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## **Special Feature Article**

### **'Mask' and 'Vaccine': Association between Celebrity Suicide Reports in the Media and Suicide**

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#### **Abstract**

It has been speculated that celebrity suicide reports may have contributed to the increase in the number of suicides in Japan reported in 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic. Although there has been some progress in Japan regarding the understanding of the mechanisms and countermeasures related to media reports for suicide prevention in recent years, efforts are insufficient. Herein, we examine the relationship between celebrity suicide reports and the increase in the number of suicides due to the Covid-19 pandemic. We also review research findings on the relationship between celebrity suicides and media coverage and propose possible countermeasures.

We examined articles reporting celebrity suicides (number of articles, comments, and evaluations) on the Internet; the time series of the number of suicides by month in 2020; and studies that independently suggested that celebrity suicide reports had an impact on the number of suicides in 2020. We used a suicide contagion model that suicides caused by media coverage of celebrity suicides are an imitation of suicidal behavior because of social learning from the media rather than a cluster of suicide phenomena.

Considering media measures for suicide prevention from the contagion model, we propose that, in the context of a society where information diffusion is strong and people are easily isolated, appropriate media coverage based on guidelines can be used as a

'mask', and learning of correct knowledge about suicide prevention, such as how to overcome suicide risks when individuals are at risk, can be regarded as a 'vaccine'. Both of these suicide prevention measures for media should be promoted in the Covid-19 era. Our findings suggest that in clinical practice, we should ask patients who are at mild risk of suicide about the influence of media reports of celebrity suicides.

**Keywords:** celebrity suicides, suicide contagion, media guideline, Papageno effect

## Introduction

In 2020, when the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19 pandemic) began, the annual number of suicides increased for the first time in 11 years. That year was also notable for a chain of suicides involving multiple celebrities.<sup>6)</sup>

Sociological suicide research shows that suicide-reporting, depending on its content, can either increase the risk of suicide among the general public or contribute to suicide prevention. The former is called the Werther effect, and the latter is called the Papageno effect.<sup>13)</sup> Furthermore, reporting on celebrity suicides has long been known to increase suicide rates. This phenomenon is termed suicide contagion in Western countries. Specifically, society promotes individual suicidal behavior by glorifying the death of a celebrity or providing detailed coverage of the means and motives.<sup>2)</sup> While research on the mechanisms linking suicide coverage to increased suicide rates has advanced in recent

years, and Japan has seen changes in response strategies since the COVID-19 pandemic,<sup>4)</sup> measures beyond collective data analysis and media guidelines remain insufficient.

Therefore, this paper reflects on the chain of celebrity suicides during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. By examining recent research findings on suicide and media effects, it aims to rethink the celebrity cluster suicide model, identify challenges in utilizing media for suicide prevention, and indicate what can be done within psychiatric clinical practice. It should be noted that the author does not intend to assess the appropriateness or examine the causes of the celebrity suicides discussed here. Rather, they are introduced solely for the purpose of utilizing the social impact of suicide-reporting in suicide prevention strategies.

## I. The 2020 Celebrity Suicide Chain During the COVID-19 Pandemic

First, let us review the celebrity suicide incidents of 2020.<sup>14)</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic began in February with the quarantine incident aboard the Diamond Princess cruise ship in Yokohama Port. In March, comedian A died after contracting COVID-19. From April to June, a state of emergency was declared, forcing the cancellation of various entertainment events. During this period, in May, actor B, who appeared on television programs, committed suicide. Although the declaration was lifted in June, actor C's suicide occurred in July. Subsequently, actor D in September, actor E in the same month, actor F at the end of September, and artist G in October (celebrity suicides occurred almost every month). The annual suicide count for entertainers and professional athletes that year reached 17, a 2.8-fold increase from the previous year. The consecutive suicides of Mr. C, Mr. D, Mr. E, and Mr. F between July and September were reported as a chain of suicides linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, due to their shared acting history and personal connections. Particularly, the suicides of Mr. C and Mr. F<sup>5)</sup> were reported as breaking news by mass media. Subsequent weeks of coverage detailed and sensationalized the methods used, existence of suicide notes, speculations on motives, and individuals' backgrounds, including

their connection to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, various narratives, including unverified information, have continued to circulate across different media outlets.

Meanwhile, the monthly suicide count for 2020 began increasing from July, peaking in October. Motohashi and colleagues at the Japan Suicide Countermeasures Promotion Center (JSCP), a corporation designated by the Minister of Health, Labour and Welfare, reported that, compared with past data, a significant increase in the number of suicides was observed for approximately one week following the July reports and for about three weeks in September. They further noted that the September case involving Mr. F could explain approximately 70% of the increase in the number of suicides in October. Based on these findings, they considered that, in addition to background factor effects such as the economic and employment environment during the covid-19 pandemic and inadequate access to medical resources, celebrity suicides produced a Werther effect, whereby they contributed to an increase in the number of suicides as an inducing factor.<sup>7)</sup>

## II. Media Analysis of 2020 Suicide Chain Reporting

We independently examined reporting related to the suicides of Mr.

C and Mr. F in 2020.<sup>15)</sup> Specifically, we conducted:<sup>1)</sup> an examination of the content of online news articles,<sup>2)</sup> a time-series analysis using Google Trends for monthly suicide counts and search volumes for related news, and<sup>3)</sup> an examination of the time-series trends in the number of articles on Yahoo News and Yahoo News comments.

Regarding news article content, we qualitatively examined whether they violated the World Health Organization (WHO) Guidelines for Media Reporting on Suicide.<sup>18)</sup> Regarding the relationship between media coverage and suicide, searches were conducted using the keywords “Mr. C,” “Mr. F,” and “suicide.” Google Trends searches covered January to December 2020, while other searches covered the period from July 18 (date of Mr. C's death) to December 31. The collected data were quantitatively compared with monthly suicide data. Yahoo News and comments were collected using a custom-built crawler program.

First, articles reporting on the suicides of Mr. C and Mr. F were often presented as breaking news, featuring sensational imagery prominently displaying the word “suicide.” Many included images of the deceased alongside details of presumed motives and suicide methods, often mixed with uncertain information. Some also included the location of their homes or

statements from associates. Much of the accessible reporting violated all six “Do Not Do” points (i) to (vi) listed in the 2017 WHO Media Guidelines on Suicide Reporting (Table 1), while only implementing one “Do Do” point (i).

Next, comparing monthly search volume indices on Google Trends for the keyword “suicide” with monthly suicide counts revealed clear increases in the search volume in May (when Mr. B died), July (when Mr. C died), and September (when Mr. F died), as shown in Figure 1. A significant correlation (correlation coefficient: 0.73) was observed between monthly suicide-related search volume and female suicide counts, with a one-month lag. Furthermore, the year-on-year increase rate in monthly suicide counts showed marked short-term spikes: 19.6% in August and 42.9% in October, compared with increase rates of 12-13% in other months. This indicates that suicide counts exhibit a temporal correlation with celebrity suicides and related search activity.

Finally, we examined the time-series trends in the number of news articles and comments regarding the suicides of Mr. C and Mr. F. The number of articles related to Mr. C's suicide was around 40 on the day of his death. However, a small number of articles continued to appear over a long period until December, reaching a total of 566 articles. In contrast, articles about Mr.

F reached over 120 on the day of the suicide report, about three times that of Mr. C. However, they rapidly decreased within a week and disappeared within about a month. Consequently, the total number of articles during the same period was 443, fewer than for Mr. C. Furthermore, among the comments in Mr. C's suicide articles, 1,537 contained the phrase "I want to die," averaging about 3 per article. The number of "Good" ratings given to these comments was 254,522, reaching 450 times the initial number of articles. Moreover, the number of comments showed a bimodal trend over time: there were more than twice as many comments on the day of Mr. F's death than the 100 comments posted the day after Mr. C's death. Meanwhile, among the comments posted on the article about Mr. F's suicide, 1,323 contained the phrase "I want to die." The number of "Good" ratings given to these comments was 166,688, reaching 376 times the number of articles. These results indicate that the suicides of Mr. F and Mr. C were mutually linked, resulting in an increase in information volume. In summary, the suicides of celebrities in 2020 were reported hundreds of times in online media and showed signs of a chain reaction. This may have led the suicides in September to combine synergistically with those in July, thereby potentially exerting a uniquely

strong influence on the increase in suicide numbers.

### III. Suicide Contagion Following Celebrity Suicides

The phenomenon where cluster suicides occur after reporting on celebrity suicides or suicides involving novel methods was first reported by sociologist Phillips, D.P. as the "Werther effect," named after the incident where many young people committed suicide using the same method after the publication of Goethe's novel: *The Sorrows of Young Werther*.<sup>11)</sup> Since then, this phenomenon has been observed worldwide. In Japan, a study examining the relationship between celebrity suicide reports and subsequent suicide rates from 1989 to 2010 found that daily suicide rates increased by 5% on the day newspaper reports began, with this effect lasting for 10 days. Specifically, reports of celebrity suicides ultimately led to a 5% or greater increase in suicide rates.<sup>17)</sup> A recent systematic review also found that reporting on the suicide of a single celebrity is associated with an average 13% increase in suicides over the following month. Furthermore, when the method used by the celebrity is reported, suicides using the same method increase by 30%.<sup>9)</sup>

Based on these findings, WHO has developed media guidelines on suicide-reporting.<sup>18)</sup> Such guidelines have been

developed in many countries, and various suicide prevention stakeholders promote awareness and adherence among media outlets. However, insufficient compliance remains a problem. Since 2020, JSCP has held multiple press conferences with the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, calling for restraint against excessive reporting and adherence to the WHO media guidelines on suicide-reporting.<sup>3)</sup>

But why does reporting on celebrity suicides trigger cluster suicides? In Western countries, the phenomenon where a celebrity's suicide spreads within a group is likened to an infectious disease due to its highly transmissible nature and termed "suicide contagion." Cheng, Q. et al.<sup>2)</sup> reviewed 340 papers on suicide contagion and concluded: "Suicide contagion should be defined as a phenomenon of imitation through social learning, rather than as a cluster, transmission, or group attribute. Because Phillips generalized this using collective suicide statistics under the name "Werther effect," suicide contagion came to be perceived not as an individual phenomenon but as a collective phenomenon involving media and society, thus failing to lead to an explanation of individual suicide imitation behavior."

Figure 2 shows a schematic diagram of suicide contagion to aid

understanding. Suicide contagion is the phenomenon where information about a celebrity's suicide is conveyed to the general public through media reports, and among them, individuals with certain attributes commit suicide as an imitative act. The Werther effect refers to the collective phenomenon where suicides increase as a result of suicide information being conveyed to a group via the media, while cluster suicides are the result of collective suicidal behavior. These concepts focus solely on explaining collective phenomena and cannot be used to interpret the reasons for individual suicidal behavior. Conversely, if imitative behavior constitutes the essence of suicide contagion, it becomes easier to understand why celebrity suicides influence suicide rates. It is self-evident that people imitate the clothing and actions of celebrities they idealize or identify with. According to Bandura's social learning theory,<sup>1)</sup> individuals learn by freely observing and imitating (modeling) others' behaviors. Detailed reporting of a celebrity's suicidal act can make people who view that celebrity as a life role model, or individuals with mental disorders who are already vulnerable, want to imitate the suicide. Thus, suicide contagion is the result of social learning: people learn the method of suicide using the celebrity suicide report as a blueprint and then imitate it.

#### IV. Considering the Role of Media and Suicide in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Viewing celebrity suicides as an information contagion model opens avenues for medical and public health analysis and countermeasures. This can be likened to “masks” and “vaccines” during the pandemic.

First, media guidelines can be seen as the equivalent of masks. One reason suicides increased during the COVID-19 pandemic is considered to be cognitive biases among isolated individuals caused by information biases, such as uncertain information and prejudices arising from the information flood, called an infodemic, along with social distancing.<sup>12)</sup> If unverified information about celebrity suicides frequently circulates among isolated individuals, it could markedly increase the suicide risk for those already prone to it. Therefore, suicide contagion is an issue of infodemiology. While safeguarding freedom of expression, it is crucial to disseminate appropriate health information while avoiding inappropriate information that heightens individual suicide risk. If inappropriate information is likened to a virus, this is precisely an infection control measure. Here, the key lies in how effectively the suicide-reporting

guidelines, as countermeasure guidelines, can be implemented.

From this perspective, it can be positively evaluated that JSCP now routinely sends guidelines as messages to media outlets immediately after suicide incidents and has begun organizing study sessions involving social media companies on the appropriate approach to suicide-reporting. Furthermore, evidence is accumulating that suicide contagion occurs not only in news coverage but across various media, including films, stories, and music containing suicide scenes; that contagion does not spread significantly if content is produced appropriately following guidelines; and that reporting focusing on the deceased's life and social or artistic contributions is not correlated with suicide rates.<sup>19)</sup> The author recently received a request from a film production company to supervise the appropriate depiction of suicide scenes; the shift in awareness was surprising. However, to the author's knowledge, there has been no movement to apply guidelines to manga, anime, and games, particularly so-called “depressing manga” and “depressing games,” which the author personally fears may strongly influence youth suicide in Japan. This remains a future challenge.

Another prevention measure, likened to a vaccine, is the Papageno effect.<sup>8)</sup>

This refers to the significant suicide prevention effect gained when individuals who have experienced suicidal ideation under severe circumstances are exposed to media content conveying stories of others who overcame that crisis. Niederkrotenthaler, T. et al., who proposed the Papageno Effect, identified groups strongly influenced by suicide reporting, as follows (as shown in Figure 3): (i) Individuals judged to have a higher suicide risk than the general population but with a low current risk, e.g., those with mild suicidal ideation or a history of suicide attempts but currently lacking strong suicidal thoughts or plans; (ii) Individuals who perceive the reporting as a coping mechanism for stress; (iii) share similarities in sex, age, and behavioral patterns with the deceased celebrity; (iv) empathize with the deceased celebrity's words, actions, or works (e.g., being a fan); (v) repeatedly encounter reports about the same celebrity's suicide; and (vi) experience an information overload of suicide-related content. Furthermore, as previously problematic with the Werther effect, the correlation between celebrity suicide coverage and suicide rates may actually be an ecological fallacy.<sup>20)</sup> To avoid this possibility, as shown in Table 2, randomized controlled trials designed to induce the Papageno

effect were conducted across various media, including films, newspapers, videos, and websites. These trials reported a social learning effect, demonstrating a reduction in suicidal ideation within the target group.<sup>10)</sup> This evidence suggests that appropriate suicide prevention education for individuals at risk can lead to primary prevention. Evidence regarding the Papageno effect is currently limited to reports from Western countries, and cultural differences are also anticipated. Therefore, research in Japan is desirable.

### Conclusion

As discussed above, the relationship between suicide and the media was initially treated as a group-level sociological debate, viewing the media as the villain based on the correlation between newspaper articles and suicide statistics. Subsequently, through the development of reporting guidelines and discovery of the media's suicide prevention effect, namely, the Papageno effect, the discussion has progressed to a clinical level, addressing how the media can be effectively utilized for individuals at risk of suicide. In daily clinical practice, have you ever hesitated to ask adolescent patients with depression about their feelings when a celebrity suicide of someone their age is reported in the media, and

consequently avoided bringing it up? As this reflection makes clear, inquiring how the patient perceives such events can itself contribute to confirming suicide risk. Furthermore, while mourning the death, incorporating narratives of individuals who overcame suicide and knowledge about suicide prevention can potentially create a therapeutic turning point. Without invoking pathography, it is clear that celebrities and psychiatrists have long been familiar with each other.

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表1 WHOの自殺報道に関するメディア・ガイドライン概要

「やるべきこと」	「やってはいけないこと」
(i) どこに支援を求めるかについて正しい情報を提供すること	(i) 自殺の報道記事を目立つように配置しないこと。また報道を過度に繰り返さないこと
(ii) 自殺と自殺対策についての正しい情報を、自殺についての迷信を拡散しないようにしながら、人々への啓発を行うこと	(ii) 自殺をセンセーショナルに表現する言葉、よくある普通のこととみなす言葉を使わないこと、自殺を前向きな問題解決策の1つであるかのように紹介しないこと
(iii) 日常生活のストレス要因または自殺念慮への対処法や支援を受ける方法について報道をすること	(iii) 自殺に用いた手段について明確に表現しないこと
(iv) 有名人の自殺を報道する際には、特に注意すること	(iv) 自殺が発生した現場や場所の詳細を伝えないこと
(v) 自殺により遺された家族や友人にインタビューをするときは、慎重を期すること	(v) センセーショナルな見出しを使わないこと
(vi) メディア関係者自身が、自殺による影響を受ける可能性があることを認識すること	(vi) 写真、ビデオ映像、デジタルメディアへのリンクなどは用いないこと

(文献18より引用)

Table 1: Summary of WHO media guidelines on suicide-reporting “What to Do”

- (i) Provide accurate information on where to seek support.
- (ii) Educate the public about suicide and suicide prevention using accurate information, avoiding the spread of myths about suicide.
- (iii) Report on coping strategies for daily stressors or suicidal thoughts, and ways to access support.
- (iv) Exercise particular caution when reporting on celebrity suicides.
- (v) Exercise extreme caution when interviewing family or friends of suicide victims.
- (vi) Media professionals should recognize that they themselves may be susceptible to the effects of suicide.

“Things to Avoid”

- (i) Do not prominently feature suicide-related news articles. Also, avoid excessive repetition of such reports.
- (ii) Do not use sensational language to describe suicide or language that trivializes it as a common occurrence, nor present suicide as if it were a positive solution to problems.
- (iii) Do not explicitly describe the method used in the suicide.
- (iv) Do not provide detailed information about the scene or location where the suicide occurred.
- (v) Do not use sensational headlines.
- (vi) Do not use photographs, video footage, or links to digital media.

(Cited from Reference 18)

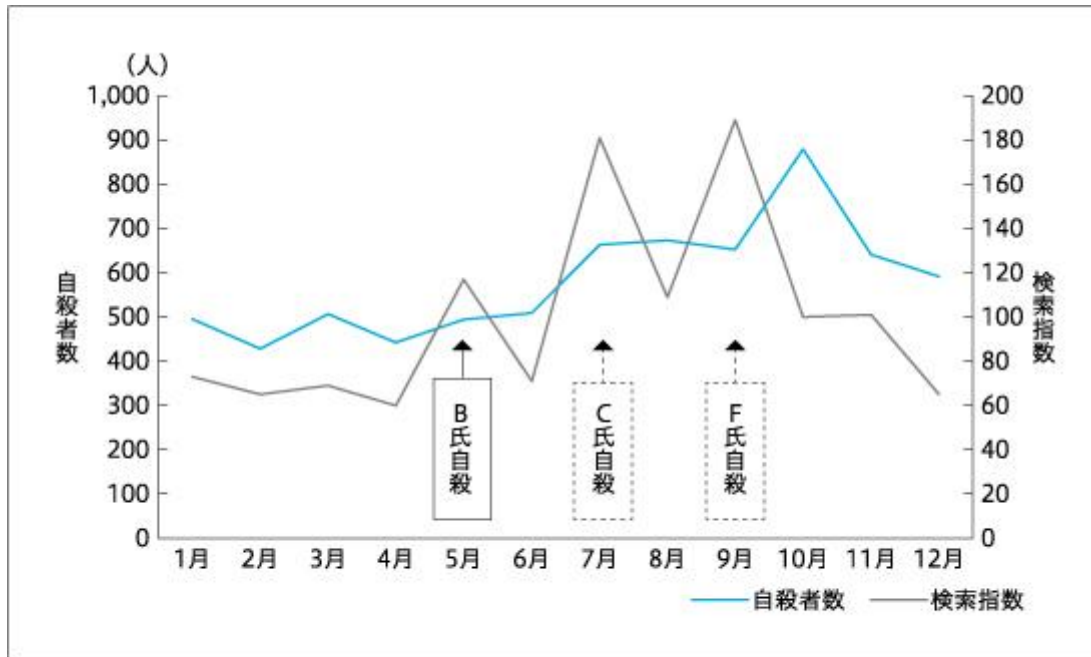


図1 2020年12月別自殺語検索指数と女性自殺者数の関連  
(文献15より引用)

Figure 1: Relationship between monthly suicide-related search index and the number of female suicides in 2020  
(Cited from Reference 15)

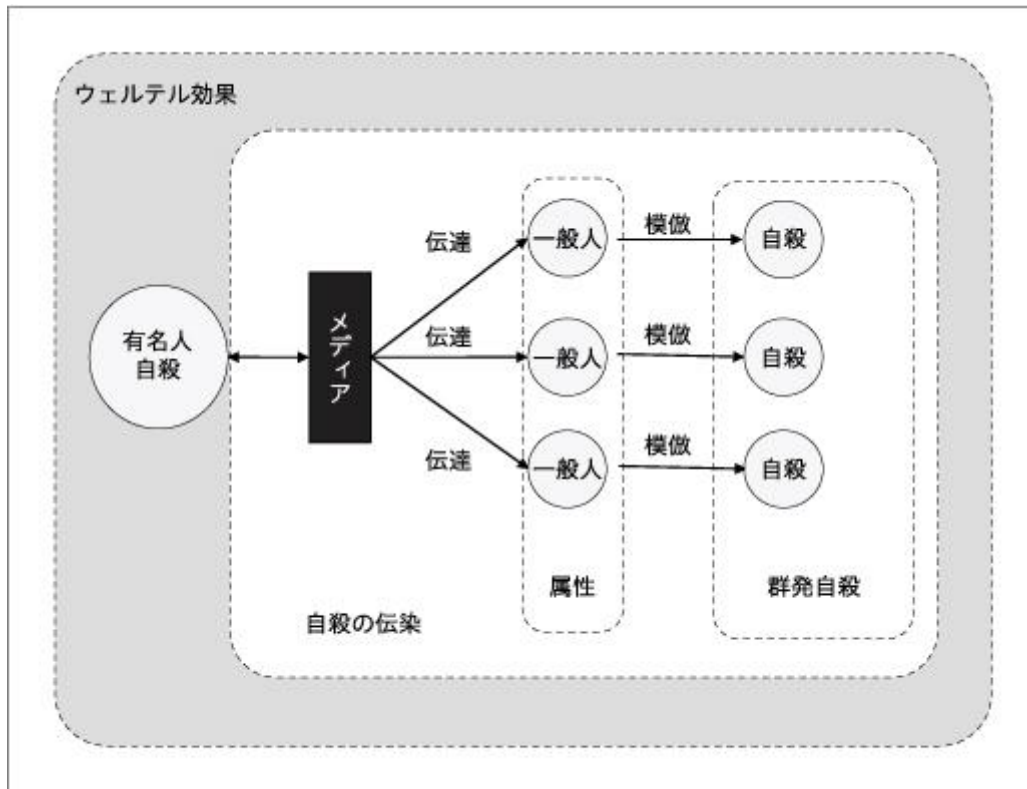


図2 有名人の自殺の伝染に関する用語整理図  
(文献 15 より引用)

Figure 2: Conceptual diagram of terms related to celebrity suicide contagion  
(Cited from Reference 15)

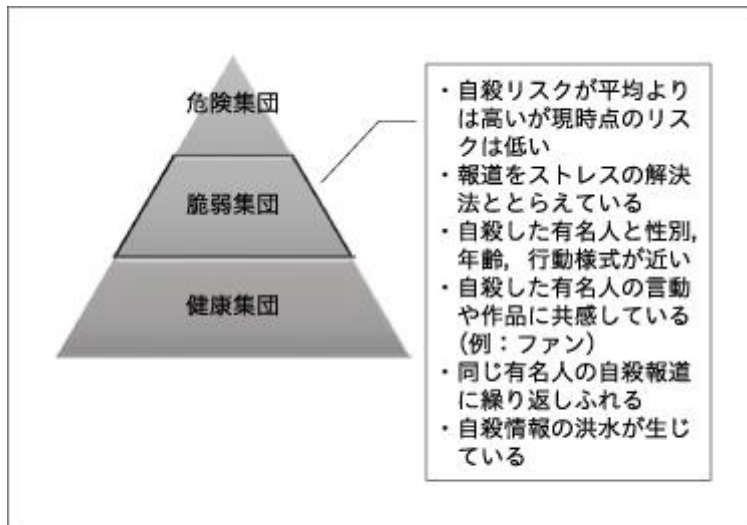


図3 有名人の自殺に感染しやすい人々と環境  
(文献 16 より引用)

Figure 3: Individuals and environments prone to celebrity suicide contagion  
(Cited from Reference 16)

表2 パパゲーノ効果を検証した研究報告

著者	対象集団	メディア	結果
Till, Strauss, Sonneck & Niederkrotenthaler (2015)	成人 95 名	ハリウッド映画	人生の満足度が上がり、世界への共感性が高まった。
Arendt, Till & Niederkrotenthaler (2016)	大学生 112 名	新聞報道	逆境に立ち向かう認識が弱かった参加者の自殺念慮が減った。
Till, Tran, Voracek & Niederkrotenthaler (2017)	成人 161 名	教育的ウェブサイト	相対的に高い自殺傾性がある参加者の自殺念慮減少、自殺予防関連知識の向上。
Arendt, Scherr, Niederkrotenthaler, Krallmann & Till (2018)	成人 273 名	新聞報道	自殺危機への対処と自殺に関する誤った知識の修正に関する読み物を読んだ後の自殺関連の知識の増加と自殺を考えている人への適切な支援意識の増加。
Braun, Benedikt, Pirkis & Niederkrotenthaler (2020)	未成年 299 名	若者が危機から回復し希望を語るビデオ	自殺念慮を援助希求で処理する仲間の個人的物語は、若者に明らかな自殺予防効果をもたらした。

(文献 10 より引用)

Table 2: Research studies examining the Papageno effect

Authors	Subject group	Media	Results
Till, Strauss, Sonneck, & Niederkrotenthaler (2015)	95 adults		

Hollywood movies

Increased life satisfaction and heightened empathy toward the world.

Arendt, Till, & Niederkrotenthaler (2016)

112 university students

Newspaper reports

Suicidal ideation decreased among participants with weaker coping perceptions.

Till, Tran, Voracek, & Niederkrotenthaler (2017)

161 adults

Educational website

Suicidal ideation decreased among participants with relatively strong suicidal tendencies, and suicide prevention knowledge improved.

Arendt, Scherr, Niederkrotenthaler, Krallmann, & Till (2018)

273 adults

Newspaper reports

After reading materials on coping with suicide crises and correcting misconceptions about suicide, there was an increase in suicide-related knowledge and awareness of appropriate support for people contemplating suicide.

Braun, Benedikt, Pirkis, & Niederkrotenthaler (2020)

299 minors

Video of young people recovering from crises and speaking about hope

Personal stories from peers who processed suicidal thoughts through seeking help produced clear suicide prevention effects among young people.

(Cited from Reference 10)