









Case Report

A University Student Suicide with Possible Copycat Features: A Forensic Case Report

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ABSTRACT

Background: Suicide among university students is a growing concern that sits at the intersection of public health and forensic science. Many students face intense academic pressure, emotional burden, and social instability, all of which can contribute to suicidal thoughts and actions. One particularly troubling aspect is the “copycat” phenomenon, where exposure to another person’s suicide, whether through media, social networks, or personal connections. Those all can lead to imitative behavior, especially among young people. Although this effect is recognized worldwide, there is a lack of detailed forensic documentation in Southeast Asia.

Case Presentation: This report examines the case of a 20-year-old female undergraduate who died after a fall. The external examination revealed multiple healed scars on her forearm, indicating a history of self-harm, and severe head injuries consistent with a high-impact fall. Friends reported that she had recently sent messages that sounded like farewells, and there were rumors of a previous suicide at a nearby institution. The presence of similar stressors, a history of self-harm, and contextual similarities suggest that the possibility of a copycat effect should not be overlooked, even if a direct link cannot be confirmed.

Conclusion: This case highlights the urgent need for thorough forensic investigations and stronger mental health support systems on university campuses. Preventing suicide contagion among students requires not only careful documentation but also responsible media reporting and targeted interventions for those at risk. By addressing these factors, we can work towards reducing the spread of suicide and protecting vulnerable students.

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Introduction

Suicide among university students is a deeply troubling issue that challenges both public health and forensic professionals. Young adults in higher education often find themselves navigating a difficult transition (1), facing not only academic pressure but also social isolation, relationship struggles, and anxiety about their performance and future (2). These stressors can sometimes go unnoticed, allowing early signs of psychological distress to escalate into more severe self-harming behaviors or suicidal thoughts (3).

One particularly concerning aspect is the “copycat” phenomenon, also known as suicide contagion. This refers to situations where an individual is influenced to engage in self-harm or suicide after learning about a similar case through friends, social networks, or even media coverage (4, 5). The reasons behind this are complex, but factors like emotional vulnerability, a strong identification with the person who died, and easy access to information about suicide methods all play a role. University students may be especially at risk, as they are often highly sensitive to peer influence and share close-knit environments with others their age (6, 7).

Despite growing awareness of copycat suicides in the psychiatric and sociological literature, there is still a lack of forensic research on this phenomenon within Southeast Asian universities. By examining a student suicide that shows possible signs of imitation, this case study aims to shed light on the importance of understanding the broader context in youth suicide investigations and to highlight the urgent need for more comprehensive prevention efforts.

Case Presentation

On the morning of September 18, 2025, staff at an apartment complex affiliated with University X were startled by a loud noise coming from the courtyard. When they went to investigate, they discovered the body of a 20-year-old female accounting student who lived alone in the building.

Friends and classmates described her as a quiet, introverted person who kept a small social circle. She had been living by herself for several months and, according to those close to her, had recently gone through a difficult breakup that left her emotionally distressed. In the weeks before her death, she reached out to a few friends with messages expressing gratitude and apologizing for “causing trouble”, seemed like subtle goodbyes.

Although there were no official medical records to confirm her struggles, some of her friends remembered times when she had hurt herself in the past, which suggests she may have attempted suicide before. When investigators examined the scene, they found no signs of forced entry or a struggle, making it unlikely that anyone else was involved.

External Examination

The external examination of this young female decedent revealed several findings indicative of her physiological state at the time of death and her prior medical history. Hypostasis was observed as reddish-purple discoloration over the dorsal aspect of the body (Figures 1 and 2), which blanched upon pressure, consistent with early postmortem lividity. Lighter hypostasis was also present on the anterior chest and abdomen (Figures 3 and 4), likely reflecting postmortem positional changes. Rigor mortis was present but not fully established, and could be overcome with moderate force. No evidence of decomposition was noted.



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Figure 1. Overall view of the body displaying reddish-violet postmortem lividity across the posterior surfaces.



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Figure 2. Lateral perspective of the body illustrating postmortem hypostasis in accordance with the position of the body.



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Figure 3. Anterior view of the chest showing mild hypostasis and superficial abrasions.



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Figure 4. Anterior view of the chest showing mild hypostasis and superficial abrasions.

A large, jagged cut was found on the back of the scalp, stretching over the occipital area (Figure 5). The edges of the wound were rough and blunt, and the underlying skull bone was visible at the bottom of the injury. When the area was gently pressed, a crackling sensation could be felt. There was also some loss of both bone and brain tissue, which points to a serious blunt force injury (Figure 6). Several bone fragments were also present within the wound.



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Figure 5. A large, irregular open wound on the posterior scalp is visible upon gross examination of the head.

On the left forearm, approximately 3 cm proximal to the wrist, a linear and brown, healed scar measuring 3.0 x 0.2 cm was noted (Figure 7). Surrounding this were five additional linear, pale, healed scars, similar in color to the adjacent skin, suggestive of a history of self-inflicted injury.

Medical examination revealed that the inside of both eyelids appeared unusually pale, a sign that she had likely lost a significant amount of blood (Figure 8). There were no small red spots (petechiae) on the whites or surfaces of the eyes. Looking inside her mouth, it was clear she had poor dental health, with several



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Figure 6. Extensive cranial bone loss and brain tissue exposure due to severe craniocerebral trauma.



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Figure 7. Several healed linear scars on the left wrist's ventral aspect, which may indicate prior self-harm.



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Figure 8. Pale palpebral conjunctiva, indicative of significant blood loss or anemia.

missing teeth, receding gums, and a removable denture in place (Figure 9).

A thin scratch was found on her upper arm (Figure 10). On the backs of her hands and fingers, there were shallow scrapes that had started to scab over (Figure 11A). Her lower legs showed a large, uneven cut running from just above the knee down to the thigh, exposing the tissue beneath the skin (Figure 12).

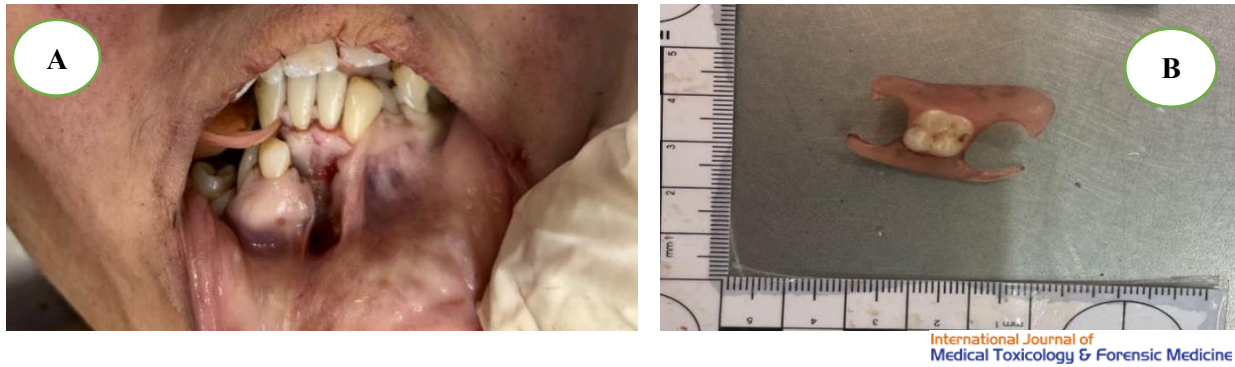


Figure 9. (A) Examination of the oral cavity showing natural dentition and periodontal status; (B) A removable partial denture recovered during examination.



Figure 10. Linear abrasion observed on the forearm.

Additional scrapes and dried blood were seen on the tops of her toes (Figure 11B). Examination of the external genitalia revealed female genitalia without evidence of trauma, hemorrhage, or foreign bodies (Figure 13).



Figure 12. Abrasions and contusions observed on the lower extremity (shin area).



Figure 11. Dorsal view of the hand showing multiple abrasions. Dorsal view of the foot exhibiting abrasions and dried blood on the toes.



Figure 13. Examination of the external genitalia showing no distinct signs of sexual violence.

Discussion

This case highlights the profound impact of psychological distress and environmental factors on the wellbeing of university students. The fatal injuries are

consistent with a high impact fall from height, a pattern frequently observed in suicides involving precipitous descent (8). The early postmortem findings, including livor mortis and incomplete rigor, indicate that the individual was discovered soon after death, underscoring the sudden and tragic nature of the event.

Beyond the immediate physical trauma, the presence of multiple healed linear scars on the left forearm points to a history of self-inflicted injury. Such scars are often associated with non-suicidal self-injury or previous suicide attempts, and their identification aligns with established risk factors for suicidal behavior in young adults (9). This is further corroborated by witness accounts describing prior self-harm and psychological distress, both of which are recognized as significant contributors to suicide risk in this population (10).

University students are particularly vulnerable to psychological stress, which can be exacerbated by academic pressures and interpersonal conflicts. Research consistently demonstrates that stress, poor sleep, and mental health challenges are prevalent among students, with many experiencing anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation during their studies (2, 11). In this case, recent interpersonal conflict and the victim's expressions of gratitude and apology to friends, suggest a period of acute emotional turmoil preceding the incident.

An additional contextual element relevant to this case is the reported existence of an earlier, undocumented suicide incident within the different university. While official records are lacking, anecdotal accounts of similarities between the two cases raise the possibility of a copycat or contagion effect (12). The literature describes the "copycat effect" as a phenomenon in which exposure to suicide (5), particularly within a shared social or geographic environment, may increase the risk of imitation among vulnerable individuals (4). This risk is heightened among young people, who are especially sensitive to social influences and may be more likely to identify with peer who have died by suicide. However, the relationship between exposure and imitation remains complex and cannot be definitively established without direct evidence of influence or intent (6, 11).

Although it is not possible to confirm a direct link between the two incidents, the convergence of psychosocial stressors, a documented history of self-harm, and the existence of a prior suicide in the community underscores the importance of early mental health intervention and institutional vigilance. Proactive measures are essential to mitigate the risk of suicide contagion and to foster a safer environment for

university students.

Conclusion

This case underscores the profound impact of psychological distress and environmental stressors on the well-being of university students, which in this instance culminated in a fatal high-impact fall. Forensic findings indicating a history of self-harm, combined with acute psychosocial stressors such as recent interpersonal conflicts, highlight the extreme vulnerability of this demographic to suicidal behaviors. Furthermore, the reported existence of a prior suicide within the same community raises serious concerns regarding a potential copycat effect or suicide contagion, even if a direct link cannot be definitively confirmed. Therefore, this case highlights the urgent need for comprehensive forensic investigations paired with proactive mental health support systems and institutional vigilance on university campuses. To effectively prevent suicide contagion, it is crucial to implement careful documentation, responsible media reporting, and targeted early interventions for at-risk individuals, ultimately fostering a safer and more supportive environment for vulnerable students.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was not required for this study because it is a case report derived from a routine medico-legal autopsy and all personal identifiers were removed.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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