to the first level as being textual, they also note that framing messages can be displayed through multiple devices, including both words and images. Entman (1993:52) defines framing in a similar manner. He also suggests that there are four levels. His

levels, however, are more focused on reasoning and include defining the problem, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation. Therefore, the media does not necessarily tell readers how to think about a social issue, but instead influences what readers will think about (Price, Tewksbury, and Powers 1997). The media sets the agenda and primes the reader (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Gamson 1989).

Since journalists, who have both a subject experience and a subjective position, create the frames, the creation of the media frame is also subjective. This is why some variation in framing occurs amongst multiple media sources despite the focus on the same event. According to Goffman (1974), these frames almost always have some implicit link to the journalist's or the media institution's cultural roots. In the same vein, consumers of media do not interpret the frames in the same way because readers also bring their own subjective experience to the interaction. Therefore, although media frames can "prime" or "raise the salience or apparent importance of certain ideas," there are other intermediating factors that influence the way readers interpret and are affected by the report (Entman 2007: 164; also see Van den Bulck and Claessens 2013).

According to Gerhards and Schafer (2010), Internet news websites have become important forums in the public sphere. Given their accessibility, they have the ability to "communicate collectively relevant issues to larger audiences and facilitate the formation of public opinion" (Weber 2014:942 in reference to Gerhards and Schafer 2010). According to Weber (2014), online news sources are unique in how they create public discourse due to the inclusion of attached comment sections. The inclusion of these comment sections allows researchers to better understand the public discursive processing of news issues by its readers (Weber 2014).

According to Carey (1989), there are two different conceptions of communication in reference to framing. The first is the transmission view. This conception views communication as a way of transmitting and distributing information within a community or population. The second conception is referred to as the ritual view. The ritual view takes into consideration how culture and community are maintained through the use of communication. This second conception draws heavily from Dewey's (1916) theory on the relationship between common, community, and communication. Dewey (1916:5) states, "Men [and women] live in a community in virtue of the things which they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common...aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge – a common understanding." Essentially, it is "the construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful culture world" (Carey 1989:18). Using the ritual view of communication when considering how the media conveys information to the public, one can argue that the reporting of tragic events such as teen cluster suicides has the potential to bring people together. This is accomplished by providing an outlet for the sharing of communal beliefs, values, and goals. According to Cummins-Gauthier (2003:35):

The ethical implication here is that a shift in the way we view communication may actually affect our conception of society and the way communication occurs within it. Viewing communication as a process through which our common culture is defined, disseminated, and reinforced may result in forms of communication that respect and honor our shared beliefs and values.

This may be especially relevant to online news media that not only disseminate information, but also provide an online, interactive environment for users to communicate with each other about the news report.

Katz (1957) argues that readers and viewers of media are much more than passive consumers. He calls into question the idea that views “the audience as a mass of disconnected individuals hooked up to the media but not to each other” (Katz 1957:61). Instead, the media works on multiple levels. First, it disseminates information that has the potential to influence attitudes or motivate behavior on an individual, micro level. Second, it has the ability to stimulate public discourse. “In times of national crisis, the news media disseminate information and raise relevant issues, thus providing for those who watch, listen, and read shared knowledge and concerns for further discussion amongst themselves” (Cummins-Gauthier 2003:35). This argument suggests that media is not only providing information about tragic events, but also providing a space for public discourse that could raise issues, problem solve, and pose important questions.

The above literature informs the researcher of how public discourse is created through media framing. Given that online news media sources provide a digital space for public discourse, this research seeks to better understand how individuals interact with media frames. Do respondents in these forums simply reflect the frame put forth by the media/journalist? In other words, how does the public respond to these reports of suicide within these digital spaces? And, what does the online discourse reveal about these communities and the struggles they are facing?

Media, Public Discourse, and Tragic Events. According to the conceptual arguments outlined above, if the media creates and disseminates reports on tragic events, it also contributes to the production of public discourse about beliefs, values, and attitudes related to those events. Furthermore, online media creates a space for diverse groups of individuals to come together and debate the social issue being covered by the

news report. According to Cummins-Gauthier (2003:36), “Public discourse, initiated and supported by the news media, is a form of communication that brings individuals with diverse opinions and wills together and allows them to participate in the development of a collective will, a consensus with which they can identify.” As a result of these publications, not only is public discourse created in small sectors of an individual’s personal lives (peer groups, family members, co-workers, etc.), but the online forum creates a space for individuals to interact with others not only on the local level, but also on a national and international scale. This highly diverse group in an anonymous setting allows for the creation of a collective will.

According to Post (1995), the creation of public discourse is most important during times of tragedy. He goes even further to state that not only does the media have the right to initiate public discourse due to the freedom of the press, but that the media has an obligation to do so. In the face of tragedy:

We need factual information, but even more we need to understand the implications of tragic events for our society and the many personal, social, religious, and political issues they raise. All of this can equip us to engage in public discourse with the goal of formulating a collective response that best reflects our shared culture (Cummins-Gauthier 2003:36).

This allows consumers of the media frame to think about the issue, discuss it, and collectively decide what is happening and how to solve the problem.

Problem solving through discourse often focuses on forming some sort of agreement in relationship to morals, ethics, and values. These decisions are usually discussed and/or crafted in response to some sort of emotional response that is evoked by the news report. According to Cummins-Gauthier (2003), emotion plays an important role in the creation of public discourse derived from the reporting on tragedy. She states

that emotional engagement allows the reader to empathize with victims and survivors. “Emotional reactions and our appreciation of the emotional experiences of others are important elements in the development of truly moral attitudes and response” (Cummins-Gauthier 2003:37). If an issue has both political and social implications, the development of these moral attitudes and responses are imperative to making decisions about preventative measures that affect large groups of individuals. Therefore, attempts to regulate media stories by, for example, encouraging media outlets to avoid sensationalism, may actually remove an important component of the public discourse creation process. Rather than criticizing the emotional appeal of the media, one may want to consider how that emotional appeal plays an important role in bringing together members of a community.

According to Cummins-Gauthier (2003), stories of tragedy in the media can serve an important role in moral decision-making. While suicide prevention guidelines suggest that talking about the victim in a positive manner and/or glorifying the actions of the victims could lead to suicide contagion, Cummins-Gauthier (2003) argues that these details are important. Readers/consumers of these media reports can analyze the victim’s story and learn about both the stories of good and evil lives, personal choices, actions, and their consequences. “Our attention to the story of what happened, because it did not happen to us or to our own families, allows us to make judgments and form attitudes and opinions that are more universally applicable” (Cummins-Gauthier 2003:38). These victim stories can help to form models of the types of values and actions one would accept and those one would reject. Therefore, while literature on media contagion suggests that these reports act as a model for others to participate in suicide, it is quite

possible they could also act as a model for what *not* to do, especially if the public consensus is that suicide is morally wrong.

Tragic events such as suicide are often fear and anxiety provoking. Cummins-Gauthier (2003) argues that the reporting on tragic events can actually aid in the alleviation of such fears and anxieties by providing details on, or insight into, how the event occurred. As consumers of media reports about tragedy, readers have access to the (alleged) facts of the events. These facts can help individuals understand not only what happened, but also how to prevent such tragedies from happening in their own lives and in their own communities. Furthermore, the public discourse created by this information allows for readers to understand what is being done to solve the problem, which can act to alleviate feelings of anxiety within the community by providing a sense of control (Cummins-Gauthier 2003).

Along with feelings of fear and anxiety, tragic events can also cause feelings of collective and individual guilt. In the case of suicide, members of a given community may feel responsible for the death of one of its members, especially because public solutions to the problem often place the onus of responsibility on individuals. Media reports about the tragic event can create public discourse surrounding issues of guilt. In the process of communicating with others, members of a community can begin to pinpoint who or what they think is to blame for the creation of the social problem. According to Cummins-Gauthier (2003), if consumers of media can pinpoint blame, especially if the blame is placed on institutions, it can alleviate individual and collective guilt.

It is also important to note that readers and consumers of reports on tragic events do not always create public discourse that aligns with the framing of the article. According to Van den Bulck and Claessens (2013:81), media consumers can create “counter-frames” that decode media messages in an oppositional or negotiated way. These counter-frames are often derived from personal experiences that create a strong view on the issue. For example, a media frame may attempt to evoke emotional empathy for a victim. However, readers may pass oppositional judgment of the victim by referring to them as cowardly or selfish (Van den Bulck and Claessens 2013). In such cases, readers communicate an opposition that condemns the uncritical perspective held by the media.

The above literature is used to better understand how public discourse is a response to the media framing of tragic events, such as suicide. As noted above, consumers of media do not always passively accept the frame put forth by journalists. This project seeks to better understand how readers create public discourse that counters the frame put forth by the media outlets. Do consumers of these reports of suicide criticize the tactics used by journalists? Furthermore, do journalists evoke emotion by framing the media reports in a particular manner? Do these emotional responses reveal how the community works towards developing a collective will? Given the digital space, do individuals discuss prevention methods or strategies for ending the suicide clusters? And, who or what is to blame for these tragic events, according to the respondents?

Making Sense of Suicide Through Framing and Discourse. In order to better understand how suicide affects teens and young adults, one must also understand how they make meaning of suicides in their personal lives. Teens and young adults practice

sense-making with regard to suicide, and how they interpret the act depends largely on discourse and context. “Suicide inevitably becomes meaningful to young people in relation to their socio-cultural context” (Roen et al. 2008). By evaluating the public discourse created in these socio-culture contexts, a better understanding of suicides and suicide contagion emerges. In other words, “it is useful to understand discourse as not merely located in language but, rather, as producing action” (Roen et al. 2008:2089 in reference to Parker 2005).

According to post-structuralist theorists, common-sense emerges out of social interactions, i.e. discourse. Roen et al. (2008:2091) claim, “Discourses operate in such a way that it is hard to challenge taken-for-granted or ‘common sense’ understandings of the world.” In this way, individuals may unknowingly feel constrained and/or enabled by social boundaries that are upheld by public discourse. Furthermore, they may struggle with explaining and/or justifying behaviors that seem natural despite the fact that they are often socially created. “Social behavior is a manifestation of shared patterns of symbolic meaning” (O’Brien 2011:51).

Using a post-structuralist lens, examining how an individual interprets or makes sense of suicide is largely determined by public discourse. Public discourse is created through multiple institutional settings including, schools, the media, the family, and peer groups (amongst others). Roen et al. (2008) interviewed teens and young adults between the ages of 16-24 and discovered four central frameworks derived from moral and public discourses on teen suicide. These include: framing suicidal subjects as “others,” viewing suicidal subjecthood as readily accessible, rationalizing suicide, and understanding how relationship bonds influence suicidal subjects.

Of the four frameworks, framing suicidal subjects as “others” is the most heavily used form of sense-making amongst teens. According to Roen et al. (2008), their participants viewed suicide as an act that was both shocking and morally wrong. Furthermore, they viewed suicide as something that would be unlikely to happen in their neighborhood and/or their social circles. This allowed them to view suicidal individuals as “others” while maintaining a safe distance from suicidal acts that are frequently stigmatized by larger society. Not only do these findings suggest a moral order (Foucault 1967), but they also reveal a contradiction with another framework: viewing suicidal subjecthood as readily available.

The second framework used to make sense of suicide amongst teens is the framing of suicide ideation as not only a normal, but also a predictable outcome of adolescence (Roen et al. 2008). By doing so, they actively move suicide ideation from a pathological thought process toward something that is the direct result of their lived experience. According to Roen et al. (2008:2093), “Framing suicide as something that all young people think of gives permission for suicidal possibilities to be entertained without this being a sign of pathology or immorality. Some teens and young adults even view suicide attempts and/or ideation as a way to create meaning in their lives. Roen et al. (2008) argues that their participants often hyper focused on struggles in their personal lives, and suicide became a part of the framework because it serves as a more dramatic solution to solving their personal conflicts.

The third framework, rationalization, was usually the result of hindsight. Individuals were able to evaluate the suicidal victim’s life circumstances, these evaluations were then used to justify such an “immoral” or “wrong” decision (Roen et al.

2008). Teens and young adults may need to view suicide as the rational outcome of multiple other available solutions to an individual's struggles. Also, by rationalizing the successful suicide of a peer and/or family member, teens and young adults were able to reframe suicide from other widely accepted discourses that define suicide as a chaotic decision that makes individuals more vulnerable. Furthermore, rationalization also played a role in maintaining social order. "Constructing suicidal subjects as rational people, whose ordinary life circumstances simply become overwhelming, produces an understanding of suicide as reasonable, though shocking" (Roen et al. 2008:2095). This also allowed teens and young adults to explain away any disjuncture they experienced between the perceived state of reality and reality.

The fourth framework explains the relationship between personal connections and suicidality. As noted earlier, social groups such as the family or peer groups are viewed as playing a key role in one's will to live. Due to established emotional connections, teens and young adults may feel an obligation to choose life. This fourth framework suggests both a rational line of decision-making, as well as recognition of one's value within a social group or community (Roen et al. 2008). Teens may deal with a tragic event like suicide by using the event to better understand their own value within the social systems in which they participate.

The above research offers insight into how teens and adults cope with tragic events such as suicide. This literature informs the reader of the multiple processes that people can undertake in order to come to terms with the death of a peer, friend, or family member. Given the online, public discourse, how do individuals make sense of these suicide clusters? Do they identify with the victims? In other words, can they relate to

feelings of wanting to die by suicide? Or, do they distance themselves from the victims by expressing that they are confused about why this is happening in their community? Upon reading these articles on suicide, do individuals come to recognize their own worth? Is it possible that reports of suicide could actually help vulnerable others realize that suicide is not the best option?

Macro Sociological Theories of Suicide

According to Anderson (1999:20), viewing suicide as a “broader social ill” dates back to classical sociological theorists such as Marx and Durkheim. Marx ([1846] 1999:47) states, “the yearly toll of suicides, which is to some extent normal and periodic, has to be viewed as a symptom of the deficient organization of our society.” Although not all societies experience suicide at the same rate, “the classification of different causes of suicide would be the classification of the failures of our society itself” (Marx [1846] 1999:64). Suicides suggest something is amiss in society.

Social Integration and Normative Regulation. One of Durkheim’s ([1897] 1966) main arguments is that suicide rates reflect the level of social solidarity within a society. The solidarity, or connection to others, those members of society experience is based on the individual’s level of social integration and normative regulation. Social integration and normative regulation are not necessarily separate spheres. In fact, the relationship between the two can be quite strong and somewhat hard to distinguish. According to Bearman (1991:522), integration and regulation are said to go “hand in hand” where integration causes regulation and vice versa. However, it is important to discuss the distinguishing features of each in order to understand their effects on cluster suicides amongst teens.

Social integration is, “the extent of social relations binding a person or a group to others such that they are exposed to the moral demands of the group. Integration may vary from complete embeddings in a group—the fully connected clique—to the pure isolate without social relations” (Bearman 1991:503). Integration focuses on both the micro level (how people relate to one another within groups) and the macro level, which is how those same groups relate to others in larger society. The strength of these multiple and collective social ties determines the amount of social integration an individual experiences (Pescosolido and Georgianna 1989).

Normative regulation is, “the normative or moral demands placed on the individual that come with membership in the group” (Bearman 1991:503). These regulations can come in many forms. Most originate in social structures such as the family, religious groups, peer and social groups, schools, etc. These institutions help the individuals within them to understand their place in society (or the group), the role(s) they are expected to play, and the rules that govern the action of the institution’s members. Moderate levels of normative regulation help to create group solidarity, while low levels tend to isolate the individual from greater society, and high levels create a restrictive environment where the individual may feel oppressed by societal expectations. Arguably, without normative regulation one becomes isolated, and as a result is also less likely to be integrated in society. This is an example of the strong relationship between integration and regulation.

According to Baller and Richardson (2002:873), “high suicide rates cluster in geographic space only because weak social integration and regulation also cluster in that same space.” Suicide is social in that it is greatly dependent on the level of social

solidarity that is derived from normative regulation and social integration or both. The levels of these factors are powerful indicators of cluster suicides (Baller and Richardson 2002:875). Furthermore, the result of modern society is the problem of too little social integration and too little normative regulation. Adolescents may be strongly affected by both of these conditions because of their “place” within society.

Organic Societies. The level of solidarity one experiences is also dependent on the type of society in which the individual lives. The levels of integration and normative regulation are greatly tied to the type of society individuals are a part of. An extreme division of labor characterizes organic societies, and they mostly focus on individualism (Durkheim [1897] 1966; Bearman 1991). One can imagine an organic society being like that of the human body; there are multiple parts (organs) all serving society as a whole, but each with their own responsibility and separate duties. There are relations amongst them, but only functional relations, which are temporal and shallow. According to Bearman (1991:506), it is in these societies where:

Individual personality is freed from the bonds of collective personality, and as all people are unique, nothing social (common) remains to regulate them. Each individual pursues highly individuated ends using others as means. In such a context there is no group to which one could be integrated, and each man or woman is an isolate.

In essence, the individual has few strong social ties to the larger community, which greatly decreases the level of social integration. Instead, they have autonomy and agency within their social world with little acceptance of (or guidance by) others.

Urban locales within American society are excellent example of an organic society. Capitalism, with its focus on personal profits, breeds individualism. According to Levine (2007:32), America is, “built on a foundation of forward motion,

entrepreneurship, and free enterprise, our nation has long tended to romanticize rugged individualism.” Many relationships within capitalistic societies can be broken down into terms of exchange (Bearman 1991). There is a large division of labor and an intense focus on individual success and profits. Relationships, with the possible exception of the family, are the result of material and monetary exchange, which can create stable relationships, but they are often shallow and do not establish the solidarity necessary for proper social integration (Durkheim [1897] 1966). However, Marx and Engels ([1847] 2011:19) note that even the family has been affected by capitalism whereas its “sentimental veil” has been removed, and family has been reduced to a “mere money relation.”

Types of Suicide. Durkheim ([1897] 1966) proposes that suicide is an indicator of the amount of social cohesion within a group and/or society. Suicides can be broken down into four different types: anomic, egoistic, fatalistic, or altruistic. Each type is based on the extreme presence or lack of social integration and/or normative regulation mentioned above. For the purposes of this research, altruistic suicides will not be examined because they are not the result of organic societies, nor are they important to the case studies examined within this research. However, both egoistic and anomic types are critical to the explanation of cluster suicides, especially amongst teens. Finally, although Durkheim did not fully discuss fatalistic suicides, and when he did he viewed them in opposition to anomic suicides, this research argues that it is possible to have both fatalism and anomie in the same case of cluster suicides.

It is best to think of levels of social integration as being on a spectrum. On one end there is high social integration, which relates to altruistic suicides. On the other end

of the spectrum there is low social integration, which is known to cause egoistic suicides. “Insufficient social integration creates individualism and egoistic suicide” (Baller and Richardson 2002:875). According to Durkheim ([1897] 1966), egoistic suicides are said to occur when individualism is at its peak. This type of suicide most commonly occurs when the individual becomes detached from greater society, and they feel their life has lost meaning. Egoistic suicides are most common in organic societies, of which America is a prime example. According to Bearman (1991:505), “with the division of labor comes personality, the occupancy of a distinct position in society. Organic society is characterized by heterogeneity in which the process of individuation associated with modernity has reached its limit.”

Normative regulation can also be thought of as a spectrum. Extreme normlessness may be found on one end of the spectrum. On the other end of the spectrum lies the presence of strict (or too many) social norms. According to Durkheim ([1897] 1966) anomic suicides occur in societies with few norms, while fatalistic suicides occur in societies where there are too many norms. Although anomic suicides may seem very similar to egoistic suicides because they both result from a lack of social solidarity, anomic suicides are actually different in that they occur as the result of the level of normative regulation instead of social integration. According to Bearman (1991):

Anomic suicide is the suicide of an individual who is integrated into the social world, for otherwise he or she would be classified as egoists. The necessary condition for anomie is that individuals must be integrated into groups and yet not be regulated by the normative demands of the group.
(P. 513)

One may question how an individual can be integrated in society yet still lack normative regulation. After all, to be an accepted member of society one must follow norms.

However, anomie has more to do with a type of social disconnect or conflict between individual norms and group norms (dissonance). “Dissonance yields normlessness and the absence of regulation, despite integration” (Bearman 1991:519).

For the most part, Durkheim ([1897] 1966) speaks of anomie in terms of economic events (spikes and crashes in the market) and social upheavals (wars and environmental disasters). Both types of events create a new social order with new norms that the individual must adjust to. Often, the new role is in conflict with the old role, which is where anomie takes place. Although the examples Durkheim provides are of anomic situations, they are not the only situations in which anomie can occur. At the root of anomie is cognitive dissonance, which can be applied to many social events and situations, including adolescence. Cognitive dissonance is the uncomfortable feeling caused by holding two contradictory ideas simultaneously (Festinger 1957). The level of dissonance is the key to understanding anomic suicides because when there is a disconnection between group expectations and individual reality the potential for anomic suicides increases.

According to Durkheim ([1897] 2006:267-277), “Whenever serious rearrangements take place in the social body, whether it is due to sudden growth or to an unexpected disaster, men [and women] are more inclined to kill themselves...when society is disturbed...it become provisionally incapable of exercising its function...and consequently for a time there is no regulation.” In this way, anomie can occur both institutionally (when shifts occur) and social psychologically within the individuals effected by the deregulation or instability (Bjarnason 2009). Without the appropriate level

of normative regulation, society at-large could be influenced by the anomic structure of society.

Anomic situations are usually temporary chunks of time within a society in which adaption to a new social condition occurs. By definition, adolescence is a transitional stage of physical and mental human development that occurs between childhood and adulthood; it is temporary by nature. In contemporary society, this stage of life involves the instability of several different institutions, specifically the institutions of family (as the child matures and enters adulthood) and education (as the child transitions to new levels of school). Therefore, it may also increase the risk for anomic suicides (Bjarnason 2009; also see De Grazia 1948 and Coleman 1961). Evidence suggesting that the rate of suicide drastically decreases by the age of 24 (Shaffer and Phillips 1987; Gould et al. 1990) may reveal that once an individual fully transitions to adulthood, they may feel more stability, and thus be at lower risk of experiencing anomic suicides (at least due to life stage). By this age, adolescence is complete for both men and women, and the extreme anomie they once experienced with regard to adolescence will (for the most part) come to an end.

Further research by Stockard and O'Brien (2002) suggests that anomic factors related to age cohort size, non-marital births, and family structure may also be affecting teens and young adults within this age range. They claim that these social factors are directly connected to social networks, social control, and self-control (Stockard and O'Brien 2002:26). Because these social factors can affect both levels of integration and regulation, these changes may be partially to blame for the recent increase in suicides amongst teens and young adults.

As mentioned earlier, Durkheim ([1897] 1966) did not go into a lengthy explanation of fatalistic suicides. In fact, the only mention of fatalistic suicides can be found as a footnote in the chapter on anomic suicides. Durkheim states, “[Fatalism] is the suicide deriving from excessive regulation, that of persons with futures pitilessly blocked and passions violently choked by oppressive discipline” (p. 276). Therefore, fatalism occurs when an individual has too much normative regulation, and they are unable to find meaning in their lives outside of the constraining roles in which they are a part of.

More contemporary sociological theorists have expanded on Durkheim’s theory, and they will supply the bulk of support for this theoretical component. Bearman (1991:520) does an excellent job of summarizing fatalistic conditions by stating:

The fatalist has no identity beyond the role that he or she must occupy...fatalism is a structural position induced by the asymmetry of individual integration and group integration...fatalists are governed by the formal occupancy of a role. In the eyes of others they have identity only as a role occupant. In their own eyes they are without social ties and therefore purpose.

Individuals sometimes feel trapped in the roles they are assigned by society. One example that Durkheim ([1897] 2006) provides is that of a mother or wife who is unable to bear children and feels restricted by society’s expectation of motherhood. Social roles usually supply high levels of normative regulation (because one is expected to follow strict norms assigned to that role), while also creating very low levels of social integration. This occurs not only because the individual does not identify with their assigned role (it was not necessarily their choosing), but also because greater society assumes them to be integrated by the role.

The above literature will be used as an analytical tool for this research project. Although Durkheim ([1897] 2006) warns against using these macro explanations for

individual suicides, he does support the use of these macro frameworks for better understanding the social conditions that could lead to suicidal behaviors. In this way, the concepts of normative regulation and social integration, along with the three types of suicide discussed above, will be used to perform a sort of “social autopsy.” Public discourse, as well as journalists, can reveal much about the social conditions that these victims were living under at the time of their death by suicide. This project seeks to better understand how these macro theories map onto the three clusters under investigation. According to public discourse, might the community members in Palo Alto and at Cornell University experience too little or too much of social integration and normative regulation? Considering U.S. Census data, school reports, and public discourse, which type of suicide are these communities most at risk of experiencing: anomic, fatalistic, or egoistic? Is it possible that victims within these clusters could be at risk for more than one type of suicide?

Non-Media Related Social Influences of Suicide

According to Durkheim ([1897] 2006:127), if one were to find a group of individuals “showing a similarly pronounced tendency to suicide...this spread within a single region could very well derive from the fact that certain causes favouring suicide are equally prevalent there and the social environment is the same.” He argues that there must be a “collective state” within clusters where individuals are “suffering from the same mental infirmity” (p. 141). Media as a social factor was described in detail above. Below is literature pertaining to some of the most notable social forces that influence suicide and suicide contagion. These include the institutions of the family, socio-economic class, peer groups, and education.

Social Class. Durkheim ([1897] 1966:165) claims that suicide is, “undeniably exceptionally frequent in the highest classes of society.” The higher suicide rate for wealthy individuals is tied to several social factors. One cause of higher suicide rates amongst the affluent is anomie (described above). Durkheim ([1897] 2006) argues that anomie can also occur when our needs and/or wants are limitless. He argues that wealthy individuals experience this type of anomie because they have a hard time satisfying their needs, both materialistic and emotional, despite their capital assets and social resources. Having access to means leads to the desire of increased ends.

Family. According to Stockard and O’Brien (2002:612), “Perhaps the relationships strongest in stability and durability in modern society are family relationships—especially in one’s family of birth. The greater the stability, durability, and density of social relationships that involve this important social institution, the greater the social integration and regulation are likely to be.” As Durkheim ([1897] 1966:202) suggests, “Family is a powerful safeguard against suicide, so the more strongly it is constituted the greater its protection.” The family is where social norms and moral rules are taught and upheld. Also, social networks and ties are created amongst families, which help to connect individuals to larger groups in society. Therefore, families are a relatively stable social force in the lives of adolescents and, in most cases, should act as a buffer for suicidal tendencies (Roen et al. 2008; Joiner 1999).

Despite the family acting as a stabilizing force in an individual’s life, disruptions to the normative regulation found within the family may also influence levels of microanomie (Konty 2005; Bjarnason 2009). Things such as divorce, substance abuse, economic crises, and relationship changes due to aging (in adolescence and old age) can

all influence the function of the family as a stabilizing unit (Bjarnason 2009). Another change in the family structure that influences disruption to the institution of family involves the existence of two working parents (Darrah, Freeman, and English-Lueck 2007). With two parents out of the home most of the day, there is less time spent with the family.

Intersection of Family and Social Class. According to LeBeau (1988), affluent families have more social and professional demands, which result in a severe deficit in “family time” often referred to as “the silver spoon syndrome.” As a result, there tends to be an inverse relationship between socioeconomic status and the connection affluent children feel toward their parents (Csikszentmihalyi and Schneider 2000).

These “social class dynamics are woven into the texture and rhythm of children and parents’ daily lives. Class position influences critical aspects of family life,” especially time use (Lareau 2003:236). And, while working-class families may have similar social conditions (working long hours, intensive parenting, etc.), Lareau (2003:236) claims that the family behaviors surrounding these two class structures are “quite different” (also see Hays 1996). Lareau (2003) suggests that wealthier families practice “concerted cultivation,” which is a parenting style where parents (especially mothers) are largely responsible for orchestrating the child’s everyday life and personal success. They do so successfully by allowing the child very little autonomy or leisure time. And, although wealthier parents are heavily involved in their children’s lives, they are not often spending direct, quality time with their children. Instead, they are often under the supervision of multiple other authority figures (teachers, tutors, coaches, etc.). These changes in family structure have the potential to drastically influence the levels of

social integration experienced by the youth of today's families. These changes may partially explain the social conditions related to the recent increase in suicides amongst adolescents.

Affluent teens are more likely to feel disconnected from other members of the family, especially their parents (Levine 2006). There is a tendency of greater society to deny this claim because wealthy parents are usually highly involved in their children's educational and social lives, but there is a distinct difference between involvement and connection (Lareau 2003; Levine 2006; Darrah et al. 2007). These children need to feel accepted by their parents in order for social integration to occur within the family, and they also need to feel guided (as opposed to controlled) in order to experience appropriate levels of normative regulation within the family.

While the regulating forces of the family can protect individuals against a lack of regulation (anomie), overregulation of individuals within the family may relate to fatalistic suicides. According to Marx ([1846] 1999:50), "Among the sources for despair that leads easily excitable people, passionate beings with deep feelings, to seek death, I found the primary cause was the bad treatment, the injustices, the secret punishments that these people received at the hands of harsh parent and superiors, upon whom they were dependent." Marx ([1846] 1999:53) speaks specifically of the effect of affluence on family life. He argues that the richest are also the "least capable of resistance themselves." As a result, they "become unyielding as soon as they can exert absolute parental authority" (Marx [1846] 1999:53) over their children.

Some psychologists have suggested that the wealthy family also faces issues of low social integration, especially amongst teens within the family. The affluent family

demands a high level of secrecy within the community. According to Levine (2007:29), “in affluent communities, privacy and perfection are highly valued, and, as a result, looking good can take precedence over feeling good—often until distress becomes intolerable.” If teens raised in affluent households are socialized to be secretive and to appear “perfect,” then there are few outlets for them to share their personal emotional issues and stressors with the outside world. This too could lead to a lack of social integration not only within the family, but also within greater society.

The emotional issues of affluent children are likely derived from the pressures they experience as members of an upper-class family. Affluent children are more likely to be pushed or pressured by their parents to live up to high ideals, or as Levine (2007) refers to it, “the perfect child” image. According to Shaffer and Phillips (1987:611), “there is a subgroup of teen suicide victims who have not previously appeared to be troubled. However, such teenagers worry a great deal about getting things just right.” These teens are expected to live up to standards that are set by the family, the school system, and society as a whole. There is little room for exploration of interests outside of living up to the ideal, successful, and highly intelligent child. This situation has the potential to influence the rates of overregulation (fatalism).

If adolescents of affluent families do not live up to their parents’ ideals, they may suffer from emotional stress related to what Abrutyn and Mueller (2014:346) refer to as “fatalistic-anomic suicides.” According to Abrutyn and Mueller (2014), feelings of shame associated with disappointing an authority figure can result in both feelings of fear and anger. The anger stems from a “real or imagined violation of social expectations” (p. 326). The fear is generated because the adolescent worries that a change in their social

status may occur due to an inability to meet social expectations, which could lead to stigmatization within both the community and the family. According to Durkheim ([1915] 1945), emotions are crucial mechanisms of social solidarity. They may influence an individual's well-being due to the primacy of family life (Lin 2002; Christakis and Fowler 2009). Therefore, these social factors are closely linked to Durkheim's egoistic, fatalistic, and anomic suicides.

Peer Groups. Peer groups, like the family, are very important to the level of social integration and normative regulation. Essentially, it is within these groups that teens and young adults learn how to behave with others within their age range. Young people also turn to each other for suggestions on how to express their individuality. Unfortunately, the norms and regulations of the peer groups are often in conflict with the regulations and norms of the family. According to Bearman (1991:517-18):

Many (teens) find it difficult to reconcile the conflicting normative demands entailed by these memberships... The adolescent of today often spends substantial amounts of time and energy in social worlds quite distant from the adults who have putative moral authority over his or her behavior... Thus we have the structural position of high integration and low regulation.

He theorized that this feeling of being torn between two social group ideologies can lead to cognitive disjuncture amongst teens, which has been linked to anomic suicides.

Peer groups may also have an influence on how attempted suicides are perceived. In other words, peers have the power to create frameworks for understanding suicidal behavior. Roen et al. (2008) argue that a peer's response to suicide can either be supportive or unsupportive. In some cases, teens will take emotional responsibility for an attempted or completed suicide. Teens and young adults believe that showing love support could lead a suicidal individual to choosing life. This, of course, assumes a

rational thought process. This type of framing also gives the individual hope. “One of the effects of constructing supportive relationships as a potential suicide-prevention mechanism is that it offers hope. If suicide attempts are not understood as random, unpredictable, or unpreventable, and if they can be averted by staying in supportive networks, then there is hope” (Roan et al. 2008:2096). On the contrary, an unsupportive response to suicide entails claim-making that suggests a suicide or suicide attempt was nothing more than a call for attention that needs to be worked out within the individual.

Education. It is important to note that statistical suicide rates reveal a positive correlation between levels of education and suicide. The more educated a person is, the more likely they are to commit suicide (Durkheim [1897] 1966). As educational level increases, the ability to critically analyze and critique the social order in which one lives also increases. Education has a tendency to bring into question norms that were previously taken for granted, which according to Durkheim ([1897] 1966:168), leads to less normative regulation. “Suicide increases with knowledge... suicidal tendency is greater in educated circles, this is due to the weakening of traditional beliefs and to the state of moral individualism.”

It is not just the level of education that is important to consider, but also the giftedness and intelligence of the individual. Researchers (Harkavy and Asnis 1985; Seibel and Murray 1988; Hayes and Sloat 1990; Cross, Cook, and Dixson 1996) from several studies found that more intelligent individuals commit suicide at a greater rate, especially amongst undergraduate students (Seiden 1966) and adolescents between the ages of 12 and 14 (Shaffer 1974; Joffe and Offord 1983). According to Blatt (1995), this is likely linked to perfectionism found amongst gifted individuals.

Although the media is known to play a role in suicide contagion, there are other social forces that can influence rates of suicide within a community. The above literature outlines these non-media related sources, such as the family, affluence, peer groups, and education. More specifically, this research seeks to understand how these other social factors may influence rates of social integration and normative regulation. Given the data provided by the media reports, as well as the public discourse created by the response to those reports, the researcher hopes to better understand how each of these factors may have influenced anomic, egoistic, and/or fatalistic suicides.

Micro Sociological and Psychological Theories of Suicide

Two of the most popular explanations of suicide clustering within the realm of psychology are imitation and contagion. The terms are often used interchangeably in the literature on suicide. However, there are notable differences between the terms.

According to Tarde (1903:xiii), imitation occurs “when a [hu]man...reflects the opinions of others, or allows an action of others to be suggested to him [or her].” Furthermore, English and English (1958:253) define imitation as an “action that copies the action of another more or less exactly, with or without intent to copy.” This suggests that imitation is more directly linked to the “copycat” aspect of cluster suicides, specifically when the same method is used or when the suicides occur at the same location.

Imitation is a modeling behavior, which teens and young adults are at high risk for. Furthermore, teens and young adults from today’s larger birth cohorts are at an increased risk of dependency on their peers for behavioral suggestion (Stillion et al. 1989). According to psychologists, identification with the victim results in even greater imitation (Stack 1987; 2000). Teens are more likely to model their peer’s suicide,

especially if the victim of suicide was a close friend or acquaintance (Davidson et al. 1989; Joiner 1999; Johansson, Lindqvist, and Eriksson 2006). Therefore, teens and young adults are more likely than other age groups to fall victim to cluster suicides due to imitation (Stillion et al. 1989; Dunlop et al. 2011). According to Gould et al. (1990:212), “the relative risk for suicide given exposure to the suicide of one or more other persons may be quite great,” especially amongst 15- to 19-year olds where the risk is two to four times higher than among other age groups (Gould et al. 2003).

Similar to imitation, contagion occurs when an individual carries out a particular behavior, which results in others in the group following suit (Tarde 1903; English and English 1958; Akers 1994; and Centre for Suicide Prevention 1999). The term contagion can be applied more as an epidemiological term that is applied to behavior instead of biology. A potentially vulnerable population exists (each member acting as a host), followed by the introduction of a stimulus (a suicide), ending with the increase of risk factors within the population, which leads to further suicides (Joiner 1999). Gould et al. (2003:1269) suggest “contagion can be viewed within the larger context of behavioral contagion, which occurs when a particular behavior spreads spontaneously through a group.” With contagion, suicide spreads like a disease, but those infected do not necessarily carry out their voluntary death in the same manner. If they do, both contagion and imitation are at play.

The psychological concept referred to as social learning theory would support both the theories of imitation and contagion as it applies to suicidal behaviors. According to psychological literature, cluster suicides may not originate from imitation and contagion, but once initiated by the first suicide, contagion and imitation have the

potential to take place within the same socially cohesive group. According to Bandura (1977), human behavior is learned through the observation of others and carried out through the use of modeling. Furthermore, this theory argues that behavior is shaped by reinforcement. Mueller, Abrutyn, and Stockton (2014) also argue that young adults who have had a family member or friend attempt suicide are more likely to report suicide ideation or suicide attempts. Social learning theory is especially evident when examining “copycat” suicides that occurred amongst individuals with similar characteristics. Social learning has the potential to result in imitation and the development of contagion. According to Baller and Richardson (2002), acceptance of both imitation and contagion are necessary in order to better understand geographic (point) clustering.

Contagion and imitation also correspond with the lack of coping skills and increased suicide ideation teens and young adults experience. According to Romer et al. (2006:266), “Early-age suicides may reflect stressors associated with entry to adulthood...Persons in these developmental stages may find other persons’ suicides as confirming their own hopeless situations.” Furthermore, teens and young adults are often more impulsive, which make them more likely to commit suicide shortly after exposure to a peer’s suicide.

This literature will be used to better understand the contagion and imitation within each cluster. Do the victims within the clusters appear to imitate each other? Do they die by suicide in the same manner at the same location? Do the suicides spread to nearby communities or are these clusters contained with specific geographical areas? This literature serves as an alternative to the macro theories outlined above. Given the results

of the social autopsy, is it possible that contagion and imitation are more at play (versus more social factors)?

Critiques of Psychological Explanations. Theories of imitation and contagion are rarely accepted within the discipline of sociology as causes for geographic suicide rates. Imitation is said to be too obligatory. It is also argued that imitation is too focused on modeling, which is too much an automated behavior that does not reflect the interpretive process of human behavior that is the direct or indirect result of the collective current. Imitation, or modeling of behavior, is too psychological and devoid of social factors.

Instead of using imitation as a way to describe the clustering of suicide, Durkheim ([1897] 2006) argues that the spread of suicides in a given region are both the effect of the “collective state” *and* the endemic nature of society. The collective state reveals how individuals are subjected to the same social conditions. Durkheim ([1897] 2006:126) states:

If imitation is to be blamed, it is not enough to ascertain that rather a large number of suicides occur at the same time and in the same place, because they might be due to a general state of the social environment producing a collective tendency in the group which expresses itself in the form of multiple suicides...Spread within a single region could very well derive from the fact that certain causes favouring suicide are equally prevalent there and the social environment is the same.

He further argues that if suicide occurred through imitation, then the clusters would likely spread to the surrounding areas because communities located on the fringe of the cluster would be no less likely to succumb to the imitative behaviors.

Even if imitation were to occur, imitation does not sufficiently explain how clusters are started. Durkheim ([1897] 1966:141) states, “It may be said that imitation is not an original factor of suicide. It only exposes a state which is the

true generating cause of the act and which probably would have produced its natural effect even had imitation not intervened; for the predisposition must be very strong to enable so slight a matter to translate it into action.” In other words, imitation is not the sole cause of suicide clusters. Instead, it is the shared group attributes that create these clusters and “imitation all by itself has no effect on suicide” (Durkheim [1897] 1966:140). Although Durkheim ([1897] 2006:124) recognized suicide clusters (he spoke specifically of military clusters), he did not think imitation was a factor in the development of these clusters, but instead the result of a “collective resolve... This is just what happens every time that a social group, whatever it may be, reacts in concert under pressure from similar circumstances.” His findings suggest that suicide rates are often contained within certain sectors of society, and social factors are to blame, not merely individuals copying the behaviors of other individuals.

Sociologists also critique psychological theories of contagion. Although there is spread within a community, it is more likely linked to endemic behavior (versus epidemic behavior) because the spread appears to be contained within a specific area where individuals share the same collective state of being. Durkheim ([1897] 2006:136) states, “Never does a country that is particularly disposed to suicide because of particular conditions impose this tendency on its neighbours through the sole force of example... So it is natural that, wherever it is the same, it should have the same consequences without any kind of contagion being involved.” If suicide clustering were truly epidemic and contagious, you would see spread beyond particular geographic regions.

According to Romer et al. (2006:255), “If some of these deaths were covered in the news, the influence of such reports could be misattributed to mass media rather than to interpersonal communication processes within communities.” Durkheim ([1897] 2006) also specifically challenges theories of media imitation and contagion. He acknowledges that media is largely responsible for the dissemination of information about suicides. However, he does not think that media plays much of a role in influencing suicide rates. He further claims that even if a society were to ban the publication of suicide stories from the media, it would not change the moral order of that society. In other words, the social risk factors that influence suicide would still exist.

These critiques of the psychological factors will be useful during the discussion of the suicide clusters under investigation. The research seeks to better understand how psychological theories of contagion and imitation fall short of explaining what is going on in these communities. Furthermore, if a critique of these psychological theories is derived from this research, how does that reveal the value of using a more sociological approach to understanding these suicide clusters and why they may wax and wane?

Chapter Summary, Research Questions, and Analysis Overview

As noted earlier, most prior research examining the media’s influence on suicide contagion, imitation, and clustering focus on print media or television reports of suicide. Prior research suggests that media plays a role in the contagion of suicide. As a result, the AFSP and the CDC have established media guidelines for the prevention of suicide. Several research studies suggest these guidelines have been effective in decreasing copycat or imitative suicides. Other research is inconclusive. This research seeks to better understand what role, if any, the media may play in the growth of suicide, point clusters.

Despite the presence of research that examines the effect of the Internet on suicide in general (see Tam, Tang, and Fernando 2007), there is a void in the literature examining how more recent forms of media (online news reports and online comment sections specifically in this case) may influence the development or reduction in suicide clustering through their framing of the issue. This void, along with the above noted inconsistencies, calls for a more thorough examination of online media and how it frames issues of suicide. This void also calls for an investigation of how online news media sources adhere to prevention guidelines. Given the hyperactive, interactive, and share-ability nature of online news media, a better understanding of the effects these reports have on public discourse and teen suicide clusters is necessary. Finally, given that teens are at highest risk for suicide clustering, and because they are more likely to obtain their news through online sources, an analysis of this kind is long overdue.

This research seeks to answer several complex problems. First, it examines whether or not online news media outlets adhere to the suicide prevention guidelines disseminated by the CDC and the AFSP. This project also explores the number of violations, the date the violations occurred in reference to the dates of the suicides within a cluster, and the number of online articles available for review through common search engines. How often do these failures to adhere to the guidelines occur? When does media coverage of the suicide cluster peak? How might this impact exposure to vulnerable populations?

Along with the above-mentioned questions, which are more quantitative in nature, this research also seeks to understand the context and qualitative component of these failures to adhere to the media guidelines. This research seeks to fill a void in the

literature that has historically only focused on quantitative aspects of adherence. By revealing what is said, what language is used, and how the violations are framed, one can better understand the severity or potential risks involved in publicizing these suicides in this manner. This research seeks to examine how the online media sources frame the issue of suicide within the articles published in reference to the suicide clusters under examination.

One of the major features of online media reports is that they also often include comment sections where readers/consumers of the article can reply to the editor, the journalist, or the community of other readers. This is a unique feature of online news media; one that has not been previously examined by prior studies evaluating adherence to prevention guidelines. Because the general public is likely unaware of prevention guidelines, is it possible that these comment sections contain language that the CDC and/or the AFSP might deem risky for vulnerable consumers of media? This research seeks to examine the public discourse created in these comment sections and how those comments relate to prevention guidelines that have been set forth.

Since the media is responsible for framing the issues of suicide in their online reports, online news media offers insight into how the public responds to this media framing. With the advent of comment sections, researchers can now examine direct responses to the frames the media has disseminated. How does the public respond to online media reports of suicide? Do their responses reflect the content of the article? Or, do they ignore framing and develop separate or oppositional topics of conversation? Do readers criticize the media framing? Or, do they seem to appreciate how the media is approaching the topic?

Public discourse created in response to these online news reports can also reveal how individuals, including teens and young adults cope with tragedies such as suicide. This project seeks to understand how self-identified teens and young adults connect with and/or distance themselves from the victims through the practices of ideation, othering, and rationalization. It also seeks to understand how parents, alumni, community members, peers, and administrators (of all ages) identify with or challenge the victim's actions through these same processes of ideation, othering, and rationalization, as well as through the development of shared values pertaining to suicidal acts.

This research also seeks to understand how the community arrives at some sort of collective will. Do online media comment sections provide a space for readers/consumers to express their personal beliefs and value systems pertaining to suicide within their own communities and schools? Do these public, online forums serve as a mechanism for establishing a collective will? Furthermore, do those discussions focus heavily on prevention ideas and/or resources?

This research also seeks to understand how individuals make sense of suicide. Who or what is blamed for this act? Does the online public discourse reflect an understanding of the social factors outlined by sociological research (family, peer groups, education, social class, and media)? Or, do they spend more time blaming the individual for being too weak, mentally ill, or cowardly (more traditional, individualistic accusations of blame).

Finally, this research hopes to contribute to a better understand of the social conditions the victims were living under near the time of death. This information, garnered from the reports as well as the public discourse, will be used to better

understand how the levels of social integration and normative regulation may have influenced a propensity for suicide. Furthermore, this information will be used to perform a sort of social autopsy. Given the data, how might macro theorists label these types of suicide? Are community members at risk of anomic, fatalistic, or egoistic suicides? And, if macro sociological theories cannot explain the phenomenon, then how might psychological theories of imitation and contagion help the researcher to better understand the development of these suicide, point clusters?

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Sample and Study Design

This research uses an intra-national comparative case study design to examine three case studies.⁴ These included two clusters in Palo Alto, CA (2009-2010 and 2014-2015) and one cluster in Ithaca, NY at Cornell University (2009-2010). According to Baxter and Jack (2008:544), qualitative case studies “afford researchers opportunities to explore or describe a phenomenon in context using a variety of data sources. It allows the researcher to explore individuals, relationships, communities, or programs and supports the deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction of various phenomenon” (also see Yin 2003 and Kohlbacher 2006). The case study approach is valuable to the development of theory, the evaluation of prevention programs (in this case, the prevention techniques outlined by both the CDC and the AFSP), and the development of interventions. Furthermore, the comparative approach to case studies gives the researcher the ability to better predict similar results across cases, as well as predict contrasting results based on theory (Yin 2003). In other words, this research will analytically generalize to theory, not to populations.

Cases were selected and included in this analysis using certain criteria. First, cases were only included if the clusters contained adolescents, teens, and/or young adults (ages 10-24⁵). This research also only included clusters occurring within the United States,

⁴ As noted, a fourth case was in and around Norfolk County, MA (2004-2009) was studied. However, it lacked data in terms of public discourse. Therefore, this data are excluded from the main study. However, more information about the fourth cluster may be found in the appendix.

⁵ Age range was capped at 24 due to research that suggest individuals aged 15-24 are at highest risk for suicide. World Health Organization (WHO 2016) defines adolescent as anyone between the ages of 10 and 19.

despite the discovery of relatively largely publicized clusters outside the U.S.⁶ This assured for greater cultural similarities (in general). The third criterion for inclusion required that only clusters receiving a wide array of (i.e. far-reaching) media attention (both geographically and across outlets) be included. This allowed for more fruitful data for analysis. Preference was given to clusters receiving both local and national attention⁷. The fourth criterion was the time span of a cluster. This research only focuses on clusters that developed rapidly within a short time span (usually less than one year)⁸. Finally, in relation to time, a cluster also must have occurred within the last ten years⁹ in order to be included for analysis. Comment sections are relatively new to online media and were largely introduced within the last decade (Deuze 2003). Therefore, only recent clusters guarantee access to this form of data, which was necessary for achieving the methodological goals of the research.

Data Collection Process

Data for this project was extracted from a collection of online public documents. These can be broken down into two different types of documents: primary and secondary. In general, primary documents are considered the “original” object of study. These include documents such as: obituaries and in-memorandum websites (of victims), online news articles, suicide prevention resources pages, and community information websites.

⁶ See Bridgend County in Wales for an examination of International suicide clusters.

⁷ Some clusters discovered during collection did not produce enough data for inclusion. These included: Standing Rock Reservation; Red Lake, MN; Kaukauna, WI; Mentor, OH; Newton, MA; and Manasquan, NJ.

⁸ Several clusters discovered during data collection were excluded by this criterion. These included: Monmouth County, NJ and Fairfax County (more broadly speaking).

⁹ At the time of data collection.

This project only examines online news articles¹⁰. Eighty-two sources were used for primary documents¹¹. These were used to answer the following research questions:

1. Do the online news articles adhere to the recommendations outlined by the CDC and the AFSP? If not, how often do these violations occur? And, what is the relationship between the violations and the wax/wane of the suicide cluster?
2. What do these failures to adhere to the recommendations look like qualitatively? How are the various ways in which the same issue is framed by multiple media outlets?
3. Do the online news articles provide preventative information, such as scientific facts about suicide or resource information?
4. What types of online news media features are present amongst these primary documents? Are there hyperlinks to additional articles on the same topic? Is there a space for interactivity and share-ability? Are there features of these online articles that distinguish them from more traditional forms of media, such as newspapers and television reports?

Secondary documents were also extracted. These are records about primary documents. For example, blog sites, community forums, and comment sections (located at the base of online articles). These are often considered “responses” to the primary documents. This project only included online comment sections in relation to the online

¹⁰ There was ample data available that was not online articles, but qualified as primary text. However, this data falls outside the scope of this research project.

¹¹ 116 articles total if including the fourth cluster

news report. Over 2,500 individual comments from 51 of the above articles were used as secondary documents.

All information, at the time of collection, was available to the public free of charge and did not require paid membership for access to databases. Because this research attempts to understand how the average consumer interprets and is affected by the media, the researcher did not want to search for data using academic databases (such as LexisNexis) that are exclusive to the academic/professional field. Many of the articles were found through major public search engines such as Google and Bing.¹² The hypertextuality of online articles also allowed for the snowball sampling of several other online sources. For example, if an article posted links to other primary online sources of information, these were followed to the point of saturation. Articles that failed to differentiate substantially from other already collected sources were excluded¹³. The overall goal of the data collection process was to obtain media on the topic of cluster suicides in the same manner the general public would.

Comment interfaces, usually at the bottom of the article webpage, provided a wealth of data for interpreting cultural meanings and understandings of social issues. As noted, not all primary documents included secondary documents. Rarely restricted, these interfaces are open to all readers and/or consumers of media. For the purposes of this research, the individuals who replied in these comment sections are referred to as “respondents,” “commentators,” “users,” or “participants.” Editors occasionally modified entries, as noted by a “modified” notation within the comment. But, this only seemed to

¹² For a complete list of search terms, please email the author at tdehaan@uoregon.edu.

¹³ This occasionally occurred – most likely due to how the Associate Press disseminates news reports.

occur when content was deemed inappropriate by the editor or news outlet.

Unfortunately, since many of these comments had been posted in the past, the researcher did not have access to the text that had been removed. The majority of comments are posted within hours or days of the original publication. These reflections capture immediate community response and provide a snapshot of public discourse in response to specific articles. These secondary sources of data will be used to answer the following research questions:

1. Do comment sections contain language/content that reflects the frameworks provided by the media reports? If so, do these comments contain language/content that might be deemed risky (by the CDC and the AFSP) for vulnerable consumers of media? If not, do the comments reveal a sort of oppositional framework?
2. How do these comments reveal the development of a collective will? Who or what are the respondents blaming for these tragedies? What prevention strategies are developed within these comment sections? How do individuals commit to making social and/or individual changes in order to prevent future suicides from occurring?
3. How do the comments reveal coping strategies (as outlined by Roen et al. 2008)? Do respondents connect with and/or distance themselves from the victims through ideation, othering, and rationalization? How are the actions of the victims challenged within these forums (as a way of coping with the death)? And, how are shared values developed as a result of these online spaces?

4. What are the social factors of suicide revealed within the comment sections? Do respondents reveal the social factors influencing suicides within their communities? Do they reveal individual/psychological level factors?

There are some concerns over referring to those individuals who reply to the news articles as legitimate “respondents” (as you would in other forms of qualitative research). First, although they are posting in a public forum, they most likely did not consider that their response might be used as data for a research project. This can raise the question of whether or not the use of that secondary document is ethical. However, given the public component of the Internet, it is safe to assume that respondents are well aware of the vulnerability they will experience in posting to an online forum. Since anyone is allowed to join, this undermines the claim to privacy (Bakardjieva and Feenberg 2000).

The second concern centers on the anonymity of the Internet; it is quite possible that individuals posting could be falsifying or “making up” their response to the online article. As such, when appropriate, respondents are referred to as “self-identifying” within the findings. This language acknowledges that the researcher cannot say with confidence that these individuals are who they say they are. According to Charmaz (2009:39), Internet users “may alter what we define as basic information – age, gender, race, ethnicity, and social class origins – as well as the specific content of their responses.” Although the anonymity of an online discussion raises some concerns about the validity of the data (it is nearly impossible to assess the true identity of respondents – even if those commentators are linked to a verified Facebook page as some of them were), this anonymity also offers individuals the opportunity to speak more freely and

honestly about extremely taboo subjects such as suicide. It is quite possible the responses provide a more accurate reflection of the individual's reality or unique insights into their perspectives and practices than other qualitative or ethnographic methods (Charmaz 2009). Furthermore, those who post in these online forums reflect the "dominant and elite voices in the public conversation about a social problem...[and thus these become] important sites of reality construction" (Bogard 2001:431).

Discourse, Content, and Qualitative Research

This research project uses several different qualitative approaches to data collection and analysis. First, it uses qualitative discourse analysis. According to Cotter (2001), discourse analysis (pertaining to media research) seeks to understand how media "encodes values and ideologies that impact on and reflect the larger world." As noted above, this research seeks to understand how public discourse both reflects and potentially impacts the consumers of online media in relationship to publications that focus on teen and young adult suicide clustering.

To some extent, this media discourse analysis is critical. Because this project seeks to understand how the media may shape human behavior (through the process of framing, which leads to the creation of public discourse), this project also questions how or if the media has some sort of social responsibility. Does the media have the power to influence the growth of suicide clusters? If so, should they be held responsible for how they have framed the issue in online media reports?

This research project only uses spontaneous discourse as data. According to Ruiz Ruiz (2009), spontaneous discourse differs from induced discourse by purpose of generation. News reports and comment sections both create spontaneous discourse, while

more traditional forms of data such as interviews, group studies, and observations generate induced discourse. One of the major weaknesses of using discourse analysis in this case is that using spontaneous discourse involves analyzing data produced by subjects that had specific aims that differ from those of the researcher (Ruiz Ruiz 2009). Participants of this study did not know they were going to be studied or analyzed for these purposes, nor did they consent or agree to participate.

According to Caldecott and Koch (2014), using spontaneous discourse as data also has several positive attributes. First, when using spontaneous discourse, the researcher has less control over what is being produced, and thus is less likely to bias the data being collected. Second, the collection of spontaneous data is unobtrusive. In this case, the researcher was not able to dictate the direction of the discourse,¹⁴ and the researcher did not need Human Subjects approval because all the data used for the research was obtained through public online forums¹⁵.

Closely linked to discourse analysis is another qualitative method used throughout the data analysis process called qualitative content analysis of extant text. This form of analysis was extended to both the articles and the comment sections attached to the online media sources. While quantitative content analysis stems from more traditional positivists perspectives, qualitative content analysis focuses more on interpretive practices. Unlike traditional quantitative content analysis, this research does *not* focus entirely on numbers and quantifying observations. Instead, it uses descriptive statistics to explore the scope of violations in online reports while also using qualitative evidence in order to examine how

¹⁴ The researcher did not participate in online comment discussion sections.

¹⁵ No passwords or memberships were required in order to gain access.

failures to the adherence of established guidelines for the prevention of suicide appear. For example, knowing how many articles associated with a single cluster that mentioned the method of suicide may be important to understanding how and/or whether or not these news reports have the potential to influence future suicides within a cluster. But, it is also important to know how journalists choose to talk about those violations more specifically. In other words, are they sensational headlines or do they just simply state the word “suicide” in the title? One must also consider how readers might interpret a wide range of framing that could all fall under the category “disclosure of method.” Simply saying someone jumped in front of the train could arguably have a much lesser affect than saying something like: “the train is both a convenient mode of transportation and a convenient mode of suicide. There’s no doubt about it. It works.¹⁶” There is a wide range of ways in which to communicate information to the audience. Arguably, some are potentially more dangerous than others. This is why a qualitative analysis is imperative.

With the introduction and expansion of online news media, qualitative media analysis becomes important in understanding how online public discourse develops in response to media content (Altheide and Schneider 2013). It is no longer enough to simply study the *content* of media. There is a need for examining the process, meanings, and emphases that are reflected in that content. As interactivity increases in online media outlets, human interaction has the potential to shift social activities, including how communities react and respond to tragedies such as suicide clusters. Online communication has the potential to shift personal identities, relationships, activities, and social institutions (Altheide and Schneider 2013).

¹⁶ See findings section – Chapter IV

As noted, this research uses extant text as a source of data. All data used for this analysis was preexisting. Essentially, these texts were used in the same manner as traditional ethnographic field notes; they were used as a way to discover, clarify, and document the process, formats, and cultural meanings, while also emphasizing discourse that has been presented to a public audience (Altheide and Schneider 2013). In other words, the data conveys cultural meanings that act to shape social reality. Since technology has made it possible for the layperson to retrieve (and save) massive amounts of data, this approach is quickly becoming more and more relevant.

As with the analysis of spontaneous discourse, the qualitative analysis of extant texts helps alleviate researcher bias during the data collection process. Because this content is usually created for purposes other than research, it provides a seemingly objective perspective (Charmaz 2006). Extant texts, however, also have serious limitations. For example, the researcher must draw conclusions about the purpose of the text, who produced the text¹⁷ and why, as well as predict what information has been left out. Despite these shortcomings, the examination of existing text as a source for data provides insight and understanding of social problems, which can later be used by other researchers or complement other methods (Charmaz 2006).

The comment sections that were examined in relationship to the online news reports more closely follow what is described as cyberethnography. Cyberethnography is used as a way to transform offline ethnographic methods into virtual fieldwork (Robinson and Shultz 2009). Online interactions are observed, and extant text collected in public forums can be used verbatim (much like a transcribed interview) in order to lessen

¹⁷ This is exceptionally challenging in online forums where individuals use screen names and, in some cases, do not need to be authenticated in order to post.

distortion of a participant's interaction (Hine 2000). In this case, online interactions are viewed as representations of the offline world. Therefore, this research does not make conclusions based solely on assumptions about how the media affects audience members. Instead, the approach to this research views audience members as active participants. Consumers of online media are subjects in the online reality, and their public content reflects their interpretations of these media representations of suicide clusters in the offline world.

Approaches to Data Analysis

The specific method used for data analysis was domain and theme analysis, which is nearly identical to Glaser and Strauss' ([1967] 2010) constant comparative method. Domain and theme analysis is referred to as "a search for the larger units of cultural knowledge" (Spradley 1979:94). This method involves the coding of texts to establish domains, which are symbolic categories containing related sub-categories (properties of the category), referred to as themes. This approach is most commonly used in ethnographic research. However, it is applicable here because of the use of written data created by both respondents in the comment sections and journalists in the articles. These writings serve a similar purpose in terms of the comparable ethnographic field notes; they reflect cultural understandings of a particular topic.

Coding the data had two different aims. The first aim was to explore compliance to the suicide prevention techniques designed for media and established by the CDC and the AFSP. This was a focused code using the guidelines as an established domain. Guidelines used for domain analysis included the following:

- Exposure to the method of suicide;
- Detailed descriptions or pictures of location where suicide occurred;

- Presenting suicide as the inexplicable act of an otherwise healthy or high-achieving person;
- Dramatizing the impact of suicide through descriptions and pictures of grieving relatives, teachers, or classmates or community expressions of grief; and/or
- Headlines using the word suicide.

This list does not include all of the suggested guidelines, but the guidelines selected for analysis relate most closely to the prevention of modeling behaviors. The researcher confirmed compliance to the recommendations and documented (coded) any failure of adherence in order to create timetables while also taking record of the qualitative expression of these failures. In other words, if there was a failure, the researcher wanted to understand how that failure was being communicated, specifically and qualitatively, to the public. This allowed for the development of themes within the data.

While checking for compliance to these guidelines, the researcher used what is referred to as “manifest content.” According to Babbie (2013:346), manifest content is “the visible, surface content – of a communication analogous to a standardized questionnaire.” Using the above guidelines as a measure of content allows for both ease and reliability of coding. However, this reliability comes at a cost to the validity of the findings.

The researcher also coded comment sections for similar domains (and themes) related to the guidelines for prevention. Although, there was no check for “compliance,” there was consideration of how discussions of suicide method, locations of suicide, descriptions of the victim, and/or romanticization of suicide could be deemed a failure of adherence to the recommendations provided for the appended article. Although prevention is a concern of many audience members, there is no expectation of compliance to these recommendations like there is within the journalist community

(because the information is not widely disseminated to the general public). However, a failure to adhere may suggest that the media has framed the public's thinking, i.e. they have encouraged readers to respond in a similar fashion. Because some articles lacked this type of interactivity, domains and themes were derived only from those articles that contained comment sections.

For the next phase (the second aim) of analysis, the researcher used a grounded theory approach to coding both the articles and their accompanying comment sections. An initial read allowed for the emergence of conceptual categories (separate from the guidelines noted above). Initial coding allows the researcher to remain open to multiple theoretical possibilities while also helping to define core conceptual categories (Spradley 1979; Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 2010). This process involved an introductory read of the content more generally. First within clusters, and later this process served as comparison data across clusters (incident-to-incident coding). These comparisons generated theoretical properties.

Online news articles were analyzed line-by-line for themes/properties and then coded within the appropriate domain/category. The process was conducted in chronological order, which allowed for a better understanding of both emerging and diminishing themes over the course of a given cluster. This also allowed for comparison across clusters. Some of the texts pertained to the cluster as a whole, while other texts focused on an individual death within the cluster. Data also supplied a wealth of information about the communities in which clusters occurred, the individual victims, and the characteristics of each cluster; all were noted as separate domains.

In order to seek valid findings, the researcher then coded the articles a third time examining the latent content. According to Babbie (2013), latent content reveals underlying meaning. This third review of these same pieces of data allowed for a confirmation of both domains and themes established during the initial coding process. Because the total assessment is influenced by the researcher's own interpretations of the data, these qualitative findings are not reliable, nor are they as specific as the manifest content. There is no guarantee that the definitions and standards derived from this data remained constant throughout the entire enterprise (Babbie 2013).

Like the articles, comment sections were initially coded for emerging domains/categories and themes/properties. This information was used to theorize how media consumers construct meaning in relationship to media framing of teen/young adult suicide clusters. Comment sections within the same cluster were then focus coded a second time and analyzed line-by-line, in chronological order. This allowed for further development of domains and themes derived through the initial coding. Similar to the articles, some comments pertained specifically to victims, while others pertained to the social problem as a whole. The evaluation of comments over time (both within the article and across articles) allowed for a better understanding of reactions that develop and evolve as readers return to the comment interface for further dialogue with others. This was made easier by the documentation of usernames.

Ethics and Limitations

Ethics. Since suicide is an extremely taboo topic, and because the population under study contained minors, the use of extant texts as data allowed for unobtrusive measures. Qualitative content analysis seldom has any direct effect on the subjects being

studied (Babbie 2013). Using public records does not require consent, nor does it concern itself with confidentiality or anonymity. Furthermore, individuals who responded in public comment sections had the personal option of revealing as little or as much personal information as they desired.

Despite the use of unobtrusive measures, there are several concerns worth noting. First, Robinson and Schulz (2009) note that online “lurking” performed by cyberethnographers must be undertaken carefully. Because participants in this study had no way of knowing that they were under study, the research took extra care in collecting data only from websites that were clearly public spaces¹⁸. Therefore, the researcher did not collect data from any website or web source that required registration or approval in order to participate in the discussion, even if it was discovered through public search engines.

The other ethical concern is the use of public, accessible, permanent online records. Unlike transcripts used by traditional ethnographers, the data collected through cyberethnography is often available to the public for years following the production and dissemination of research findings. Although, some of the data collected in 2010-2011 has since been digitally removed from the Internet. While this long-term availability is a benefit to replicability, it also poses a threat to online participants. It is likely (and plausible) that a reader could perform an Internet search of the quoted material noted in the findings section and track down the individual users that made such claims (Hine 2000). Given the sensitivity of the topic under investigation, neither the victims nor the

¹⁸ This is why online social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, message boards or listservs requiring registration, and/or personal blogs were excluded from research; many of the people posting on social media require that you add them as “a friend” in order to receive access to their commentary, and many listservs and/or message boards require “approval” before lurking or posting.

journalists will be referred to by name. However, due to the anonymity of usernames, some respondents will be referred to by their public username, but only when their username reveals something about their identity that may be important to their claims.

Limitations. There are several limitations to this research project. First, the analysis only pertains to online news/media sources. It does not consider other media reports such as television, radio, podcasts, or print media. Furthermore, this research only includes certain forms of online media. Therefore, findings cannot produce generalizations about all forms of online media (social or otherwise), nor do claims about findings extend beyond the specific media genre under investigation. Although the findings are not generalizable to all media formats, the conclusions are valid in reference to the selected online media outlets selected for inclusion.

Second, since this research only uses data about cluster suicides appearing in multiple local and national outlets, several clusters that are excluded from the analysis may have influenced the theoretical outcomes. Furthermore, since this study attempts to interpret online media representation, the focus on this criterion does not allow for comparison cases not exposed to ample media attention. For example, a cluster in Manasquan, NJ had stark similarities to Palo Alto, CA. In both cases six teens died by jumping in front of commuter trains. However, because there was not enough data available for inclusion, this cluster will not be analyzed. Also, it is important to note that Manasquan, NJ is a working-class neighborhood, which could be why it received less media attention. Unfortunately, these criteria for inclusion/exclusion fails to allow for comparison between heavily and minimally publicized clusters.

Another limitation of this research is that it does not take into account or examine issues of mass cluster contagion. A mass cluster is defined by time period without consideration of geography (Olson 2013). Although several of these cases received national attention during the same time period (2009-2010 specifically), which could have influenced mass clustering, this research does not attempt to connect the relationship between the reading of online media from one point cluster and the subsequent suicides that developed in other mass clusters proceeding the publication. While this is a worthy undertaking, it is outside the scope of this project.

This project (like others before it) does not attempt to measure exposure to media accounts of suicide victims. This research does not measure whether or not subsequent victims in any one of these clusters were exposed to any of the media under analysis. Although unlikely given online media consumption by youth, it is possible that any secondary victims (after the first victim in the cluster) failed to consume any of the media collected for data analysis. This is also something that could not be measured using qualitative content analysis of extant text and/or unobtrusive measures. Therefore, this research cannot say with any confidence that any one individual victim committed suicide due to direct consumption of related media. This is also why the unit of analysis for this research remained at the level of the cluster and not the individual. Despite these limitations, the contribution this research makes to the understanding of public discourse on teen cluster suicides is quite valuable.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The findings section is organized into three parts. Part I of chapter IV explores data gathered from media reports, public discourse, school reports, and the U.S. Census Bureau. It offers the reader a summary of the communities under investigation. It also helps the reader to better understand how respondents perceive of the communities being investigated. Part II of chapter IV discusses the sources of data used for this analysis. It also explores the number of articles published and how the publication date relates to the timing of suicides within each cluster. This part of the chapter also explores the rates of adherence to the suicide prevention guidelines created by the CDC and AFSP. Finally, Part III of chapter IV explores the more qualitative aspects of the data. It reveals how the failures to adhere to the guidelines appear qualitatively. This section also reveals the public discourse response to the media framing of the suicides. Part III also includes a comparative analysis across the three cases.

Part I – Community Descriptions and Cluster Demographics

The information about the communities contained within this section of the findings provides insight into several social factors that could influence suicide. First, the information below details demographical information about class. By examining the level of affluence within the community, one may be able to conclude how, if at all, class standing may play a role in these suicide clusters. Second, the information details demographical information about the educational environment that these students were operating under. By understanding the institutions in which these individuals were studying, a better understanding of how educational expectations may have played a role

in these suicides emerges. These factors are especially important to the discussion of normative regulation and social integration.

This section also includes information about the clusters under investigation. This includes information about the timing of suicides within the cluster, as well as demographical information about the victims. Furthermore, the cluster demographics reveal whether or not the suicide was public or private. This information is valuable to understanding how the cluster waxed and waned in relationship to the failures to adhere to the media guidelines (discussed later within this chapter). It is also valuable to understanding why the media may frame the issue in a particular manner due to the conditions of the suicide. Finally, this information will act as support for claims made about hotspots and point clustering. The demographical information about each suicide also reveals whether or not imitation and/or contagion (more psychological factors) may be at work within the clusters.

Community Description – Cornell University. Ithaca, NY is a small town of about 30,000 residents (see table 1). The city is located in central New York State. Ithaca is the largest city in the Tompkins County metropolitan area, which has a population of roughly 100,000 citizens. Ithaca is home to Cornell University, an Ivy League school with just over 20,000 students. It is known for its university-town feel. The major economic industries in the area are education and manufacturing. Citizens tend to be highly educated; 64 percent of citizens aged 25 and older hold a Bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau 2016b). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2012), Tompkins County's median income is just below \$26,000 per year. It is ranked 22 in the state for median income, and it is below both the state (\$40,000) and national (\$27,000) averages.

While the city of Ithaca may appear to be less affluent, it is important to note that average income is likely skewed by the large percentage of students in Ithaca. It is also important to note the variation in the cost of living within these two geographical areas. Palo Alto has a higher cost of living, which would likely result in higher incomes, in general.

Table 1 - City Characteristics

| City | Population | Median Income | % Bachelor's Degree |
|---------------|------------|---------------|---------------------|
| Ithaca, NY | 30,000 | \$24,000 | 64 |
| Palo Alto, CA | 65,000 | \$126,700 | 80 |

The media accounts analyzed rarely depicted Ithaca outside of the suicide cluster tragedy. The media also rarely talked about any positive attributes of the city. Instead, depictions of Ithaca included referring to it as a “suicide capital.” References were also made to the weather/climate in Ithaca, which was frequently described as gloomy and/or grey with overcast skies and oppressive.

Cornell is a prestigious, private, Ivy League University located in the city of Ithaca. It ranks fifteenth in the nation according to the *U.S. News & World Report* (2016a) list of top colleges (see table 2). The campus location is exquisite; it sits on a hill and overlooks Cayuga Lake and downtown Ithaca. Of the 20,000 students attending Cornell, 14,000 of them are undergraduates. Students can choose from seven different colleges. The two most popular colleges are Arts and Sciences and Agriculture and Life Sciences. Engineering is the most popular major, which is ranked ninth in the nation by *U.S. News & World Report* (2016e).

Table 2 - School Demographics

| School | Population | U.S. News & World Report Rank | White %: Minority % Ratio | Male %: Female % Ratio |
|----------------|------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|
| Cornell | 20,000 | 15 | 42:58 | 49:51 |
| Gunn High | 1,900 | 26 | 41:59 | 53:47 |
| Palo Alto High | 1,900 | 41 | 51:49 | 51:49 |

Admission to Cornell is challenging. The university only admits approximately 15 percent of all applicants. Legacy students are given an advantage in admission. Students who were admitted in the fall of 2015 had middle range SAT scores of 680-780 for math and 650-750 for critical reading (Cornell University Division of Budget and Planning 2016). Cornell has a low student-faculty ratio (9:1), and it prides itself on small class sizes; 55.3 percent of its classes have fewer than 20 students (*U.S. News & World Report* 2016f).

The student body is comprised of 49 percent male students and 51 percent female students. The majority of students identify as white (42 percent). Yet in 2013, 39 percent of students identified themselves as “foreign nationals” (Cornell University 2016). Asian Americans make up the largest percentage (17 percent) of minority students. Approximately 14 percent of students have at least one parent who is an alumnus. Thirty percent of students are originally from New York State.

Cornell University is located in the east/northeastern sector of Ithaca. Travel between downtown Ithaca and Cornell requires the use of one of six bridges crossing Fall Creek and Cascadilla Creek gorges. These gorges, while natural and beautiful, are also the source of many student deaths, both by suicide and by accident. The bridges of

Cornell have become “hotspots” for jumping suicides, not only for members of campus, but for those living in Ithaca and the surrounding communities. Media accounts describe Cornell as a caring community that is academically rigorous, prestigious, and competitive. The atmosphere is described in the media as a “pressure cooker;” high stress; and “the specter of competition, cold and suicide.”

There is certainly an amount of “suicide lore” associated with Cornell University. It has become known in both the community and the nation as a “suicide school” despite its average rate of suicide. The lore dates all the way back to 1889 when rumors began to circulate about the legend of Edward Wyckoff. Wyckoff was the engineer who designed the Fall Creek suspension bridge, which is the site of multiple suicides within the cluster under analysis. He was an engineering student at Cornell, and rumor has it that he jumped into the gorge to commit suicide after campus officials rejected the plans for his bridge. This rumor is not true. The bridge was actually financed by Wyckoff and built about a decade later. Two popular suicides back in 1940 helped to maintain the legend of this same bridge. And, in a 1953 prank, a false call was made to police that someone had jumped from the bridge. Rescuers came upon a coat, pants, shoes, textbooks, and a written note. They searched the gorge for hours, but no body was ever found, and no one was ever reported missing. The gorges are also popular in fictional pieces written by Cornell alumnae. In one fictional piece called *Cat’s Cradle* two female students jump into the gorge together, holding hands after they are denied access to their favorite sorority.

Community Description – Palo Alto, CA. Palo Alto is a relatively small city with a population hovering around 65,000 residents. It is located in the northwest section of

Santa Clara County, CA. The city is centrally located between two major metropolitan cities in the Bay Area, CA: San Francisco and San Jose. Palo Alto is best known for the presence of both Stanford University (it shares a border with the campus) and high-tech companies such as Google, Facebook, and HP.

Due to the city's central geographical location, one of the Bay Area's major commuter trains runs through the heart of the city. The Caltrain, which is supported by county dollars from San Francisco, San Mateo, and Santa Clara Counties, has two tracks. One track runs southbound to San Jose and the other runs northbound to San Francisco. All but one of the crossings (University Avenue) in Palo Alto are "at-grade," which means the train crosses directly over city streets, as opposed to running through tunnels or over bridges. Not all trains stop in Palo Alto. Therefore, some trains pass over the city streets at-grade moving at speeds of up to 79-miles per hour. A train moving that fast can cover up to the length of a football field in less than three seconds. A train can be cleared of an intersection (including the time it takes to lower and raise warning bars) within 60 seconds (Caltrain 2016). Approximately 90 trains pass through Palo Alto daily (on weekdays).

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2016a), in 2010 Palo Alto was one of the most expensive (ranked fifth) cities to live in within the United States with an average housing price of \$1.67 million. In 2010, the median household income in Palo Alto was \$126,700. It is also one of the most educated cities in the country with 80 percent of its citizens holding a Bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau 2016a). Media accounts describe the community as graceful, park-like, and high-income. In short, it is an affluent community with top-rated schools housed in a university town.

Palo Alto has two major public high schools – Henry M. Gunn High (also referred to herein as Gunn High) and Palo Alto High (also referred to herein as Paly). Both are ranked amongst the best in the country. Furthermore, both schools are considered “feeder” schools to nearby Stanford University, which is ranked #5 in the nation (*U.S. News & World Report* 2016a). There is a healthy rivalry, both in sports and in academics, between the two high schools. Both are a part of the Palo Alto Unified School District (PAUSD).

U.S. News & World Report (2016b) ranks Gunn High twenty-sixth in the state of California. Newsweek ranks it fourth in the state of California. Its national ranking by *U.S. News & World Report* is #157. Newsweek ranks the school 38th in the country. According to *U.S. News & World Report* (2016c), Gunn High is ranked 11th amongst all high schools in the nation for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) education. Advanced placement (AP) coursework and exams are made available to students, and 75 percent of students participate in AP courses compared to the national average of 33 percent (College Board 2014). Forty-six percent of the senior class of 2016 has earned a GPA of 3.76 or higher for the previous six months. Eighty-one percent of the class of 2015 went on to 4-year colleges. An additional 15.6 percent of the class of 2015 went on to 2-year colleges (PAUSD 2016a). Clearly, Gunn High is considered a rigorous, academic environment where college prep and academic success are paramount.

Approximately 1,900 students attend Gunn High. The student body is comprised of 53 percent male and 47 percent female students. While the student body is quite diverse, it does not represent the larger population in the Bay Area, nor that of the city of Palo Alto, at large. Approximately 59 percent of the student body is categorized as a

racial minority, as compared to 36 percent in the city of Palo Alto. The majority of the racial minority students are Asian (43.8 percent), while 27 percent of the population in Palo Alto is Asian. Thirty-nine percent of students are white (California Department of Education 2015a). Palo Alto is comprised of 64 percent white people. Seventy-two percent of students have at least one parent at home who has attended graduate or professional school (California Department of Education 2013).

U.S. News & World Report (2016d) ranks Palo Alto High School #41 in the state of California. According to *Newsweek*, Paly is ranked #56 in the nation. *U.S. News & World Report* ranks Paly at #228 in the nation. It is ranked nineteenth in the nation in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) education. Thirty-eight percent of the senior class of 2016 has earned a GPA of 3.76 or higher in the previous six months (Palo Alto High School 2016). Nineteen AP courses are available to students. Sixty-eight percent of students participate in AP courses. Seventy-two percent of students from the class of 2014 went on to a 4-year university. An additional 16 percent attended a 2-year college (PAUSD 2016b).

Approximately 1,900 students attend Palo Alto High School. The student body is comprised of 51 percent male and 49 percent female. Approximately 49 percent of the student body is categorized as a racial minority. The majority of the racial minority students are Asian (33 percent). Fifty-one percent of the students are white (California Department of Education 2015b). Like Gunn High, although the student body is racially diverse, it does not represent the larger population within the Bay Area, CA. It does, however, more closely resemble that of Palo Alto, CA.

Cluster Demographics – Cornell University. Over the course of a few decades Cornell University has witnessed their suicide rate wax and wane. Between 1996 and 2002 there were eleven suicides, and between 2002 and 2006 there were five. The campus experienced several “suicide free” years until the fall of 2009 when three students committed suicide. Three more occurred in spring of 2010, raising the number of suicides for the 2009-10 academic year to six (see table 3). Given the population of Cornell, their suicide rate in the 2009-10 academic-year was three times the national average (Spodak 2010). Also, a finding worth noting is the unusually high number of non-suicide student deaths (six) during the same academic year. Although these were declared accidents or death by illness, they could be considered a social trigger for suicides and/or suicide clustering.

All the victims in this cluster were male. They ranged in age from 18 to 32. One of the victims was a graduate student, two of the students were first-years, one was a sophomore, and two were juniors. The first three suicides occurred during the fall semester, and each of these suicides was private. As a result, they were not heavily publicized as they occurred, and the methods of all three were not made public through Internet media sources. In fact, readers were not made aware of the first three until the publications following the sixth suicide of this cluster. In several of those articles, the author noted the prior deaths. The final three suicides of the cluster were public, and therefore received heavy publicity. It’s important to note that a private suicide by a community member (over Fall Creek Gorge) was publicized in August prior to the first private suicide of this cluster. This article was included in the analysis due to its location and timing.

Table 3 - Cluster Demographics by Site

| # | School | Date | Age/Grade | Sex | Setting | Location | Method |
|---|-----------|------------|---------------|-----|---------|--------------------|---------|
| 1 | Cornell | 10/19/2009 | First-Year | M | Private | Dorm | Unknown |
| 2 | Cornell | 11/01/2009 | 32/Grad | M | Private | Unknown | Unknown |
| 3 | Cornell | 01/13/2010 | Junior | M | Private | Unknown | Unknown |
| 4 | Cornell | 02/17/2010 | 18/First-Year | M | Public | Thurston Bridge | Jumping |
| 5 | Cornell | 03/11/2010 | 19/Sophomore | M | Public | Thurston Bridge | Jumping |
| 6 | Cornell | 03/12/2010 | 21/Junior | M | Public | Thurston Bridge | Jumping |
| 1 | Gunn High | 05/05/2009 | 17 | M | Public | Meadow Drive | Train |
| 2 | Gunn High | 06/02/2009 | 17/Senior | F | Public | Meadow Drive | Train |
| 3 | Gunn High | 08/21/2009 | 13/First-Year | F | Public | Meadow Drive | Train |
| 4 | Gunn High | 10/19/2009 | 16 | M | Public | Meadow Drive | Train |
| 5 | Gunn High | 01/22/2010 | 19/Alumni | M | Public | Meadow Drive | Train |
| 1 | Gunn High | 10/15/2014 | 19/Alumni | M | Public | Charleston Street | Train |
| 2 | Gunn High | 11/04/2014 | 16 | M | Public | Charleston Street | Train |
| 3 | Gunn High | 01/24/2015 | Senior | M | Private | Unknown | Unknown |
| 4 | Paly High | 03/09/2015 | 15/Sophomore | M | Public | Churchill Crossing | Train |

Cluster Demographics – Palo Alto, CA. The city of Palo Alto has experienced two recent suicide clusters. The first cluster occurred between May 2009 and January 2010. Over that period of time, a total of five students associated with Gunn High (including one alum and one student preparing to enter Gunn High as a first-year a week after her death) would die by suicide. At least one additional attempt was prevented. Two of the victims were female. Three of the victims (and the attempted suicide victim) were

male. Victims ranged in age from 13-19 years old. All five teens jumped in front of commuter trains run by Caltrain. Four of the five completed suicides, along with the one attempt, occurred at the same crossing – Meadow Drive. This created a “hotspot.” All of the suicides were public, which aided in creating a major focal point of discussion in the media.

Palo Alto experienced a second suicide cluster beginning in October of 2014 and ending in March of 2015. During this time period, four teens died by suicide. Three of the four teens were associated with Gunn High. One of the teens was associated with Palo Alto High School. Three of the four suicides were public. All three of those public suicides were by the same commuter trains run by Caltrain. Unlike the first cluster, however, these suicides did not occur at Meadow Drive. Instead, they occurred at Charleston, California, and Churchill crossings. All of the victims were male, and they ranged in from 15-18 years old.

Part II – Sources of Data

This section explains what sources of data were used for this analysis. It also explores the number of articles, the publication date of each article in relationship to the suicides within each cluster, and number of times an article failed to adhere to one of the six guidelines noted in chapter III (suicide mentioned in title, method of suicide, effects on others, location, pictures, and positive characteristics of victims). These findings are valuable to the analysis because they reveal whether or not these online news media outlets adhere to the guidelines established by the CDC and the AFSP. Furthermore, it helps the reader to better understand how media coverage is linked to the wax/wane of

the suicide clusters under investigation. Finally, this information reveals how exposure to these media outlets may have impacted the victims within each cluster.

Cornell University. Twenty-five online media sources, written by at least 18 journalists,¹⁹ were analyzed for this cluster (see table 4). Findings suggest that media sources involved in reporting on the Cornell cluster failed to uphold the suggested guidelines made by mental health organizations. Every article analyzed breached at least one of the five recommendations. Eighteen (72 percent) breached three or more. Almost all of the articles (92 percent) were published after the fifth and sixth suicides, which occurred on the same day. The media did not mention the first three deaths until after the sixth suicide. However, according to the data, students were notified by the campus administration through email and announcements made on the President’s webpage. Articles were published by a wide array of both local and national media outlets including *The Cornell Daily Sun* (also referenced as *The Cornell Sun*), *The Cornell Insider*, *The Huffington Post*, *CNN*, *The Daily Pennsylvanian*, *The New York Times*, *U.S. News & World Report*, *The Cornell Chronicle*, *USA Today*, *AOL News*, and *ABC News*.

Twenty (80 percent of) articles from the above analysis included comment forums consisting of nearly 1,200 individual responses. These forums served many purposes; they became a space for a multitude of topics, concerns, and discussions. Respondents spoke of shared experiences; posted letters and poetry to the deceased; shared memories of the victims; posted links to suicide prevention resources; used the space to advertise psychological services; and questioned the authors, publishers, and editors of the article.

¹⁹ Five articles were written by “Staff,” and one article was written by the Associated Press. These were not included in the count.

In many cases, the comment forums evolved into spaces of great debate. They also appear to have served as a safe-haven for the open expression of opinions.

Table 4: Cornell University Articles

| Ref. No. | Date | Suicide in Title | Method | Effect | Location | Pictures | Positive Characteristics |
|---|------------|------------------|--------|--------|----------|----------|--------------------------|
| Non-Student Gorge Related Suicide – June 26, 2009 | | | | | | | |
| 1 | 08/27/2009 | X | X | | X | | |
| First Suicide – October 19, 2009 | | | | | | | |
| Second Suicide – November 1, 2009 | | | | | | | |
| Third Suicide – January 13, 2010 | | | | | | | |
| Fourth Suicide – February 17, 2010 | | | | | | | |
| 2 | 02/18/2010 | | | X | X | X* | X |
| Fifth and Sixth Suicides – March 11, 2010 | | | | | | | |
| 3 | 03/11/2010 | | | | X | X* | |
| 4 | 03/12/2010 | | | X | X | X* | |
| 5 | 03/12/2010 | X | X | X | | | |
| 6 | 03/12/2010 | | | X | X | X* | X |
| 7 | 03/13/2010 | | X | X | X | X* | |
| 8 | 03/14/2010 | X | X | | | X* | |
| 9 | 03/15/2010 | | X | | X | | X |
| 10 | 03/15/2010 | | X | | X | | |
| 11 | 03/15/2010 | X | | X | X | | X |
| 12 | 03/16/2010 | X | X | X | | | |
| 13 | 03/16/2010 | X | X | | | | |
| 14 | 03/16/2010 | X | X | X | X | X | |
| 15 | 03/17/2010 | | X | | | | |
| 16 | 03/18/2010 | X | X | X | | | |
| 17 | 03/19/2010 | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| 18 | 03/19/2010 | X | X | X | | | |
| 19 | 03/20/2010 | X | X | X | | X | X |
| 20 | 03/23/2010 | X | | X | | | |
| 21 | 03/24/2010 | X | X | X | X | | |
| 22 | 03/24/2010 | X | X | | X | | |
| 23 | 03/25/2010 | X | | | | | |
| 24 | 06/10/2010 | X | X | | | X | |
| 25 | 06/17/2010 | X | X | | | | |
| Total | | 17 | 18 | 14 | 12 | 10 | 6 |
| % | | 68 | 72 | 56 | 48 | 40 | 24 |
| *Picture(s) included emergency crews working on removal of body | | | | | | | |
| **Also refers to abnormal or warning sign behaviors in victim | | | | | | | |

Palo Alto, CA (2009-2010 Cluster). Twenty-nine articles, written by 23 journalists²⁰, were reviewed for the first Palo Alto cluster (see table 5). All of them failed to comply with at least one of the recommendations chosen for analysis and set forth by national mental health organizations. Twenty articles (69 percent) failed to adhere to three or more recommendations. The vast majority of articles (20 of the 29) reviewed were published after the fourth suicide on October 19, 2009. These articles were published by an array of both local and national media outlets including *Palo Alto Online*, *SF Weekly*, *The Stanford Daily*, *ABC Local (KGO)*, *The Mercury News*, *The SF Examiner*, *ABC News*, *CBS News*, *LA Times*, *MSNBC*, *Jezebel*, *AOL News*, *The Huffington Post*, and *National Public Radio (NPR)*.

Comment sections attached to articles referencing the first Gunn High cluster involved a variety of topics for discussion and debate. These online forums created a public space in which individuals could debate the issue, share personal experiences, memorialize the victims, offer condolences to family and friends, share suicide prevention resources, and discuss possible solutions. Respondents included self-identified students, alumni, parents, family members, community members at-large, moderators (those who modify inappropriate comments), teachers, and professionals. Over 700 comments from 17 articles were included in the analysis for the first cluster.²¹

²⁰ Five articles were written by “Staff.” These were not included in the count.

²¹ The other twelve articles either did not have any comments attached (none posted) or there was not an option to post comments.

Table 5 - Palo Alto, CA 2009-2010 Articles

| Ref. No. | Date | Suicide in Title | Method | Effects | Location | Pictures | Positive Characteristics |
|---|------------|------------------|--------|---------|----------|----------|--------------------------|
| First Suicide – May 5, 2009 | | | | | | | |
| 1 | 05/05/2009 | | X | | X | X* | |
| 2 | 05/07/2009 | | | X | | X | X |
| Second Suicide – June 2, 2009 | | | | | | | |
| 3 | 06/03/2009 | | X | X | X | X | X |
| 4 | 06/04/2009 | X | X | X | X | X | |
| 5 | 06/05/2009 | | X | | | | |
| 6 | 08/01/2009 | | X | X | | | |
| Third Suicide – August 21, 2009 | | | | | | | |
| 7 | 08/23/2009 | X | X | | X | | |
| 8 | 8/24/2009 | X | X | X | X | | |
| 9 | 08/25/2009 | X | X | | X | | |
| Fourth Suicide – October 19, 2009 | | | | | | | |
| 10 | 10/20/2009 | | X | X | X | X | |
| 11 | 10/21/2009 | X | X | X | X | | |
| 12 | 10/21/2009 | X | X | | X | X | |
| 13 | 10/22/2009 | X | X | X | | X | |
| 14 | 10/23/2009 | X | | | | | |
| 15 | 10/23/2009 | X | X | | X | X | |
| 16 | 10/24/2009 | X | X | | X | | |
| 17 | 10/30/2009 | X | X | X | X | | |
| 18 | 11/01/2009 | X | X | X | | | |
| 19 | 11/01/2009 | X | X | X | | X | |
| 20 | 11/02/2009 | X | X | X | | | |
| 21 | 11/03/2009 | X | X | | | | |
| 22 | 11/07/2009 | X | | | | | |
| 23 | 11/09/2009 | X | | | X | | |
| 24 | 11/12/2009 | X | | X | X | | X |
| 25 | 11/30/2009 | X | X | | | | |
| Fifth Suicide – January 22, 2010 | | | | | | | |
| 26 | 01/24/2010 | | X | | X | X | X** |
| 27 | 01/25/2010 | | X | | X | | |
| 28 | 01/27/2010 | | X | | | X | X** |
| 29 | 08/05/2010 | X | | | | | |
| Total | | 20 | 23 | 13 | 16 | 11 | 5 |
| % | | 69 | 79 | 45 | 55 | 38 | 17 |
| *Included picture(s) of dead body under tarp at the scene | | | | | | | |
| **Also refers to abnormal or warning sign behaviors in victim | | | | | | | |

Palo Alto, CA (2014-2015 Cluster). Twenty-eight articles, written by 26 journalists²², were reviewed for the second Palo Alto cluster (see table 6). All of them failed to comply with at least one of the recommendations chosen for analysis and set forth by the national mental health organizations. Twenty (71 percent) of the articles violated three or more of the recommendations. The vast majority of the articles (14 of the 28) reviewed were published after the fourth suicide on March 9, 2015. These articles were published in a wide array of both local and national media outlets including *Palo Alto Online*, *The Mercury News*, *KCBS*, *San Francisco Chronicle (SF Gate)*, *Palo Alto Patch*, *Fox News*, *Peninsula Press*, *KQED (Public Broadcasting)*, *KRON 4*, *CBS News*, *ABC News*, *The Paly Voice*, *NBC Bay Area*, *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *National Public Radio (NPR)*, *San Francisco Magazine*, and *The Huffington Post*.

Fourteen of the articles from the above analysis included comment forums consisting of just fewer than 600 individual responses. These forums served many purposes. For this particular cluster, the largest focus of discussion forums was on problem solving, developing a collective will to overcome the suicide cluster phenomenon, and collective finger pointing (blame). Unlike other clusters in this analysis, there were very few respondents that shared their experiences with suicide ideation or attempts. And, even fewer respondents focused on shared memories of the victims.

²² Two articles were written by more than one author.

Table 6 - Palo Alto, CA 2014-2015 Articles

| Ref. No. | Date | Suicide in Title | Method | Effects | Location | Pictures | Positive Characteristics |
|--|------------|------------------|--------|---------|----------|----------|--------------------------|
| First Suicide – October 15, 2014 | | | | | | | |
| 1 | 10/20/2014 | | X | X | X | | |
| 2 | 10/23/2014 | | X | X | X | X | |
| Second Suicide – November 4, 2014 | | | | | | | |
| 3 | 11/04/2014 | | X | X | X | | |
| 4 | 11/04/2014 | X | X | X | X | X | |
| 5 | 11/04/2014 | | X | | X | X | |
| 6 | 11/04/2014 | X | X | X | X | X | |
| 7 | 11/05/2014 | | X | X | X | | |
| 8 | 12/19/2014 | X | X | X | | X** | X |
| Third Suicide – January 24, 2015 | | | | | | | |
| 9 | 01/24/2015 | | | X | | | |
| 10 | 01/27/2015 | X | | | | | |
| 11 | 01/28/2015 | X | | X | | | X |
| 12 | 01/28/2015 | | | X | | | |
| 13 | 01/29/2015 | X | | | | | |
| 14 | 01/30/2015 | | | | | | |
| Fourth Suicide – March 9, 2015* | | | | | | | |
| 15 | 03/09/2015 | X | X | X | X | X | |
| 16 | 03/09/2015 | | | X | X | X** | |
| 17 | 03/09/2015 | | | | | X | |
| 18 | 03/09/2015 | X | X | X | X | X | |
| 19 | 03/09/2015 | | X | X | | X | |
| 20 | 03/10/2015 | X | X | | | X | |
| 21 | 03/10/2015 | | X*** | X | X | X | X |
| 22 | 03/12/2015 | | X | X | | X**** | |
| 23 | 04/01/2015 | X | X | X | | | |
| 24 | 04/02/2015 | X | | X | | X | |
| 25 | 04/11/2015 | | X | X | | | |
| 26 | 05/10/2015 | X | X | X | | | |
| 27 | 05/22/2015 | | X | X | X | X | X |
| 28 | 06/02/2015 | X | | | | | |
| Total | | 13 | 18 | 21 | 12 | 15 | 4 |
| % | | 46 | 64 | 75 | 43 | 54 | 14 |
| <p>*Palo Alto High student **Includes video at the location of death with the body under a tarp ***For getting around guards ****Not related to suicide or suicide victim</p> | | | | | | | |

Since this cluster happened more recently, several advances were made in the way comment sections are handled by online news outlets. First, there were several new features of comment sections. Many of the news outlet comment sections are now integrated with Facebook, a social media website. These forums register whether or not you are currently logged into your Facebook account; if you are, posting is pretty seamless – no login is required. This also allows other users to click on your profile picture and, if your profile is public, garner additional information about you. Another new feature of comment sections is the ability for other posters to “like” your post. Some comments solicited a large amount of support from other readers. Finally, some of the news outlets allow for the “verification” of a poster. While it is unclear how one becomes verified, there was often a note under the user name that would state, “verified user” if the person had been verified by the news outlet. One can assume this is done in order to cut down on “Internet trolls” who make useless and/or inappropriate comments.

Part III – Findings and Comparative Analysis

This section of findings is relevant to several major research questions under investigation. First, these findings expose how failures to adhere to established guidelines appear qualitatively in these online news media sources. These findings reveal the type of language used by journalists and participants as they discuss the suicides within these cases. Therefore, these findings express not only how the media frames the issue, but also how that framing creates public discourse. A better understanding of how public discourse reflects or challenges (through the use of oppositional responses) emerges from these findings. Finally, these findings explore how the journalists write about the topic of

suicide whether or not they include a discussion of scientific facts pertaining to suicide or suicide prevention. And, if they do, what is the qualitative nature of those discussions.

The findings derived from comment sections, specifically, also reveal a significant amount of information about the community and the respondents under investigation. First, these findings reveal how individuals cope with and make sense of suicides. Second, these findings reveal how respondents approach problem solving and/or collective will in terms of suicide prevention. Third, these findings reveal how respondents make sense of suicides through othering, rationalizing, ideation, and/or self-valuing. Finally, these findings also reveal information about the communities that can lead to a better understanding of how the social conditions could have created anomic, egoistic, or fatalistic conditions due to social integration and normative regulation.

Adherence to Guidelines – Method – Cornell University. According to the CDC and the AFSP, publishing the method of suicide can lead to the growth of suicide clusters, especially imitative behaviors where individuals use the same method of suicide publicized in the media report. As a result, the CDC and AFSP recommend that journalists do not include any methods of suicide (related to the case, or otherwise, be publicized). Did the articles under investigation fail to adhere to this guideline? And, if so, how were these failures expressed qualitatively?

A method of suicide, not necessarily *the* method of suicide used in this cluster, was disclosed in eighteen (72 percent) articles. Discussion of methods referenced carbon monoxide poisoning (in reference to advancements made in gas stoves to prevent suicides), jumping or dropping from bridges, jumping from buildings (in reference to New York University's [NYUs] suicide cluster in 2003), and "gorging out." The latter

term has a shared meaning within the Cornell community and defines the act of jumping off one of the bridges of Ithaca into the gorge below.

The Vice President for Student and Academic Services, created a video that she posted to a new website developed as a direct result of the cluster. A link to this website was included in article seven²³ from where the author quotes the video. The quote selected reads, “While we know that our gorges are beautiful features of our campus, they can be scary places at times like this.²⁴” Although this statement does not explicitly state the method of suicide, by this time members of the community were well aware of the jumping deaths by suicide. In this case, she is drawing attention to both the method (jumping) and the location (the gorges) of those deaths and reaffirming the secondary meaning of the beautiful gorges on campus.

Adherence to Guidelines – Method – Palo Alto, CA (2009-2010). A method of suicide was disclosed in twenty-three (79 percent of) articles. Of these, only one (article 16) referenced methods used outside of the cluster. These methods included gas poisoning, overdosing on pills, and self-inflicted gunshot wounds. All other articles only referred to jumping in front of trains as a method for suicide.

While some articles briefly mention the method in passing, others are quite explicit in describing the effectiveness of the method used in a particular suicide (attempted or successful). For example, in article five, the journalist writes, “The fewer trains running on the tracks, the fewer Gunn High students can end their brief lives beneath Caltrain’s steel wheels.” This was in reference to a recent announcement made

²³ Refer to the tables in part II of chapter IV for more information about each article reference number.

²⁴ All quoted materials from articles and comment sections are written verbatim in order to preserve their full context. Spelling and grammatical errors are not removed.

by Caltrain to increase fees while cutting services. The author's argument equates to: less trains passing through means less kids jumping in front of them and dying.

In article six, the author interviews a train engineer about the local suicides. He quotes the engineer as saying: "They are using me as an instrument to accomplish an end, when I want no part of it." The article goes on to explain how affected the engineers are by suicides (both successful and failed attempts) on the tracks (more on this below).

On October 21, 2009, article 11 exhibited a potentially dangerous reference to expert commentary from Emory University. In discussing the method of death, the journalist quotes the expert as saying, "It serves its purpose for kids who are serious about taking their own lives. A train is violent. There is no question about it. It works."

Another journalist from article 13, states, "Too often this year the Silicon Valley commuter train that roars through affluent Palo Alto has become a terrible solution for troubled teenagers." This same article quoted a parent referring to the train as being "like a siren to kids who are in this area who are not feeling well." Ironically, this same article quotes a warning made by the Palo Alto Police Department. An officer is quoted as saying, "By showing video of the passing train, the loud train steaming down its corridor, we make that more accessible in the minds of someone else who's feeling troubled or feeling depressed." Ironically, this article violates the recommendation while also noting the risks of doing so.

Article 20 also reveals the method of suicide while noting its success at killing those who elect this method. The author claims, "[The train] is a very convenient mode of transportation, and also a disturbingly convenient way to kill yourself." These statements were published with blatant disregard to contagion prevention guidelines for media.

Readers, vulnerable or otherwise, exposed to these publications learn of an effective way to take their own life. Not only do these statements provide a method for suicide, but they also confirm the success of using trains to take your own life.

Adherence to Guidelines – Method – Palo Alto, CA (2014-2015). A method of suicide was disclosed in eighteen (64 percent) of articles. Only one article mentioned a method used outside of the cluster. Article two discussed a suicide in the nearby city of Woodside. The journalist revealed that the teen girl had jumped from the Sand Hill Road overpass (about 5 miles west of Palo Alto) onto northbound Highway 280 just ten days prior. All other articles discussing a method of suicide pertained directly to this cluster or the previous cluster and only referenced jumping in front of trains.

Most of the articles mentioned the method of suicide briefly. Some noted that a “pedestrian” had been “hit” or “struck” by a train, noting that the death was a “suspected” or “presumed” suicide. Others referred to the suicide as the train “striking and killing” the victim. Article 26, for example, referred to the method of suicide as, “local teenagers...stepping in front of trains.” One observation that was made with this set of data was the number of articles that included photos of Caltrain trains. Eight articles included either a picture of a Caltrain or a photo of the Caltrain tracks. Thus, the method was revealed both visually and in text.

One of the suicides in this cluster occurred in an undisclosed location near the victim’s home. Therefore, none of the articles published after the third and before the fourth suicides included information about the method of suicide. Instead, they noted that the victim, “died by suicide near his home.” The specific method used by this victim was

not disclosed in any future publications, nor was the specific location (discussed in the next section).

Adherence to Guidelines – Method – Comparative Analysis. Discussions of method varied slightly by cluster. The largest percentage of articles mentioning the method of suicide happened in the first cluster in Palo Alto. In that case, 79 percent of the articles revealed the method of death. Interestingly, the failure to adhere to this guideline decreases by 15 percent from the first to the second cluster in Palo Alto. In the 2014-2015 cluster, only 64 percent of articles included information on the method. Cornell University articles published the method of suicide in 72 percent of reports.

Of the three cases, the timing of publications that failed to adhere to this guideline varied somewhat. For example, only one of the 18 articles that failed to adhere to this guideline in the Cornell University case happened prior to the fifth and sixth suicides, and these suicides happened on the same day. With the first Palo Alto cluster, however, most of the failure to adhere to guidelines happened before the fifth suicide. Only one article before the fourth suicide avoided disclosing the method of suicide. The second cluster in Palo Alto looked more similar to the first cluster in Palo Alto (rather than Cornell University). All of the articles prior to the third suicide included details about the method of death. None of the articles between the third and fourth suicide discussed the method.

The way that methods were discussed also varied slightly across clusters. Descriptions of the method were much more detailed, visual, and poetic in the Cornell University cluster and the first Palo Alto cluster. Not only did journalists often dramatize

the method, but also they were also occasionally quite explicit about the details. As noted earlier, some publications included in the 2009-2010 clusters also alluded to the success rate of the method. Comments such as, “The train is violent. It works” is quite different from just simply stating that someone was “struck by a train in an apparent suicide.” The Cornell University cluster articles also frequently included photos of the bridge and/or the gorge. This is also revealing of the method. The later cluster in Palo Alto had far fewer discussions of methods within the articles. They did, however, often include photos of trains in the same way that Cornell University included photos of the gorges.

Adherence to Guidelines – Location – Cornell University. According to the CDC and the AFSP, publishing the location of suicide can lead to the growth of suicide clusters, especially imitative behaviors where individuals choose to die by suicide at the same location publicized in the media report. In other words, publicizing the location may lead to the development of a suicide hotspot. As a result, the CDC and AFSP recommend that journalists do not include any information about the location of suicide. Did the articles under investigation fail to adhere to this guideline? And, if so, how were these failures expressed qualitatively?

Twelve (48 percent) of the articles referred to a detailed location of suicide, such as the name of the bridge where the jump occurred. Others mention the creek that the victim jumped into. Locations mentioned include: Fall Creek Gorge and Thurston Avenue bridge. While these are literal descriptions of the location of suicide, there were also more metaphorical, general descriptions used. The author from article 8 writes, “For as long as anyone can remember, Cornell’s gorges have furnished a wide open casket for those so inclined.” This statement suggests to readers that the bridges spanning the gorges

of Cornell represent a place where people go to die. Another example of this was published in article eleven. The journalist states, “The rocky chasms have proven to be a beacon for students seeking to end their own lives.

Much of the discussion of location was in reference to rescue efforts. While articles often mentioned where the body was “discovered” or “located,” more articles focused on information about bridge closures and/or rescue efforts at a particular location on campus. Other articles discussed the location in reference to preventative measures. For example, article ten claimed that both the Thurston Avenue Bridge and the Stewart Avenue Bridge had been closed. It notes that the Thurston Bridge was closed due to rescue efforts, while Stewart Bridge had been closed as a precautionary method. It is unclear whether or not this was precautionary in terms of aiding in the retrieval of the body or precautionary in the prevention of additional suicides.

Adherence to Guidelines – Location – Palo Alto, CA (2009-2010). The specific location of suicide was mentioned in sixteen articles (55 percent). In article one, a nearby train suicide in Mountain View (not directly related to the cluster) was also mentioned. Some articles specifically noted whether or not a northbound or a southbound train hit the victim. As described above, all the suicides were public, and four of the five suicides occurred at the same Meadow Drive crossing. Articles referred to this location specifically, either in reference to a particular death or in reference to preventative measures that were undertaken. Article 12 even notes that the East Meadow Road crossing is “not very far from Gunn.”

In article 16, the author notes that there is “nothing notable about the train crossing at Palo Alto’s Meadow Drive, a weedy and gravel-lined site in a town of beauty

and comfort.” She goes on to note, “four students from one school in the last six months have traveled here to end their lives.” The argument made is that there is nothing notable about this intersection other than the suicides that keep occurring there.

Article 17 states that “the crossing itself is plain, weedy and less than two miles from the Gunn campus.” She makes this statement in reference to the community discussion of erecting a permanent memorial at the East Meadow crossing (more on this below). Again, the online news reports not only reveal the location of the suicides, but also the proximity to the school the victims attended.

When the exact location was not included, detailed pictures were provided, making the location easily identifiable to members of the local community. Pictures were published in 11 articles (38 percent) and showed up throughout the cluster. For example, article one included a slideshow of images from the scene of the suicide.²⁵ Two of the four photos included graphic pictures of the dead teen covered by a yellow tarp while rescue crews and police investigated the incident. In one captured image, the train (an instrument used as a weapon for jumping), the location, the deceased, and the effected crew were presented to readers. This was the first article in the analysis, published on the same day as the first suicide. Pictures in the other articles were not as descriptive and often focused more on the specific crossing, memorials, or pictures of the deceased while living.

Adherence to Guidelines – Location – Palo Alto, CA (2014-2015). The specific location of suicides either in this cluster or the prior cluster was noted in 12 (43 percent) of articles. As noted above, one location of a suicide outside the cluster was revealed; the

²⁵ This is just one example of how online articles differ from print media. Electronic slideshows are unique to online mediums.

location was on Sand Hill road in the nearby city of Woodside. Some articles were more specific and noted both the time (identifying which train it was) and/or the direction (northbound or southbound). Only three of the four suicides in this cluster were public. Those three all occurred on the Caltrain tracks in Palo Alto. Two (the first and the second suicide of the cluster) occurred at the Charleston Road crossing. The third (the fourth in the cluster) occurred near the Churchill crossing. References were also made to the 2009 cluster and the danger of the East Meadow intersection. Articles also discussed the California Avenue crossing as a “potential” location for future suicides.

Several articles included photos or videos of the location of the suicide. For example, article 18 included a photo taken of a memorial near the tracks includes the caption, “A northbound train approaches Churchill Ave. in Palo Alto, Calif., on Monday, March 9, 2015. A Palo Alto High School student allegedly committed suicide.” Another article (19) included a video of the investigation underway at Churchill crossing after the fourth suicide. This video not only included geographical images that would reveal the exact location of the death, but it also included images of the rescue crew and coroner working to remove the body from the tracks alongside the stalled train (that hit the victim). Also article 16 included a video (including a live newsfeed) that provided both overhead and street-level visuals of the scene. The images captured included geographical information that would provide viewers with the exact location of death. This video also included images of the deceased body of the fourth victim on the northbound track underneath a yellow tarp.

By the time the fourth suicide occurred, Palo Alto had already implemented a program called “Track Watch” where they hired security guards to stand at the

intersections, including Churchill. The guards were intended to prevent suicides from occurring by discouraging people from loitering near the tracks. Despite the presence of a guard on March 9, 2015, the fourth victim of this cluster managed to commit suicide without the guard being aware. Making matters worse, article 18 (published on the day of the fourth suicide), included information about how the victim must have gained access to the track by avoiding the guard. The journalist writes, “A private-security guard at the Churchill crossing said the victim found a way onto the tracks away from his post – before dawn; he may have slipped over a fence, or sneaked on near the California Avenue station where this is no crossing and no guard.” Publishing this kind of information could increase the risk of future suicides because it provides a location for breaching the preventative measure established by the community.

Adherence to Guidelines – Location of Suicide – Comparative Analysis.

Discussions of location varied slightly by cluster. The largest percentage of articles mentioning the location happened in the first cluster in Palo Alto, CA. In that case, 55 percent of articles revealed the specific location of suicide. Later reports for the second cluster in Palo Alto only revealed the location 43 percent of the time. This is a 12 percent decrease despite the presence of a similar number of articles being published (29 in the 2009-2010 cluster and 28 in the 2014-2015 cluster). Cornell University fell in between the two different rates for Palo Alto. Approximately half of the articles revealed the location.

Details about the locations varied amongst clusters. Some reports simply revealed the intersection or bridge where the suicide occurred. Other reports included photos and/or videos of the scene (usually of the rescue crew or memorials that had been set up

my mourners) that provided viewers/readers with specific geographical markers that could be used for identification. By far, the second (2014-2015) cluster had the most videos and/or photos. And, both Palo Alto clusters included scenes of the rescue efforts, which included imagery of where the victim laid dead (as evident by the yellow tarp that was visible in the images).

The timing of these failures to adhere to this guideline also varied somewhat drastically by cluster. For example, in the Cornell University cluster all but one of the articles revealed the location before the fifth and sixth suicides (occurring on the same day). For the first Palo Alto cluster, only six articles revealed the location prior to the fourth suicide, as compared to ten after the fourth suicide. As for the second cluster in Palo Alto, all but one of the eight articles leading up to the third suicide included the specific location. And, only 5 of the remaining articles (of twenty) included location details. These publications all came after the fourth suicide.

Adherence to Guidelines – Victim – Cornell University. According to the CDC and the AFSP, publishing information about the suicide victims, especially positive characteristics that reveal how the victim was seemingly normal and healthy, can lead to the growth of suicide clusters. The risk involved is linked to readers potentially identifying with the victim's ordinary lived experience and then feeling as though suicide may be a reasonable option for them as well (ideation). As a result, the CDC and AFSP recommend that journalists do not include information about victims that would reveal they were seemingly normal and healthy prior to their death. Did the articles under investigation fail to adhere to this guideline? And, if so, how were these failures expressed qualitatively?

Sixteen (64 percent) of the articles included some sort of identifiable demographic information about the victim. Thirteen (52 percent) included the year of graduation. Nine (36 percent) of the articles included information about the victim's major. Majors of the victims included engineering and economics. Other demographic information that was revealed on a smaller scale included the victims' gender/sex, hometown, place of employment, class schedule, professor's name, age, and/or location of death. All of these demographics stand to act as identifiers connecting the victims to other students and/or individuals on or around campus. This type of information could allow others to "see themselves" in the victim.

Six articles (24 percent) discussed the victims in a positive manner. Articles referred to the deceased as caring, intelligent, quick to laugh, full of promise and energy, talented, athletic, thoughtful, curious, energetic, welcoming, intelligent, warm, very kind, "a spark plug," a straight-A student, an athlete, gentle, and one who had deep concern for others. As noted, the CDC and the AFSP suggest that only speaking about positive characteristics without noting emotional or behavioral problems can increase the risk of contagion and imitation.

After the death of the fourth Cornell student, article two included a quote from one of the victim's fraternity brothers. The president of the fraternity (Alpha Epsilon Pi), noted, "[The victim] was a spark plug and always full of energy. Someone who was always wanting to be the best brother he could be, wanting to have a good time and wanting to cherish every moment." The article concludes with another quote from the fraternity president. He states, "[The victim] will be remembered in nothing but the

fondest light.” These passages not only reveal how upstanding the fourth victim was, but also that he would be remembered in a favorable light.

Another article (six) includes quotes from both fellow students and professors about the sixth victim. A self-identified student is quoted as stating, “[The victim] was an intelligent and very kind guy. He showed up late a few times to prelims, and at times seemed rushed, but was undoubtedly a very welcoming and thoughtful person.” One of his professors was quoted as saying, “I knew [the victim] as a curious, warm and gentle person of great promise.” It is possible that an individual interviewed may have said something about the sixth victim’s mental instability and/or health. However, if they did, the journalist(s) did not include these quotes. Instead, the journalist(s) chose to focus on the positive aspects of his character and personality.

“[The victim], a beloved employee at RPCC dining, tremendous athlete, talented poet, and caring friend, died Friday afternoon after he is believed to have dropped from the suspension bridge over Fall Creek Gorge.” This quote is the opening line of article nine. The journalist goes on to explain that the sixth victim was set to graduate that spring, and she informs readers that he already had a job lined up with an insurance company in Madison, WI. She quotes his high school English teacher as stating, “He was a wonderfully energetic young man eager to laugh.” The article continues on while describing many of the sixth victim’s achievements. He was a member of the National Honor Society, “a star” on the varsity baseball team, and a student manager at his place of employment at the campus-dining hall. The article also discusses his other hobbies. He enjoyed snowboarding, basketball, ultimate Frisbee, poker, video and board games, and

volunteer firefighting. The article clearly paints the sixth victim as a kind of all-American, college guy.

The journalist from article 18 writes, “Each time such a tragedy is reported, it seems to involve a highly promising young person who did not get the necessary help in time.” She made this statement in reference to both the Cornell cluster, as well as the 2003 NYU suicide cluster. While this was a more general statement (she was not talking about any one specific victim), the message is the same. These are just average kids who offer no warning signs of what they are about to do.

Only one article hinted at symptoms of distress in the victim leading up to their death. However, these symptoms were paired with a description of all the ways the sixth victim was also just a normal guy. The journalist from article 12 quotes the victim’s ex-girlfriend as saying, “Some who knew him more than others could see he was having trouble. He’d talk, but it wasn’t as much. He slept more than usual. Didn’t feel motivated about some things. Tried distancing himself, little by little.” The sixth victim’s ex-girlfriend believed that he was depressed about things that had happened in his earlier life. She also claimed that others had reached out to him and urged him to get help, “but no matter how great his support system was, his mind was set, and he was going to do whatever he wanted to do.”

Adherence to Guidelines – Victim – Palo Alto, CA (2009-2010). According to the CDC and the AFSP, describing the act of suicide as an inexplicable act of an otherwise healthy or high-achieving person can increase the risk of suicide contagion. In this case, only five (17 percent) of articles described the victims as a high-achieving person. Of those five, two of the articles acknowledged that the victim may have had a previous

diagnosis or issue with mental illness, which does not imply the victim was “otherwise healthy.” However, the remaining three articles did focus the attention of readers on how healthy the victims appeared to be just prior to their death by suicide.

In article two, the author interviews the parents of the first victim of this cluster. The journalist quotes the mother as stating that the first victim “was smart, funny, and had a great sense of humor – and was sweet.” According to the article, the first victim “had a love of animals and ability to play musical instruments, sports and games well. He had an artistic talent and wrote well.” Throughout the article the first victim is described as a kind, gentle young man who was able to win the hearts of neighbors, children, and small animals. He was a boy scout, he donated his allowance to charity, he was always the guy to choose the least desirable students to work with in small groups (because he did not want them to feel left out), teachers admired his intelligence, and family members thought he would grow up to be a minister. The article goes on to explain that “everyone was surprised, and no one sensed any problems” with the first victim’s behavior or emotional state.

In article three, the author describes the second victim in this cluster. The subtitle of the articles states, “remembered for her creativity.” The article notes that she was a senior scheduled to graduate later that month, and the journalist also notes that the second victim had already been accepted into NYU for the fall. The article describes the second victim as artistic; avid in the theater department; and good at hair, make-up, and costumes. Friends who were interviewed for the article described her as having a unique style with an authentic sense of self. They also describe her as helpful and noted her willingness to volunteer for Gunn High’s Gay Straight Alliance and the Youth &

Government program at the YMCA. Another friend interviewed for, and quoted in, the article noted that the second victim was an “amazing writer and speaker,” noting that she had won first prize in a short-story contest put on by *Palo Alto Weekly*.

Article 24 confirmed the second victim’s artistic skills while interviewing friends. One of these friends is a Gunn High alum currently attending Stanford. The student notes, “On the surface, there was no sign that she was at risk... That’s troubling for a lot of reasons, if someone can be that internally damaged and not show it at all.” It is interesting to note that the students being interviewed for this article are framed as the ones that “made it out” of Gunn High and moved on to the coveted Stanford University. It is assumed in the article that they would know first hand what stress feels and looks like due to their own experience as former Gunn High, and now Stanford, students.

One of the two articles that note some sort of prior mental illness or emotional distress is article 26. The article describes the fifth victim of this cluster. While the article acknowledges that the fifth victim was a prior athlete (varsity wrestling and tennis), homecoming prince his senior year, and that he represented the student body as service chair, it also notes that he was believed to be suffering from both schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. The article goes on to note that the fifth victim had recently dropped out of Brigham Young University due to his struggles with mental illness. Article 27 also noted the sixth victim’s struggle with mental illness. Finally, article 28 described the fifth victim’s mental illness as developing during his sophomore year of high school when he “developed repetitive, looping thoughts... School became increasingly difficult, and some relationships were more strained as he had initial symptoms of a mood disorder.” This

same article acknowledges that he was receiving care at UCLA and Stanford medical centers for his mental illnesses.

Adherence to Guidelines – Victim – Palo Alto, CA (2014-2015). In this cluster of suicides, only four (14 percent) of the articles included positive characteristics about the victims. Victims were described as high achieving, funny, athletic (basketball and soccer), outgoing, kind, goofy, cheerful, happy, popular, nonchalant, handsome, and a “grinning kid.” All four of these articles described the victims as being healthy and/or high achieving, which violates the recommendation put forth by national suicide prevention organizations. Although only one discussion of mental illness directly related to one of the four victims, there were discussions in the articles about depression, anxiety, and mental illness (also see “blame” section below) more generally.

Article 21 discussed the fourth victim of the cluster. According to the journalists, “It isn’t clear what lead to Monday’s death. Students who knew the boy – whom the school did not identify – said he gave no warning signs, He was, they said, high achieving, athletic and funny.” These same journalists interviewed the Superintendent, and they quoted him as saying, “Depression and mental health problems are so easy for kids to mask. Sometimes with high achieving families we are brought up to suffer in silence.”

In article 27, the journalist describes the second victim of the cluster. She describes the second victim as, “a goofy basketball player with short brown hair and a pixie face.” She goes on to claim that he was “the last kid anyone would have suspected of being troubled.” She claims that his classmates viewed him as “happy, nonchalant, and popular.” She references photos of his homecoming dance (she viewed on Facebook)

where he appeared “handsome, grinning, and standing smack in the center of his clique.” The journalist also quoted a friend of the second victim. She states, “If you told me that someone in my friend group would commit suicide, he would be my straight-up last guess.”

In this same article, the author references the third suicide victim of the cluster as well. While the journalist is describing the “hysteria” at Gunn High, she notes that the district may have prompted the third victim’s parents to make a public statement. According to the article, the third victim’s mother released a claim that school stress was not a factor in her son’s death. Instead, she notes that her son suffered from depression. The journalist writes, “[The third victim] had been deeply depressed, had even mentioned wanting to die. He was getting help, but there were waits for referrals and appointments. In the end, it was too late.”

There were several articles that referred to the first victim from the earlier suicide cluster in Palo Alto; those discussed his struggles with depression, mental illness, and suicide ideation, but framed it in hindsight. For example, article eight discusses the first victim of the earlier cluster as outgoing, compassionate, and kind. Although the journalist does not directly note mental illness as a factor in this victim’s suicide, she does interview and quote the victim’s mother as saying, “It’s a health issue.” Later, in article 27, the journalist also quoted the first victim’s mother as saying, “He sent out signs to people by phone and online. He even let people know that he intended to take his life. But they didn’t understand.”

Adherence to Guidelines – Victim Description – Comparative Analysis. Very little variation occurred between cases in terms of publicizing details about the victim. Both

clusters within the 2009-2010 timeframe discussed the victims in this manner at nearly the same frequency (21 percent for Palo Alto and 24 percent for Cornell University). The later cluster in Palo Alto, however, only discussed victims in this manner in 14 percent of the articles. And, articles pertaining to the fifth and sixth suicide did not reveal any sort of slant; they were quite evenly distributed.

The frequency of discussion of the victims varied across the span of the clusters. In the Cornell University cluster, all of the articles that failed to adhere to this guideline occurred after the fourth suicide. The first Palo Alto cluster articles discussed positive victim characteristics early on (after the first and second suicide) and not again until nearly a month after the fourth suicide. Interestingly, the two articles that failed to adhere after the fifth suicide also included information about abnormal warning signs that the victim displayed prior to death. The first Palo Alto cluster more often included photos of the deceased (both while alive and deceased), and articles more frequently focused on the victim's lives. Finally, the second Palo Alto cluster failed to adhere to this guideline most frequently after the third suicide. Despite this, photos of the victims were rarely included. Instead, photos of surviving students (more generic images) were used in articles about this cluster.

Adherence to Guidelines – Impact – Cornell University. According to the CDC and the AFSP, publishing information about the effects of suicide can lead to the growth of suicide clusters, especially imitative behaviors due to individuals believing their own death would likely result in the same dramatized effects. As a result, the CDC and AFSP recommend that journalists do not include any information about the impact of the suicides (related to the case be publicized or otherwise). Did the articles under

investigation fail to adhere to this guideline? And, if so, how were these failures expressed qualitatively?

The impact on others was discussed in 14 (56 percent of) articles. References were made to the effects the suicides had on rescue crews, parents, friends of the family, other students, the community at-large, family, and the hometown community of the deceased. The impacts on campus functions were mentioned often. For example, some articles noted the implementation of special training to educate staff and faculty about suicide warning signs, while others mentioned bridge closures. The campus lockdown that occurred after the sixth suicide was also publicized. Emotional responses also seemed to be quite popular. These included shock, emotional fatigue, somberness, anxiety, helplessness, being shaken, and being cathartic.

Article four, quotes the President of Cornell as stating, “I do want to acknowledge the toll we all may be experiencing from repeated losses already this year.” Another article (7), published the next day, also quotes the President of Cornell as saying, “The cumulative effect of this loss of life is palpable in our community.” Administrators, and therefore the media, were quick to note how the suicides affected the grief-stricken community.

One area of focus within the media reports was the effect the suicides had on prevention techniques and/or public responses. This became such a large theme within this specific domain that it was eventually transitioned into its own domain²⁶ (see below). Interestingly, the discussion of preventative measures often linked to several of the other domains related to preventative framing. These other domains included method of

²⁶ It was later done for the other two clusters in this analysis.

suicide, as well as the location of suicide. It was also frequently linked to the additional domain of scientific evidence.

Adherence to Guidelines – Impact – Palo Alto (2009-2010). Thirteen articles (45 percent) focus on the impacts of the suicides on others, including family members, faculty, community members, train conductors/engineers, and friends. Some describe parents as “anxious” or “devastated.” Several others describe how students are upset, crying, and coming together in wake of the tragedy. Some articles include pictures of memorials that are in place, either at the site or at the school. Ironically, several of these same articles note the prevention recommendations by acknowledging that publicizing or romanticizing suicide may increase contagion or additional suicides.

Some articles discussed the effects that suicide had on parents. In article two, the author notes that the first victim’s father was “pausing to choke back emotions” and frequently needed time to “regain composure” during his interview. The journalist also claims that the death came as a “shock” to family and friends, generally.

Article three describes how affected students were by the second victim’s death. The journalist notes that the “areas where seniors hang out were hushed as peers held each other through tears and sobs...Some students sat alone with tears streaming down their faces.” The article also suggests that students were in “disbelief” about the death of yet another student given that the first victim had just died a month earlier.

The journalist from article six spends several paragraphs discussing the effects that train engineers and conductors experience when there is a suicide on the tracks. The article suggests that engineers and conductors are “scarred – heart and head – forever.” The journalist also includes quite vivid and disturbing details about the actual impact that

happens between train and victim. A Caltrain engineer is quoted as saying, “One of the things that really sticks with an engineer is the sound of striking somebody. It just is a very distinct, hollow sound, and it’s got a metal ring to it...It stays in your mind, I don’t care how long ago it happened.”

At least five of the articles (17 percent) referred to the number of people who gathered for memorials. On the contrary, article 8 mentions concern over placing memorials. This article was published after the third suicide of the cluster, and it notes that a memorial had been established for the previous two suicides. The journalist notes: “Transit officials said they were enforcing their policy on removing memorials, worried that the public grieving could inadvertently glorify the deaths and inspire more attempts.” This same article also quotes an Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at Stanford University’s School of Medicine as confirming that any sort of sensationalizing of the deaths could lead to “contagion or copycat attempts.” Clearly, this journalist has been made aware of the risks associated with dramatization or glorification through the interviews she conducted. However, she later glorifies the suicides by noting how affected the teachers at Gunn High are. The journalist states that a Gunn English teacher she interviewed said that he was so affected by the deaths that he did not know how to face his students the next day.

Article 11 notes the silence surrounding the deaths. The journalist writes, “Information about the teenagers and the particulars of their deaths are being closely guarded by school and police officials who fear a public spectacle will only encourage more unstable students to take their lives.” However, this same article references parents being “scared” that their students may also fall victim to suicide. The article also makes

reference to a visiting psychologist from Emory University being “stunned” upon learning of the suicide cluster. The journalist quotes the psychologist as claiming, “Parents would be extremely affected by this. How do you know your kid isn’t going to be next?”

Article 17 includes a passage where the journalist discusses the effects of the suicides on the community. She notes that the community is “shattered.” The journalist quotes an executive director of Adolescent Counseling Services (a free assistance program to students at Gunn High) as stating that “one teen suicide is really difficult, but two, three, four is really tragic. There’s a sense of hopelessness and social depression.” Later, the article references an email that had been sent to the parents of Gunn High students in which it states, “We at school are all struggling to come to terms with this incomprehensible loss.” The journalist then goes on to discuss how hard the teachers at Gunn High have it. The journalist quotes a student at Gunn High as saying, “The teachers have it the hardest in all of this. They don’t know how to deal with the fact that their students are killing themselves.” She quotes another student as stating, “My Spanish teacher was crying all day after this latest one.”

Another article also notes the impact that these suicides have on the community. Article 20 states, “Just as trains bring together people whose lives wouldn’t ordinarily intersect, a suicide on the tracks has a collective impact: it’s an oddly civic death, one that becomes an entire community’s to analyze and mourn.” The author also recalls her own experience with train suicides. She recalls how the tracks close when there is a suicide. The journalist notes that commuters have to find another way home, and she refers to the stranded passengers as “becoming the suicide victim’s funeral procession.” This is a very

poetic way to note the effects a train suicide can have on the community, but it is also a powerful suggestion for those individuals who may be seeking a method of suicide that will result in far reaching effects.

Article 24 focused heavily on peers affected by the suicides. The journalist quoted one student as stating, “The whole feeling of the school is completely different when somebody has committed suicide.” Later, the journalist writes, “Many current Gunn students who were close to the victims have felt the need to take time off from school.” These examples express to other vulnerable individuals considering suicide how their death may alter others lives in a negative way.

Adherence to Guidelines –Impact – Palo Alto, CA (2014-2015). This violation was, by far, the most common within this cluster. Seventy-five percent (21) of the articles dramatized the impact of the suicides. Discussion of the impact of others focused on faculty, family member, peers, the community, administration, and commuters (both by train and by car). Articles also discussed the effects the suicides had on the structure of education at both Gunn High and Paly High. Descriptions of the emotional toll on others included discussions of “broken hearts,” crying, mourning, being distraught or devastated, and being shaken by the events. Some articles described the experience as being “too much to bear” or so upsetting that a somber mood was created on campus. Emotions noted included sadness, fear, terror, grief, panic, anxiety, and frustration. Commuters were described as being forced to deal with traffic backups and delayed commutes. Finally, it was discussed how the schools were being forced to bring in a crisis response team, hold community meetings, hire additional psychologists and substitute teachers, and modify lesson plans.

In article 11, the author quotes a student at Gunn High. This student started a campaign at Gunn called “Save the 2,008.” The program is aimed at saving the 2,008 students and faculty at Gunn High from further suicides. At the PAUSD board meeting, the student stated, “I am not OK and I can speak for many of my friends at school when I say we are not OK. I want to feel comfortable at school, I want to be happy at school, and I want to enjoy what I am learning. Right now, I am doing none of those things.” The journalist makes it a point to mention that the student was “choking back tears” when sharing these feelings in front of the PAUSD board of education days after the third suicide of the current cluster.

In this same article, the journalist quotes another student who is a junior at Gunn. The student states, “I’ve grown up much quicker than I should have to and have been forced into situations that no 16-year-old should have to deal with. Instead of stressing about which girl to ask to prom...or the type of clothing to wear to school, I’ve had to deal with suicidal friends, crying teachers, and one of my closest and most cheerful seeming friends killing himself.”

In article 21, the authors claim, “The very life of the school district has been altered in ways large and small.” The authors go on to discuss how some classes on campus practiced meditation instead of focusing on lessons, teachers and staff were being trained to identify at-risk youth, and that the wellness center at Gunn High was undergoing “accelerated construction.” The authors describe the scene, both at the tracks and on the campus. They state, “The train that struck the student stopped and stayed, within view of the campus. Investigators could also be seen combing the tracks. The mood on campus, on a bright springlike day, turned somber. Here and there, students

reported, classmates were crying and counselors checked in on individual students. Amid the shock and mourning, everyone struggled for an answer.”

In article 27, the journalist describes Gunn High (despite the fact that the fourth suicide was at Paly). She writes, “Teachers dissolve into tears mid-class; students describe feelings akin to those of soldiers coping with post-traumatic stress disorder.” As noted above, she described the scene at Gunn High as “hysteria.” She speaks specifically of the fourth victim’s death by suicide when she claims, “[Students were] too distraught to stay at school. The scene was awful: wailing kids running out of classrooms; boys rocking with their heads in their hands; students staring at the ground in the eerily silent courtyard.”

Adherence to Guidelines – Impact – Comparative Analysis. The articles in all three cases frequently dramatized the impact by discussing the effect that the suicides had on others. As noted, these others included faculty, administrators, parents, peers, Caltrain workers, commuters, and rescue crews. In the two earlier cases (2009-2010), both Cornell University and Palo Alto discussed the effects of the suicides in 48 percent of articles. The later cluster in Palo Alto, however, discussed the effects in 75 percent of the publications. This is a large variation between the three cases. It is hard to understand this drastic shift. It is quite possibly due to the fact that this is the second cluster within the same geographic area, which would likely have a compounding effect on others.

The frequency and timing of articles that failed to adhere to this guideline varied slightly by cluster. The Cornell University cluster only included articles after the fourth suicide that discussed the effects of suicide on others. And, of those, most of the failure to adhere to said guidelines happened 4-13 days after the fifth and sixth suicide. Both of the

Palo Alto clusters looked rather different from the Cornell University data. For the first cluster, all of the articles that failed to adhere to this guideline were published prior to the fifth suicide. And, this occurred at a relative steady frequency throughout the cluster. The same can be said of the second cluster in Palo Alto. The failure to adhere to this guideline occurred rather consistently across the span of the cluster with the least amount of failure between the third and fourth suicides.

Adherence to Guidelines – Title – Cornell University. According to the CDC and the AFSP, using the word suicide in the title of a news report can lead to the growth of suicide clusters due to sensationalizing the act. As a result, the CDC and AFSP recommend that journalists do not include the word suicide in the title. Did the articles under investigation fail to adhere to this guideline? And, if so, how were these failures expressed qualitatively?

A majority (68 percent) of the articles contained the word “suicide” in the title. The dramatization of the word varied from source to source. For example, article three used the title “Cornell University: Suicide Lockdown.” In this case, the campus was actually on lockdown after the final suicide in the cluster; it was also the third suicide within a 30-day time period. Another article (22) is titled, “Cornell Responds to Alarming Surge of Apparent Suicides.” While the title is dramatic, and it includes the word suicide, it also includes the word “apparent.”

Within the articles coded, several of them attempted to use a different word for suicide, not necessarily in the title but within the context of the article. All of the following terms were used in place of the word suicide: tragic death, tragic loss of life, dropped from the bridge, taken their own life, gorge related deaths, gorging out, ending

their own lives, these events, and this tragedy. For example, article three uses the word “voluntary death” instead of suicide. Another posed a question to readers; article eight was titled, “Cornell Suicides: Do Ithaca’s Gorges Invite Jumpers?” On a side, this title also reveals a method.

Adherence to Guidelines – Title – Palo Alto (2009-2010). Twenty of the 29 articles (69 percent) used the word “suicide” in the title. Most of these failures to adhere to suggested guidelines occurred during the publications of the third and fifth suicides. All three of the articles between the third and the fourth suicides contain the word “suicide” in the title. Fifteen of the 16 articles published between the fourth and fifth suicides contain the word “suicide” in the title. Titles varied in content. Some mentioned the suicide cluster, some noted that a track death was a “suspected suicide,” while others noted some sort of effect associated with the suicides (trauma to Caltrain crew, counseling for peers, anguish felt by community members, a call to action, etc.). Several other titles focused on prevention.

Ironically, in article 25, the author references a concern that the locals have over the use of the word “suicide” when discussing the recent events. Within the article, the author states: “No one even uses the ‘S’ word, instead referring to ‘the incidents’ or ‘the misuse of the tracks.’ The volunteers fear saying anything that could encourage another copycat.” While this reporter is acknowledging the fear (and understanding of the established guidelines), she glosses over these concerns by placing the “S” word, written as “Suicide,” in the title of her article.

It is important to note that alternative words for suicide were frequently used, not only within the titles of the articles, but also within the body of the articles. This occurred

in eleven (38 percent) of the articles analyzed. For example, all of the following alternative terms were substituted for the word suicide at some point in the eleven articles: “the incident,” “misuse of tracks,” “ending their life violently,” “taking their lives,” “lost their lives,” “killed themselves,” “fatality,” “epidemic,” and “killed.” It is unclear if these were intentional attempts by the authors to avoid referencing the term suicide or if they were simply using a common synonym or relying on quoted material of someone they had interviewed.

Adherence to Guidelines – Title – Palo Alto, CA (2014-2015). Thirteen articles (46 percent) included the word suicide in the title. Neither of the articles focusing on the first suicide, and only half of the articles pertaining to the second, third, and fourth suicides, violated this guideline. The context surrounding the use of the word suicide varied. Several articles included the word “apparent” or “suspected” prior to the word suicide. One article printed their title as “Caltrain Tragedy: Teen Boy Commits Suicide This Morning on Palo Alto Tracks.” Some article titles referred to a “Wake” or “String” of Suicides. Others referred to efforts to “Reduce Suicides on Train Tracks.”

The articles that did not include the word suicide in the title often found creative ways of avoiding it. For example, some articles framed the title as “man killed on train tracks” while others declared that a boy was “fatally struck” by Caltrain. Some just simply stated that Paly was “mourning the death of a student.” Titling the article in this way avoided using the word suicide while also avoiding the method of suicide used. Article 27 (noted above) did not use suicide in the title (the only recommendation the journalist did not violate). However, they did not attempt to be indirect. The title of the article reads: “Why Are Palo Alto’s Kids Killing Themselves?”

This same article was, by far, the worst violator of the prevention recommendations. While the journalist failed to put the word “suicide” in the title, she spent an entire paragraph complaining about the “suffocating unease” she felt in trying to understand the first cluster in Palo Alto. She claims that when she attempted to ask questions about the deaths, so she could write about them, she was “consistently shut out.” She feels as though Palo Alto community members are “terrified that media coverage – or even public utterance of the word ‘suicide’ – would spread the contagion. She feels as though this “fear was too great,” and that she was given an “unofficial gag order.” According to the journalist, things have changed with this cluster, and people are willing to talk about it. Whether or not that is true is unclear. However, what is made clear is that she has no regard for following preventative measures (as noted throughout the findings).

Adherence to Guidelines – Title – Comparative Analysis. As with some of the other domains, there was a large difference between cases when examining the failure to abide by the guideline that suggests the avoidance of the word suicide in the title; the earlier clusters more frequently failed to abide. Between 68-69 percent of articles in both 2009-2010 clusters used the word suicide in the title. The later cluster in 2014-2015 in Palo Alto only failed to abide by the guideline 46 percent of the time. This is a decrease of roughly 22 percent.

The timing of these publications in relationship to the dates of suicide also varied by cluster. For example, only one of the 17 articles in the Cornell University cluster that failed to adhere to the guideline was published before the fifth suicide. In the 2009-2010 cluster in Palo Alto, most of the articles that failed to abide by the guideline were

published after the third suicide but before the fifth suicide. Only one article included the name suicide in the title before the third suicide. And, only one article contained the word suicide after the fifth suicide. Finally, the second cluster in Palo Alto showed a relatively steady frequency of articles with the word suicide in the title. However, no publications failed to live up to this guideline prior to the second suicide.

One interesting finding between the two Palo Alto clusters pertains to how the word suicide was used within the articles. The earlier cluster often included coded language in order to avoid using the word “suicide.” As noted, examples included referring to suicide as “the S word,” “misuse of the tracks,” and “the incidents.” By the second cluster in Palo Alto, this coded language had mostly disappeared from the data. The word suicide was used more openly within the articles even though it was used less within the titles.

Articles – Scientific Facts – Cornell University. According to the CDC and the AFSP, publishing scientific facts about suicides and suicidal behaviors may help to prevent the growth of suicide clusters. As a result, the CDC and AFSP recommend that journalists, when possible, include information about prevention, scientific facts about warning signs, and national/local resource information for vulnerable readers. Did the articles under investigation adhere to this guideline? And, if so, what kind of information was included?

Several articles made an attempt to share scientific facts about suicide. In this case, the facts were more focused on dispelling any myths about Cornell being a “suicide school.” For example, in article 13 the journalist interviewed experts, including the Director of Counseling and Psychological Services, as well as the Director of Mental

Health Initiatives on campus. These experts claim, “It’s well known that Cornell has a reputation as a ‘suicide school,’ which is not consistent with the reality of statistics.” The article goes on to note that the average suicide rate would be 2 per year for a campus this size. Looking at the data from the last few decades, Cornell is well within that average. It is hard to tell if the articles are attempting to preserve the image of Cornell University or if they are hoping to calm a frantic public – maybe both.

Article 14 notes that suicide ideation is not all that rare. The article cites research conducted by the National Research Consortium of Counseling Centers in Higher Education. This research suggests that 15 percent of college students have seriously considered an attempt, and more than five percent had actually tried to commit suicide. The article continues on by claiming, “College students are particularly vulnerable.” The journalist quotes Cornell’s Director of Mental Health Initiatives as saying, “One of the things we know about adolescents and young adults, is the decisions they make about things like suicide are often impulsive. That’s why it’s so important to prepare the community to recognize the signs.” While this statement is factually true, the article did not include information about how to recognize the signs of suicide ideation, which could have been useful for readers.

Another article (21) quotes the Director of Prevention Projects at the AFSP. The article quotes the director as stating, “Mental health disorders – not stress levels – are the main factor contributing to suicides. But ‘access to lethal means’ also plays a key role, and at Cornell the infamous bridges above the gorges present both a ‘real’ and a ‘very public’ means for suicide.” This same article also attempts to dispel the myth that the suicides could be related to the oppressive weather conditions.

Finally, article 25 discussed the importance of implementing the fence barriers mentioned above. The article was published after the publication of a consultant's report that had been released to the public several days prior. According to this report, which was cited by the journalist, "Most individuals who jump from iconic sites are ambivalent, act impulsively, choose a specific site, and if deterred from their attempt at that site at a particular time, these individuals most often do not later die by suicide." These same experts claim, "Restricting access to jumping sites has a 'substantial probability' of saving lives."

Articles – Scientific Facts – Palo Alto, CA (2009-2010). Another domain that emerged from the articles was notation of scientific facts associated with suicide. Experts from both nationally and globally renowned organizations such as: The National Suicide Prevention Resource Center, Columbia University, The AFSP, Stanford, American Association of Suicidology, and the CDC were referenced by journalists. These experts in the field of suicidology reveal "need to know" facts about suicide and suicide prevention. Correlations between mental illness and suicide were discussed in several articles. According to experts, 90 percent of victims have an undiagnosed mental illness. Other important statistics were also revealed. For example, some articles reveal that 40 percent of individuals attempting suicide know a family member or friend who has also attempted suicide. There was also expert information about suicide clusters made available to readers. For example, experts noted that two percent of all youth suicides occur in clusters (roughly 200 deaths per year). Furthermore, five percent of deaths by suicide occur in clusters.

Other scientific information regarding warning signs or triggering events was also discussed. According to the data, research findings suggest that depression, deterioration in academics, substance abuse, talking/writing about suicide, difficulty concentrating, disinterest, giving away possessions, drug/alcohol abuse, and increased isolation are all clinical warning signs of suicidal behaviors. Experts referenced within the data also note that social events such as academic stress, the death of a peer to suicide, bullying, stress (in general), problems with relationships, media reports, and high-pressure situations can trigger suicidal acts and ideation.

Articles – Scientific Facts – Palo Alto, CA (2014-2015). In article 10, the journalist informs readers about the rates of suicide in Santa Clara County. She notes that the suicide rate in Santa Clara County is lower than both the state and national averages (despite the current clustering). She also quotes Santa Clara’s Suicide Prevention Coordinator as claiming that suicide rates are higher than homicide rates within the county, and that suicide is the third leading cause of death amongst teens in the county. This same article concludes with local resources available to at risk youth, including the Santa Clara County Suicide Prevention and Crisis hotline.

Article 16 includes an interview with a Caltrain spokesperson. In the article, the spokesperson is responding to the most recent suicide on the tracks (the fourth victim of this cluster). She states, “Suicide is a complex, community health issue. Research shows that most of the time people who die by suicide are struggling with mental health issues. Dedicated people in our community are working every day to lift the stigma surrounding mental illness and reduce suicide.” The spokesperson also referenced a Caltrain resources

website that provides information about suicide prevention resources (the journalist elected to publish the hyperlink within the article).

In article 17, the journalist provides comparative statistics from the CDC. The author suggests that 5,000 more individuals died by suicide than by motor vehicle accidents in the U.S. during 2010. The author also included a list detailing eleven warning signs of suicide. Finally, the article provided a phone number for the National Suicide Prevention hotline in case readers know someone exhibiting those warning signs.

Article 20 is a publication about Caltrain and suicides. Within the content of the article are several references to scientific data regarding suicide in the area. For example, the journalist notes a study completed by the California Department of Transportation in 2010. The report claims that most of the suicides on Caltrain since 2005 have been concentrated in and around Palo Alto. The journalist goes on to note, “The fatalities often end the lives of young people. Since 2010, 10 teens have died by suicide on Caltrain tracks, with two this year.” The article also notes that suicide is usually correlated with underlying mental illness such as depression or anxiety. It also claims those mental illnesses are treatable. It goes on to define what a suicide cluster is, and the journalist interviews a physician at Palo Alto Medical Foundation, who claims, “We’re in one. There is no doubt we’re in one.” The article continues on with a discussion of the role that media can play in contagion, and they even include a hyperlink to those guidelines. The physician notes that media glorifying suicide while providing extensive details about the manner of death can lead to contagion. However, she also notes that media can play a role in educating the public on risk factors for suicide and resources.

Article 25 references a recent increase in suicide rates amongst individuals between the ages of 10 and 24. The journalist references the CDC when noting that the suicide rate for this age group in 2003 was 6.74 deaths by suicide per 100,000. According to the article, that rate increased to 8.15 per 100,000 in 2013. The journalist also references the CDC when he claims that 17 percent of American high school students have considered suicide during the previous year (2012). He concludes the section by describing how suicide clusters are a reflection of both imitation and the social environment.

Article 27 also provides facts about suicide clusters. While the journalist does not cite the source of her information, she claims that suicide clusters are most common amongst adolescents, college students, prisoners, and soldiers. She also claims that approximately five clusters happen per year in the United States. The journalist interviews a psychologist who claims that teens are prone to modeling. The journalist also quotes a psychiatrist who states that the youth in Palo Alto are likely suffering from acute stress disorder. Later in the article, the journalist cites facts about rates of depression amongst American teens. She claims that rates of depression increased by 35 percent between 2006 and 2013.

Articles – Scientific Facts – Comparative Analysis. All three cases included articles that published scientific facts and/or resource information about suicides. In the case of Cornell University, articles focused heavily on dispelling the myths about Cornell being a suicide school. They often provided social facts on the rates of suicide. These articles also discussed the vulnerability of teens and young adults. And, they often discussed their tendency for ideation. Finally, the Cornell University case included

articles that discussed the role that mental health plays in suicide while also discussing how prevention methods, such as netting, could prevent mentally distressed individuals from dying by suicide. In the earlier Palo Alto cluster, scientific facts more frequently discussed the relationship between mental illness and suicide. These articles also presented information on the warning signs of suicide. Unlike the first cluster in Palo Alto, most of the scientific fact published in the 2014-2015 Palo Alto cluster contained factual information about suicide. The articles for the second Palo Alto cluster also included more scientific fact about resources available to the local community. Journalists published information about local suicide rates, rates of suicide by Caltrain, and national rates of suicide as they pertain to teens and young adults.

Articles – Preventative Measures – Cornell University. The AFSP recommends that journalists include scientific facts, especially in relationship to prevention methods, resources available, and warning signs. Due to the share-ability and interactivity of online news media, this may be more important to online media outlets. The following findings reveal the types of references made to scientific facts about suicide. The most popular theme within this domain was the frequent discussion of preventative measures.

Many prevention methods were noted in the articles for the Cornell cluster. Many of these prevention methods were enacted over the course of the cluster, while others were approaches noted as options for prevention. The prevention methods enacted included implementing a suicide lockdown, fencing off the bridges, extending the hours of operation for counseling services, adjusting exam/assignment schedules, door-to-door check-ins, implementing mental health campaigns, training staff (including dorm custodians) on how to spot signs of suicide ideation, posting guards at bridges, tabling

events, holding public meetings between campus authorities (police and administrators) and the student body/community, and tweaking the Family Educational Rights to Privacy Act (FERPA) in order to inform parents of student grades that were slipping and/or mental health issues. Other preventative measures were suggested, but not implemented. These included screening incoming first-years for mental illness and putting up nets under the bridges.

One thing that becomes apparent while sifting through the data is that campus officials did not have time to respond quickly given the succession of suicides within such a brief period. Although campus officials were frequently quoted within news articles as providing campus resource information, they were also frequently quoted as being aware that more needed to be done and that changes were underway. Article seven discussed how the campus put security guards in place on all of the bridges as a temporary solution until administration could “reevaluate the situation.” This article also revealed that the University launched an “aggressive mental health campaign” and had initiated a door-to-door check of every dorm room. Furthermore, the campus held “off hours” at the Gannett Counseling and Psychological Services building. They opened on both Saturday and Sunday despite normally being closed on the weekends.

Another prevention method mentioned in this same article was directed at faculty. According to the Provost and the Dean of the University Faculty, faculty were encouraged to speak to students during their classes about “keeping their academics in proper perspective.” Faculty was told to remind their students that they cared about them both academically and personally. And, they were also encouraged to adjust exam schedules for those students who “appear to be under unusual duress.” One professor who

had taught the fifth victim supposedly sent an email to the class. The article quotes him as writing, “All deadlines for completing course work are suspended until further notice as students take time to process these events.” Furthermore, the article informed students that they could talk to the associate and academic deans and/or advisors if they were “having trouble managing their work or believe that a particular professor is being especially unfair about a deadline.”

In article seven, the author references (and includes links to) a video statement made by the Vice President for University Communications (VPUC). According to the VPUC, “Suicide is not a solution. It can be prevented. If you are considering suicide, please understand: the psychological pain you feel now is not permanent. Counseling is effective.” Many of the articles mirrored this plea. Administrators who were quoted frequently asked members of Cornell to join together, seek help, and support each other as a way to prevent future suicides.

One prevention method that received quite a bit of media attention was the use of fence barriers. Article 22 focuses entirely on this preventative measure. The article describes the fence as an “eight-foot chain-link fence.” According to the article, Cornell responded with this tactic under the advice of experts at both the local and national level. At the time of this publication, Cornell was also trying to convince the city of Ithaca to install similar barriers on city bridges. Article 24 also describes how the placement of fencing provoked a “torrent of responses.” While some members of the community praised the efforts, others argued, “The fences were unattractive and ineffective structures that promoted a prison-like atmosphere and served as a constant reminder of tragedy.” In article 15, campus officials responded to such criticisms by stating, “The beauty of our

landscape is vital to the identity of Cornell and Ithaca. I'm confident that we will find a way to balance our need to experience the natural beauty of the gorges with our concern from the safety of our most vulnerable students and community members.”

At least one article included quotes from Cornell community members who criticized campus preventative methods, especially the use of public gatherings. In article 18, the journalist interviews students at a campus gathering where community members joined together to sing the Alma Mater and students could set up tables and posters with words of encouragement. A senior student is quoted as stating, “I think it’s wonderful. But, I also think the biggest thing is these [events] need to start happening without reason. It shouldn’t be reactionary, it should be something that continues and is preventative.” Another student is quoted as saying, “I disagree with a lot of what the students are doing. I feel like they have marginalized and belittled the problems of depression. I really hope that people realize that depression is a huge problem that you can’t solve by throwing a little concert or rally.”

Articles – Preventative Measures – Palo Alto, CA (2009-2010). One reoccurring domain in these twenty-nine articles was the inclusion of prevention methods. Journalists, and those whom they quoted (parents, peers, teachers, and experts), noted prevention methods. Within the domain of prevention methods, several major themes developed. These included general prevention methods, prevention methods to be implemented at the school, prevention methods to be implemented at the site of the suicide, and the creation of suicide prevention coalitions.

Eight (28 percent) of the articles offered readers some sort of general advice for prevention of additional suicides. These include suggestions to parents that they

communicate with their teens about the recent suicides. Some articles also noted that encouragement of “no-suicide pacts” might be useful in preventing further deaths by suicide. Other articles suggested that the community (journalists included) should focus on demystifying suicide. Ironically, others suggested that the community find ways to discourage any sort of publicity, especially through the avoidance of talking about suicide specifically.

Articles also suggested prevention methods for schools. These included hiring guards who would watch students and become school officials that individuals could turn to in order to report suicidal ideation and/or behaviors. Other suggestions included requiring routine psych screenings for students, changing the curriculum to promote mental health (including canceling quizzes and homework, as well as holding classes outdoors), and hiring more staff for support. Suggestions were also made about memorials and/or shrines that had been erected on campus. Some of these prevention methods were suggestions; others were actually implemented as a result of public discourse (as noted in the articles themselves).

Prevention methods at the site were also discussed in eleven (38 percent) of the articles analyzed. Like the prevention methods noted for the schools environment, some of these were actually implemented, others were just discussed as options. Prevention methods that were implemented (and discussed) include establishing a volunteer patrol system, hiring private security guards, increasing police surveillance, and removing shrines/memorials. Suggestions that had not yet been implemented, but had been suggested, include: adding better lighting, setting up surveillance cameras, running fewer trains (this happened, but due to budget cuts, not as a prevention technique), adding

additional signage, building pedestrian overpasses, and playing “ear-splitting” messages if an individual were caught loitering near the tracks. Other suggestions included modifying the physical environment by planting thorny bushes (that would block access to the track), building fencing (in 2016 Caltrain continues to invest in this after the second cluster), putting up additional gates, and building trestles.

Finally, coalitions and/or resources that focus on suicide prevention were often noted in the articles. Eleven (38 percent of) articles made reference to at least one coalition. These include coalitions that are local (mostly established by peer groups and/or parent groups), as well national suicide prevention organizations. Some of the local coalitions mentioned included student/peer groups that have been established such as, Operation Beautiful, Talk to Me Campaign, Reach Out. Care. Know (ROCK), Henry M. Gunn Gives Me Hope (HMGGMH), and Adolescent Counseling Services (ACS). Some articles also include local or regional resources such as Crisis Hotline and Santa Clara County Suicide Hotline. More national resources that were noted (sometimes in hyperlinks at the end of articles) include Teenline, National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, Suicide Awareness Voices of Education (SAVE), Yellow Ribbon Suicide Prevention Program, National Institute of Mental Health: Suicide Prevention, and WHO: Suicide Prevention.

Articles – Preventative Measures – Palo Alto, CA (2014-2015). As with the first cluster, the articles covering the second cluster also discussed the issue of prevention and/or solutions to the problem of suicide contagion. Journalists, and those quoted (parents, administration, faculty, peers, family members, and experts), noted different approaches to solving the problem. Like the first cluster, the researcher labeled these as

general, school, site, and coalition responses. Some of these prevention methods had already been implemented. Others were offered as solutions to the problem.

Six (13 percent) of the articles offered readers some sort of general advice for the prevention of additional suicides. Several articles noted that there should be a system in place where teens could report “at-risk” youth who could then be monitored by professionals. Three articles noted the need for the reduction of stigma surrounding mental illness. There was a generalized belief that if the stigma were reduced, individuals would seek help. Three articles suggested raising community awareness by holding regular meetings. One article even suggested holding child-parent forums where children (students) could voice their issues and/or sufferings and parents would “hear their children’s voices.” Several articles also noted that suicide might be prevented if one were to “redefine success.” One of the ways of doing this was to decrease the demand on students to attend nearby Stanford University. Other suggestions included the creation of a “gratitude wall,” better access to counseling and in-patient treatment centers, and reducing the number of times the SAT can be retaken.

Multiple prevention techniques were proposed for the school district. For example, in article nine the journalist references a letter sent out to parents and students from the Superintendent. She quotes a section where the Superintendent outlines prevention methods that have been implemented. These include active monitoring of at-risk youth, extensive counseling services, maintenance of ROCK, homework monitoring, and professional development of teachers that focuses on recognizing the symptoms of at-risk youth. In this same passage, the Superintendent also informs readers that there are additional plans to implement further prevention methods. These include educating

students on sleep deprivation/management, creating a more formal approval process for students who want to take on a more challenging curriculum, conducting an independent research study of the curriculum (consistency, instruction, assessment, grading, and homework practices), monitoring of project/test stacking, and working with students to develop identities outside of academia.

Article 12 focuses on the PAUSD board of education meeting that took place shortly after the third suicide in this cluster. The journalist quotes multiple speakers at that meeting. Most of them had suggestions for prevention. Some of these suggestions included changing the bell schedule, building a wellness center on campus, requiring once-a-year student check-ins with mental health counselors (to reduce the stigma of those who use the services), switching to a block schedule to reduce homework, lowering levels of stress, implementing a student forum where children could have their voices heard by the adults (including parents), reducing class sizes, “right-sizing” homework, and implementing a “happiness” class.

There seemed to be much debate about how and when to improve the circumstances at Gunn High. While the focus was on preventing suicide, one board member suggested that these changes should be made not just because they prevent suicide, but also because they would make Gunn a better school for students and faculty. A school board member is quoted as saying, “It’s true that the connections between stress and depression and suicide and mental illness are complicated and vexing and, particularly, individual cases are difficult to discern. But the value of having schools that are healthy and where students thrive isn’t just because they may or may not prevent suicides, it’s also because that’s good for kids.” Later in the article he was quoted as

saying, “I know there is an urge to blame. I know there is an urge to jump to solutions. We all want to solve this problem now, but it will require multifaceted solutions.”

There were minimal suggestions made for prevention methods at the site of the public suicides. Only four (14 percent) of articles included such suggestions. Two articles noted that adding additional fencing would be helpful. This is something Caltrain has implemented since the end of the first cluster. At the time of this analysis (2016), they are still in the process of installing barbed-wire fence down the length of the track throughout the city of Palo Alto. Two articles suggested increasing signage for the “There is Help” campaign. This is also something Caltrain has implemented since the 2009-10 cluster. Finally, several articles called for an increase in security at the crossings despite the fact that one of the victims successfully maneuvered around the guard at Churchill Ave.

Finally, there were multiple mentions of suicide prevention resources and/or coalitions available and accessible to readers. Thirteen (46 percent) of the articles referenced at least one organization or coalition. These included city, county, state, and national level resources. Organizations and coalitions led by students at the city level included Speak! Feel! Be!, HEARD, Save the 2,008, and ROCK. District-wide resources included Adolescent Counseling Services, PAUSD resource website, and Paly Crisis Resources. County services included 911 Dispatch, the Suicide and Crisis hotline, Santa Clara County Crisis Center, and San Mateo County Hotline. State level resources were provided through the Caltrain website, There is Help Campaign, and EMQ Families First. And, at the national level, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline was included.

Articles – Preventative Measures – Comparative Analysis. Preventative measures were the largest theme within the “scientific facts” domain. Eventually, it became so

large that the researcher could justify making it its own domain. Prevention methods were discussed across all three clusters. However, the various methods and the way the journalists discussed prevention varied by case. In the case of Cornell University, most of the prevention methods related specifically to the university community. There was very little discussion of what community members in Ithaca (outside of the university) should or could do to prevent future suicides. Prevention methods included increasing mental health, training faculty, and implementing physical barriers. Physical barrier recommendations focused on installing fencing along the bridges. However, there was also some discussion of installing nets underneath the bridges. The first Palo Alto cluster shared some similarities with Cornell University. For example, it included discussions of physical prevention methods (such as fences) and it also discussed changes that could be implemented within the school district. However, the first Palo Alto cluster also discusses more general prevention methods that could be applied to the community at-large. These included parenting techniques, demystifying suicide, and (on the contrary) avoiding talking about suicide. The discussion surrounding prevention methods occurring within the articles for the second cluster in Palo Alto very closely mirrored that of the first cluster. The only exception was that the articles pertaining to the second cluster included discussions of physical barriers to suicide that had already been installed after the first cluster. These included fencing (near the tracks) and additional suicide prevention signage.

Online News Media Features – Cornell University. Since very little research has examined online news media sources for adherence to the guidelines for suicide prevention, these findings help to fill the void in the literature. These findings explore

how online media differs from print or television reports of suicide. Furthermore, the AFSP warns journalists that online news media features have the potential to “go viral” due to the share-ability of online reporting. Therefore, the AFSP recommends that the adherence to the suicide prevention guidelines be of utmost importance for online media, especially in reference to what the AFSP (2016) refer to as “citizen journalists.” Therefore, these online news media sources should take extra care when including photos, videos, and stories that violate the recommendations.

Pictures appeared in 40 percent of publications capturing images of the scene (location and/or method), the rescue, or the deceased. These pictures not only effectively disclose the exact location of death, but also allow the reader to identify with the victims. Article six included a picture showing students walking north over Thurston Bridge during the evacuation of the body. The caption says, “Students taking a dreadfully familiar walk home.” Another article (3) offered a slideshow of six photos capturing various visual perspectives of the recovery efforts. The author included the caption, “a picture worth a thousand words.” There is much truth to this statement. Unfortunately, there was no consideration of the potential impact these photos may have on the public or how they might encourage suicide contagion and imitation.

Another feature of online news media noted is the presence of hyperlinks. These clickable hyperlinks brought readers to various sites including other publications on the topic of suicide (both at Cornell and elsewhere), video resources provided by campus administration, EARS the peer counseling department at Cornell, and official written messages put out by administration including the consultants’ report noted above. A total of nine (36 percent) articles included such hyperlinks. An additional five (20 percent) of

articles included “tags,” which allow readers to see keywords, which are then linked to other articles that include those same keywords. Click the link, and a list is provided. Some of the tags included: suicide, Cornell, Cornell suicide, fences, higher education, Ithaca, Greek life, Ivy League, engineering, economics, depression, and mental health.

Links for sharing the article were also present in seven (28 percent) of articles. These links allowed readers to share the link through email, Facebook, and Twitter. There were also options to print the article. Finally, there were options on some of the articles to subscribe to the news feed. This allows readers to receive updates and/or additional article links directly to their email accounts as more information becomes available.

Online News Media Features – Palo Alto, CA (2009-2010). Some features of online news media, which were considered a separate domain, were noted during this analysis. First, there were three articles that included a video (news report) of the event. One of the articles was more of a “written transcript” of what the video showed. The other two include content that was in addition to the written components of the article. Three separate articles include hyperlinks to other articles that were relevant, specifically to the first Gunn High cluster. An additional four articles include tags (similar to hyperlinks) that you could click on in order to reach other articles that pertain to the same topic. And, although photos are not “new” or unique to traditional news media, the number of photos available in online news media is (due to slideshow features). Of the 29 articles analyzed, nine (31 percent) of articles included at least one photo. Photos focused on the site location (including emergency crews, the train, memorials, and the victim’s body under a tarp) and photos of the deceased victims while living.

Online News Media Features – Palo Alto, CA (2014-2015). Pictures or videos appeared in 15 (54 percent) of the articles. All but two photos pertained directly to the location, the method used, or the victim. Two videos posted within the articles revealed great details about the suicides. For example, article 16 includes a video with an overhead view of the Churchill Avenue intersection. As mentioned above, at the time this was a “live” video, but the article included an imbedded version of the report. That video included images of the intersection, the train (the method), rescue crew, and an image of the body of the deceased victim under a yellow tarp.

Multiple hyperlinks were also included within the articles coded for analysis. Fifteen (54 percent) of articles included a hyperlink to other websites. These links sent readers to various related subjects including prevention resources websites, prevention guidelines information, the Palo Alto High School website (which provided resources for at-risk teens), and to other news reports related to the cluster and the topic of suicide more generally. Tags, which provided access to other articles based on topic, were also included in multiple articles. Seven (28 percent) of articles included tags. Tags covered a wide range of topics including California Avenue, Caltrain, Gunn High School, Palo Alto, PAUSD, Mental Health, Santa Clara County, Prevention, Train, Pedestrian, Caltrain Accident, Delays, Suicide, Pedestrian Struck, Teenage Suicide, and Adolescents.

Sharing options were also available on eight (29 percent) of the articles. Individuals reading could quickly share (often one-click) to other online media sites including social media such as Twitter, Facebook, Email, Google Plus, as well as other less popular venues. There were also several articles that allowed readers to subscribe to future, additional articles on the same topic. And, the email addresses of the journalists

were often provided at the end of the article in case readers wanted to contact the journalist directly in a more private conversation.

Online News Media Features – Comparative Analysis. All three cases included features that are unique to online news media sources. By looking at the first two cases between 2009-2010, there is evidence of both hypertextuality and interactivity. Another feature of online news media presented in the first two clusters was the inclusion of slideshows, videos, and transcripts. Of the twenty-nine articles pertaining to the first Palo Alto cluster, four (14 percent) of them included tags (similar to hyperlinks). Fifty-nine percent of articles included the option for interactivity through the use of comment sections.

These findings mirrored that of the articles pertaining to the Cornell University cluster. However, the Cornell University articles included a much larger number of several online news media features. For example, the number of tags (20 percent) and access to hyperlinks (36 percent) increased. Also, the amount of interactivity potential increased. Eighty percent of articles included a comment section. They also included a “share” features that allowed readers to post the article to other online media sites. This occurred in 28 percent of the articles.

By the date of the second Palo Alto cluster, the online news media features had advanced. First, in addition to slideshows; videos; and transcripts, this cluster also contained audio files (podcasts). Fifty-four percent of the articles included hyperlinks. Twenty-eight of the articles included tags, while 29 percent of the articles allowed for sharing. However, only 50 percent of the articles included an opportunity for interactivity.

Articles – Causes of Suicide – Cornell University. The following findings provide information about the potential causes of suicide within the communities under investigation. This information is important to the performance of the “social autopsy” conducted within this research. What causes of suicide did journalists point out to readers? In other words, whom or what is to blame according to these online news reports?

Several articles included a discussion of potential causes of these individual suicides. Multiple articles referenced the gloomy climate in Ithaca while others discussed more social factors. Social factors included the educational environment, the economy, and the media. Mental illness was also noted as a cause of suicide, but was framed as a more individualistic factor than a social one. However, there were discussions of how social factors may compound individual factors in order to increase risk of suicide.

In article 12, the author discusses several potential social factors. These included the “classroom demands of an Ivy League university” and “the evaporation of internships and jobs for graduates during a bleak recession” (the economy). This same article quotes a campus psychologist as being cautious about trying to pin down the cause of an individual suicide. He states, “The psychology of suicide can be very individual.”

Article 14 includes an interview of one of Cornell’s current students. He is twenty-one years old and is a resident advisor in the dorms. According to the article, one of his responsibilities is to “keep an eye on students and their spirits.” This student describes what he thinks is one of the largest issues at Cornell. He states:

Cornell is a hard school. This time of year, almost every class tries to get in their last large assignment before spring break and it weighs on students. The atmosphere here is very tense this time of year and although the school offers excellent counseling services, some students who find

the pressure too great to handle and lack support from back home find a solution in the bottom of the gorge.

Article 21 includes an interview of the Executive Director of the Suicide Prevention and Crisis Service Center in Ithaca, NY. She argues, “The normal pressures of an elite school can combine with the predisposition to mental illness to drive students to ‘extreme measures.’” This same article also quotes the Cornell Student Assembly President as stating, “The somber mood on campus, combined with the added pressures of midterms, made for a very down feeling before spring break.” In this case, the individual causes combine with social causes, which put those most vulnerable at higher risk in an academic setting such as Cornell.

Articles – Causes of Suicide – Palo Alto, CA (2009-2010). The discussion of blame, or the focus on the causes of suicide, was a common domain within the articles from the first Palo Alto cluster. Causes discussed within the articles included both individual and societal level factors. Individual factors included mental illness, such as depression. Social factors included the suicide of a peer, social stress, academic stress, bullying, boy/girlfriend issues, the media, and social pressure to achieve stemming from both parents and the educational environment.

Article 19 references several potential factors contributing to suicide contagion. The journalist claims that the community is struggling to understand the scope of the issue but states, “School, social stress, romantic problems or even having a classmate who died by suicide are rarely big enough triggers alone to cause a teenager to end his or her life.” She states this in reference to comments made by an expert she interviewed for the article. The journalist goes on to quote the expert as stating, “These poor kids died from an untreated psychiatric illness, or undertreated. It’s not as if it’s a mysterious thing

and it's not as if it's not preventable." The tone of the articles suggests that any social factor would also have to be accompanied by an individual factor, namely mental illness.

The journalist of article 20 poses the following question to readers: "Palo Alto might think of the cultural implications of its suicide cluster. Do kids at Gunn – a major feeder school to Stanford University – feel insurmountable pressure to achieve? Do the economics of Palo Alto, a high-income community that stands in stark separation to its lower-income, higher-crime neighbor East Palo Alto, contribute to this pressure?" The journalist is asking whether or not both affluence and academic pressure could be a factor at play within this first suicide cluster in Palo Alto.

The journalist from article 21 suggests that the media may play a role in the development of suicide clusters. He interviews the executive director of the American Association of Suicidology. The journalist quotes the executive as stating, "When there's lots of publicity through the media, you sometimes see copycat behavior. Vulnerable kids will imitate behavior. It's a very thin line to walk: how to increase awareness without adding to the problem." Despite citing expert opinion on this type of social cause, the journalist does not acknowledge how his own report may influence such behaviors.

Article 24 suggests that pressures stemming from academic and community expectations of performance may be to blame. The journalist quotes a current Stanford student, who is also a graduate of Gunn High, as stating, "One of them [suicides] occurred during APs. I don't know if they just couldn't take it anymore. Growing up here, it's a stressful environment. You're right next to Stanford. You're in Silicon Valley." The article continued on to discuss how the community will heal from the recent suicides. The author suggests that a focus on preventing mental illness will be necessary.

Articles – Causes of Suicide – Palo Alto, CA (2014-2015). The discussion/issue of blame was very prevalent in the articles from the second cluster. Thirteen (46 percent) of articles suggest a potential cause of the suicides in Palo Alto. Journalists and the individuals they were quoting raised over 30 specific issues. The journalist from article 27 writes, “There aren’t enough fingers in Silicon Valley to point at all the people, norms, and institutions that may or may not be responsible.” Most of these were social factors from pressures relating to peer groups, family, and education. Peer group pressures included relationship issues, competitiveness, and glorification of depression. Family pressures included parental pressures, arguments with family members, affluence, and the pressure to perform. Educational pressures included standardized tests, college acceptance, academic expectations, student life, school scheduling, and school inaction. Other social causes were related to race (many of the victims have been Asian American), the media, the community, and the lack of mental healthcare facilities. Non-social factors included mental health (anxiety and depression) and sleep deprivation. However, one could argue that these non-social factors are also influenced by social conditions.

In article 25, the journalist interviews a former Dean from Stanford University. According to the journalist, the former Dean recently published a book called “How to Raise an Adult” that addresses shortfalls of modern parenting. The journalist claims that the former Dean views parents in Palo Alto as “overprotective but overbearing, micromanaging the lives of children, pointing them toward specific mile markers of achievement and denying them any time to flail or room to fail.” The journalist later quotes a psychiatrist who describes parents in Palo Alto as “wealthy and secure beyond

imagining.” The journalist argues that parents are “consumed by fear of losing that perch or failing to bequeath it to their kids.” According to the psychiatrist, this acts to maintain and advance “insidiously high educational standards in our children as a way to soothe this anxiety.”

In article 25, a student (a junior at Paly) is quoted as stating, “As I sit in my room staring at the list of colleges I’ve resolved to try to get into, trying to determine my odds of getting into each, I can’t help but feel desolate.” According to the journalist, this student has admitted to experiencing panic attacks during class. She also claims to have experienced missed menstrual periods due to exhaustion. This same student is quoted later in the article as stating, “We are not teenagers... WE are lifeless bodies in a system that breeds competition, hatred, and discourages teamwork and genuine learning.”

In article 27, the journalist references a town meeting that was held. She claims that students in attendance both blamed and defended the educational system at PAUSD. The article describes the school climate as “misery-producing.” One of the concerns raised by students at this meeting was the “contradictions of a culture that demands personal excellence but withholds emotional support.” A student was quoted as saying, “They just check boxes, put counselors in place so that it will look good, not thinking about how to do it in a way that really helps kids.” Students also described the school as “fake” and claimed “the institution breeds competition while claiming to foster unity.” The journalist describes the school as an “academic coliseum where students look down their noses at peers in a lower math ‘lane,’ guard their grade point averages like state secrets, brag about 2 a.m. cramming sessions, and consider a B a disaster.” Other students cited within this article defended Gunn High. A senior expressed a frustration with victim

blaming and “trying to fit all the suicides neatly under one umbrella.” This student was later quoted as claiming that it wasn’t the school. Instead, it was “students against students.”

The concept of “The Stanford Duck Syndrome” (SDS) was discussed in this article as well. A Gunn High sophomore whose parents are both Stanford professors, describes SDS. She states, “Everybody puts on a front of being super relaxed and perfect, but under the surface they’re kicking furiously. When all you see is calm ducks, you think that you are the only one who’s not perfect... This isn’t really an environment where people talk about being less than perfect.” In general, students expressed the contradiction that many of them face. They are “relentlessly pushed to chase higher grades and greater commendations” while also being “simultaneously pressured to maintain an air of confidence and composure.”

Within this same article, the journalist also cites parental concerns over the education system at Gunn High. She notes that parents are frustrated with the lack of action taken by PAUSD. The mother of the first victim from the 2009-2010 cluster states, “A plan is not action.” PAUSD received vast criticisms for not hiring additional, professional counselors. They were also criticized for not implementing plans for avoiding the “stacking” of tests and homework. Others defended the school by citing that they had changed the final exam schedule. It was also noted that some of the changes proposed ended up being harder to implement than originally expected. One example of this was the plan to implement mental health screenings. According to the article, parental consent issues flared up and in-patient facilities were lacking when students in need were discovered.

Article 28 also addresses the institution of education and how it is to blame for these high-pressure social conditions. The journalist states:

It should not be ‘too hard’ any longer for America’s institutions of higher learning to own-up to the role they play in fostering unnecessary anxiety among high school students, abandon their selectivity game, and address the unmet need for far more transparency about their admissions standards. That step alone could make a major difference in the psyches of high school students, not only in Palo Alto but also across the entire nation.

The journalist is especially critical of PAUSD because he believes that the Silicon Valley is a place of great innovation, and he is confused as to how the school district can output such talented, skilled, and innovative students, yet it cannot figure out how to solve the issue of teen cluster suicides within its boundaries.

Several articles discussed the role that media can play in the spread of suicide contagion within a community. Article 20 notes, “News coverage can play a role in deepening a cluster.” This article also included a hyperlink to the guidelines established for reporters (this article violated three). The journalist interviews and quotes a Caltrain spokesperson that claims, “We believe that it is very clear that media coverage of these suicides, particularly in Palo Alto, has exacerbated the problem.” A physician at Palo Alto Medical Foundation was also interviewed and quoted. She recognizes the role media can play in contagion, but she also notes that it can be beneficial. According to the physician, “reporting that glorifies suicide, gives extensive details of the manner and means of death, or focuses on memorializing the deceased can put vulnerable people at risk. But, the news media can play an important role in educating the public on risk factors for suicide and resources available.”

In article 25, the journalist describes the Palo Alto community. He describes it as “the epicenter of overachievement.” He writes, “Children here grow up in the shadow of Stanford University, which established a new precedent for exclusivity during the recent admissions season, accepting just 5 percent of its applicants.” In the article, he interviews a former Dean at Stanford. She’s quoted as stating, “There’s something about childhood itself in Palo Alto and in communities like Palo Alto that undermines the mental health and wellness of our children.”

In article 28, the journalist confronts the Palo Alto community and notes how it is to blame for the continuation of teen suicides. The journalist states how successful the Silicon Valley is. He argues that even failures in technology innovation are considered successes. But, he claims that “failure as success” does not apply to the community’s teenagers. He writes, “The ‘failure is good’ mantra, however, seems to be applied just to adults, and not to their children, especially not high school students prepping to be ‘credentialed’ for life by college admission e-mail. The Valley seems also to have invented a new category of youth: ‘trophy kids.’ F’s in business and finance are fine and dandy, but ‘we don’t do B’s.’”

As noted above, both the lack of qualified counselors and in-patient facilities was a source of blame. According to article 28, the data in Santa Clara County suggests a strong need for additional in-patient beds for teens. The journalist is surprised by the lack of action in response to this need. He states, “The needs of vulnerable Palo Alto teenagers are not unknown, they are crystal clear and they remain unfulfilled despite the type of known data that usually drives Silicon Valley thinking and action.”

Finally, there was the brief discussion of race as a social factor that was to blame for suicides in Palo Alto. In article 27, the journalist interviews a senior from Paly. He discussed a blog post he had composed shortly after the fourth suicide. On the blog, the senior created a Venn diagram of three concentric circles explaining the social causes of the teen suicides. According to the journalist, the two large circles were labeled “Palo Alto” and “Male.” The center was labeled “Asian.” The senior wrote, “It seems that the demographic most at risk are Asian (Chinese) males in high school (hey, that’s what I am!).”

Articles – Causes of Suicide – Comparative Analysis. Journalists across all three cases proposed casual factors to readers. These factors were both at the individual and societal levels. The 2009-2010 Palo Alto cluster and the Cornell University cluster contained a comparable number of causes (themes). However, the 2014-2015 Palo Alto cluster contained the most. Journalists writing about this later cluster presented readers with over 30 different issues that could be contributing to the local suicides.

Each of the clusters contained articles discussing similar factors. For example, all three cases included articles that discussed the pressures of the academic/educational environment. All three cases also discussed the role media may be playing in the growth/maintenance of the cluster. And, at the individual level, issues of mental health were discussed in all three clusters.

There were some causes that were only discussed in one or two cases. For example, the (poor) economy was frequently noted in articles from the 2009-2010 clusters. This factor had completely disappeared from the 2014-2015 discussion. Family and peer groups were discussed frequently in both Palo Alto clusters. Meanwhile,

weather was only discussed in the Cornell University case; this is likely due to the favorable weather conditions in Palo Alto. And, finally, race (being Asian) was only discussed in the 2014-2015 Palo Alto articles.

Comment Sections – Article Reflection – Cornell University. Given the research on the creation of public discourse in response to media reports, these findings reveal the relationship between the online news report and individual respondents to the stories. The AFSP (2016) warns journalists that the publication of stories on suicide could create scenarios where public commentators post potentially hurtful comments and/or statements. If these online news reports fail to adhere to the guidelines established by the CDC and the AFSP, do commentators reflect those same types of violations? If so, what are the qualitative characteristics of these social responses?

Descriptions of the Cornell community made by readers mirrored those mentioned in the articles. Some respondents described Cornell as miserable, depressing, terrible, intense, a “pressure cooker,” isolating, and “one long panic attack.” Others described it as outstanding, wonderful, prestigious, challenging, and good. This was not the only domain with conflicting viewpoints. Respondents also spoke frequently about methods and location of suicide. Not surprisingly, jumping from the bridges of Ithaca into the gorges seemed to be of particular focus. In many cases, individuals acknowledged the power of the gorges to draw people in with their natural tranquility and beauty. One reader of article eight, who self-identified as a Cornell University alumnae²⁷, describes the temptation and availability of this method and location by stating:

²⁷ Usernames are only included when they aid in status identification. Otherwise, usernames have been removed from the findings or a pseudonym has been created to protect the identity of respondents.

The only feeling I can really liken it to is holding a gun in your hand for the first time, knowing that you could end yourself if you wanted to. Furthermore, you know it's a gun that numerous others have used to end their own lives. I would liken crossing the gorge everyday to walking by that gun... You cross the bridge from Central into Collegetown, and you can hear the water running under the bridge. There's virtually no one out with you, and you look to the right and see the gorge and the lowlands across the way. I'm not sure exactly how to describe the feeling, but everything just looks so much simpler there. You start thinking about all the others who have done it, how maybe everyone else has gotten away, and in a way, you want to join the fraternity.²⁸

Another respondent from article ten states, “Many times I crossed a bridge at Cornell and thought of jumping, usually out of a mixture of depression and wariness at how stressful and arbitrary my life had become.” Finally, another self-identified alum commenting on the above-mentioned article claims, “What I find surprising is that they haven’t yet set aside a separate lane on the bridge for people queuing to jump.” These comments express the public’s understanding of “gorging out” as a successful option for voluntary death, while at the same time, romanticizing it.

Although there were multiple photos posted within the articles, very few, if any respondents mentioned or responded to the images. Instead, respondents actually desired additional photos. One commentator who responded to article 13 was frustrated with the media images because they did not fully reveal the depth of the gorges or the height of the bridges. This user admits to searching for additional photos in order to better understand the circumstances. S/he states, “Found pictures of the campus. From the article it’s difficult to tel the ectent of the problem. Cornell really has a Brooklyn Bridge type problem there, no easy fix and probably no way to prevent determined people from jumping...not an easy retro-fit at this point.” And, although articles that included photos

²⁸ All quotes taken from the comment sections have been transcribed herein verbatim. This was done in order to preserve the commentators’ syntax, tone, and language.

appeared to elicit more personal responses (including shared memories and condolences), people did not specifically make reference to the included images of the specific victims. In one comment from article 4, user Engineer Sophomore actually requested someone post an image of the fifth victim. They state, “[The victim’s]”²⁹ name sounds really familiar. I know I was in Physics 2214 with him but can’t for the life of me think of what he looks like. Does anyone have a link to a picture of him so I can place him?”

Like the news reports, comment sections provided details about the victims’ lives and personalities. For the most part, they reflected the positivity outlined in the news reports. For example, a user from article two states, “Oh [fourth victim] why??? You had so much to live for. You were a shining star.” In this same article, user friend since elementary school writes, “One of the nicest people I have ever met. Never would have expected this, very sad to see such an awesome person gone.” Another commentator states, “R.I.P. [victim four], you were a great kid, loveing and kind.” In article four, a user posted, “I know he seemed to have a great time when he was there...He was such a sweet guy who loved to talk about physics, computers, and many other things I was completely obvious to...I know him pretty well and the last time I saw him and talked to him, he seemed fine.” And, in article 12, one respondent writes, “According to administrators, resident advisors, and friends, the first student showed no signs of depression and was acting cheerful and positive up until his timely passing. He had no major issues academically or personally that he shared with is friends.”

Although the vast majority of respondents focused on the positive qualities that victims possessed, some commentators revealed factors that may have contributed to the

²⁹ All victim names have been removed from the commentators’ quotes. This was done in order to protect their identity and respect their families.

victims' deaths. In article four, one user states, "I do know [victim five] was experiencing financial difficulties and was having a hard time to get food to eat. Very seldom he went out to a movie or practically anywhere because he never had any money to spend."

Another user by the name High School Friend in this same article states, "This is very disheartening for me. I was in the graduating class with [victim five] and we were very good friends. He was always a little different and very depressed so I am not going to say that this surprises me."

There was some discussion within the comment sections that directly addressed the effects these suicides were having on individuals, as well as the community. For example, Parent '13 in the comment section of article ten writes, "My condolences go out to this family and friends of these individuals but do not think for a moment that these deaths have not affected the entire community." However, responses such as this one were not ubiquitous. In fact, "effects" was actually one of the smallest domains developed out of the data within the comments. Respondents mentioned several effects caused by the suicides. These included effects on: parents, friends of the family, the rescue crew, other students, the community, and family members (in general). There was, however, quite a bit of discussion of the emotional effects of the suicides. These included conversations where commentators discussed their feelings of shock, sadness, anger, horror, emptiness, and sickness. For example, one commentator responded to article two by stating, "We were sooooo saddened to hear this tragic news." A few posts down from this one, another respondent writes, "There are no words to say how we feel right now...My own tears & the pain in our hearts can never console your loss at this time." In this same forum, another user states, "I have been in total shock and can't seem to focus

on anything but all of you and [victim four].” All three of these posts were directed at the family of the fourth victim. Commentators used the forum to discuss their response to the news of the fourth victim’s death and to offer condolences to the fourth victim’s family. Even individuals who did not know the fourth victim directly expressed how the death had affected them. One user states, “As a former Cornell parent and a resident of Boca Raton, I am agonized by your loss.” The fourth victim was from Boca Raton. Another user by the name of Frank [same last name as victim] writes, “As a [same last name as the victim], I was especially sad to hear about [the fourth victim], whom I never met, but feel close to.”

In the comments from article four, one user kept their response short. They said, “[Victim five] was a great guy. This is very very sad.” Another respondent writes, “I am sitting in my little cubicle at work. A Cornell calendar on the partition behind me and a little Cornell flag in front of me... Today I am sitting in my little cubicle at work very sad.” One commentator self identified as a Cornell mother. She states, “As the mother of a Cornell Freshman, living thousand of miles away from my son, this tragic event deeply saddens my soul.” In the comments for article ten, one commentator by the name of Concerned Parent writes, “Every time I hear of this happening, my heart breaks for the parents, family and friends of the student.”

Comment Sections – Article Reflection – Palo Alto, CA (2009-2010). Comment sections often reflected some of the violations of prevention guidelines made by the articles they were attached to. For example, respondents often discussed various methods of suicide. All of the following methods were discussed: jumping (in front of trains, into rivers, off of cliffs, off of bridges, and off of buildings), pills, guns, hanging, and

drowning, While no specific details and/or instructions on how to use each of these methods were included, they still provide readers with a wide array of options. Some comments were more insensitive than others. For example, a respondent from article 14 writes, “It’s really selfish and nasty to jump in front of a train and traumatize the driver and passengers and passersby. Did they ever hear of drugs?” This statement also speaks to the respondent’s value on the appropriateness of public suicide. Another commentator responded to article 20 by stating, “It seems, jumping in front of a train is a seriously fucked up way to go. There’s no mistakes with that one, no turning back, and I imagine it’s potentially not all that fast.”

Respondents also seemed to respond to photos of the victims and/or memorials that had been posted by news outlets. In article one, a respondent by the name of friend stated, “These photos make me cry, knowing that I’ll never see the person lying under the yellow tarp ever again.” This was in response to the photo of the body under a tarp (mentioned above). In a response to article two, another respondent stated, “Thank you so much for sharing the photos of your lovely son and family. Seeing the photos of the good memories of [victim one] with your family is heartwarming during a deeply sad and painful time of loss.” The family had provided a slideshow of recent photos of the first victim while he was still living. Some photos also elicited critiques from readers. For example, one respondent from article 12 criticized the media for posting a picture of the MUNI train (another commuter train that services San Francisco) instead of the Caltrain. In article two, respondents questioned the appropriateness of posting photos of the memorial site.

Not surprising, some of the public discourse reflected topics and/or claims framed by the published article(s). For example, respondents frequently discussed characteristics of the victims; most were positive attributes. Commentators described the victim(s) as: sweet, musical, thoughtful, good at math and science, bright, kind, content, wonderful, gifted, athletic, funny, charismatic, generous, cool, fascinating, confident, honorable, and intelligent. There was not a single comment that noted a prior mental illness or condition that may have signaled a warning about the victim's vulnerability to suicide. Instead, they framed the victim(s) as high-performing, normal individuals, which reflects (for the most part) the media's representation. In article one, one commentator named HighSchoolStudent noted, "Oh my gosh. I just heard who it was from someone, and I know him...but he doesn't seem like the kind of guy who would commit suicide." Another respondent says, "He was a great guy. I remember him always cracking jokes and brightening up the mood in the classroom. I will keep him and his family and friends in my prayers." Another user comments, "It's scary though...because I saw him yesterday, and he was just being a normal teenager, sitting and talking with his friend...and of course I thought nothing of it."

Respondents frequently discussed the effects of suicide on themselves, as well as others. In a response to article one, a user writes, "Whether suicide or accidental, it was a death, and affects those around the person. It is a sad time for the family especially, and my heart goes out to them. It will be a hole in their lives for a long time." Another respondent in that same discussion named A mom states, "I was driving to work this morning and right before the train track at Charlston and heard the radio saying 'Mother's Day this weekend' then I burst into tears. I can imagine the poor Mom how to

pend her day without her son.” Later on during this public discussion, a respondent recalls what it was like being in 7th grade (back in 1958) and losing a classmate to suicide. He stated, “To this day, he is still fondly remembered. Not just by myself, his parents, and siblings, but by the community who also grieved for him.”

Comment Sections – Article Reflection – Palo Alto, CA (2014-2015). Several domains developed that reflected the article violations. For example, many of the comments included a discussion of suicide. Unlike the other clusters in analysis, these comments did not avoid the use of suicide as much. Only occasionally did commentators prefer to use the word “tragedies” instead of suicide. As noted above, there was much less discussion of alternative possibilities (such as accidents or homicide).

Very few comments discussed the location of the suicides, specifically. When the locations were discussed it was more in reference to geographical markers in the surrounding area such as cemeteries, proximately to Palo Alto High, and the private location of one of the suicides in this cluster. Only occasionally did people mention the specific location, and if they did it was mentioned in reference to some other argument. For example, one person noted that she always sees crossing guards at the Churchill Avenue crossing.

Methods of suicide were also discussed minimally. Not surprisingly, the most frequently discussed method of suicide was jumping in front of trains. There were only two comments that discussed an alternative method of suicide, and again, these were more indirect discussions. For example, one commentator mentioned someone attempting to jump from the local Interstate 680 overpass. Another commentator suggested that prevention methods, like placing nets under the Golden Gate Bridge, work well for

stopping individuals from jumping to their death. No other methods of suicide were noted or described. Finally, when discussing ways to prevent future suicides, a respondent by the name of Live near Meadow Crossing posted to article 12. They stated, “A determined person can find a way to commit suicide no matter the obstacles put in place, but a depressed, impulsive youth may be very susceptible to a well-known, easily available method.” They argued that preventative measures might be effective in preventing future train-related suicides.

The theme that was most evident within this domain was the link to affected others. Respondents described their emotional response to the suicides as devastating, heartbreaking, and sad. Some respondents mentioned that they could not go to school due to feeling grief-stricken. Others noted that many students and faculty were seen crying because they were devastated. According to a self-identified student of Gunn High in article three, “A student in my class this morning broke down in tears when we heard the news about the suicide. To be honest, I felt like crying myself, even though I didn’t personally know the boy.” Another respondent from article three stated, “Today at school the atmosphere was different each class, 4 out of every five people were hysterically crying...I’m confused and moreover heartbroken.”

Discussions of the victims’ attributes were also quite rare. In fact, very few respondents identified as friends or classmates of any of the victims. The only exception was several comments made after the first suicide in the cluster. In response to the article three, one user stated, “I knew and was friendly with [victim two]...He was the nicest person I have ever met. Without. Doubt I would call him one of the most popular kids in my high school...I was talking with him last week and everything seemed fine.” Within

this same forum, another user stated, “The boy was likeable. He had friends. He looked happy.” And, a third respondent writes, “This seems to be a case where there were no warning signs.”

Comment Sections – Article Reflection – Comparative Analysis. All three of the cases included public comments that reflected some of the content from the attached articles. For example, all three cases included comments that discussed methods of suicide. Interestingly, the first two clusters discussed multiple forms of suicide within the articles. This resulted in an increased number of discussions about those, as well as additional methods. The articles discussing the first Palo Alto cluster noted four various methods of suicide, which resulted in discussions of five different types of suicide within the comment sections. The articles in the Cornell University case also discussed four different methods. However, comment sections discussed eight. And, finally, the second cluster in Palo Alto included articles that discussed only one method of suicide. The comments attached to these articles also only included discussions of one method of suicide.

All three cases included comments referencing the location of the suicides. As a result, there was discussion across all three cases about how to stop future suicides from happening at those particular hotspots. These discussions also provided additional context for better understanding why an individual may have selected a specific spot. For example, the beauty of the gorges in Ithaca was discussed within the comments of the Cornell University cluster, and the proximity of the trains to the schools was discussed in the Palo Alto clusters. Furthermore, some of the comment sections actually referenced suicide locations not included in the cluster. For example, several respondents noted

suicide clusters at other campuses (NYU and MIT) that involved individuals jumping off of buildings. The Cornell University cluster data even included comments about the first cluster in Palo Alto. This reveals that there is some cross-examination occurring within the populations; they are reading reports of each other's suicide clusters.

Like the articles, all three cases in this analysis included discussions of the victim within the comment sections. The Cornell University data included one-directional messages to the victim as well as descriptions of the victim. And, most of them were positive. The first cluster in Palo Alto also included frequent memorial-like posts that often made the victim out to be a normally functioning person. However, the second cluster in Palo Alto included much less of this kind of discourse. That could be a reflection of the media framing within the second cluster – much less of it focused on individual victims. One thing the public discourse revealed that many of the articles did not were facts about the victim that could have served as warning signs. This was especially true in both the Cornell University discourse and the second Palo Alto cluster discourse.

Probably the most popular domain within the public discourse, that was also a reflection of the media framing, was the topic of impact. Across all three clusters there was ubiquitous data that suggested a multitude of individuals had been affected by the suicides occurring within their communities. All of the clusters included public discourse that described the effects on the institution of education (shifting exams, changing curriculum, implementing check-ins, etc.). All three clusters included public discourse that described the effects on family and friends. All three also included discussion of how rescue workers were affected by the suicides (at least the public ones). The only variation

amongst the three cases was in the evidence suggesting that the second cluster in Palo Alto less frequently included dialogue of this nature. Their public discourse was focused much more on problem solving and blaming and much less on the effects of individual suicides or the cluster as a whole.

Comment Sections – Opposition – Cornell University. Given that readers of media are not considered to be passive consumers of the content produced by journalists, there is a possibility for the development of oppositional (to the framing) discourse. The following findings reveal the various forms of oppositional responses to the media reports on suicide.

Several respondents challenged how the media had framed the stories of suicide. For example, article four frames the suicides at Cornell as a social issue worth examining. However, not all commentators viewed the issue in the same way. One user by the name of Engineering 08' made a comment about selfishness and suicidality. Note, this also reflects the process of “othering” described below. Anonymous Grad later responded by writing, “Really? You are smart enough to go through Engineering at Cornell and yet you are unable to realize that people commit suicide do so not because they are selfish, or in any way to blame, but because they are beyond their limits to cope?”

Many commentators questioned whether or not the media should be promoting such reports; others failed to see how these reports of death by suicide are even news. In article 14 a commentator simply writes, “Why is this news? The gorges at Cornell has been a ‘favorite’ suicide spot since the campus started long ago.” Another respondent from article 12 warns readers about memorializing students through these reports/comments. They state, “After suffering five teen suicides in five months among a

student boy numbering less than 1500, our local high school finally realized that the best way to combat the problem is by not giving any recognition to the teens involved.” One respondent from article 16 states, “I think broadcasting it does not help those who are in need of counseling at Cornell either, b/c it just reinforces the legacy and tempts those who need true help, by offering this as a sad trend to dealing with depression and personal problems.” Another commentator on this same article states, “These students aren’t punchlines, and they didn’t jump off of a bridge just so a couple folks on CNN could have a larff.” There seemed to be a general discussion of how relevant, appropriate, and/or dangerous it was to publish such stories in the media.

Article 13 framed the report in the same manner. However, one commentator stated, “Who Care? I am a A hole on this subject...If weak minded people want to kill themselves unless it is terminal illness, I really don’t care...If someone is miserable after counseling, pills, etc., if they go end their life, so be it.” Note, this is also an example of “othering” discussed below. This particular forum had a “recommend” button that others could push to express that they agreed with this specific comment. Four other readers suggested that this post was recommended by clicking the “recommend” icon.

In article 13, the article poses the following question to readers: “Does 6 deaths in 6 months make Cornell ‘Suicide School?’.” While many readers agreed that the Cornell climate (social and environmental) is conducive to suicide (see below for more detail), others were quick to defend this framing of Cornell by the media. For example, one user posted the national average for suicide rates in the U.S. for individuals aged 20-24. They state:

The suicide rate for 20-24 yo in the USA (2006) was 12.5/100,000 (NIH Statistics). Cornell’s population=21,000. One would expect a total number

of suicides to be 2.5/year I count 22 suicides at Cornell in 15 years or about 1.5 per year. Even with this year included, which appears to be an aberration, the suicide rate is about 40% less than expected! Any suicide is tragic, but why is Cornell being singled out here? Sensationalism.

Another commentator responded to the headline by stating, “What an idiotic, pandering, ghoulish premise (headline) for a story. Did someone at Fox write this headline?” Although these oppositional responses existed, they were quite rare. For example, in the case of this article, only two of the 40 comments posted were oppositional; the rest responded without challenging the frame.

Comment Sections – Opposition – Palo Alto, CA (2009-2010). Readers occasionally challenged or offered an oppositional position on how the media framed the suicide(s). A significant exchange worth noting was discovered in response to article five. In this article, respondents criticize the editor for violating the CDC’s recommendations to media for preventing suicide contagion. One respondent wrote, “It looks like Palo Alto Weekly, PA Online and this comment section may be adding to the potential for suicide contagion. Maybe we should all read the CDC’s recommendations about preventing it.” Included in his post were links to the CDC’s website.

In response to the above critical comment, and several others that followed, the publisher of *Palo Alto Weekly Online* stated:

We are acutely aware of the concerns, expressed by some in the comments above, that media coverage of suicides can potentially lead to an increased risk of suicides by other vulnerable individuals....At the same time, there is also general agreement that it is healthy for there to be opportunities for the sharing of feelings and to grieve as a community, and we hope Town Square can play a helpful role in providing one venue for that conversation.

This message confirms, that in some cases, publishers are aware of media guidelines, yet consciously fail to adhere to them. Ironically, in an article published a month prior

(article one) in the same news outlet, the same publisher removed “objectionable content” and announced to readers:

The comments that we are removing from this topic are generally comments that will be constructive and appropriate tomorrow or the next day, but that we feel are not appropriate as family and friends are dealing with the early impacts of this event. Please respect them by limiting your comments to expressions of support and remembrances. There will be ample time later for a discussion of issues relating to teen stress, school testing, parental and peer expectations and other forces that affect our children and families.

Article one in conjunction with this comment failed to adhere to three prevention recommendations (method, location, pictures). Article five failed to adhere to five of the recommendations including method, effects the suicide had on others, location, pictures, and speaking of the victim positively without regard to mental illness or warning signs. While framing appears to be consistent, the resistance to the framing, and the response it elicits, seem to be inconsistent.

Respondents, due to how it was framed, heavily criticized article five. The article was published in reference to the attempted suicide that failed (it happened after the 2nd successful suicide in the cluster). One respondent states, “This is callously and distastefully done. Since people’s lives have been lost, I suggest that you word such news in a more sensitive fashion.” Another respondent states, “This article definitely has a sarcastic tone and is in poor really taste.” These comments were in response to the title of the article (amongst other things), which read: “Again? Gunn High School Students’ Moth-Like Attraction to Caltrain Tracks Has Grown Surreal.” The author also “thanks God” for recent cuts to the Caltrain budget as a prevention tactic while also claiming that if the campus were near a cliff or a river, students would kill themselves jumping in/off those instead. Furthermore, the journalist makes an attempt to use puns when he states,

“Someone needs to *train* these kids on how to stay safe. The scary thing is that these kids were on *track* for a promising future” (emphasis added). It is quite clear that the readers are not simply absorbing what the journalist has stated. Instead, they are challenging his outlook and insensitivity on the subject.

Comment Sections – Opposition – Palo Alto, CA (2014-2015). Several respondents challenged how an article (or the journalist) had approached the topic of suicide. Others questioned the moderating of comments. The latter was most popular amongst readers of *Palo Alto Online*, which is not surprisingly a local news outlet. A commentator by the name of Retired teacher responded to article six. They stated, “I question why the Weekly would allow the comments on student stress, newspaper coverage, and the absurd insinuation from kludged that these comments themselves make suicide victims into ‘heroes’ and thus encourage more suicides!” This user was questioning why some comments are allowed to remain posted while others have content removed. In this same forum, the Town Square Moderator responded with the following: “In light of the fact that family and friends of this teenager are grieving the loss of their loved one at this time, please limit your comments on this thread to providing support rather than discussing issues that can be addressed more appropriately on another thread or at least after the initial shock has passed. Thank you for your consideration.”

In general, many of the articles focused on and criticized PAUSD, especially Gunn High for creating a stressful, difficult environment for students. Others criticized the student population for being too competitive. However, comment forums and those creating public discourse within them challenged this framework, especially those who self identified as students. For example, a user commented on article 13. While

acknowledging that Gunn is a difficult school, and that Palo Alto puts high expectations on students, he also notes, “I can honestly say that I love going to Gunn. The people there, both teachers and students are so welcoming and helpful. It feels like we’re all working together instead of just fending for ourselves.” This is in stark contrast to several of the articles that have painted the PAUSD as being “cut-throat” and “student against student.”

Another way that respondents were oppositional to the framing of the media was through their mockery of the seriousness surrounding the issue. Several respondents to article 15 took the opportunity to mock the story of suicide. A respondent suggested that others feel sympathy for the engineer who must witness the suicide. This started a line of dialogue that reduced to banter about cow suicides. Another user noted an experience s/he had while riding a commuter train that hit a cow. They recalled the engineer (more likely the conductor) being covered in cow guts after inspecting the train wheels. Another user then took the opportunity to respond with, “Cow suicides are something most people don’t think about with all the news about Palo Alto students but it’s no easier facing the reality that this cow felt there was nothing more to live for and used the train driver for his own *udderly* selfish final act.” These comments, while possibly considered inappropriate, also act to challenge the established media frame.

Other forms of oppositional responses included calling out journalists for violating suicide prevention recommendations. In response to article 18, a respondent by the name of concernedmom calls out the journalist for not following the AFSP guidelines for the prevention of suicide. She states, “Please please please...there are established guidelines when reporting a possible suicide...The article posted does not include a

number of important elements, including a hotline logo or crisis number, ‘warning signs’ or ‘what to do.’ Posting articles without this critical information is dangerous and irresponsible.” This user also included a link to the AFSP website for the journalist and other readers to examine.

One respondent from article 20 included a comment that was oppositional to the way media frames suicide. In his opinion, the media does not present the news of suicides graphically enough. This commentator stated:

What if the media stopped memorializing and started saying things like ‘This f** idiot that ended their life early missed out on all the good stuff. They didn’t talk to their friends and family, and instead suffered 30 minutes of agony before bleeding out on the tracks. Before their last breath, an onlooker heard them say wtf was I thinking. Yea it sucks, but they’re the ones missing out the most.’ [Picture of gory body parts]. I know it’ll never happen, nor do I really think it should...but what if it did?

This individual is not only criticizing the media for being too soft on the issue, but he’s also accusing the victim of having made a mistake and being idiotic. In other words, he is othering them (discussed in more detail below).

Some users criticized the media for focusing on certain issues of blame. In a comment posted in a forum from article 21, the respondent complains about the journalist’s target of blame. He states, “You could cut and paste the dates and names from every article written as they are all the same. They always mention the friends and always fail to talk about the parents. It’s not the schools or the child’s friends job to look after mental health.” He was not the only respondent to complain about the media’s target of blame.

Comment Sections – Opposition – Comparative Analysis. All three clusters included some form of oppositional responses to how the media had framed the issue.

The Cornell University cluster heavily criticized any media frame that referred to, or raised the question of, Cornell University being a “suicide school.” This did not occur amongst the discourse from either of the Palo Alto clusters. All three cases included public discourse that challenged the framing of the victims. Although articles often framed the victims in a positive light, all three clusters included discourse that challenged that viewpoint. People referred to the victims as cowards, for example. Both the Palo Alto clusters included data that suggests readers were well aware of the media guidelines established by the CDC and AFSP. This was evident in their criticisms of the journalists and how they framed the issue. They also further criticized how the moderators elected to edit and/or delete comments within the comment forums. Respondents frequently felt as though these spaces should be free of journalistic or editorial policing. One finding that was unique to the second cluster in Palo Alto was the presence of mockery within the public discourse. Respondents within this cluster occasionally “made light” of the issue by making jokes about train suicides more generally (see earlier comments about cow suicides). This type of mockery never appeared in either of the datasets for the first two cases.

Comment Sections – Collective Will – Cornell University. The following findings reveal how respondents form a sense of collective will, as well as how they problem solve the issue of suicide within their community. Do online media outlets provide a space for readers to express their personal beliefs and value systems pertaining to suicide? Do these spaces also allow for a public discussion of an otherwise taboo topic? If so, do respondents use these forums as a space to problem solve?

One commentator in article four states, “We are clearly missing something in our collective understanding of suicides, warning signs and how to prevent them. Until then, I’m not sure what can be done.” In general, the comment sections were used to establish some sort of collective understanding of what was causing these suicides, as well as how to solve the issue at hand. The forums became a place to hash out options, challenge current tactics/strategies, and offer suggestions. The most common discussions/debates focused on solutions (or prevention methods), discussing whether or not the school was doing enough, and whether or not the media should be posting such stories (and leaving room for comments).

The largest domain within this cluster data involved the discussion of prevention methods. Over twenty-five individual suggestions for prevention were included in the comments. Some of these preventative approaches were mentioned multiple times. Recommendations included physical barriers to suicide such as: improving bridge safety by increasing the height of the railing, patrolling the bridges (either with guards or surveillance cameras), installing suicide nets, removing memorials, and temporarily closing the bridges. Note, many of these reflected those posed by the articles that comments were responding to. Others suggested preventative methods included emotional barriers such as turning to God, performing random acts of kindness, opening the lines of communication, and changing the general atmosphere at Cornell. One respondent suggested offering “suicide prevention days” in which students could take one day off of classes per month to relieve stress. Another respondent did not have any particular prevention in mind, but stated, “Stop the PR blather and do something.” All of

these recommendations reflect the public's need for resolution, and the discourse represents problem solving in action.

Several respondents suggested taking an upstream approach to prevention. In article four, one user states, "In order to prevent suicides we have to look towards the cause and finding a solution far earlier in the chain of events that leads someone to this decision rather than just making higher railing." Another respondent by the name of Cornell Grad 08 in the same article criticized the downstream approaches being taken by the university. They state, "Building higher railings is like finding out there's an arsonist in your neighborhood burning down houses, and deciding to hide your matches. It isn't the damn bridges." This same user later compares the installation of fences on the bridges to a "Band-Aid."

Other respondents focused more on the power of using micro interactions to prevent suicide. In article ten, user Grad Student shares their experience with other participants. They state:

Recently, someone asked me how I've been doing at Cornell and I burst into tears... The person I was speaking to hugged me in response, and though that made me cry all the more for a moment, the fact that a total stranger extended that sort of personal human kindness, made that day different for me than those of the past eight months... Hug a stranger today. Hug a friend, a roommate, neighbor, a person you once had class with that you see crying on campus. You can't underestimate the difference this could make for someone.

Earlier within this comment made by Grad Student, they had expressed how depressed they had been since arriving at Cornell in the fall. The solution they offer seems simple and easy; it is about building human connection. Other students, while agreeing with this approach, did not find it feasible. In this same comment section, one commentator states, "Yes, we should reach out to friends more, but due to the amount of school work, this is

difficult because we're each caught up with our own workload." Although this user understood how workload could interfere with peer connection, they did not feel as though the curriculum should be changed.

The comment sections were also used as a space for readers to express concern over the efforts that Cornell was making to prevent future suicides. Some argued that Cornell was not only doing everything it could, but also that it played no role in the cause of these suicides. Other respondents suggested the Cornell administration could do more. In article 10, A concerned parent writes, "Surely two days in a row must inspire the University to take more serious action than a sympathetic E-mail, and reminder of the schools mental health program!" One respondent states:

It surprises me that only now is the University's public level of concern beginning to approach what it should have been all along. This, by the account of the rumor mill, is Cornell's fifth suicide this year... The university thus far sent a message to its students that if each one of us were to leave this earth, our legacy would be a closed-off bridge and a form-letter email. THIS IS NOT ENOUGH.

Within this same section, a commentator claims, "I don't know the solution, but I think it starts with the administration and students talking about what leads to this kind of depression and not just treating it as a medical problem, but a problem with the way the Cornell community is structured." Another commentator by the name of Concerned Parent and Educator shares the concerns of others when s/he writes, "Cornell must do more than installing cameras, building rails, and posting 24/7 security guards."

Later in this same comment section, Current Student challenges the idea that Cornell is not doing enough. They state, "I'm puzzled by most comments suggesting more to be done to prevent such incidents from further happening. Might I remind you all that this has been a problem for Cornell since 1983 and even before. More has already

been done. Cornell has one of the best mental health services of ANY university I've surveyed. I don't think we need more preventative measures." Another commentator attempts to steer the blame away from Cornell. They state, "The problem is within the mental health of the student body and it does not begin at the university. Suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death of college students nationwide and not just at Cornell. The pressures of Cornell are relative...The university has actually worked very hard at reducing."

Others responding to this same article were hyper critical of the bridge patrols that had been established by Cornell. Some respondents argued that suicidal individuals would just find another way to end their life; others felt watching the bridge was ridiculous since the bridge (and the gorges) was not the problem. One commentator by the name of middle/high school friend states, "With all do respect watching a bridge when kids are committing suicide is the dumbest thing I've ever heard." Commentator An alumnus posted facts (taken from the National Institute of Health [NIMH] website) and stated, "Here are the facts about suicide as found in the NIMH web site. Note that there is nothing about suspension bridges."

There also appeared to be discussion about how these comment sections should be used. One respondent from article 16 states, "I'm a bit disgusted with the comments left here so far. Three students have committed suicide in the past month. Two within two days, even. Now is not the time to fight over whether or not Jesus is to blame, or to poke fun at Cornell as an institution...Just because you are on a semi-anonymous forum online does not mean you should stop being human."

Comment Sections – Collective Will – Palo Alto, CA (2009-2010). Problem solving and collective will established another domain derived from the data. This discourse often came in the form of discussions surrounding potential solutions and/or prevention methods. Respondents discussed implementing both physical and emotional barriers to suicide. Suggested solutions included installing “cattle pushers” on the front of trains, making the tracks less accessible, removing “at-grade” train routes, turning to God, offering additional counseling to teens, implementing stress reduction programs, showing love to children, opening communication with kids, and changing the curriculum at Gunn High.

Several readers felt the necessary changes that would encourage prevention should be obvious. In response to article five, a self-identified Gunn High alum states:

The solution IS obvious: change the motherfucking curriculum so that Gunn isn't so goddamn stressful. When I used to be a student there I slept 4 hours a night on average. Every student taking a substantial course load there at least THINKS about killing themselves at some point. Combine the stressful curriculum with the fact that the schoolwork could eat away at a student's potential social life. Goodbye, teenage childhood.

Another respondent in that same comment section writes, “It is a difficult city to grow up in because it is so amazingly competitive, especially among the students at Gunn. They need to create a program for the stress these students face while attending Gunn.” Many respondents claimed to have firsthand experience with the educational, community, and family environments experienced by the victims. These comments also relate to the rationalization of the suicidal acts as described below. These individuals, as evident above, did not hesitate to share their opinions, often passionately, with other readers.

Some respondents were critical of other respondents and their suggestions for prevention. In article 25, respondents had mentioned the importance of parent volunteers

guarding the tracks to discourage potential victims. One respondent argued the ridiculousness of this suggestion. He stated:

If these parents spent half the time they spent in lawn chairs at railroad crossings talking to their offspring about the veritable meaninglessness and despair that fires kids up for a premature exit, they could comfort themselves in knowing that before their children laid down on the tracks a quarter-mile down the road, they got a peek into their burgeoning minds.

Comment Sections – Collective Will – Palo Alto, CA (2014-2015). Within the comment sections of these articles, respondents focused on several different approaches to problem solving and collective will. The most popular forms of problem solving addressed reforming of the school district and/or parenting techniques used by Palo Alto parents. Other suggestions to solving the problem included increasing security on the tracks, “undergrounding” the trains, installing air bags or “cow catchers” on the front of train engines, redefining stress, and improving air quality. Much of the discussions of collective will focused on agreeing to the issue(s) at hand and answering some very difficult questions about what is going on in the Palo Alto community.

In general, there seemed to be some frustration about a lack of implementation of problem solving techniques since the first cluster. One commentator by the name of Parent responded to article 12. They called for a more proactive, immediate response to the issue. Parent stated, “Creating a collaborative and problem-solving culture will mean we are always solving problems and improving, instead of waiting for crises to give us the impetus to act and overcome our inertia as we do now.”

Another respondent to article one, a user by the name of JLS mom of 2, suggests that this is the time for the community to come together, form a collective will, and create changes that will aid in the prevention of future suicides. While her post focuses mainly

on preventing bullying, which can lead to suicide, she also suggests other issues that need addressing. JLS mom of 2 writes, “The entire community should now have a sharp intake of breath and reflect on what that means in the context of our work to protect our youth. There is no one cause of suicide. Suicide is a complex interaction of depression, opportunity, impulse, and access of means to lethal harm.”

In this same article, commentators used the space to appeal to others who may be considering suicide. Frustrated mom’s plea reflects a proposed solution to the potential for future suicides. She writes, “To others who are considering suicide: please do not do it, the families left behind go through so much pain, instead of it ask for help. There are people in and outside your family who would love to be given a chance to help you.” Comments like these place the onus of responsibility on potential victims.

Another theme of this same article was to use peer groups as a means for preventing suicide. Interestingly, one post includes both a blame and a prevention slant. A respondent states, “Friends don’t let classmates take their own lives. Be aware, tune in and know who is in trouble and get them help.” She suggests that students talk to the kid eating lunch alone, and she further encouraged students to defend and protect the weak from bullying (which can lead to suicide).

In general, many commentators posed theoretical questions to others in the forum. Some commentators questioned what was happening in Palo Alto. One user posted a comment in response to article five. He states, “Top ranked PA schools, priciest real estate in the country, but half a dozen high school suicides the past few years? What’s it all mean? Were there commonalities in the despondency felt by each kid? I don’t know.” Another commentator responded with, “There are so many pressures on our kids today,

especially in areas where everyone is expected to be above average. Every kid needs to know they are loved and valued, regardless of what is expected of them and how well or poorly they perform.” In article 21, a respondent poses some important questions for the community to consider. They stated, “Lets ask ourselves: What is the district’s highest priority? How does the district’s success get measured? Looking at the superintendent’s background (no disrespect), I can guess further academic excellence (rightly) is the focus, but what will continue to be the price?” Another user posted in response to article 26. She notes, “This is a very interesting case study of several phenomena that are not unique to the Palo Alto schools, and raises a series of important questions.” Her questions asked about correlations between intelligence and mental illness; the correlation between suicide, self-harm, and depression rates in high-pressure/high-prestige learning environments; and the predictability of suicide.

Article 12 discussed the school board meeting where students were allowed to attend and comment on the suicides occurring at Gunn High. The comment section for this particular article was full of remarks made by students who agreed with other student comments quoted in the article. User Gunnstudent16 states, “I’m proud to say that I know many of the students that went to this meeting and I agree 100% with what they are saying.” The student went on to state, “Honestly the most stressed people I know are worried because of their parents. The parents expectations are what bring so many students down and I feel like no one wants to there it.” S/he made a suggestion for listening more to the student experience and discrediting much of what the adults claim “because this is a situation that can’t be solved by people who aren’t effected by the problem, but want to dictate the solution.” Another commentator in this same forum

suggested something similar. They state, “We NEED to listen to the students. PERIOD. Stupid to say we know better, we don’t, they’re literally killing themselves so we can listen.”

Multiple commentators criticized the Palo Alto community, as well as PAUSD for not doing enough. One respondent from article 21 writes, “Guards, fences, and suicide hotlines are just a band aid on a lethal wound. They don’t do anything to fix the underlying problem.” This individual’s solution was to focus on the Silicon Valley work environment and how workers are being treated like machines. Others commended the community, especially track guards for preventing multiple suicides. For example, a respondent notes, “We’re seeing more delays from police removing people from the tracks than actually hitting folks...It’s somewhat inspiring to know the Palo Alto PD are making the effort to stop these types of events.”

While there was much discussion on how mental illness plays a role in suicides. Other commentators were quick to argue the strictly biological component of suicide. A commentator who was posting in response to article nine states, “Mental health help is not the solution – our students shouldn’t even get to the point where they need to see a counselor.” One dialogue between two users from article 21 mirrored this position. One commentator responded with a discussion about how depression is strictly a chemical imbalance capable of treatment. However, another respondent disagreed. They stated, “Absolutely not. Depression can be a result of environment...Despair about academics, lack of support and love at home...Change the environment, and the attitude changes.”

Comment Sections – Collective Will – Comparative Analysis. Findings across all three clusters suggest that public discourse was heavily focused on issues of problem

solving. This was especially evident in the second Palo Alto cluster. The vast majority of comments within that case focused on finding anything (large or small) that could be contributing to the suicides. One interesting finding was the variation between the first and second clusters in Palo Alto. The first cluster data included more reasonable, predictable forms of problem solving such as changing the schedule of the trains, placing guards at the track, building fencing, implementing social support systems, etc. However, the second cluster included discourse that focused on more rare forms of prevention such as testing the drinking water for toxins, installing air filtration systems in the schools, improving the Feng Shui of the school, and installing airbags on the front of trains. Because many of the suggestions from the first cluster's public discourse had been either discussed or implemented, this likely opened the door for the less traditional or logical prevention methods mentioned above.

Another interesting point was that the second cluster often discussed preventative measures that had been suggested during the first cluster. Some of these had actually been implemented (social support campaigns, guards on the track, fencing, etc.), and these forums became spaces for individuals to critique the effectiveness of these implemented changes that had been suggested in public discourse during the first cluster. Also, individuals were able to point out changes that had been suggested, but not implemented. One of the (self-identified) mothers of a victim was the most outspoken about this within the forums.

Like the second Palo Alto cluster discourse, the discourse at Cornell University also took a more critical approach to prevention method implementations (or the lack thereof), especially as the cluster progressed. Respondents used the space to criticize the

ugliness of fences installed for prevention. They also used the space to criticize the school's efforts to build community through sponsoring public events. As a result of these criticisms, others defended administrators and authority figures responsible for implementing these prevention techniques. This also occurred within the public discourse for the second Palo Alto cluster.

Comment Sections – Causes/Blame – Cornell University. Comment sections attached to online news reports of media may provide insight into how readers reflect on the causes of suicide within their communities. The following findings reveal how readers came to understand issues of blame. Do respondents blame social factors? Or, are they more likely to blame the individual through the use of othering?

Themes of blame included high-stress preliminary exams, the school (engineering), fraternity life, the faculty, the university, the state, the media, lack of safety at the bridges, parents, peers, the economy, racism, society, and overwhelmingly, the weather (including a Vitamin D deficiency caused by the weather). Othering was less common, but as noted above and below, still occurred occasionally amongst the comments.

In the comments from article four, one user placed blame on the school when stating, "It's this fucking school. Death is romanticized at Cornell as if it were the inevitable product of the rigorous atmosphere of this miserable place." Another respondent confirms the above claim. They state, "It's absolutely this school. This place is ridiculously stressful and nobody gives a shit about anybody else, unless it means they will get a good grade or get an officer title in a club or get an opportunity that will look good on a resume. Nobody would EVER notice if one kid was lonely or

depressed...Cornell is horrible.” Others blamed the suicides on college life, in general. Cornell Student (from this same article) stated, “College is a time of uncertainties and it’s a rough time for a students in general with social life, school work, and thinking about what we really want to do with our life.”

Other respondents defended Cornell. Instead, they blamed mental illness or the peers of the victims for “not picking up on signals.” In article four, Biometry & Statistics ’07 writes, “There is no ‘problem’ at Cornell...It’s just as much YOUR fault as anyone elses. What have YOU done to reach out? What have YOU contributed to helping those who feel death is the only answer...Stop passing the blame and do something!” Another user writes, “Don’t use these sad events as a means to put the college down. Don’t blame the school, Cornell is what you make of it.” Some respondents blamed those closest to the victims for not picking up on the signs and symptoms of distress. For example, in article ten, user Current Student posts, “I’m confused. Did you try to reach out to him given that you’re his ‘sad friend’? Why didn’t you call CAPS or tell someone authoritative after seeing this facebook post?” This was in response to another poster who had noted that one of the victims had posted a warning sign to Facebook shortly before his death.

Some respondents tried to defend those around the victim from blame. For example, in response to article ten, user Cornell Student, Junior says, “The blame doesn’t sit on the shoulders of the other students for ‘not picking up on signals,’ but rather on the shoulders of Cornell, a BUSINESS, that pushes its students with unrealistic expectations to do assignments that are meaningless and to do well on exams...See, they didn’t jump, Cornell threw them off.” Another respondent in this same article by the name of Alumna

states, “Cornell is like one long panic attack.” A different user writes, “It’s difficult to say what drives each student to suicide, in the three cases, from what I’ve heard from friends who knew these students, there didn’t seem to be signs. Hindsight is always 20/20, but we cannot read the minds of others even when we’re constantly around them.”

Some individuals blame the victims in defense of the university. A commentator from article four writes, “You have to be really emotionally unstable to think that...jumping is the only option. It is definitely not Cornell’s fault.” Another user by the name of Cornell Alumni agreed with this approach. They said, “It is too bad that the signs weren’t caught before this, or that the students hid their pain, but it isn’t the colleges or bridges fault! If you don’t like it there, transfer out or just get out!

Respondents blamed both the social and environmental climate at Cornell. In article four, user Unduly high levels of Stress provides others with a long list of “sources of stress at Cornell.” The list included fear of loss of funding, overloaded schedules (no time for personal life), peer pressure, in-class exams, isolation, stressed out advisors, and standards that are higher than other schools issuing the same degrees. In this same article, another user notes, “It is the school atmosphere.” He then lists demanding coursework, stress, isolation, “crappy” weather, and “crappy” social IQ of the student population for the depressive state of students.

Within the comments blaming the school, there seemed to be quite a bit of focus on the mental health services available on campus. Individuals felt as though the support systems in place were not living up to their responsibilities. Other users believed that the services were adequate, but that more should be done. For example, in article four, user Cornell Grad 08 states:

People seem to be having different experiences with the counseling systems on campus, but I just want to say that my experience with CAPS was exemplary...I don't like the comments on this public website that say the university is unfeeling and will do nothing to help you...Could the university be doing more? You bet – and I really think they will in reaction to this...Take your comments to Skorton, and Gannett and ResLife and SAO and everyone else and work to create ways to reach more students.

This divide continued throughout the comment sections. In general, individuals who had positive experiences with the university, as well as campus mental health services, often defended the university's honor. Those with negative experiences blamed the institution, its curriculum, and its value system.

Comment Sections – Causes/Blame – Palo Alto, CA (2009-2010). One of the major domains to come out of the comment section data involved themes of blame and causation. Respondents blamed the stress associated with AP exams, the media, the school system, parents, budget cuts, the high-performing environment, themselves, peers, mental illness, the economic downturn, Caltrain, and the victim. Debates between users were often developed within the forums, as issues of blame were defended and supported.

Respondents often accused the media of encouraging contagion due to the repetition of descriptive articles published about the deaths. One reader responded to article one. He states, “The juxtaposition of this [article] with yesterday's suicide suggests that the news coverage may have contributed to the repeat performance.” Yet other respondents were quick to point out that violence, death, and suicide are everywhere in the media, and therefore, other social factors should be considered.

Respondents also blamed peers and friends of the victims by claiming that these individuals should have picked up on warning signs and reported them to adults. Others just insinuated that students could do something to prevent these suicides from happening

in the future. Even the Superintendent of the PAUSD, as quoted by user Palo Alto Mom in article one, placed some of the onus of responsibility on students. His letter states, “It is very, very important that we look out for each other. If you have problems or are worried about a friend, if you know of other students who are dealing with difficult issues, please let a parent, teacher or counselor know. No problem is so big that a solution cannot be found if people ask for help and support.” In this same comment section, one respondent named Gunn Student even blamed himself or herself. S/he stated, “You guys don’t know. He was one of my closest friends. Everyone’s blaming themselves because it was our faults. We didn’t fully understand him.”

Some respondents jumped to the defense of peers and students. One reader by the name of Palo Alto Parent responded by stating:

Let’s not put too much pressure on kids to ‘take care of each other.’ Of course, being a good friend means listening and helping, but if we tell kids they’re responsible for taking care of each other, instead of doing our jobs as adults, we’re not only absolving ourselves of our responsibilities, but telling children that it might be their fault if someone harms themselves. Kids tend to take the blame unless adults tell them otherwise.

Another respondent by the name of Gunn Alumnus replied to the same article. She states, “Look young’uns – and I know a lot of high school students are visiting this threads right now – try not to blame yourselves or one another for what happened... Try not to beat each up other up over this.” There seemed to be a fine line between putting responsibility on peer groups to monitor suicidal friends and protecting (already vulnerable) friends from feelings of guilt associated with the loss of a peer.

An overarching theme within the domain of blame was mental illness and its role in the suicides. This is in contrast with the articles, which rarely addressed mental illness as a potential cause. Although mental illness, especially depression, is a major cause of

suicide, little discussion developed amongst respondents about the social influences of depression. Instead, they focused on more individualistic discussions of mental illness. For example, one respondent from article twenty suggested increasing the dose of antidepressants when young people experience suicide ideation. Another respondent from article five states, "Suicide is primarily caused by mental illness that is often treatable through therapy and medication. Mental illness is often a genetic condition and needs to be treated like other genetic illnesses like diabetes." Others debated whether or not depression was the cause. A self-identified student states, "The contributing factor to the suicides was not a mental illness...I believe that teen stress, and the inability to deal properly with that stress have led some of my classmates to attempt or commit suicide." The factors discussed by this respondent reveal social factors that can lead to depression (and suicide).

The theme of "pressure" was most relevant within the domain of blame. Respondents speculated on multiple types of pressure that might be encouraging teens to commit suicide including pressure to succeed; enter Ivy schools; accumulate money, power, and possessions; get perfect grades; perform well on standardized tests; compete with peers; live up to parental expectations; and to involve him or herself in activities that "add to their resume." A self-identified alum discussed his/her experiences as a teen at the nearby Palo Alto High in article 20, stating:

This MY TOWN. These are MY PEERS. There is something wrong in Palo Alto. There is something seriously wrong. We are across the street from Stanford University. We are EXPECTED to attend Ivy Leagues and Cal and UCLA. Anything else is looked down upon. The adults in our town are wealthy, and successful. It's hard to put into words the feeling and pressures that being in PA [Palo Alto] puts upon you.

Another respondent from article 15 states:

This is an upper-middle class university town where parental and cultural expectations of children is pathologically high. These kids can't do enough; they can't achieve enough. They are the soccer goalie, the first chair violin, the Valedictorian, and, somehow, it still feels hollow and sham.

The pressure to live up to community and parental ideals appeared to weigh heavily on the self-identified youth who responded. However, others were grateful for the high-pressure environment. One respondent from article five states, "Instead of blaming Gunn's academic strengths, we should embrace them...Gunn fosters an academic community and I am grateful for this."

Some respondents blamed affluence and the high expectations that come with having affluent families, schools, and communities. In article 15, a respondent states, "We push our kids very, very hard here, where it is becoming increasingly difficult of our children to ever dream of being as financially successful as many of us have become." Another respondent states, "Gunn is an extremely high-performing public school, and many affluent parents in Palo Alto community apply immense pressure on their kids to succeed starting in elementary school." This was in response to the article 15. One respondent wrote the following in response to article 25: "The school system in Palo Alto is incredibly competitive. Surrounded by a community of affluent Ivy-league grads, CEOs, programmers, engineers, and Stanford Students, many students are convinced that maintaining a 4.0 GPA and getting into Harvard, Princeton, MIT, and Stanford is the only way to succeed in life." These comments speak to how affluence influences both family life and the education system.

Comment Sections – Causes/Blame – Palo Alto, CA (2014-2015). Blame was a rather large domain within the comment sections of these articles. Unlike the first Palo

Alto cluster in 2009-10, these comments focused on several new possibilities of blame. These newly named/noted sources of blame included capitalism, the time change, the Puritan work ethic, the school's proximity to a local cemetery, Toxic gas, mold, air quality within the school, and bad Feng Shui. These comment forums also contained many of the same themes noted in other clusters such as peer groups, family pressure, academic stress/pressure, sleep deprivation, mental illness, access to mental health facilities, adolescence, race/racism, safety at the tracks, and affluence.

Several respondents blamed the administration of Gunn High on the wellbeing of its students. For example, in article one, a commentator who self identified as a former Gunn High student (class of 2011) states, "While there might be many positives in attending an academically rigorous school like Gunn, I found it lacking in empathy. The administration made it clear that if you were not academically inclined, then you were not welcome...the environment was poison." Another commentator agreed with some who cares. They explained how they had missed a week of classes after the last suicide of the 2009-10 cluster. They state, "I was concerned with how me being an extremely depressed and broken teenager who was suffering so much, all that THEY were concerned about, was how I was ever going to make up the assignments I missed, rather than maybe, my mental sanity...all that they cared about were academics." Within this same article, a user by the name of Paly Alum claims, "What I find appalling is that after the first suicide in 2009, the School Board claimed they would address stress and five years later, everything's still the same." Another commentator from article five simply states, "GUNN, WAKE UP AND CHANGE YOUR WAYS! You are breaking these hard-working kids!"

Others blamed parents, the community, and the pressures placed on children. A respondent from article six states, “I think we have to look at the attitude of all the adults in this community. It is we who are to blame putting the pressure on the kids to succeed.” Another commentator notes, “Palo Alto has become a place where no one else is valued and we are brainwashed into thinking that the only two options of success are drop-out startup millionaire and Ivy League. No one cares to actually listen because no one cares to actually feel feelings and express them.” She posted this in response to article 12. In article 13, a user suggested that the affluent culture of Palo Alto might be to blame. She states:

Rotating nannies, parents driving 100K cars, 2M\$ houses, tutors for every subject, an endless stream of after-school activities, coupled with very little exposure to meaningful work and instruction on how to make meaning of your life in the world...It is all really very out of hand and yet the engine just keeps chugging along. Parents know the pace & privilege & pressures are completely crazy, but they won't make changes because they too are caught in a riptide.

She later claims that people who live in Palo Alto frequently refer to it as “Shallow Alto.”

Article 18 elicited a comment about blaming parents, more specifically the demanding parenting of affluent Palo Alto. According to one commentator, “Palo Alto has a large population of very successful individuals who want to see their children succeed and do even better than them...At 15 years old, having your parents tell you every day that you're not doing well enough, that an A- on your math test is not acceptable and that you're obviously not working hard enough can be very damaging to a teenage mind.” One user within this same forum claimed, “some parents are nuts.” And, another suggests that some children who her kids go to school with genuinely fear telling their parents about B and C grades. Another user responded to article 26. They state,

“Parents need to see their kids as people, not objects to project their own ego stuff onto.”

In article 21, a user posted a response challenging parents and administrators while also blaming them for the conditions in Palo Alto. They state:

You meet up about this, sit around for a while discussing the tragedies our town continues to face, and break away for the day. It does not end for us. We are always in this loop of what-if's, worrying we will disappoint our unsupportive parents who, quite frankly, deserve no part in our future 'successful' or otherwise. It's a full-time concern, while you practically act as part-time parents in making sure we are even surviving.

This user was especially critical, and they put the blame entirely on uncaring, ignorant parents and the school district. They state, “It is no secret that Palo Alto schools are academically advanced and pressuring, and to put blame on every other factor but school is honestly moronic.”

When discussing the blame put on parents, much of the blame was placed on Asian parents and/or “tiger moms,” specifically. For example, article 18 elicited a conversation about both Asian parents and tiger moms. One user blamed “people from other countries” for bringing over their unreasonable academic expectations. Some respondents criticized this remark for being racist, others agreed. For example, one commentator stated, “I’m Asian and I agree that our community in particular has a crazy obsession with grades. I don’t think, however, that this is an issue we can attribute to Asians alone. There are a lot of causes aside from ‘lol tiger moms’ that have created Palo Alto’s culture of perfectionism.”

Like some of the news reports, some comments mirrored concerns over how the mental health institution in Palo Alto was to blame. One commentator posted in article 21. They state, “Big issue that no one is talking about is that by the time a parent is aware their child is in crisis there is a 3-6 month waitlist for therapists around here.” This user

also notes that sometimes it takes more than one therapist to find “the right one.”

According to another commentator, this can lead to parents taking their children to the ER for psychiatric evaluation, which is not a long-term solution.

There were only a few examples of social “othering” in the comment forums for this cluster. One, which was mentioned above indirectly refers to suicide victims as idiots. Another comment, which was eventually deleted from article two, referred to the first victim as a “selfish ahole” for having committed suicide. The threaded replies to this deleted post remained intact, however. As a result, another user replied by saying, “She posted ‘selfish ahole.’ A coward hiding behind a computer keyboard is all she is.” This commentator continued to belittle the original poster by saying, “Someone should have dropped YOU down a well upon birth.” User PA resident responded with, “This isn’t the kind of thing you shouldn’t post on an article like this...Pretty disrespectful to the subject of the article if you ask me.”

Comment Sections – Causes/Blame – Comparative Analysis. All three cases included an extensive discussion of the causes associated with suicide. All three included dialogue about the system of education and the academic pressures that students within these two districts likely experienced. All three also discussed familial pressures, especially as it related to affluence. This topic was much more prevalent in the Palo Alto data (for both clusters) than it was for Cornell University. All three clusters also included discourse pertaining to the need for better or additional mental health facilities. Peer groups, and their responsibility for each other’s health, was also an issue of blame raised amongst respondents. Commentators often accused friend groups of the victims for not “picking up on the signs” of suicide that could have prevented the death.

In terms of causes, the cases varied in several ways. One cause of suicide that was discussed amongst the Cornell University data, but not within the Palo Alto clusters was the climate. This makes sense given the vast difference between the two climates; Palo Alto is extremely sunny and temperate, while Ithaca is gloomy and experiences “the four seasons.” Only the first two clusters (2009-2010) discussed the role the economy may have played in the suicides; the second cluster in Palo Alto did not include such discussions.

In general, the public discourse across the cases included debates (sometimes heated) around these issues of blame or causes of suicide. User-to-user comments debated the issues of blame. For example, when a self-identified student blamed the family, very frequently a parental figure dialogued by defending their actions and blaming the school or the peer groups. Then, someone would defend the school and blame the peer groups. A peer may then join in the conversation and blame the school again. There seemed to be an intricate cycle of “finger pointing” with very few individuals taking personal responsibility for the actions of the suicidal victims. This occurred across all three clusters but was most prevalent in the second Palo Alto cluster. There were also comments from respondents that called out the media and blamed them for increasing the rates of suicide (as noted in the section on oppositional framing above).

Othering occurred in all three cases, but was minimal, especially in comparison to discussions of causes/blame. The Cornell University cluster data included comments that questioned the intelligence of a student who would think jumping was the only option. The second cluster in Palo Alto included comments (that have since been deleted) referring to the victim as a coward. No comments of this extreme nature were found

within the data for the first Palo Alto cluster. However, there were comments that suggested distancing between the victim and the respondent.

Another important component of othering that was found in all three clusters was the emotional response of shock or surprise that respondents expressed. Comments, especially in the two earlier clusters, often included notes to the victim expressing that the commentator did not understand why they committed suicide. While this did happen in the most recent cluster (the second in Palo Alto), it happened much less frequently than in the first Palo Alto cluster. In general, participants within those forums seemed less surprised by the deaths.

Comment Sections – Sense Making – Cornell University. Research (Roen et al. 2008) examined in chapter II reveals how individuals make sense of tragic events such as suicide. The following findings provide evidence of the claims made by Roen et al. (2008). Do respondents use these forums to express their own self-value? Do they reveal how they have thought about suicide themselves? And, do they rationalize the suicides by explaining (in hindsight) the type of social/individual conditions the victims had been living under?

Comment sections quickly became a place for community members to share their value system with others. This included sharing feelings of ideation with the victim, which often led to a rationalization of the suicidal acts. Themes included the reader's own personal experience with suicide ideation and/or attempts, as well as histories of family members or friends committing suicide. Comments discussed the direct effects, and especially the emotional impact of a friend or family member's death. In some cases, survivors discussed overcoming depression and thoughts of suicide, offering hope to

others. These forums served as a “safe zone” for discussing very personal and taboo topics not often discussed openly in public settings or face-to-face interactions. These experiences were shared by both individuals within the Cornell community, as well as by others, including a citizen of Palo Alto (the location of the other clusters in this analysis). Comment sections also occasionally included reflections from individuals who could identify with the victim, but declared that they would not take the same way out due to a sudden understanding of their own self worth.

Article two featured the third victim of the cluster. Many of the commentators took the opportunity to offer condolences to his family and friends; others shared their own experience with losing a loved one to suicide. For example, one user posted a letter that she had written to the fourth victim’s family. In the letter she states, “I lost my son in November 2001 to the Stewart Avenue Bridge over the Cascadilla Gorge...I know what you are going through. I wish I could tell you it gets easier. It just gets ‘different.’”

Another commentator states, “No words can express how very sorry I am. I learned what it is like to lose a child when my sister lost her son a few years ago and the heartache is unbearable.” In article four, user Anonymous450450450 states, “One of my friends in a different college committed suicide two weeks ago. Like the first suicide here, it came as a shock to all who knew her.”

In article ten, a respondent identifies with the attraction to the gorges (as a place for ending one’s life). They state:

There is something about the gorge and the bridge that seem to pull us in, especially when we are consumed with negative thoughts. I used to look down into the sparkling water and there were things that one can associate with, sometimes beautiful but there had been times that there weren’t. Now, I am not implying anything that is about the supernatural but I do believe there is certain hypnotism, not unlike magnetism that has the

ability to pull one in. Of course one can exit if one ways to and there are many ways to make that exit. I am afraid to say that the instrument for such exit is both convenient and fast and can be found in the nature of the bridge, gorge and surrounding environment. In short, it is the ‘most liberating’ place for such an exit.”

This respondent understands what it is like to feel distress and seek serenity at the bridges of Cornell. Even further, the respondent shares an ideation with those who have jumped before them. This respondent identifies with the draw of the gorges, the hypnotism of it all. It is also important to note here that the respondent has identified (for other readers) a successful method for ending one’s life.

One respondent in an earlier article (four) also identified with the depressive conditions at Cornell and their experience with suicide ideation. They believe that if it were not for their supportive parents, they too would have died by suicide. Alumnus states, “I’m an alumnus of Cornell as well. My entire four years at the school were filled with depression...I hated it out there...I knew I would have my loving parents waiting for me with open arms as soon as I graduated...If I didn’t, I maybe would’ve considered suicide.” Another respondent from article 13 also identified with the victims. She shared with other commentators that she too had attempted suicide while at Cornell nearly a decade prior to this cluster. She states, “While at Cornell, I attempted suicide. I did not jump...instead I took pills...Many people I knew at Cornell went through at least one bout of major depression. Most were much healthier outside of Cornell than in it.” She suggests that it is something about the school, specifically the stressful environment, that makes people depressed enough to attempt suicide.

Several respondents across the data tried to rationalize the deaths of these students by denying that the deaths were caused by suicide. Alternative explanations included

murder and falling by accident. For example, in article four, a commentator by the name of [fifth victim's] friend states, "Maybe he got too close to the gorge and slipped? The snow was melting, so the rocks may have been slippery." Another commentator writes, "I was thinking the same thing." Another participant says, "I agree with [fifth victim's] friend. Why does everyone assume that [fifth victim] and [fourth victim] committed suicide? Is it not possible that it was murder or just an accident? Just sayin'." In response to these posts, user High School Friend attempts to challenge this theory by claiming, "...it seems [fifth victim] took off his backpack and left his wallet on the bridge before falling in so that is why it is being sad that it was a suicide." In another response from article 13, a respondent states, "I am just wondering if anyone has thought that maybe these students that were found in the gorges had not committed suicide but perhaps maybe were murdered? Someone could have thrown them over. Just a thought." Someone else in this forum agrees when stating, "Is anybody actually seeing these people jump? Are you sure someone's not 'helping' them...Do I watch too much criminal minds?????"

Comment Sections – Sense Making – Palo Alto, CA (2009-2010). Other domains worth noting included shared experiences, which involved both respondents examining community values and respondents sharing their personal history of dealing with suicide ideation, suicide attempts, or family suicides. Others also used the space to "work out" the details and/or rationalize the death of individuals within the cluster.

Many respondents questioned the value system at Gunn High. Much of this was linked to issues of blame (mentioned above). However, these comments also offered a

space to examine how a value system might be linked to feelings of low self-worth or a lack of meaning in one's life. A respondent from article one states:

I can't help but think our value system has gotten seriously off course, where our children are surrounded by the message that their value as human beings is determined by a letter or a grade, and without a certain number or a certain grade, they have nothing to offer the world... They spend so much time on homework and in structured sports, community services, or whatnot (all in an attempt to appear perfectly well rounded in their high achievements) that they don't have the time, freedom or accepting environment in which to just be teens, hang out with friends, and form the types of really close, non-judgmental friendships that sustained most of us adults through our teen years... When will we realize this? What will it take?

Other comments seconded this critique of the value system. Another respondent says, "I just had to say that [user above] has said it so well, what so many parents have felt for a long time." She then goes on to share her child's experiences at Paly. She argues for a "healthier, less pressured society." Another commentator says, "I think the last two posters are getting it right." In a separate article (14), a respondent states, "I always thought someone needed to intervene and advocate for these kids being allowed to just be kids, not be so programmed and channeled into activities that looked good on the college application instead of what fueled their passion."

There also appeared to be quite a few respondents who reinforced the culture value of survival. Multiple respondents argued that suicide was not the best, or most acceptable, way out of a stressful condition. One respondent who posted under article one states, "Being a graduate of Gunn, the pressure of academics from school and parents is not an easy task to juggle along with all the standardized testing and impending college applications/essays. Suicide should never be the answer to anything." Another respondent from this same article using the name "student," states, "I'll admit that I have had some

suicidal thoughts lately and this is a big wake up call for me. It's not worth it. Get a bad grade...life goes on." This student now better understands her value within her community due to the media reports of suicide she has consumed.

Multiple respondents used the comment sections to share with others their own personal experience with suicide ideation and failed suicide attempts. Many focused on suicide ideation and attempts in Palo Alto. However, others focused on personal experiences elsewhere (Vietnam, Tokyo, Palo Alto 20 years ago) and/or clusters that had happened elsewhere. Many of these responses were somewhat vague, and respondent used terms like "in my hometown," "where I'm from," and "at my high school."

Some individuals not only shared their personal experiences with suicide, but also used that experience to rationalize the actions of the victims. In one response to article one, a respondent by the name of Asian Mom states, "Junior year at Gunn High school is the roughest year. With parents who demand perfection in academics, that could send someone to want to commit suicide." In article five, a self-identified Gunn High student stated, "As a current student at Gunn High School, I have many-a-time felt the pressure that has almost led me to commit suicide myself." A respondent from article 20 states, "I, like many others, contemplated it [suicide] a few times during my adolescence and young adulthood, but thankfully I never really made the final decision."

In article one, a respondent tried to rationalize the death of the first victim by denying that it was a suicide. She states, "East Meadow Drive is a popular route for children walking to school. I know that Caltrain likes to call all pedestrian deaths on the train tracks 'suicide,' but it is possible that this boy was just walking to school and got confused by the train crossing?" A later response in this same article by another

commentator states, “To Readers: If you did not know him personally and don’t know what happened/the reason behind it, please don’t say anything presumptuous; it hurts to read a denial of what happened due to ignorance on behalf of the commentator or reader.” In this dialogue, both are attempting to rationalize the death – the outsider denies it is a suicide while someone on the inside justifies the act as suicidal.

Comment Sections – Sense Making – Palo Alto, CA (2014-2015). Unlike other comment sections from other clusters, there was very little discussion of suicide ideation and/or rationalization of such suicidal behaviors. Those who shared a history of ideation were often former Gunn High students or adults living in Palo Alto who remember being suicidal as a teen. Very few people tried to rationalize the suicides other than by acknowledging that they had once felt the same (ideation). Only one commentator suggested that these may not be suicides. This is a stark difference from the previous Palo Alto clustering. There was some discussion of shared values, especially shared condolences. Overall, this was a small domain.

One commentator shared their experience of losing their child to suicide with other commentators. They posted their response in article one. They stated, “We, too, have lost a child to suicide when he was away at college. That was almost 10 years ago now. We are so sorry for the loss of yet another beautiful young person and for the pain this family is now going through after their tragic loss of their beloved child.”

A respondent from article one identified himself or herself as a recent college graduate. They shared their experience with feeling shame in an academically challenging environment and how that led them to pretending everything was OK. They stated:

I attended high school in an academically competitive school district, just down the road from Paly...I was going off to college to study engineering...I found out it wasn't for me and wanted to change my major to something else...thought I'd be a total failure in my parent's eyes...thought it would be an act of shame and my family would disown me...I would hide behind my smile and pretend everything was normal, but I was suffering inside.

This individual made this comment in an attempt to expose how others who may be suffering are capable of hiding their personal agony.

Another respondent by the name of Gunn15 posted a similar response to article 12. They shared with other commentators their own experiences with suicide ideation. They also communicate that the most talented are not immune to experiencing these feelings. Gunn15 stated, "Most of us have probably thought about suicide at some time in our lives, even if it was simply a passing thought. And more students than you think have probably suffered from depression at some point...Hell, I was a top student, went through all my classes with ease. Yet I still found myself not wanting to interact with others, not wanting to get up in the morning."

A respondent posted a comment in article 18. In their response they are referencing a conversation they recently had with "a young woman who graduated from Paly a couple of years ago." According to this user, this woman described her high school experience as "an academic concentration camp." They claim, "Although she didn't and doesn't suffer from depression or any known mental illness issue, she told me that she had considered suicide on two different occasions due to immense academic pressure and the fierce, relentless competitiveness, and she was an excellent student."

In article 21, one user wrote a particularly moving piece about how they understood what students living in Palo Alto are going through. They state, "Good God,

the things you put us through. It's AP classes, it's SAT prep from day 1, it's punishment for less than a 4.0 GPA, and it fuels the tears that put us to sleep at night while you rest soundly. So many students, if not the majority, are the embodiment of pure stress. If we're not tired, we're smiling through how absolutely livid you make us." He concludes his comment with, "I hardly think a comment on, unsurprisingly, another article on a teenage suicide will do much to change any minds or behaviors, but I am so, so angry. We cannot wait for change. We need it now."

An interesting dialogue developed in article 13. Several individuals in the comment forum began to discuss the issue of being "raised an Asian." The forum became a space to discuss the difficulty of raising a child if you are an Asian parent. User Asian Mom states, "I wish I knew how to parent as a non-Asian. I know how to cook, to teach, to discipline. But I don't know how to make it fun, how to tell when he needs the space, to just back off. I've been crying all morning...because that boy could very well be my son." A commentator by the name of Evergreen high mom responded to Asian Mom's post by stating:

I am also an Asian mom... We ****constantly**** encouraged our kids to work hard for their future... Our daughter worked extremely hard to maintain a 4.0 GPA, had daily piano practice, joined math competition program and other math training, etc. 7 days a week no break no life but we didn't even realize it until very recently she opened up to me suggesting that she wanted to commit suicide because she basically had no time to even breath.

They continued the discussion noting that all that ambition is not worth much if your child has died by suicide. They also called for counseling for Asian parents on how to be more open, communicative, and flexible with the needs of their children.

Very few commentators tried to rationalize the behavior by claiming it was something other than a suicide. As noted, only one respondent did so. This commentator in response to article 15 wrote, “People: Stop walking on the train tracks!” This comment insinuates that it was an accident, not a suicide.

Comment Sections – Sense Making – Comparative Analysis. Ideation was a frequent domain within all three clusters. Many of the respondents could identify with a wide array of social, psychological, and environmental factors that may have influenced the victims to end their lives. These ideations were found most commonly within the Cornell University cluster data. These comments were also much more explicit, detailed, and dramatic/poetic. While the ideations within the two Palo Alto clusters were quite prevalent, they did not carry the same weight as the Cornell University data. Respondents often identified or shared stories of their own history with suicidal thoughts. Both clusters in Palo Alto also contained evidence of ideation. However, the second cluster included far less.

In relation to the ideation, many individuals across all three clusters were able to rationalize the behaviors of the victims. Respondents frequently pointed out factors that may have influenced the victim’s suicide, even if they could not themselves identify with the desire to end their own life. In every cluster at least one friend or family member of at least one of the victims posted a comment referencing at least one warning sign that alluded to the individual being suicidal. Other comments focused on justifying the acts by discussing a torrid past or a stressful family life.

Another form of rationalization was the communication of denial. This happened occasionally amongst the first Palo Alto cluster. One respondent noted that kids need to

“pay better attention” as if the teen had failed to hear the train approaching. However, by the second cluster in Palo Alto, very little discussion doubted the media’s account of the train death as being a suicide. The Cornell University data was, by far, the discourse that contained the highest levels of denial. Commentators frequently suggested that the men who had ended up in the gorges could have either fallen or been pushed by accident. One respondent even referenced the “Smiley Face Murder,” a notorious serial killer that preys on young, college men. These denials were evident despite the presence of information within the article (the one victim left his backpack, wallet, and cell phone on the ground in the middle of the bridge) that would make it hard to deny these were suicides.

Self-valuation was most common in the second Palo Alto cluster. Respondents frequently discussed how suicide was “not worth it.” Others suggested that suicide was not the answer to the victim’s problems. Discussions like this were also evident in the other two clusters, especially Cornell University. In general, the publication of these reports, and possibly the discourse created within the comment sections, encouraged other readers to value their contributions to the social world. In all three clusters at least one respondent realized how their deaths may affect others and decided that, despite ideation, they would not choose the same path as the victims.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Below is a discussion of the findings from chapter IV. This chapter links the findings from chapter IV with the theories outlined in chapter II. Not only does it link findings to supportive social research, but it also points out how the findings fill theoretical and empirical voids in the current literature. This chapter concludes with a “social autopsy” of the clusters under investigation, and it offers new insight into understanding how Durkheim’s suicide typologies could be applied more effectively.

Suicide Clusters and Demographics

The findings from chapter IV pertaining to the suicide cluster demographics helped to support literature examining shared social environments, hotspots, and suicide point clusters. Findings addressed all of the following research questions under investigation within this research: Do these suicides meet the criteria for a suicide point cluster? Does demographical information reveal a sense of shared social conditions/environment? Were there hotspots established within each cluster?

By the definitions established in chapter II, all three cases under investigation meet the criteria for a suicide cluster. All of the victims lived in “the same general geographic location,” they were all similar “demographically” (in terms of age, gender, and race), and they all died by suicide within a “relative short span of time” (Stillion et al. 1989:90). Also, all the cases had clearly defined distribution patterns.

All three cases would be considered a “point” cluster (Joiner 1999) because they occurred locally within a small geographical area. And, they all involved individuals with mutual interests and/or compatible qualities; all victims within each cluster were

associated with the same university or school district. As a result, all the victims were “exposed to the same social pressures” and may have “lacked necessary social support.” For example, in all three clusters there was a wide array of discussion centered on the high levels of academic pressures experienced by students in both locations. There was also a discussion of pressures from family members. Furthermore, in both 2009-2010 clusters there was discussion of economic pressures (likely due to the economic downturn at the time). Discourse also revealed where there were voids in social support. For examples, members of the Palo Alto community voiced concerns about having a lack of access to counseling and mental health resources. Cornell University respondents also noted a lack of resources, but their discourse focused more on revealing how the campus lacked support from faculty and other students who were all operating in a highly competitive environment.

All three cases included “hotspot” locations as defined by Beautrais et al. (2010). For Palo Alto, the hotspots were the train tracks running through the city, more specifically the Meadows and Charleston crossings. At Cornell University, the hotspot became the bridges spanning the gorges of Ithaca, specifically the Thurston Street Bridge over Fall Creek Gorge. These locations, possibly due to media coverage (given the high rate of publications that included location information), became popular amongst the victims. Furthermore, these hotspots were all public locations (only four victims across all three clusters died by suicide in private), and they were all easily accessible by the victims. At Cornell University, for example, you cannot leave or enter campus without crossing over the gorges of Ithaca. It is also important to note that the hotspots at Cornell University were aesthetically appealing, which is an important component of a “hotspot”

(Beautrais et al. 2010). More than one respondent noted how tempting the natural beauty of the gorge is, especially while feeling stressed. Although the hotspot in Palo Alto was not aesthetically pleasing, it did pose a hazard to the public, which is also an important factor in the creation of a “hotspot” (Beautrais et al. 2010). As noted, respondents frequently discussed how the suicides affected engineers, conductors, and commuters.

Media’s Influence on Suicide

The findings from chapter IV pertaining to the media’s influence on suicide clusters both support and challenge some of the literature outlined in chapter II. Furthermore, the findings help to fill several voids in the literature pertaining to the qualitative representation of failures to abide by the recommendations for suicide prevention put forth by the CDC and AFSP. Findings addressed all of the following research questions under investigation within this research: Did the online news reports adhere to the guidelines for the prevention of suicide contagion established by the CDC and the AFSP? More specifically, did media outlets do any of the following: use suicide in the title, reveal the method of suicide, reveal the location of suicide, discuss the effects on others, include pictures pertaining to the suicide and/or suicide victims, and publish information about positive victim characteristics that would reveal they were both normal and healthy? If there was a failure to abide by these recommendations, how did the timing of the violation relate to the wax/wane of the suicides within the clusters? Also, did the articles include preventative information recommended by the AFSP such as scientific facts about suicide, warning signs, and resource information? The results, and how they pertain to chapter II, are discussed below.

Literature on the media's influence on suicide suggests that media publications on the topic have at least two underlying mechanisms that can contribute to contagion. These include accounts that offer both a method and a location of suicide and accounts that romanticize and/or glorify the deaths (Romer et al. 2006). All three clusters contained media reports that met these criteria. As noted, revealing the location of suicide can aid in the creation of a "hotspot." And, revealing the method of suicide can increase rates of copycat suicides (Fekete and Macsai 1990; Romer et al. 2006). Finally, the romanticization or glorification of suicide in the media can create an environment where the vulnerable population may become preoccupied with the victims, which could result in others committing suicide as well (O'Carroll 1990).

Adherence to Guidelines – Method of Suicide. As noted in chapter IV, discussions of the method of suicide varied slightly by cluster. There was quite a large variation between the two Palo Alto clusters. This variation could, in large part, be due to the fact that one of the suicides in the later cluster was private, and no details were ever made public. All of the suicides in the first cluster were public. Cornell University's findings more closely mirrored that of the first suicide cluster in Palo Alto. However, unlike Palo Alto, there were no publications of the private suicides to analyze. Therefore, findings suggest that higher numbers of private suicides within a cluster may deter the publication of method within articles pertaining to deaths by suicide. Furthermore, if a suicide is private, they may not be publicized at all. One might also argue that the variation made between the first and second cluster in Palo Alto may be, at least in part, due to an increased awareness of the guidelines for prevention.

The inclusion of photos revealing the method was quite intriguing to the researcher. As noted, photos of the train were often included in publications about Palo Alto. Essentially, this is just another symbolic way to represent the method (or weapon) of suicide. This raises a question for future research. Would publicizing photos of methods used in other forms of suicide (a bottle of pills, a gun, plastic bag, a knife, etc.) occur at the same frequency? If not, what might motivate journalists to select an image of the train (or the gorges at Cornell University) when publicizing stories of suicide.

Adherence to Guidelines – Location of Suicide. According to Sonneck et al. (1994), the publication of details about the specific location can increase the likelihood of future suicides. However, when examining the failure to adhere to this specific guideline, there were often more descriptions of the location as the suicide cluster progressed. The only exception to this trend was the second Palo Alto cluster. Findings suggest that publication of the location of suicide may be closely linked to the privacy of the death. As with both Cornell University and the third suicide of the second cluster in Palo Alto, private suicides did not reveal the specific location of death.

Adherence to Guidelines – Victim Description. According to the CDC and the AFSP, describing the act of suicide as an inexplicable act of an otherwise healthy or high-achieving person can increase the risk of suicide contagion. Findings suggest that discussing the victim in this manner may have had little effect on the future suicides within these specific clusters, especially given the slow down of the cluster growth after increased publications. So, although readers (potential victims) may have been able to identify with the victims in these cases, the data does not suggest that specific victims within the cluster would have been heavily influenced by these news reports. This is

especially true of the Cornell University cluster where most of the publications occurred after the fifth and sixth suicides.

Adherence to Guidelines – Dramatizing the Impact of Suicide. When journalists publish information that dramatizes the impact of the suicide on others, this can lead to an increased risk of suicide contagion (Davidson et al. 1989; Fekete and Schmidtke 1995; and Gould et al. 2003). Dramatizing the impact may lead to glorification or romanticization of the act, especially if a vulnerable reader wishes to impact those around them with their own suicide. This could also result in higher levels of ideation, especially amongst teens and young adults (Romer et al. 2006).

As noted, there was much variation between the first two clusters (in 2009-2010) and the third cluster. One explanation for this could be related to the fact that the third cluster was also the second cluster to happen within the same city in a very short period of time. And, the impact of this second cluster could very well have had an even larger effect on the journalists, and therefore public, than the first. This could likely be linked to a feeling of disbelief that this was happening again, especially given the number of preventative measures that had been implemented between the first and the second cluster within Palo Alto.

Given the variation in findings, one could not conclusively argue that dramatization of the effects on others played a role in the growth of these clusters. However, given the timing, and the high frequency of failure to abide by this guideline, it is quite possible that reading about the effects on others may have influenced future suicides within the cluster. However, the Cornell University data would suggest that a failure to adhere to this guideline did not play a role. It is possible that the discussion of

the impact on others may have led readers/respondents to better understand the scope of the issue, thus raising awareness of how serious the issue was.

Adherence to Guidelines – Using ‘Suicide’ in the Title. According to Gould et al. (2003), using sensational headlines focusing on suicide may influence contagion. However, findings within this research are inconclusive. In a case such as Cornell University, it would appear as though having the word suicide in the title would have little effect given that most of the publications happened after the fifth suicide. However, in a cluster such as the 2014-2015 cluster in Palo Alto, a steadier stream of publications using the word suicide in the title may have impacted future suicides within the cluster. At any rate, none of the clusters used the word suicide in the title after the first suicide, yet a second suicide occurred in each of the clusters. Therefore, one could not say with any level of certainty that placing the word suicide in the title had an adverse effect on readers within these specific geographical locations.

Importance of Scientific Fact. As noted by Easson et al. (2014), publishing information about risk factors, prevention methods, and scientific facts related to suicide (warning signs, access to treatment, etc.) may act as a buffer to suicide contagion related to the media. As noted, each case within this cluster included some aspect of these buffering techniques. These examples were quite ample, especially in the second cluster in Palo Alto. Across the cases, risk factors, prevention methods, scientific facts, discussions of warning signs, and access to treatment were included. As noted in chapter IV, prevention methods were the most frequently discussed theme within the scientific fact discussion across all cases. It was discussed so frequently that the researcher decided

to make it a separate domain. These findings suggest that the publications within these cases may have aided in the prevention of future suicides (both mass and point).

Online News Media Features

The findings from chapter IV revealed several components of online news media that were present amongst the cases under investigation. These findings help to address several of the research questions posed herein. Research questions that were answered through the use of findings from chapter IV include the following: What kind of features does online (new) media offer to its consumers of stories on the topic of teen suicide clusters? Is there a presence of hypertextuality, interactivity, and share-ability amongst online reports of teen suicide clusters?

According to Dunlop et al. (2015), 25 percent of teens learn about the news through online media sources. An additional 93 percent of young Americans are on the Internet, more generally. Furthermore, several features of online news media such as hypertextuality and interactivity make online news media much different from the more traditional television and print media sources. Findings suggest that these online media reports were often both hypertextual and interactive. And, the opportunity for hypertextuality increased between the first two clusters in 2009-2010 and the third cluster in 2014-2015. Interestingly, the opportunity for interactivity between participants through the use of comment sections decreased. These findings suggest that media outlets may be leaning more towards “outsourcing” the public discourse created by their articles. If a reader’s only option is to share the story to another new/social media site, such as Facebook or Twitter, then the public discourse will occur “out there” in other realms of the digital world. Given the frequent use of these social media sites by teens, increasing

share-ability could drastically increase the risk to vulnerable readers, especially when discourse on public media is rarely moderated in the same way that it was within this data set (by media journalists and forum moderators).

Another noteworthy finding pertains to the variation in levels of interactivity between the three clusters. As noted in chapter IV, both of the Palo Alto clusters had fewer opportunities for interactivity (59 percent for the first cluster and 50 percent for the second cluster) than the Cornell University cluster. Eighty percent of the articles in the Cornell University case allowed for interactivity. When considering the total number of comments from each cluster (700 comments from the 2009-2010 Palo Alto cluster, 600 from the 2014-2015 Palo Alto cluster, and 1,200 comments from the Cornell University Cluster), one can conclude that more opportunities for interactivity allowed for an increased production of public discourse. The number of articles allowing for interactivity correlated positively with the number of comments posted³⁰.

Media Framing

The findings from chapter IV revealed how media outlets have selected to frame the issue of teen suicide clusters. Findings herein support several of the theories outlined in chapter II, especially with regard to how the media transmits messages to readers/consumers. Below is an explanation to the following research questions: How did the online media reports on suicide frame the issue? Did readers respond to the framework set forth by media outlets?

According to Goffman (1974), the media frames a social issue by explaining to the audience what is going on while also determining what is salient during a particular

³⁰ The correlation coefficient between hypertextuality and the number of comments was 0.9901

event or experience. This can determine not only how an individual perceives of the issue but also how they respond (Goffman 1974; Van Gorp 2004). According to Van den Bulck and Claessens (2013), this occurs through the use of symbolism (text and images). Furthermore, the journalists bring their subjective experience to the publication, which would likely affect how the same issue is framed differently by multiple journalists. Findings suggest that there is variation in how the stories are portrayed, including what the journalist chooses to focus on. For example, some journalists wrote about the actual suicides, others wrote about public meetings pertaining to the suicides, and others wrote about specific victims. Finally, some journalists were more likely to adhere to the guidelines for suicide prevention than others. This suggests that subjective experience may partially influence how these reports are written.

There are at least two different views on how readers perceive the information published in news reports. These views include the transmission view and the ritual view (Carey 1989). The transmission view argues that that information is distributed and communicated through the media frame directly to the readers. The ritual view argues that readers can use the media frame as a way to discuss cultural issues and work towards “the construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful cultured world” (p. 18).

Findings within this research confirm the presence of both types of experiences. First, the articles clearly transmit ideas and information directly to readers. Findings also suggest the ritual view of communication because many of the articles included comment sections with interactivity amongst readers. These comment sections stand as evidence that people are reading the material (reflects transmission view) and that they are also

using the platform to change, create, and recreate cultural meanings. This is most evident in the domains of collective will, problem solving, and social factors.

Katz (1957) argues that viewers of media are far from passive consumers. He suggests that the media disseminates information that has the potential to influence personal attitudes, as well as motivate behaviors at the micro level. He also argues that media framing has the power to create public discourse. Evidence from this research supports both of Katz's claims. For example, these articles provided readers with very specific details about the method and location of the public suicides. The journalists also framed the articles in a way that introduced topics of blame and/or causes of suicide. Finally, the articles framed the issue as happening to specific victims, and some of these victim stories were quite detailed within the articles. As a result of this framing, massive amounts of public discourse was created within the articles that allowed for interactivity. These comment forums became locations for individual to raise awareness of the issues, problem solve, and pose important questions. Findings suggest that discussions in the article may remove stigma from the respondent for talking about suicide and/or liberate them to speak candidly and openly about an otherwise taboo topic. According to Cummins-Gauthier (2003), this public discourse is an important aspect of media frames surrounding topics of crisis, such as suicide.

Creation of Public Discourse

This research also helps to support literature that focuses on the reflection and opposition of readers to the media frames put forth by news reports on teen suicide. Furthermore, the data raises the question of whether or not more mediation may be necessary within the comment sections of these online news outlets. Findings addressed

the following research questions: Did public discourse created within the comment sections reflect frames put forth by the online media outlets? If so, is there a potential for respondents to increase the risk of exposure to commentary that could increase the risk of suicide contagion (as noted by the AFSP and the CDC)? Or, did the respondents present an oppositional response to the online media framing?

Findings suggest that public discourse often reflects the content produced and framed by the media outlet. As noted with the discussion of methods within the articles, this led to an equal or higher level of discussion within the comment sections attached to articles. Findings suggest that discussion in the article may remove stigma from the respondent for talking about suicide and/or liberate them to speak candidly and openly about an otherwise taboo topic. This was also evident in the discussions of suicide locations, effects on others, and characteristics of victims.

While it is likely safe to assume that readers are mostly unaware of the guidelines for prevention that have been established by the AFSP and the CDC, it is also important to recognize how a failure to adhere to those guidelines by journalists may create frames in which the public reflects those failures back to other readers in their own response/comment. Findings from these cases suggest that there is a positive relationship between articles that frame the issues without considerations of the guidelines and discussions that also present public discourse in a similar fashion, thus potentially increasing the risk of the vulnerable population reading both the article and the comments. This is likely why the AFSP (2016:2) has recommended that online news outlets practice “industry safety recommendations,” i.e. conformance to the guidelines for prevention.

Method. The number of methods revealed within the articles varied by case. For example, data from both clusters in 2009-2010 revealed more than just the method of suicide pertaining to the specific victim in the report. Both sets of articles published four different types of methods within the articles. In the Cornell University cluster, respondents revealed eight different methods – twice as much as the journalists. The earlier Palo Alto cluster discourse revealed five different methods, which closely resembled the media reports. The later cluster in Palo Alto only discussed the method of suicide used by the victims, even within the comment sections. These findings suggest there may be a relationship between how the media frames the reports on suicide and how respondents end up talking about it. With this factor, it is possible that individuals felt less restricted by the journalist's openness to discussing other methods used.

Location. Findings within this research fail to suggest that publishing information about the specific location led to an increase of growth within the point cluster. On the contrary, one could argue that publishing such details led to public discourse that relates to prevention measures specific to the site of death. Because the news reports often published specific details, commentators were able to strategize why people might be using that location and how to prevent others from doing the same including putting up nets and fencing and hiring security guards to post at those specific locations. All three cases hired private and public officers to patrol the specific area. And, all three locations eventually installed fencing (temporarily at Cornell University) in order to prevent future suicides from happening.

Another argument that could be made in support of publishing information about the location of suicide entails the development of a better understanding of why

individuals may select that particular spot. This was especially relevant when it was discovered in the data that individuals from Palo Alto had actually commented in the forum section of the Cornell University article(s). As noted, “hotspots” develop in areas that are frequently accessible and/or iconic. This is especially true of locations that are also aesthetically pleasing (Beautrais et al. 2010). By publishing this information, public discourse provided the context, which could help prevent other communities from developing hotspots of their own.

Victim Description. Findings suggest that the public discourse frequently mirrored the articles in terms of discussing victim attributes. In fact, the public discourse was often much more detailed, dramatic, and sensational. As noted in chapter IV, comments included notes to the deceased asking them why they chose to die by suicide. They also included comments expressing shock or confusion about why someone “like that” would have opted to end their own life. It was quite clear that this could have put readers at risk for identifying with the victim, and thus viewing suicide as an acceptable means out of the same social conditions they were living under. However, it would also appear as though individuals frequently used these representations to confirm their own value within the community, to rationalize the actions of their suicidal peers, or to other the victim (see discussion below for more details; also see Roen et al. 2008).

Dramatizing the Impact. Findings suggest that the public discourse surrounding issues of impact very closely mirrored the media frames. Data suggests that individuals were quick to discuss the effects on the system of education (including faculty, administrators, and structural components of instruction), family life, peer groups, commuters, rescue workers, and train conductors/engineers. While these discussions may

have increased the risk of contagion by failing to adhere to the guidelines set forth by the CDC and AFSP, they may also have contributed to other individuals better understanding how valued they were to others (discussed more below; also see Roen et al. 2008), which could discourage others from dying by suicide.

Oppositional Responses. According to Van den Bulck and Claessens (2013), individuals creating the public discourse in response to the media frame do not always passively accept the frame. In fact, public discourse often reflects what Van den Bulck and Claessens (2013) refer to as “counter-frames.” Findings from these three cases support this conclusion. For example, in several cases the journalist framed the article in a way that may normally elicit empathy for the victim. However, some respondents resorted to calling the victims “cowards” or referring to their acts as selfish. There were also examples of respondents criticizing how the media had framed issues of blame and/or causes of suicide. For example, some members of the PAUSD defended the school systems and did not appreciate the way the author had “pointed the finger” at the school system. Interestingly, some of these comments were later reflected in other media reports of the issue. In other words, frames became structured after public discourse that was structured after frames. This is an example of the creation and recreation of culture that Carey (1989) mentions in reference to the ritual view of public discourse.

Media, Public Discourse, and Tragic Events - Collective Will

Findings from chapter IV suggest that participants use these public spaces as a forum to problem solve and create collective will. This supports prior research that examines the relationship between media framing and the creation of public discourse (as a response). The findings answered the following research questions: Does online media provide a

space for readers to express their personal beliefs and values pertaining to suicide? Do online comment sections allow for the public discussion of an otherwise taboo topic? If so, do respondents use these forums as a space to problem solve? Below is an explanation of how these findings map onto the literature outlined in chapter II.

Cummins-Gauthier (2003:36) argues that media reports that focus on crises provide readers with a “form of communication that brings together diverse opinions and will together and allows [individuals] to participate in the development of a collective will.” Findings suggest that the individuals participating in the public discourse were quite diverse. As noted in chapter IV, respondents held a multitude of identities including faculty members, students, alumni, family members of the victim, friends of the victim, students within the same district, strangers who could identify with suicide, public officials, and experts in psychology and education. These digital spaces became a virtual reality where all of these individuals could communicate about how to solve the problem by introducing preventative ideas. They also became spaces where diverse individuals could come to some sort of consensus about what they believed to be the root cause of these suicides.

Problem solving also occurs within these public spaces. According to Cummins-Gauthier (2003), problem solving is often the direct result of emotions that are evoked by the news report. This can include feelings of empathy towards the victim and the victim’s families, as well as feelings associated with family bonding due to the discussion of morals, ethics, and value systems. Many readers of stories based on tragic events also experience anxiety and fear. They may also experience feelings of collective guilt (Cummins-Gauthier 2003). Post (1995) argues that the media has a responsibility when it

comes to publishing stories of tragic events. Cummins-Gauthier (2003:36) claims that the media has an “obligation” to publish media reports on tragic events such as suicide. Therefore, researchers suggest that the publications can allow for the increased dissemination of information pertaining to factual information, which can lead to the formation of a collective response.

The data suggests that news reports often appealed to the commentators’ emotions. They did this by discussing positive characteristics of the victims, sensationalizing the deaths, and by discussing social causes, especially in relationship to the system of education. Each one of these discussions evoked responses from the public that led to deep discussions of the issues raised within these comment sections. This resulted in the creation of several important social spaces. First, individuals were able to problem solve within these public settings. The articles often framed the issue as a puzzle, something to be solved. The readers’ expressed fears and anxieties frequently also led respondents toward a discussion of how to end the cluster and prevent future suicides from occurring. Many of solutions offered in one cluster were replicated in the other two. However, some discussions were unique. For example, problem-solving techniques in the final cluster (the second cluster in Palo Alto) included several prevention methods that may seem odd. These included moving the local cemetery, fixing the Fung Shui of the school, putting airbags on the front of trains, and removing toxic mold/chemicals from the school site. These were unique recommendations to this particular cluster despite the fact that this was the second cluster within the same city. One could theorize that the public had already discussed in depth some of the other ways to solve the issue (when the

earlier cluster occurred), and even implemented some of them, but did not experience relief from the social issue.

The second type of space created by the evocation of emotions was a space where respondents were able to share their own personal experiences with losing a loved one to suicide. Findings suggest that these public forums were used as a place to memorialize the dead, judge the dead, and offer condolences to the families of the victims. The judgment passed on the deceased plays an important role in establishing the moral compass of the community. Without these discussions, individuals within these public settings would not be able to confirm what the community believes about suicide and what they believe about the acceptable terms of suicide. According to Cummins-Gauthier (2003), these stories can help to form models of the types of values and actions one would accept and those one would reject.

Finally, the discussions of social causes evoked very powerful discussions of what might be causing the suicides. Discourses of blame developed quickly, and individuals likely sought out the factors influencing the suicides in order to alleviate any personal guilt they may be experiencing (Cummins-Gauthier 2003). As noted in chapter IV, the issues of blame focused on a multitude of factors including the largest themes of media, peer groups, the family, the education system, affluence, race, climate, mental illness, and the economy. These public forums quickly became a place to “point the finger” and alleviate collective guilt. Rarely did individuals use these spaces for taking responsibility for the suicides. Instead, they became public spaces where guilt-ridden individuals could find another entity to blame.

As noted, without this type of emotional appeal, it is quite possible that some of the conversations would not have taken place. So, although the CDC and the AFSP both advise against sensationalizing and/or dramatizing the suicides and their effects on others, this may actually be an important component of community healing, problem solving, and community cohesion building. The emotional responses evoked by the articles has the potential to create public discourse that may otherwise not have occurred, especially given the nature of these online forums (anonymity, accessibility, and interactivity) in comparison to more traditional modes of communication.

Making Sense of Suicide Through Framing and Discourse

Research outlined in chapter II suggests that teens and young adults make sense of suicide in very specific ways. The data analyzed for this project supports that literature. The following research questions were answered by this project: How did commentators make sense of suicide within these online communities? Did they other the victim? Did they identify with the victim through ideation or rationalization of the suicide? Or, did they share their own self-value in response to the online news report? An explanation of how the data reveals these practices is outlined below.

According to Roen et al. (2008), teens and young adults practice sense-making with regard to suicide through the use of public discourse. These researchers argue that teens and young adults interpret the act of suicide largely by making meaning of the situation given the social-cultural context they find themselves in. Individuals aged 16-24 do this in four different ways: othering, identifying with the victim, rationalizing the act, and understanding social cohesion and its role in suicide (Roen et al. 2008). Data suggests that individuals who self-identified as a teen or young adult practiced all four of

these sense-making strategies. The researcher also applied this theory to the population at large and found similarities across age groups.

Othering. Roen et al. (2008) claim that othering is the most heavily used form of sense-making. Through the practice of othering, peers communicate their shock over the suicide, as well as discuss how suicide is morally wrong or the act of a “coward.” They may also view suicide as something that would be unlikely to happen in their neighborhood and/or their social circles.

The data from the first Palo Alto cluster and the Cornell University cluster certainly contained aspects of both strategies of othering (shock and moral reflection). As noted in chapter IV, individuals frequently stated how shocked they were that specific individuals had chosen to die by suicide. There was also a sense of distancing; a shock that this would ever happen in their neighborhood. Obviously, not all respondents took this same approach (discussed below), but more of this moralizing of the act happened in the first cluster than in the second cluster in Palo Alto. By the time the second cluster in Palo Alto occurred, there was much less discussion of “how could this happen here?” While self-identified teens and young adults were still in shock over a specific peer’s death, they were not in shock about it happening in their community. And, in some cases, individuals expected more suicides to follow. It is not that individuals morally accepted the act, but they clearly began to view the act as a normal, acceptable way out given the social conditions of the school district and community.

Ideation. Within this data, one of the most popular strategies for dealing with suicide was identifying with the victims. According to Roen et al. (2008), identifying with the victims allows the individual to move suicide and suicide ideation out of the

realm of pathology and toward something that is the direct result of their lived experience. As noted in chapter IV, the data for Cornell University included quite a few individuals who admitted to experiencing suicide ideation while attending Cornell University. Individuals frequently made comments about how “almost everyone contemplates suicide while they’re here.” There was also discussion of how popular the term “gorging out” was. This term was used frequently in the everyday language present within the data; it reflects an acceptance of jumping (or at least thinking about jumping) from the bridges into the gorges as a normal part of Cornell life. Evidence to support this claim was also evident in both Palo Alto clusters, although certainly not at the same frequency. The first cluster had higher rates, likely because they were still very much in the “shock” stage as well. However, by the second cluster, many of the discussions became more focused on solutions (as if everyone knew what the problems were). This resulted in less discussion of suicide ideation. It was almost as if, suicide had been normalized to the extent that it had become taken-for-granted as much as other common aspects of society.

Rationalization. The third framework is rationalization of the act. According to Roen et al. (2008), teens and young adults use this strategy to reflect back (in hindsight) on their peer’s life. Through that process they find rationality for the behavior of suicide. Evidence from all three clusters also supported this claim. Across the clusters self-identified peers or classmates noted that there was something about the individual that could be used to understand why they did what they did. For example, in the Cornell University cluster peers frequently discussed the victim’s “troubled past.” In the first Palo Alto cluster, respondents frequently questioned the value system at PAUSD. They

justified the actions by noting how children within the institution do not have any personal freedoms due to workload. In the second Palo Alto cluster people frequently discussed peers, competitiveness, and bullying as a reason why one of them may have died by suicide. In all three cases, it became evident that finding just cause for the action was relatively easy, and the comments including rationalizations were ubiquitous. At Cornell University, the rationalization took on a slightly different approach. Many individuals practiced a form of denial by stating that the suicides could, in fact, be murders or accidents. Because they were not able to accept the act as rational, they rationalized the death (as opposed to the suicide) as something other than what it was (despite evidence that supported it was a suicidal act).

Shared Values. According to Roen et al. (2008), the final strategy involves individuals using a rational line of decision-making that involves a personal recognition of one's value within a social group or community. Data supporting this claim is most evident in the first Palo Alto cluster when two self-identified students posted in the same comment section. One of them stated that "suicide should never be an answer to anything," while another stated, "I'll admit that I have had some suicidal thoughts lately and this is a big wake up call for me. It's not worth it." These individuals, while one of them othered and the second identified with the victim, both expressed a value of one's place within their own world. Again, this domain was much less developed within the second cluster in Palo Alto. This fourth strategy was also much rarer within the Cornell University cluster.

Social Influences of Suicide – A Social Autopsy

Data from both the online news reports and the comment sections were used in order to perform a social autopsy. Much of this public discourse allowed the research to better analyze the social conditions of the two communities under investigation. Furthermore, these findings can be analyzed for how these social environments may have varying levels of social integration and normative regulation. As a result, the researcher can draw some conclusions about the risks associated with anomic, egoistic, and fatalistic suicides within these communities. Finally, the researcher was also able to address how several social institutions may have contributed to the creation of social conditions that are conducive to suicidal behaviors. The following research questions were answered by the data: What does the data reveal about levels of social integration and normative regulation? Given the social influences discussed in both the articles and the comment sections, what types of suicide (egoistic, fatalistic, and/or anomic) are these communities at risk of experiencing? Applications of the macro theories outlined in chapter II are mapped onto the data in the following discussion.

Social Integration. Social integration involves an individual feeling embedded into a social group and/or community (Bearman 1991). Too much or too little social integration can be a negative social condition for the individual. As far as the data from both Palo Alto clusters is concerned, the evidence suggests that social integration within the PAUSD and Palo Alto community is quite low. It was especially low at the onset of the first cluster before many of the integrative prevention measures had been put in place.

Although it would appear that many of the individuals attending Gunn High and Palo Alto High are heavily involved in the social world through school, sports, extra-

curricular activities, etc., it also seems as though these same individuals feel an immense amount of isolation. Throughout the data, the school system at Gunn High was described as a “competitive” environment where students were pitted against other students in order to achieve individualistic goals. Respondents often mentioned family life and that there was a lack of social cohesion within the family. Public discourse reflected a shared experience with parents frequently focused on performance rather than connectedness as a sign of the personal success of their offspring. Furthermore, the data suggests that these adolescents’ lives were so full of scheduled events that there was very little time for socializing outside of those settings. In other words, there was very little time for becoming completely integrated in meaningful ways. This suggests that teens and young adults within the community may be suffering from a lack of social cohesion across multiple social groups (educational setting [classmates], peers/friends, and within the family).

Despite this obvious lack of social integration amongst the Palo Alto community, the data also suggests that there are multiple integrative solutions in place. For example, media reports and public discourse within the first cluster noted the presence of multiple suicide prevention coalitions focusing on togetherness and social support. These included the Talk to Me Campaign, ROCK, and HMGGMH (as noted in chapter IV). Despite the continuation of these programs, along with the addition of several others, the second suicide cluster in Palo Alto still occurred. This would suggest that even with the presence of integrating support systems, there is still a need for further integrative practices, especially within the family.

The discussions at Cornell University suggest a very similar social environment. Individuals within the Cornell University community (not so much Ithaca) frequently discussed how the university created an isolating environment. Multiple respondents noted that faculty and support groups were frequently unavailable. Faculty was accused of not caring enough for their students as individuals. And, counselors were accused of not really caring about their patients. The competitiveness of the highly ranked university setting was also brought up as a very isolating social situation. Respondents frequently claimed that their course schedules and workloads demanded too much of their time. While there was less discussion of family support, one can assume that many of the individuals are “away at college” from their families, some for the first time (two of the victims were first-years). While this does not necessarily mean that the cohesion within the family would be lessened, it is highly likely that this geographic distance may have lessened the feelings of integration associated with family life.

Normative Regulation. Normative regulation is related to how many normative demands an individual is experiencing within a social group. Too much or too little regulation can be bad for the individual’s mental health. As noted in chapter II, too little integration can affect the levels of regulation; if you are not integrated, how can you be regulated? In both locations, the data suggests that concurring low levels and high levels of regulation likely occurred within the same vulnerable population.

Many individuals expressed a wide array of pressures placed upon these students. As noted, these pressures included academics (current and future endeavors), peer group interactions, and familial life. First, the data from Palo Alto suggests that teens and young adults within the PAUSD school district were experiencing extremely high levels of

regulation. With such an emphasis on academic performance, many of these teens and young adults felt a lack of personal agency. They receive hours and hours of homework each night, and they did not feel as though they have a say in their daily schedules due to attempts to “grow their resumes” for acceptance into universities. The percentage of students with high GPAs who go off to four year universities (as explored in chapter IV), while impressive, begs the question of how much agency these students have over their own lived experience. The number of students participating in AP classes also reveals a level of high-achieving academic pressure. As noted above, this competitive environment certainly creates a situation with very little integration. But, it also could be argued that it creates an environment of extreme regulation. In order for students in this school district to remain competitive amongst their equally high-achieving peers, they must maintain extremely regimented everyday lives.

Cornell University appears to be very similar to Palo Alto. As noted in the data, individuals within the Cornell community frequently talked about the extreme pressures they felt, especially during qualifying examinations and the period leading up to spring break. The academic/social environment was described by commentators as being very academically challenging, and individuals felt that they had very little time to do anything other than focus on their schooling. This type of social environment is the direct result of too much social regulation, which can lead to fatalistic tendencies.

The institution of family also appears to be an overly regulating institution that these teens and young adults participate in. The data within the comment sections reveal that the family lives of Palo Alto students is heavily connected to expectations for performance. Respondents expressed feelings of self worth within their family being tied

to academic performance and success. Parents acknowledged that they pressured their children too much. Not to mention, the level of education and professionalism in Palo Alto would mean that children raised in this community have much to live up to if they are going to be as successful (if not more so) than their parents. Furthermore, the expectations associated with affluence appear to lead to a rather restrictive set of ideals and/or expectations for behavior and performance. The data in the comment sections revealed that these expectations are explicitly stated, and it could be especially hard for children to escape this extreme level of normative regulation if they are experiencing it both within the school system and at home.

At the same time these students were experiencing fatalism (too much regulation), teens and young adults in Palo Alto and Cornell University were also likely experiencing anomie (too little regulation). Many of them are transitioning into adulthood. Their roles within their family life are likely changing. Respondents discussed having very little time to be a child because they were being pushed into the stresses of adulthood, i.e. they were planning for their academic and professional careers. In other words, they were being asked to perform at an adult level, yet often still feel like children due to a lack of autonomy within their family life. Therefore, they may be experiencing the type of cognitive disjuncture associated with anomie.

Although only occasionally noted within the data, it is also important to consider the age of the students at Cornell University (more generally) and the victims (more specifically). Many of these individuals are off at college for the first time. Three of the victims were in one of their first two years, and two of the victims were in their third year of college. Respondents referred to college as a “time of uncertainty” and referred to

college as “a rough time for students in general with social life, school work, and thinking about what we really want to do with our life.” As a result of this setting, these individuals may be facing newfound feelings of autonomy associated with adulthood. This is a temporary, transitional stage common amongst college students. It is quite possible that this change in living arrangements and/or shift in thinking could cause the type of cognitive disjuncture that is associated with anomic suicides.

Besides adolescence, anomie may also be linked with affluence. According to Durkheim ([1897] 2006), wealthy individuals experience a kind of limitlessness desire for additional consumption. He states that a wealthy person’s sensibility is “a bottomless abyss that nothing can fill...Since nothing limits them, they always exceed the means at their disposal by an infinite amount” (p. 270). This can lead to a sense of dissatisfaction. The youth within Palo Alto appear to constantly achieve goals and limitations of an advanced nature, yet it does not appear to be enough. Their desires to achieve more are bottomless. According to Durkheim ([1897] 2006):

The man [or woman] who has always expected everything from the future and lived with his [or her] eyes fixed on things to come has nothing in his [or her] past to comfort him against the disappointments of the present, because for him [or her] the past has only been a series of stages to be got through impatiently. He [or she] has become blind to himself [or herself] because he [or she] always thought that he [or she] would find later the happiness that he [or she] had not met up to then...Fatigue, moreover, is enough in itself to produce disillusionment because in the long run it is hard not to feel the senselessness of such an endless pursuit (p. 281)

Thus, they put an extreme amount of pressure upon themselves to achieve an infinite amount. “Wealth, by the power that it confers, gives us the illusion that we depend only on ourselves” (Durkheim ([1897] 2006:278).

According to Durkheim ([1897] 2006:281), “When the slightest difficulty arises, one is deprived of any means to withstand it.” The suicides within these communities may actually act as a form of social disturbance to the collective order. According to Durkheim ([1897] 2006), this can lead some individuals to commit suicide. He states, “Whenever serious rearrangements take place in the social body, whether they are due to a sudden growth or to an unexpected disaster, men [and women] are more inclined to kill themselves” (p. 269). Ironically, this sort of disjuncture or social upheaval could be the result of the suicide cluster itself. The social lives/environment of individuals living within these two communities were drastically altered by the suicides within their community. At the same time, the data suggests that students (and potentially the victims) may have been experiencing anomic disruptions due to the economic conditions in 2009-2010. Several media sources, as well as public discourse, referred to the lack of internships and jobs available to them upon graduation. Commentators viewed the economic environment as contributing to suicidal ideation and/or behaviors. All of this suggests that they may be experiencing both high (fatalistic) and low (anomic) levels of regulation at the same time.

Organic Societies. According to Bearman (1991:506), an organic society is a society “freed from the bonds of collective personality, and as all people are unique, nothing social (common) remains to regulate them. Each individual pursues highly individuated ends using others as means.” Both communities expressed evidence of living in an organic society. First, Palo Alto has a large division of labor, and the city is located within the urban center of the Bay Area, CA. It is well known as being the hub of the technology industry of Silicon Valley. People there support the practices associated

with capitalism, especially competitiveness. As noted by respondents, this is a high-achieving community, but possibly one without heart. People are more focused on being unique, and therefore, distinguishable from others they compete with. The focus seems to be more on individual performance than it is on community building and group support. Even families seemed more focused on the individual success of their children than they were on keeping their children emotionally supported.

Cornell University seemed to be very similar to Palo Alto. While the university is not necessarily located in a large urban area, the campus certainly provides for a more urban feel with its business-like environment and its slant towards performance, individualism, and competitiveness. Respondents frequently noted that faculty was self-absorbed and too interested in their own work to care about students. They also noted how staff counselors were disengaged from caring about the student experience, and instead they were focused on prescribing drugs to solve the problems of anxiety and depression on campus. Furthermore, multiple respondents mentioned the extreme isolation amongst students caused by nobody “giving a shit” about one another unless it was for selfish ends (“to get a good grade, an officer title in a club, or to look good on a resume”).

Due to living in this type of organic society, these individuals likely experienced egoism, and therefore, they are prone to egoistic suicides due to the social environment in which they reside. Students of affluent high schools and universities are raised in communities that focus on rigorous educational goals in a nation that practices staunch individualism. This combination is toxic and poses a huge threat to the masses of upper class and highly educated teens that experience this dynamic across the nation. And,

while it has not necessarily happened elsewhere within this organic society, it could be some combination of factors that just happened to include organic, society-induced egoism as part of a larger social system inhabited by the victims.

Factor of Suicide – Family and Affluence. According to Stockard and O'Brien (2002), the family is the strongest stabilizing force in modern society. Given that the family is a stabilizing force within the life of the individual, it is also likely that the family is capable of both integrating and regulating the individuals within it. In most cases, the family could act as a buffer for suicide. However, if the family is unable to regulate its members appropriately, or if they are unable to form social cohesion (integration) with its members, it could actually be a more detrimental force within an individual's life.

Within the family, disruptions to the normative regulation may influence levels of microanomie (Bjarnason 2009; Konty 2005). It was unclear from the data whether or not any of the victims experienced family issues that are associated with suicidality, such as divorce, substance abuse, two-parent homes, or aging. However, the data does suggest that other individuals within the comment sections may be at risk due to microanomic factors, especially in terms of aging and the presence of two-parent (affluent) working families. As noted by LeBeau (1988), this can lead individuals to experience the “silver spoon syndrome” where they feel less integrated within the family unit due to a deficiency in “family time.” This disconnect can lead to children feeling less socially integrated within their families. Despite the data suggesting that parents were heavily involved in their children's lives, this type of interaction was involvement, not connection or cohesion (Lareau 2003; Levine 2006; Darrah et al. 2007).

As noted, the data also suggests an extreme amount of familial pressure on the children to succeed. In some families, expectations of success are extremely high. Many of their parents likely have college degrees and successful careers, and respondents frequently discussed the pressure to live up to or exceed their parents' level of success. Respondents who self-identified as parents within the comment sections also frequently admitted to putting too much pressure on their children to perform well. This can lead to fatalistic-anomic suicides, as described by Abrutyn and Mueller (2014). And, when their children failed to live up to their expectations, the children were not allowed to show signs of weakness. As noted in the data, several students at Gunn High in Palo Alto discussed how they often hid their true feelings from the family member as a result of these pressures. This supports Levine's (2007) claims about the link between affluence, privacy, and perfection. Furthermore, it supports the claims that the families are operating "unyielding...absolute parental authority" (Marx [1846] 1999:53). Therefore, evidence from all three clusters suggests that the institution of family could be at least partially to blame for the suicides within the communities of Cornell University and Palo Alto.

Evidence from all three clusters, especially the two in Palo Alto, suggest that affluence or socio-economic class may play a role in the rates of suicide within these clusters. As noted, Palo Alto is an extremely wealthy community. It is ranked in the top five most expensive cities to live in within the United States. And, Cornell University is an expensive Ivy League school that attracts affluence. Since the wealthy are more prone to anomie (described more below), this puts the individuals within these communities at higher risk for suicide.

Affluent teens also face the excessive regulation of behavior that is forced on them by parents, the school system, and greater society. This research suggests that children of affluent families have a tendency to feel completely restricted by these expectations, and often feel they are unable to explore personal interests outside of the social roles they have been assigned to. These teens do not ask to be born into these high-pressure situations, and they have few resources to help them understand their place within greater society or their options outside of the role in which they have been assigned.

Factor of Suicide – Peers. Bearman (1991) claims that the peer group ideologies may be in conflict with familial ideologies, thus creating anomic conditions. However, this research does not support this claims. The data suggests that many of the peer groups these victims would have been associated very much mirror the ideologies of their parents and affluent community. Respondents frequently commented on the competitiveness of their peer groups. There was no evidence within the data that would suggest individuals struggling with the competing demands of friends and family. In the cases under investigation, the two belief/value systems appeared to aligned seamlessly. Therefore, there would have been minimal disjuncture created by having to double between the two social role expectations. Instead, it is possible that peer groups may have acted to confirm the value systems put forth by parents.

Roen et al. (2008) argues that a peer's suicide may cause an individual to feel supportive or unsupportive of the individual who died by suicide. In some cases, friends who are left behind may feel personally responsible for the death. The evidence within this research certainly supports this claim. Peers frequently commented that they should

have done more. Not to mention, other members of the community frequently pointed the blame at peers for not saying anything to authority figures or for ignoring the problem. In fact, many of the proposed solutions involved working with peer groups to prevent future suicides.

In many cases, the peer groups within the data were supportive of their peers who had committed suicide. They had, in fact, identified with their social conditions. Many of them then turned to support others who were still surviving. They started multiple campaigns on campus, such as Gunn's "Talk to Me" campaign. This is evidence of what Roen et al. (2008) refer to as a "supportive network." Very few individuals were unsupportive by claiming that the victim only committed suicide as a call for attention. Again, most of the respondents could relate to and understand the social conditions that may have led to their peer's suicide.

Despite the frequent occurrence of blame focused towards peer groups within the data. Findings from this research suggest that peer groups likely had a minimal impact on the social conditions that were conducive to suicide within these two communities. On the contrary, there is evidence that peer groups were quite supportive and even became stronger as the clusters grew larger. While the competitiveness of peer groups may have played a small role in feelings of isolation, the number of social gathering, initiatives, and campaigns successfully started by students suggests that this was a strong system of support for the vulnerable population once the clusters began.

Factor of Suicide – Education. Evidence from all three clusters suggests that the system of education is at least partially to blame for the social conditions that would influence the rates of suicide within the PAUSD and Cornell University. The school

system stands to socialize its students into a particular way of thinking and living. Normally, this would increase integration and normative regulation. However, for adolescents and young adults there is a tendency for school systems to create social isolation and cognitive dissonance. Evidence outlined in chapter IV and the arguments outlined above would suggest that PAUSD and Cornell University both upheld social environments with too much isolation and too much normative regulation.

Given the educational demands of both school systems, the individuals attending these three institutions (Cornell University, Palo Alto High, and Gunn High) are likely very gifted. As noted, Cornell University is one of the top ranked universities in the country with an acceptance rate of 15 percent. Even with the presence of legacy students, one can conclude that students actually attending are quite intelligent. Both Gunn High and Palo Alto High are ranked high amongst secondary educational institutions within the United States. Furthermore, both high schools are popular feeder schools to nearby Stanford University, which has an acceptance rate of five percent. Since highly intelligent individuals are at higher risk for suicide (Harkavy and Asnis 1985; Seibel and Murray 1988; Hayes and Sloat 1990; Cross, Cook, and Dixson 1996), findings would suggest that students of these school districts could be suffering from the perfectionism that can lead to higher rates of death by suicide due to an excess of normative regulation.

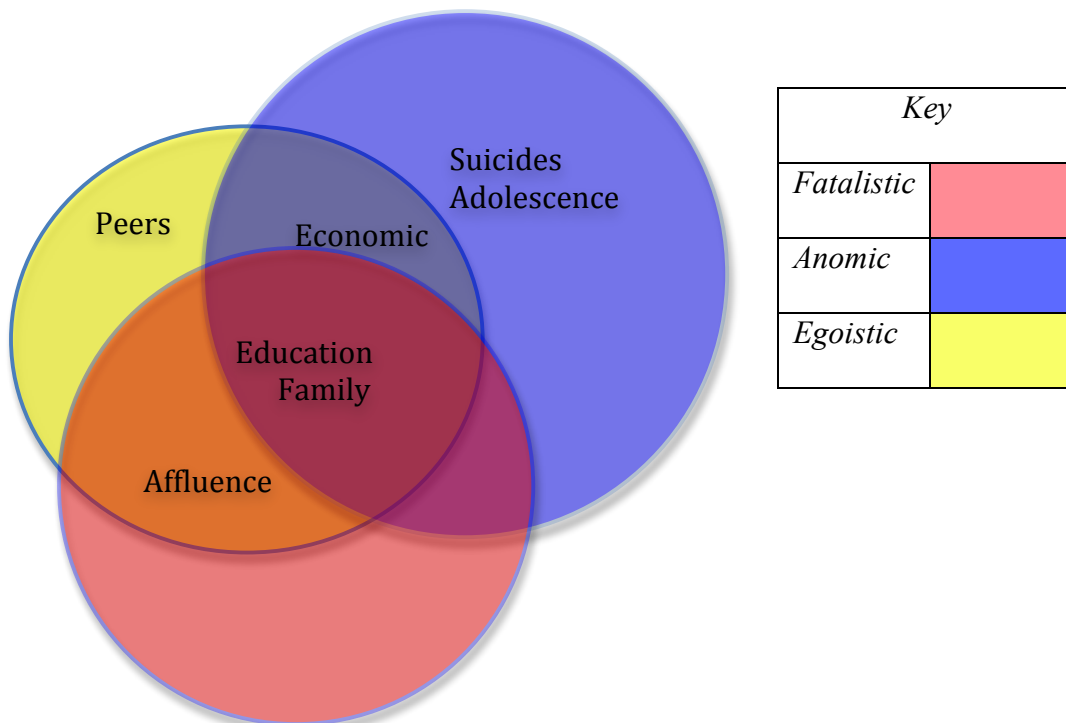
Types of Suicides. The social institutions outlined above interact in order to influence varying levels of social integration and normative regulation. Therefore, a consideration of how these social forces may have influenced suicidal behaviors through the creation of an egoistic, fatalistic, and/or anomic society is necessary. While research (Durkheim [1897] 2006; Bearman 1991) has noted that two types societies linked to

higher rates of suicide can occur simultaneously, there has been very little acknowledgement of how three types of societies may interact (see table 7 and figure 1) to produce a very high risk level for suicide. The discussion below contributes to the macro theories of suicide by challenging how researchers should think about the spectrum of normative regulation, in particular, but also how social institutional participation may affect an individual on multiple levels at the same time.

Table 7 - Frequency of Suicide Types by Institution

| | Fatalism | Anomic | Egoistic |
|------------------|----------|--------|----------|
| Economic Factors | | | |
| Education | | | |
| Family | | | |
| Affluence | | | |
| Peers | | | |
| Suicides | | | |
| Adolescence | | | |

Figure 1: Venn Diagram – Risks of Suicide Types and the Corresponding Influences



Types of Suicide – Egoism. According to the data, egoism was one of the largest risk factors among the social environments under investigation. Egoistic conditions were found in the system of education, the (affluent) family, amongst peer groups, and within the economy. According to Durkheim ([1897] 1966), egoistic suicides occur in societies where individualism is at its peak. It most commonly occurs when an individual feels as if their life has lost meaning due to the separation (isolation) from society. As noted, egoism is most popular within organic societies. In such communities, the risk for egoistic suicides is quite high. The social conditions do not allow for higher levels of integration. The competitiveness of the educational environments and the resulting individualism experienced by respondents suggests that conditions within these educational settings are ripe for egoistic suicides. The isolation and individualism experienced within their families and community at-large (due to capitalistic, organic design) also may contribute to a social environment where community members are at risk for suicide due to a lack of social cohesion. While this research does not attempt to typify those suicides that occurred, it would not be unreasonable to think that one or more of the suicides could have occurred due to a lack of social integration (egoism).

Types of Suicide – Anomic. Anomic conditions were similarly prevalent to egoistic social conditions. According to the data, anomic conditions existed in the following institutions: family life (due to shifting roles of an adolescent), the education system, and the economy. Individuals who are not appropriately integrated may, as a result, not be regulated appropriately either. Anomic suicides happen most frequently within communities that are experiencing some sort of upheaval. In this case, the

individual may or may not be appropriately integrated. However, they are definitely not appropriately regulated.

Given the age group of these individuals, one can conclude that many of them are entering a transitional stage in life. They are maturing from childhood and entering into adulthood, which are two life stages with many different expectations. Therefore, it would not be unreasonable to argue that the conditions within these two social groups (high school students and university students) are prone to anomic suicides due to age. Compared to the more macro social causes outlined above with egoism, this would be a more social psychological form of anomie (see Bjarnason 2009).

Within these cases, it is also quite possible that the population was prone to anomie due to larger institutional shifts. As noted within the data, many of the school policies within both systems (PAUSD and Cornell University) were in flux due to the suicide clustering. Many of the individuals who participated within these educational institutions likely experienced some sort of upheaval or quick change in norms from how they experienced school before the suicides versus how they experienced school after the suicides. Multiple respondents discussed how the changes implemented on campus had affected them. Many of them questioned the changes and wondered if they would be effective in preventing future suicides. At any rate, the system they were participating in found itself scrambling to regain social order. That shifting could lead to further feelings of anomie, putting students at high risk for anomic suicides.

Finally, there was a larger societal/macro level factor that could put individuals at risk for anomic suicides, and that was the economic conditions during the first two clusters (in 2009-2010). The lack of regulation caused by the social conditions of the

economic collapse of 2008 changed the social environment of the entire country. Futures were not guaranteed, and according to the data, many individuals on a macro level experienced feelings of discouragement due to these anomic disruptions. This would have created a type of “dissonance [that] yields normlessness and the absence of regulation, despite integration” (Bearman 1991:519). However, this explanation does not suffice for the second cluster in Palo Alto given that the economy in 2014 was almost fully recovered from the collapse.

Types of Suicide – Fatalistic. Recognition of fatalistic social conditions is less widespread. However, according to the data, fatalistic conditions were still prevalent in the (affluent) family and the education system. Although the concept of fatalism was not deeply developed by Durkheim ([1897] 1966), he did note that fatalism results from too much regulation within a social group. Bearman (1991:520) argued that the “fatalists has no identity beyond the role that he or she must occupy.” In other words, the individual feels as though they have very little autonomy over their own life chances. Given the amount of extreme regulation within the (affluent) family and the education system experienced by community members in both Palo Alto and Cornell University, findings suggest that these teens and young adults may be vulnerable to fatalistic suicides.

The academic environment, as noted above, was a very restrictive social world for many of the respondents within the data set. As noted in chapter IV, many current and prior students admitted to the extreme pressures they experienced as a student. These academic environments were often referred to as “pressure cooker” environments where regulations and expectations on behavior were rigid. Furthermore, one’s self worth appeared to be based solely on one’s ability to perform these roles to perfection.

The family life of members within Palo Alto also exhibited fatalistic characteristics. The many respondents that came forward to say that they were dealing with strict family expectations of success and the parents who admitted to pushing their children beyond reason reveal a level of normative regulation that could be deemed excessive. Given the high performance of many of the students within both communities, it is fair to conclude that many of the students within both communities are able to live up to these high expectations.

In some ways, these communities are similar to a total institution. Durkheim ([1898] 2006) noted that imitation did not exist. However, he recognized the clustering of suicides in areas that experienced “collective resolve” (p. 124). He believed that individuals who shared “similar circumstances” were likely to “react in concert under pressure” (p. 124). While he spoke specifically of military participants and/or patients in a psychiatric facility, certainly, the teens and young adults in Palo Alto and Cornell University are experiencing similar social circumstances. There is very little room for autonomy and/or individual agency. Therefore, one should not be surprised that they are reacting under concert given the fatalistic pressures they experience in everyday life.

Types of Suicide – Intersecting Typologies. Typologies interacted in more than one social institution. This is not surprising given the literature on interactive characteristics. According to Durkheim ([1897] 2006:318), “Characteristics belong to several of them are found together in the same suicide. The reason is that the different social causes of suicide can themselves act simultaneously on a single individual and have combined effects on him [or her].” Durkheim ([1898] 2006:318) felt that the two types of suicide most likely to have a “particular affinity” for each other were egoism and

anomie. According to Bearman (1991:522), egoism and anomie go “hand in hand.” Durkheim ([1897] 2006) also felt that anomie could coexist with altruism, which is not applicable to this research. He did not, however, mention any connection between fatalism and anomie other than that they were opposite ends of the same spectrum of normative regulation. Johnson (1965) argued that Durkheim’s typologies could be reduced to one type of suicide. However, he did this by completely removing fatalism (and altruism) from the conversation. He too felt that egoism and anomic suicides could co-exist.

While Durkheim ([1897] 1966) suggested that social groups experience anomie *or* fatalism. This research suggests that individuals can experience *both* anomie *and* fatalism at the same time. Within both social environments (Cornell and Palo Alto), evidence of fatalism existed in tandem with anomie, even within the same social institution. As noted with the system of education, these individuals experience such rigid, performance-based scheduling that they had very little control over their own life actions/decisions. For many of them, their worth was determined by their performance. Therefore, there was very little space for developing self-concepts outside of the highly organized, strict environment they were operating within. At the same time, they were also exposed to shifting conditions within the system of education linked to the suicidal behaviors of their peers. Although this combination would not explain the first suicides within the cluster, it would certainly apply to the social environment experienced by future victims.

Besides the institution of education, the teens and young adults in these communities also would have experienced both anomic and fatalistic conditions with the family. While family members had very high expectations that led to rigid role

expectations, teens and young adults were likely also experience a new lack of normative regulation given their role shift from child to adolescent and/or young adult. These shifts could have created additional strain within the same area of social life (normative regulation within the family).

Finally, in some cases, teens and young adults within these communities may have been experiencing all three types of societies (egoistic, anomic, and fatalistic), sometimes within the same institution. For example, within the family all three were present. As noted above these teens and young adults were likely experiencing anomic and fatalistic conditions at the same time. However, they were also experiencing egoism linked to capitalism and individualistic thinking that prevails in affluent family life. These three interacting factors would put children from affluent families at very high risk for suicide. These conclusions/findings suggests that Durkheim's typologies need to be more flexible in order to adapt to these types of social scenarios. If sociologists continue to use Durkheim's ([1897] 2006) more narrow definition, and if they continue to ignore fatalistic society, a potentially high risk situation could be overlooked due to a lack of conceptual development of macro theories of suicidal behavior.

Micro Sociological and Psychological Theories of Suicide

The findings from chapter IV provided insight into how more micro sociological and/or psychological theories might fit with the cases under investigation. Below is a brief discussion of how the findings both uphold and challenge components of these theories. The discussion below addresses the question of how psychological theories of imitation and contagion can be used to explain the behaviors found in these point clusters.

According to Tarde (1903:xiii), imitation occurs “when a [hu]man...reflects the opinions of others, or allows an action of others to be suggested to him [or her]. English and English (1958) claim that imitation involves the copying of behavior with or without intent to copy. Imitation usually involves the copy of a behavior, more or less, identically (English and English 1958). As such, if a peer or family member commits suicide, this puts those left behind at risk for suicide as well (Gould et al. 1990). This is especially true of teens that are more prone to modeling behavior (Stillion et al. 1989; Dunlop et al. 2011). The evidence supports the copying of the said behavior in a more or less exact same way as the earlier victims within the cluster. For example, of the victims in Palo Alto, all but one stepped in front of the Caltrain. And, of those who died by train, they all died at one of three different intersections within the city (despite the presence of other intersections made available to them). Furthermore, the three final suicides at Cornell University all involved jumping into the same gorge. This copycat behavior would suggest that imitation played some role in the suicides within these cases.

Contagion is similar to imitation. However, contagion is more the result of multiple individuals participating in the same behavior due to similar social conditions. According to (Tarde 1903 also see Akers 1994; English and English 1958), contagion occurs when an individual carries out a particular behavior, which results in others in the group followings suit. This is also referred to as “behavioral contagion,” and it is viewed as more spontaneous, whereas imitation is viewed as more deliberate. While there is no evidence within the data that suggests any of the victims were friends with each other, there is evidence that they attended the same educational environment at the same time. The data suggests that other teens (not necessarily the ones committing suicide within the

clusters) expressed a strong identification with the victims due to shared social environments. This would, therefore, suggest a high risk for contagious suicides. Some of the victims at Cornell University even shared the same major. And, some of the students at Gunn High shared the same class level. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that individuals within both school systems were likely under the influence of similar social conditions. Therefore, one could claim that those left behind could have easily identified with the victims, which can lead the type of contagious suicides found in clusters.

According to Baller and Richardson (2002), acceptance of both imitation and contagion are necessary in order to better understand geographic (point) clustering. This is largely due to how individuals, especially teens and young adults, lack the coping skills necessary for dealing with a peer's suicide (Romer et al. 2006). For example, teens and young adults (the vulnerable population) may view their peer's suicide as confirming of their own hopeless situation. This is especially true if the peer group shares similar social conditions with the victim. Evidence from the cases studied herein suggest that many of the victim's peers felt hopelessness in reference to the social conditions they found themselves living under.

It is, however, important to note that there is evidence that contagion may not be as prominent within these cases as psychologists may assume. First, one must note the geographical location of each case; all but one of the suicides in Palo Alto happened at Gunn High School. The social conditions within the city of Palo Alto are very similar. So, if contagion were the only useful explanation, one would also see higher rates of suicide at Palo Alto High. Furthermore, one may expect to see the same type of suicide clusters at nearby Stanford (another highly competitive environment within the same

geographical region). However, this is not the case. Also, it is important to note that Gunn High and Palo Alto High are just miles away from high schools in nearby East Palo Alto and Menlo Park. On a side, Menlo Park also has the same Caltrain tracks running through its city. If clustering was fully and inescapably contagious, one would assume these other nearby schools would experience suicides at the same frequency as Gunn High. This lack of spread to nearby schools supports the critique (of contagion) offered by Durkheim ([1897] 1966). There have been no publicized suicide clusters in either of these two neighboring communities despite their location in proximity to the track suicides and/or their shared demographics with the victims of these two clusters. Finally, with the Cornell University case, the suicide cluster had not spread to the city of Ithaca. It was completely contained within the campus boundaries. There certainly are affluent and stressed individuals within that same area who did not feel compelled to imitate their peers.

Durkheim also critiques theories of imitation and contagion due to the fact that these theories do not adequately explain the start of the suicide clusters. He instead focuses on “shared group attributes,” i.e. social factors as the cause for suicide clusters. He states, “The idea does not arise in one individual in particular, then spread among the others, but is developed by the whole of the group which, placed jointly in a desperate situation, collectively consigns itself to death. This is just what happens every time that a social group, whatever it may be, reacts in concert under pressure from similar circumstances (Durkheim [1897] 1966:125). Therefore, theories of imitation and contagion do not go far enough in explaining the suicide clusters under investigation within these cases. Imitation and contagion likely played a role, but only accepting this

perspective would be incredibly limiting to understanding the social issue, and therefore could limit the suggestions for social change.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

According to the CDC (2008), suicide is the third leading cause of death for individuals aged 10-24. Death by suicide amongst this population has increased rapidly in recent years amongst more recent cohorts (Girard 1993; Stockard and O'Brien 2002; Bearman and Moody 2004; O'Brien and Stockard 2006; and Levine 2007). Of the suicides within this age bracket, up to 13 percent of them happen within suicide clusters (Gould et al. 1990; Gould et al. 2003). This project examined three such cases: two in the city of Palo Alto and one at Cornell University. While some may argue that these suicides were influenced by individual factors, this research suggested that these suicides are also linked to social factors.

A social factor that was heavily investigated through this research is the influence of the media. Because there is research (see Phillips 1974; Bollen and Phillips 1982; Stillion et al. 1989; Gould et al. 2003; Hittner 2005; Romer et al. 2006; and Hagihara et al. 2014) linking the publication of news reports to the growth of suicide clusters (both point and mass), the CDC and the AFSP have established preventative guidelines for journalists. These guidelines, which are essentially “framing guidelines,” have been shown by some researchers to reduce the rates of suicide clustering (Sonneck et al. 1994; Etzersforfer and Sonneck 1998; Niederkrotenthaler and Sonneck 2007; Thom et al. 2012).

While this study did not set out to measure the effectiveness of these guidelines within the cases included, it did seek to better understand whether or not online media outlets adhere to these suicide prevention guidelines. This research also sought to better

understand how a failure to abide by these guidelines related to the formation of each individual cluster. Findings suggested that, in general, media outlets do not conform to the five guidelines selected for inclusion. Not a single article from all three cases abided by all six guidelines. However, findings also suggest that the majority of the failure to adhere to these guidelines occurred near the end of the suicide clusters in each cluster under investigation. This would suggest that, while failing to abide by these guidelines may increase the risk of suicide contagion amongst the masses (mass clustering), it did not necessarily increase the risk of contagion within these point clusters. Otherwise, the clusters would have continued much further beyond the boundaries where these clusters ended, especially given that media publications (in general) increased towards the end of the cluster. This would suggest that, within these clusters, individuals are more vulnerable in the early stages of clusters when there are *fewer* media reports of suicide. Although findings of this analysis are not statistically generalizable to the population of point cluster suicides nationally, they have implications for when and how frequently online news media outlets publish reports on suicide clustering.

In order to better understand what role these media reports may play within the communities under investigation, a study of the qualitative nature of these failures to adhere to the recommendations was conducted. By examining how the media frames the issue of teen/young adult suicides, one can better understand the relationship between media framing and public discourse. Therefore, the public discourse associated with these media reports was also examined qualitatively. This research sought to better understand how these media frames, which frequently failed to abide by the guidelines, may have influenced the consumers of those media messages. The findings outlined within this

analysis fill a void in academic literature. As noted, very few (if any) studies have been conducted on how the media frames these issues in relationship to the guidelines.

Other framing domains were developed within the context of this project. One of those was an examination of whether or not these online news media sources included factual information pertaining to suicide in their publications. According to Cummins-Gauthier (2003), the inclusion of factual information in articles pertaining to tragic events can actually help individuals to have a better understanding of what is going on *and* how to solve the issue at hand. This research discovered that quite a few of these publications included some sort of scientific fact, usually in reference to suicide risk factors, warning signs, and public resource information. This was especially true in the more recent cluster in Palo Alto. Given that the growth of the cluster slowed and/or ended with an increase in publications, one may conclude (at least within these three cases) that this information may have aided others in better understanding how to prevent further suicides within the community.

Because a failure by the media to abide by these guidelines is associated with increased rates of suicide amongst teens, and because teens and young adults are more likely to consume media online (Dunlop et al. 2011), it is also important to understand how the public discourse that occurs in online news media sources may actually fail to adhere as well. If the public discourse mirrors that of the media frame, which it often does, and individuals responding to those frames are likely unaware of the recommendations by the CDC and AFSP, how might this discourse affect vulnerable populations? This research suggests that individuals within the comment sections frequently participated in some of the very same failures, including discussing methods,

dramatizing the effects of the suicide on others, glorifying the victim, and discussing the location of suicides. However, findings also suggest that individuals who respond may hold oppositional viewpoints in comparison to the media frame. These findings could effect how public forums are managed through these media outlets. For example, this raises interesting questions about responsibility. Because the media is aware of the guidelines, should they moderate and/or delete comments that fail to adhere? Or, do these unmediated comments serve a greater purpose in these communities?

According to discourse scholars (Cummins-Gauthier 2003), the media reports on tragic events may evoke an emotional response from readers. If so, this can lead to public discourse on the topics of problem solving and/or collective will. This research discovered an abundance of discussions related to problem solving. Within every case, individuals used these forums to discuss possible ways to circumvent the clustering. In fact, the third cluster under examination (the second in Palo Alto) included mostly comments on this topic. There were also strong discussions of collective will across the cases. This would suggest that people used these forums as a space to speak openly and frankly about a topic that is normally quite taboo in face-to-face interactions. What does this reveal about this method of discourse? Online news media, in comparison to the more traditional print and television media, may offer a unique experience in terms of better understanding the social issue at hand. Hypothetically, this could ultimately led to pushing for policy and/or behavioral changes in order to implement some of the prevention methods and collective decisions that came out of those discussions. And, as evident by the case comparison between the two Palo Alto clusters, some of the prevention methods mentioned in the first cluster were eventually implemented.

However, these implementations obviously did not fully solve the social issue since the second cluster developed several years later.

The examination of these comment forums also allowed the researcher to better understand how the individuals within the community were making sense of suicide. While the research by Roen et al. (2008) only examined teenagers' sense-making strategies, this research was able to examine it across the population. Roen et al. (2008) claim that teenagers make sense of suicide by doing one or more of the following: othering the victim, rationalizing the suicide, identifying with the victim, and/or understanding their own value within the community. This research suggests that individual respondents within these areas of investigation very frequently identified with the victims of the clusters in all three cases. This would heavily suggest that these suicides are not of the individual nature, but are instead the result of social conditions. Many of the individuals responding could rationalize these deaths by providing a multitude of both individual and social factors that may have influenced the individual to die by suicide. These comment discussions also revealed how reading about the article allowed them to deal with the suicide by better understanding their own value within the community. In this way, these publications became a "wake up call" for other vulnerable individuals within the population. They also became a space for problem solving.

Part of the discussion within these forums was focused on the issue of blame and/or causes of suicide. Many individuals used the space to "finger point" specific individual and social factors. Some of these discussions mirrored the blaming discussions of the media frames, while others were conclusions that individuals had made outside of the article but brought them to the discussion anyways (quite possibly because the article

discussed causes/blame). As a result, these forums also became locations of defense and debate. This suggests that these forums could play an important role in better understanding the multitude of factors at play within these communities. This has the potential to lead to social change, assuming any of the issues are addressed within the community.

Through the evaluation of these discussions that were focused on blame and/or the causes of suicide, a better understanding of some of the social factors influencing suicide within these communities became clear. For example, discussions were rich with examples from how all of the following may play a role in individual suicides and suicide clustering: family, peer groups, education, socio-economic class (affluence), the economy, and the media. Conducting a thorough investigation of this public discourse could be quite valuable to organizations such as the CDC. In February of 2016 (shortly before the conclusion of this research project), the CDC came to Palo Alto in order to investigate the suicide clusters. Research such as this could be quite valuable by providing them with a large quantity of evidence that provides a “snapshot” of how the community feels about their lived experience.

Through the understanding of the social causes at play within these clusters, derived from the public discourse, a better understanding of how normative regulation and social integration may have played a role in the development of the clusters emerged. The findings suggest that teens and young adults (and likely others) within both of the communities under study likely suffer from a combination of anomic, egoistic, and fatalistic tendencies. Given these findings, community members could act to restore more appropriate (and protective) levels of normative regulation and social integration within

their communities. This could definitely lead to the prevention of future suicides more generally, but also specifically within these school districts.

Finally, this research project considered how these levels of normative regulation and social integration may affect which types of suicide are evident within the communities. Although Durkheim ([1898] 1966) thought that anomic and fatalistic suicides were the result of opposite issues (too little or too much regulation), this research suggests that a group of individuals may be prone to both anomic and fatalistic social situations at the same time. These findings are more closely aligned with Bearman (1991) and Abrutyn and Mueller (2014). Furthermore, given that the findings suggest that these communities fit the criteria of an organic society, they are also prone to egoistic suicides due to a lack of social cohesion. Knowing this information could lead to significant social change within these communities. For example, social bonds (both through the family and peer groups) could be strengthened to increase social integration, control (in the family and the education system) could be lessened in order to reduce fatalism, and an increase in regulation (by the family or the schools, but with consideration of the individual) or social support for anomic conditions (such as adolescence) could lead to a decrease in anomic tendencies.

Overall, this project takes a critical approach to contemporary, and somewhat ubiquitous, research that suggests there is a substantial influence of media representation of suicide on the formation and continuation of suicide clustering. Although the media is responsible for framing the issue in particular ways, findings derived from this research do not suggest that the onus of responsibility should be placed on the media, at least amongst the cases investigated. Findings suggest that media framing and its link to the

creation of public discourse are likely a buffer that could act as a form of prevention for suicide contagion and imitation. Thus, putting prevention measures in place that censor online news media reports may actually have harmful affects on public conversations that are necessary for creating shared meaning and community problem solving. This research also suggests that there are multiple other social forces at work; these are forces that need to be examined as evident by the community discourse.

APPENDIX

FINDINGS FOR NANTUCKET; NEEDHAM; AND WELLESLEY, MA

Table 8 – Nantucket, MA Articles

| Article Number | Suicide in Title | Method | Effects | Location | Pictures | Positive Characteristics |
|---|-------------------------|---------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|---------------------------------|
| First Suicide – February 3, 2007 | | | | | | |
| 02/08/2007 | | | X | X | X | X |
| 02/08/2007 | | | X | X | | X* |
| Second Suicide – October 4, 2007 | | | | | | |
| 10/11/2007 | | | X | | X | X |
| Third Suicide – January 8, 2007 | | | | | | |
| 01/10/2008 | | | X | X | X | X |
| 01/16/2008 | X | X | X | X | X | |
| 01/17/2008 | | | X | | | |
| 01/20/2008 | X | X | X | X | | X |
| 03/18/2008 | X | | X | X | X | X |
| 03/20/2008 | X | X | X | X | | |
| 06/08/2008 | | | X | | | |
| Fourth Suicide – August 7, 2008 | | | | | | |
| 08/09/2008 | | | | | | X* |
| 08/09/2008 | X | | | X | | |
| 08/10/2008 | X | | | X | | X |
| 08/11/2008 | X | X | | X | | |
| Total | 7 | 4 | 10 | 10 | 5 | 6 |

Table 9 - Needham, MA Articles

| Article Number | Suicide in Title | Method | Effects | Location | Pictures | Positive Characteristics |
|---|------------------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|--------------------------|
| First and Second Suicide – November 23, 2004 | | | | | | |
| 12/02/2004 | X | | X | X | X | X |
| 12/13/2004 | X | X | X | X | | X* |
| Third Suicide – October 21, 2005 | | | | | | |
| 11/09/2005 | | X | X | | | X* |
| 11/09/2005 | X | X | X | X | | |
| Fourth Suicide – April 3, 2006 | | | | | | |
| 04/04/2006 | | | X | | | |
| 04/12/2006 | X | | X | | | |
| 01/04/2007 | | | X | | | X |
| 02/25/2007 | X | | X | | | |
| 04/18/2007 | | | X | | | |
| 10/29/2007 | | | | | | |
| 06/15/2008 | X | | X | | | |
| Total | 6 | 3 | 10 | 3 | 1 | 4 |

Table 10 - Wellesley, MA Articles

| Article Number | Suicide in Title | Method | Effects | Location | Pictures | Positive Characteristics |
|--|------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|--------------------------|
| First Suicide – November 24, 2004 | | | | | | |
| Second Suicide – August 2005 | | | | | | |
| 10/05/2005 | | | X | | | X |
| 10/12/2005 | | | X | | | X |
| Third Suicide – November 2006 | | | | | | |
| Fourth Suicide – March 13, 2007 | | | | | | |
| 03/20/2007 | X | X | X | | | X |
| 03/20/2007 | | | X | X | | X |
| 03/27/2007 | | | X | | | |
| 03/29/2007 | | | | | | X |
| 03/29/2007 | | | X | | | |
| 04/04/2007 | | | X | | | X* |
| Fifth Suicide – November 29, 2007 | | | | | | |
| 12/03/2007 | | X | | X | | X |
| 01/24/2008 | | | | | | |
| 12/04/2009 | X | X | X | X | X | X* |
| 12/11/2009 | X | | X | | X | X |
| Total | 3 | 3 | 9 | 3 | 2 | 9 |

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