

Cultural Differences in Emotional Support Expression: Attributional Responses to Controllable and Uncontrollable Deaths on Social Media

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Abstract

It is human nature to express emotional support for suffering. Attribution theory (Weiner, 1985, 1986) posits that emotional support is shaped by the way one assigns the cause of tragedy. When a tragedy is perceived as uncontrollable, people are more likely to express empathy, whereas when an event is seen controllable, they tend to search for its underlying causes. However, few studies have examined these dynamics cross-cultural, real-time, and online settings across multiple cultures. Thus, the present study examined how online commenters responded to two different types of death-related tragedy (suicide and natural disasters) across four national contexts: Italy, Japan, the United States, and China. Using a comparative content-analysis design, 240 top-voted comments were analyzed. Across samples, uncontrollable tragedies elicited more emotional support than suicide-related deaths, consistent with Attribution Theory. However, there were significant differences in emotional support and attribution across cultures. Italian and Chinese suicide-related comments were dominated by blame and externalization, and discussed who was responsible for a tragedy. Japanese and U.S. comments were empathic, except that U.S. comments involved more self-disclosure (i.e., suicide survivor) and solutions to prevent suicide. For natural disasters, the Japanese and the U.S. comments were primarily supportive. Italian comments still remained strongly blame-oriented. However, Chinese comments emphasized solidarity more. These findings suggest that online emotional support is shaped not only by event controllability but also by culturally patterned norms of support expression.

Keywords: attribution theory, emotional support, social media comments, suicide, cross-cultural communication

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Introduction

When people encounter tragic events, they interpret why those events occurred. Attribution theory posits that emotional, social, and behavioral responses depend on the way people understand the causes of events (Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1985, 1986). According to this theory, there are three dimensions: (1) locus (i.e., whether one perceives the causes of an event originating within the person or from outside of the person), (2) stability (i.e., whether the cause is seen as enduring over time), and (3) controllability (i.e., whether the cause is perceived to be something the individual could alter) (Weiner, 1985, 1986). Especially, controllability is associated with tragic events involving deaths. Events perceived as outside human control are more likely to evoke empathy in those who have experienced tragedy, while events perceived as controllable are more likely to elicit judgment of accountability and blame those who were responsible for the events (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Weiner, 1986).

This distinction is especially relevant in public discussions of death because public attributions carry secondary psychological impacts for those who have lost loved ones to tragic events. For example, suicide-death is often seen as “controllable”, despite the fact that its actual causes are deeply complex and encompass a combination of biological, psychological, and social factors (Turecki & Brent, 2016). Thus, some tend to blame more on those who committed suicide. On the other hand, many tend to express more sympathy, comfort, and collective grief towards those who have passed because natural disasters are considered uncontrollable (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Weiner, 1986).

Moreover, cultural norms influence the way they show emotional support in death-related tragedies. For example, research in Japan and the United States highlights that Japanese communication often prioritizes shared empathy, whereas U.S. communication favors action-oriented support (Mojaverian et al., 2013; Moriizumi & McDermott, 2017). In European contexts (i.e., Italy), public discourse around tragedy frequently focuses on the accountability of the event (Scannell Guida, 2020).

However, previous research on cultural differences in attribution has relied on traditional psychological research modalities, such as interviews and surveys (e.g., Mojaverian et al., 2013; Moriizumi & McDermott, 2017). While those results are valuable, such methods often struggle to capture real-time and naturalistic reactions to tragic events. Social media platforms offer a compelling solution to this methodological gap. In online anonymous environments, people tend to share their honest opinions or thoughts (Suler, 2004). Thus, the present study examined emotional-support expression and attributional responses in top-voted comments on broadcast-news videos involving suicide and natural disasters across four countries (the U.S, China, Japan, and Italy).

Research Questions/Hypotheses

Based on attribution theory (Weiner, 1986), the following research questions (RQ) and hypotheses (H) were developed:

- RQ1: How does event controllability shape patterns of emotional support versus attribution in top-voted online comments?
- RQ2: How do those support and attribution patterns differ across Italy, Japan, the United States, and China in naturalistic online settings?

- H1: Events perceived as uncontrollable (e.g., natural disasters) will elicit significantly higher levels of empathy and comfort than events perceived as controllable (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Weiner, 1986).
- H2: Events perceived as controllable (e.g., suicide) will elicit higher levels of blame and moral judgment compared to uncontrollable events (Weiner, 1985).

Methodology

Data Source and Sampling

Comments were collected from online discussions on broadcast news videos from Italy, Japan, the United States, and China. YouTube was used for Italy, Japan, and the United States, while Bilibili was used for China. For each country, 30 top-voted comments were selected from the most recent suicide-related clip and the most recent natural disaster viewed clip at the time of data selection, resulting in a total pilot sample of 240 top-voted comments. The unit of analysis was the individual comment. Because the study focused on top-voted comments rather than all comments, the analysis emphasized the most visible and socially amplified reactions within each national comment space.

Coding Framework

The coding framework was deductive and theory-guided (i.e., attribution theory). Supportive codes included empathy (S1), Comfort (S2), Solidarity (S3), and Advice-giving and Information-sharing (S4). Attribution-related codes included Moral Evaluation (E1), Blame and Responsibility (E2), and Externalization (E3). Two additional contextual codes were captured as Collective Emotion (C1) and Meta-Commentary on Media (M1). This coding scheme enabled the analysis to move beyond a simple positive-negative distinction and instead examine whether commenters responded through emotional resonance, comforting language, self-positioning, advice, blame, moral reasoning, or external causal framing.

Analytic Procedure

The approach was a deductive thematic analysis guided by Attribution Theory, with comments receiving one or more codes according to the coding manual. Both frequencies and co-occurrences were analyzed. Findings are interpreted at the level of code frequency as well as broader thematic profiles to determine whether a given national sample was predominantly affective, affiliative, accountability-oriented, or support-focused.

Results

Consistent with Attribution theory, uncontrollable events drew more empathy and comfort, whereas suicide drew more blame and responsibility framing in all the data sets. However, the pattern was not uniform across countries. Instead, each national context displayed a distinct communicative profile in how support and attribution were publicly expressed.

Suicide-Related Videos

Italy

In the Italian suicide sample, the most frequent codes were Blame and Responsibility (E2) and Externalization (E3), each appearing 6 times in the top-voted comments. Empathy and comfort appeared only secondarily. Comments focused on assigning cause and responsibility rather than primarily expressing emotional support. Blame directed at actors such as parents, hospitals, or institutions frequently co-occurred with broader references to societal pressures, illness, or social systems. This suggests that the dominant public response was interpretive and accusatory rather than relational.

United States

The U.S. suicide sample displayed a markedly different profile. The most common code was Solidarity (S3), followed by Empathy (S1) and Advice-Giving and Information-Sharing (S4). The U.S. sample was driven by commenters identifying themselves as survivors or as people who had "been through" similar experiences (12 out of 30 comments). Empathy was often paired with practical help, such as hotline numbers or advice, making the response highly action-oriented. Blame and externalization were relatively uncommon. The dominant pattern was experiential identification: commenters established support through self-disclosure and then translated that affiliation into concrete guidance.

Japan

The Japanese suicide sample was led by Empathy (S1) and Comfort (S2), with blame present but less central. Comments often expressed shared sadness, emotional pain, condolences, or encouragement. When blame appeared, it was often embedded within otherwise supportive reactions, such as assigning responsibility to a parent or partner while simultaneously affirming the victim's suffering. Compared with Italy, the Japanese comments were more directly affective and less dominated by causal argument. Compared with the United States, they were less self-disclosing and less advice-focused.

China

The Chinese suicide sample showed the strongest concentration of Blame (E2) and Externalization (E3) among all countries. The coding summary reports 17 instances of E2 and 11 of E3 in the top 30 comments. Empathy was largely absent, while advice-giving appeared in a more political or protest-oriented form rather than as interpersonal support. Commenters blamed leaders, schools, formalism, and "the system," often combining specific blame with broader critiques of institutional structure. This indicates a public discourse in which suicide-related tragedy was interpreted primarily through systemic accountability.

Natural-Disaster Videos

Italy

The Italian natural-disaster sample, focused on flooding, was again dominated by Blame (E2). The top-voted comments targeted politicians, mayors, municipalities, and failures of prevention or management. Emotional-support codes such as empathy and comfort were

present but not dominant. Unlike in other countries, Italy did not shift strongly toward a comfort-oriented response even when the tragedy was more obviously uncontrollable. This continuity across suicide and disaster contexts suggests that public reaction in the Italian sample was structured less by event type than by a recurring emphasis on accountability.

United States

The U.S. natural-disaster sample differed from its suicide counterpart in that the most visible comments were primarily Comfort (S2), with lower levels of affiliation and little direct blame. While lower-voted comments reportedly included blame and conspiracy themes, the top-voted comments were dominated by prayers, blessings, and direct expressions of support. Thus, in disaster contexts, the most socially amplified public response shifted toward straightforward comforting language rather than survivor-based affiliation.

Japan

The Japanese natural-disaster sample, centered on earthquake-related comments, showed an overwhelmingly supportive profile. Comfort (S2) was the most frequent code, followed by Empathy (S1), Solidarity (S3), and some practical advice related to evacuation or safety. Blame was notably absent. The comments focused on encouragement, condolence, and emotional solidarity, often framing the event as cruel but uncontrollable. This pattern most clearly fits the attribution-theory expectation that uncontrollable tragedies elicit sympathy rather than blame.

China

The Chinese natural-disaster sample contrasted sharply with the Chinese suicide sample. Instead of systemic blame, the disaster comments were dominated by Solidarity (S3) and Externalization (E3). Many comments were highly personal, with users sharing that they had been present during the disaster, had served in related roles, or felt morally connected to those affected. Empathy and moral statements were also present, and the most common code co-occurrence was solidarity plus externalization. This shows that the Chinese sample was highly context-sensitive: when the event was seen as externally caused, responses moved toward collective identity and shared experience rather than blame.

Discussion

This study examined attributional and emotional-support responses to suicide and natural disaster clips across four countries. The findings were consistent with Attribution Theory (Weiner, 1985, 1986), where uncontrollability is associated with greater emotional support.

However, while event type mattered, culture shaped the specific nature of that support.

In Italy and China, for example, responses to suicide focused heavily on the causes of death. This tendency likely emerges because, in many collectivistic cultures, identifying systemic or external causes for suicide serves as a form of collective validation (Scannell Guida, 2020). While Japan is also a collectivistic country, its comments focused primarily on empathy. This result may have emerged due to high-context emotional attunement in Japan, where it is often more important to “feel with” the victim to maintain social harmony than to analyze external causes (Mojaverian et al., 2013).

Furthermore, China and Italy demonstrate what can be termed “vocal collectivism,” where support functions through collective advocacy. In these samples, assigning systemic blame is not viewed as a disruption of harmony, but rather as a protective act of solidarity that validates the victim’s struggle by pointing to shared societal pressures (Scannell Guida, 2020). In contrast, U.S. comments displayed unique tendencies, as support was primarily constructed through personal self-disclosure or the offering of practical advice. This likely reflects a cultural norm that prioritizes individual agency and experiential “truth-telling” as the primary means of comfort (Moriizumi & McDermott, 2017).

Conclusion

Public comment spaces function not only as sites of emotional reaction, but also as culturally organized arenas of meaning-making. This study demonstrates that while the core tenets of Attribution Theory regarding event controllability hold true across varied contexts, cultural norms heavily dictate the specific communicative strategies employed to express support, externalize causes, or assign blame. Recognizing these distinct cultural-emotional profiles is crucial for cross-cultural research on digital responses to suffering.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The authors declare that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The author further declares that, apart from Grammarly, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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