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## Young adults' information seeking following celebrity suicide: Considering involvement with the celebrity and emotional distress in health communication strategies

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### ABSTRACT

Young adults ( $N = 357$ ) were surveyed following the suicide of celebrity Robin Williams to better understand how involvement with the actor and emotional responses to his death influenced searches for information concerning depression, suicide, and mental health. Emotional distress following the actor's death mediated the relationship between involvement and certain types of information searches. Most respondents sought information about the celebrity's career, suicide, and depression using portable devices such as smartphones and laptop computers to access news websites for information. Those respondents who sought information about the suicide reported changes in their thoughts about suicide, most often dealing with the difficulty in spotting warning signs and the idea that "it can happen to anyone." Findings suggest placement of health messages within existing material about celebrity announcements on online websites and social media to drive more traffic toward general informational outlets. Messages that acknowledge emotional distress might be best placed within content specific to the celebrity's tragedy, rather than specific to the celebrity's career or performances.

In 2012, more than 40,000 suicides were reported in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Xu, Kochanek, Murphy, & Arias, 2014). The suicide rate in America has slowly increased over the past decade, and suicide is now the 10th leading cause of death in this country (Xu et al., 2014). This study reports findings from a survey conducted in two cities in the weeks following the suicide of American actor and comedian Robin Williams, who died on August 11, 2014, after a widely publicized struggle with depression and substance abuse (Stucker, 2014). Research on public responses to celebrity news about cancer implies a celebrity's publicly aired experience with health issues will encourage information seeking about the topic (cf. Juthe, Zaharchuk, & Wang, 2015; Myrick, Willoughby, Noar, & Brown, 2014). Thus, the present study examines this implication specifically for suicide and depression.

Robin Williams experienced both critical acclaim and box office success during a 35-year career on screen, playing lead roles in such films as *Good Morning Vietnam*, *Dead Poets Society*, *Good Will Hunting*, and *Mrs. Doubtfire*. The day Williams died, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline received 7,375 phone calls, the highest number it ever received (Taylor, 2014). The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) witnessed a 20% increase in calls to its hotline in the days following the actor's death (Taylor, 2014). Google reported more than 10 million searches for information concerning Williams the day he died, making the information the most sought-after topic among users that day.

We know relatively little about how people communicate about mental health following celebrity announcements. However, the implications for harnessing the power of celebrity disclosures and announcements are promising for public education and stigma reduction. Uncovering specific information-seeking patterns following publicized events, such as the announcement of Williams's suicide, is a necessary first step in ascertaining best strategies for crafting and disseminating effective public health messages about mental health.

The first goal of this study is to determine the best placement for effective public health messages when attempting to harness the power of celebrity in the face of a serious health issue. The present study, therefore, addresses the following research questions regarding information seeking after the announcement of Williams's death:

**RQ1:** What were the most popular types of information sought with regard to Robin Williams following news of his death?

**RQ2:** With what media channels and technologies did people seek the desired information about Williams?

This study also explores how seeking information about Williams's death might have encouraged people to think about suicide differently, in an effort to understand what beliefs public health practitioners can leverage, and which beliefs practitioners might work to change.

**RQ3:** How did people perceive their thoughts about suicide to have changed upon hearing of Williams's death?

The ultimate goal of this study is to inform the tone health messages should take following a celebrity suicide. Based in part on the literature studying celebrity disclosures of cancer (e.g., Juthe et al., 2015; Myrick, Willoughby, Noar, & Brown, 2014) and HIV/AIDS (e.g., Basil, 1996), the current study tests relationships with regard to young adults' involvement with the celebrity, emotional distress felt after learning of the event, and information seeking upon learning of the event. In doing so, this study notes the most popular types of information sought upon learning of Williams's death, as well as what media technologies were widely used in seeking this information. The literature on celebrity disclosure, involvement with celebrities, and information seeking in the face of emotional distress is reviewed next, followed by the main hypotheses.

### Health information seeking instigated by involvement with celebrities

Although not scientifically documented, celebrity disclosure of anxiety, depression, and other mental illnesses appears to be growing. For example, world-famous pop singer Katy Perry recently self-disclosed her personal experience with depression and suicidal thoughts (Diehl, 2013) following the end of an intimate relationship. A-list actors Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie, Jim Carrey, Owen Wilson, Jon Hamm, and Catherine Zeta-Jones have also discussed with the media their experiences with mental illness (WCVB, 2013). In other instances, the general public learns about a celebrity's experience with mental illness only after tragedy, as witnessed with the deaths of Robin Williams, musician Kurt Cobain, and actor Heath Ledger.

Given that such disclosures gain widespread attention, it is important we understand what the public takes away about mental illness following such revelations. Perhaps celebrity disclosures about mental health are an untapped opportunity to educate the public about serious health concerns, leading to improved understanding of mental illness and a reduction of stigmatization of people with mental illness (Rusch, Angermeyer & Corrigan, 2005). Public disclosures of celebrity experiences with other health issues have shown promising effects on public awareness, knowledge gain, and willingness to discuss these health issues (see Noar, Willoughby, Myrick, & Brown, 2014). For example, when basketball great Earvin "Magic" Johnson announced he contracted HIV, more than 40,000 people phoned the National AIDS hotline in a single day (Brown & Basil, 1995). Of 468 men surveyed in Chicago following the announcement, all of the men reported having talked about Johnson's disclosure and expressed both an interest in getting additional information about AIDS and a willingness to talk more about AIDS (Kalichman & Hunter, 1992).

The effects may be explained in part by involvement with media personae, which Brown (2015) defines as a multistep psychological process in which people develop feelings of attachment to a celebrity by first becoming immersed in stories featuring the celebrity (transportation; see Green &

Brock, 2000) and eventually feeling a parasocial interaction or imagined friendship with the media personae (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Perse & Rubin, 1989). These feelings might further develop into identification with the celebrity, which Brown (2015) defines as "the process of conforming to the perceived identity of a mediated persona both during and after media consumption" (p. 17).

Revisiting the "Magic" Johnson announcement, identifying with Johnson predicted the degree to which men expressed (a) personal concern over AIDS, (b) its threat to heterosexuals, and (c) intentions to avoid risky sexual behavior (Basil, 1996; Brown & Basil, 1995). Both admiring and identifying with baseball player Mark McGwire positively predicted respondents' knowledge, attitudes, and intention to use a nutritional supplement endorsed by the baseball slugger (Brown, Basil, & Bocarnea, 2003). According to Adams-Price and Greene (1990), desiring to be like a celebrity, or seeing a celebrity as a role model, is the most common type of attachment young people have with celebrities (see also Boon & Lomore, 2001; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005) and explains what was seen in the Brown et al. (2003) study about Mark McGwire (see also Brown, 2010). This type of involvement, also called wishful identification, can exist whether or not people perceives similarities between themselves and the celebrity (e.g., Chory-Assad & Yanen, 2005; Hoffner, 1996; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Ramasubramanian & Kornfield, 2012) and regardless of whether the celebrity commits an undesirable act (e.g., Bond & Drogos, 2014).

As Brown (2015) notes, identification can also refer to a psychological merger with a media character during media consumption, vicariously experiencing what the character is experiencing and temporarily getting lost in the character's identity (Cohen, 2001). This type of involvement tends to relate to wishful identification during media consumption, whereas wishful identification and feelings of imagined friendships tend to relate outside the media consumption experience (e.g., Chory-Assad & Yanen, 2005; Cohen, 2001; Hoffner, 1996; Ramasubramanian & Kornfield, 2012). In this study, we are interested in an overall sense of involvement with Robin Williams as a predictor of feelings and behaviors in response to Williams's death. Thus, we are interested in perceived involvement with Williams that exists beyond the media consumption experience and envisions Robin Williams as a potential friend and role model.

### Emotional distress, involvement, and information seeking

Because we tend to treat the involvement we have with celebrities or characters in the same way we treat close social relationships in reality (e.g., Greenwood, Pietromonaco, & Long, 2008; Perse & Rubin, 1989; Rubin & McHugh, 1987), it follows that we might become bereaved when a tragedy befalls our admired celebrity. Exemplifying this effect, viewers in one study anticipated feeling anxiety or sadness upon hearing their favorite character might be taken off television (Cohen, 2004). The emotional distress experienced from this loss can trigger information-seeking behaviors as a means of coping with the loss (see review by Schaefer & Moos, 1998),

whether the function is to find information that allows us to view the tragedy in a positive light (positive reappraisal or emotion-focused coping; e.g., Shani & Zeelenberg, 2012; Shiloh & Orgler-Shoob, 2006) or as a way to gain a better understanding of the tragedy (problem-focused coping; e.g., Moskowitz, Folkman, Collette, & Vittinghoff, 1996; Pain, 1999; Van Der Molen, 1999). These information-seeking behaviors might arise even when there is a recognized possibility that the information will confirm our worst fears (Shani & Zeelenberg, 2012).

Exemplifying the relationship between identification, emotionality, and information seeking, Myrick and colleagues (2013) found that sadness over the death of Apple chief executive officer (CEO) Steve Jobs mediated the positive relationship between identification and information-seeking behavior concerning pancreatic cancer. In other words, those who both admired and were moved by Jobs's death were compelled to seek information relating to the cause of death (see also Myrick et al., 2014). Based on the reviewed literature, we argue that when a media consumer feels involvement with a celebrity, that consumer will seek information to learn about a troubling event experienced by the celebrity. Furthermore, this information seeking will be intensified if the consumer feels emotionally distressed by the troubling event. The following hypothesis is tested:

**H1:** Greater involvement with Robin Williams will lead to greater emotional distress in response to his death (H1a), which in turn will lead to the seeking of information about his death (H1b).

Thus, perceptions of involvement with Williams will indirectly relate to information seeking by first predicting emotional distress. However, based on the literature, we predict emotional distress will only partially mediate the relationship between involvement and information seeking; a direct relationship will still exist between involvement and information seeking.

**H2:** Greater involvement with Robin Williams will lead to the seeking of information about his death.

## Method

To examine the hypothesis and research questions, undergraduate students were surveyed at two universities (29,000+ enrollment) in the southeastern United States. It is important that we examine this population's attitudes concerning mental illness and mental health communication because they are (a) heavy media consumers and (b) at the age when many people begin to first experience symptoms of mental illness (NAMI, 2014). Researchers conducted the project in accordance with institutional review board requirements. In exchange for participation, respondents received either course credit (Campus 1) or the chance to win an Amazon gift card (Campus 2). Researchers uploaded the questionnaire onto Qualtrics and then provided respondents access to the items using an

electronic link. The researchers collected data during the 6 weeks following Williams's death.

After fulfilling informed consent procedures, the questionnaire began by asking whether the respondents sought out information about Robin Williams, his life, or his death once they learned the news. If the response to this question was "yes," respondents were presented with a list of different information topics they might have sought after hearing of Williams's death. Topics ranged from Williams's suicide to specific information about Williams, including his depression, his career, his performances, and his family. Topics also included celebrity and noncelebrity (general public) responses to the death, as well as general information about depression, suicide, and stress. Respondents checked all that applied.

The questionnaire then asked respondents to select from a list the sources of information they used when they searched for that information. The list included television, newspapers, and magazines, as well as smartphones, mobile tablets, laptop computers, and desktop computers. Twitter, Facebook, "Other Social Media," and face-to-face/word-of-mouth conversations were also included in this list. Respondents checked all that applied.

The questionnaire then asked respondents about their thoughts about Williams. These items included assessments of involvement with Williams and emotional distress felt over Williams's death. In light of the reviewed literature on perceived similarity with characters, self-reports of prior empathy with Williams's characters and prior imitation of character gestures or phrases were also assessed and included as control variables in the analysis. Controlling for prior empathy and imitation of Williams's characters allowed us to more effectively isolate involvement with Williams, and thus isolate the relationships between perceptions of involvement, reports of emotional distress, and reported information seeking. At the end of the survey, respondents were thanked, debriefed, provided with information about local counseling services, and exited from the survey.

## Respondent demographics

Of the 395 initial respondents to the survey, 38 did not complete all items of the survey or clearly provided only one response throughout the questionnaire (answering "1" for every item). Thus, the overall sample size was 357 respondents. Respondents primarily came from households with an income of \$80,000 or more ( $n = 150$  or 41%). The majority of the sample was White or Caucasian ( $n = 305$  or 85%), followed by Black or African-American ( $n = 34$  or 10%), Asian ( $n = 15$ , 4%), or of other race identifications. Twenty-seven respondents (8%) marked "Yes" when asked whether they considered themselves to be of Hispanic or Latina/o descent. Respondents were primarily between ages 18 and 24 years. Women ( $n = 290$  or 77%) outnumbered men ( $n = 67$  or 18%). In terms of political leaning, 43% indicated liberal ( $n = 155$ ), 21% moderate ( $n = 74$ ), and 36% conservative ( $n = 127$ ). This sample thus limits the generalizability of this study to the U.S. college population and young adult news consumer.

The questionnaire asked respondents to describe the time spent seeking information using two questions. Respondents

had to select one response describing the amount of time they spent seeking information, ranging from a low of 30 minutes or less to a high of over 3 hours. Just over half of respondents ( $n = 196$  or 55%) indicated they spent 30 minutes or less seeking out information upon learning about the actor's death. Nearly 24% ( $n = 85$ ) of respondents spent between 30 minutes and 1 hour.

Respondents also chose one response that best described when they searched most for the information; response choices ranged from "the day he died" to "throughout the week after he died." Most respondents ( $n = 160$  or 45%) searched for information the day Williams died. Almost 18% ( $n = 64$ ) of the respondents sought information the day after he died, and 28% ( $n = 100$ ) sought information throughout the week the news broke.

## Measures

**Involvement.** Five items assessed involvement with Williams. Respondents were asked to rate the following statements using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (= 1) to *strongly agree* (= 5): "I liked Robin Williams," "I identified with Robin Williams," "I wished I could be more like him in terms of his personality," "I wished I could be more like him in terms of his attitudes," and "I wished I could do some of the things he did." Items were averaged into a composite score. See Table 1 for descriptive statistics for this measure. Note that this mean is above the midpoint of the scale.

**Prior empathy.** Four items assessed preexisting empathy for Williams's characters. Respondents were asked to rate four statements about watching one of his movies or television shows using the same 5-point Likert-type scale already reported. The four statements were "I sometimes wished I could tell him what to do in the story," "I worried about what would happen to him in the story," "I felt we shared the same feelings," and "I felt we shared the same experience." Items were averaged into a composite score. See Table 1 for descriptives.

**Prior imitation.** Two items assessed prior imitation of Robin Williams's character gestures and/or phrases. Respondents rated "Imitated his or his character's gestures or actions" and "Used a phrase that he (or his character) used" on a 5-point scale ranging from *never* (= 1) to *a lot of the time* (= 5). These items were averaged into a composite measure (see Table 1).

**Emotional distress.** Six items assessed respondents' emotional distress over Williams's death. Using a 5-point scale ranging from *none of this emotion* (= 1) to *a great deal of this emotion* (= 5), respondents indicated the degree to which they felt sad, concerned, confused, angry, stunned, and overwhelmed. Items were averaged into a composite measure indicating relative degree of emotional distress (Table 1).

See Table 2 for zero-order correlations between the composite scores.

**Changed thoughts of suicide.** One item assessed whether respondents felt their thoughts about suicide "changed from before hearing about Robin Williams's death." Those respondents who responded yes to this measure (see Table 1) were asked to briefly describe how their thoughts about suicide had changed. Their responses were qualitatively analyzed.

## Results

### Research questions 1 and 2

The first research question concerned the most popular kinds of information sought after Williams's death. The second research question related to the media channels and technologies used to seek these specific kinds of information. The paragraphs that follow describe the number of people who sought each type of information assessed in the survey, in addition to describing where people most often gathered this information. Table 3 shows the most-used information-seeking topics and media sources reported in the survey.

### Seeking information about Robin Williams's suicide

Most of the 357 respondents ( $n = 246$  or 69%) sought information about Williams's suicide. Of these respondents, 34% sought this information from Facebook, lower than one might anticipate. However, this percentage was still higher than mathematically expected (29%), given the overall percentage of respondents seeking any information on Facebook,  $\chi^2(1) = 10.81, p < .01$ . A similar pattern was seen for information seeking about Williams's suicide from Twitter; the percentage of respondents (33%) seeking from Twitter was larger than mathematically expected (28%), given overall Twitter information-seeking reports,  $\chi^2(1) = 9.06, p < .01$ . Seeking information about his suicide from social media other than Facebook or Twitter was in line with expectations (16% vs. 10%),  $\chi^2(1) = 1.83, p > .05$ . About 66% of the respondents who sought this information did so with their smartphone. Only 24% of the respondents seeking this type of information used television.

### Seeking information about Robin Williams's depression

More than half ( $n = 212$  or 59%) of respondents sought information about Williams's depression. Of these respondents, more respondents (37%) than what was expected (29%) sought this information from Facebook,  $\chi^2(1) = 16.03, p < .001$ . Similarly, more respondents (34%) than expected (28%) sought his depression information from Twitter,  $\chi^2(1) = 10.11, p < .01$ . More respondents than expected (19% vs. 15%) also sought this information from other social media,  $\chi^2(1) = 7.76, p < .01$ . About 67% of the respondents who sought this information did so with their smartphone. Just over 26% of the respondents seeking this information used television.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics for All Measures.

Measure	N of items	Scale			Averaged Composite			Cronbach $\alpha$
		M	SD	Range	M	SD	Range	
Involvement with Williams	5	18.08	3.35	8-25	3.62	.67	1.60-5.00	.84
Prior empathy with characters	4	17.46	5.58	6-30	3.10	.73	1.00-5.00	.82
Imitation of characters	2	4.78	2.17	2-10	2.39	1.08	1.00-5.00	$r = .74^*$
Emotional distress over death	6	18.08	3.35	8-25	2.91	.93	1.00-5.00	.85
Thought change about suicide	1	N/A (yes = 1, no = 0)						

\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 2.** Pearson Zero-Order Correlations Between Composite Measures.

	Prior Empathy	Imitation	Emotional Distress
Involvement with Williams	.46*	.49*	.57*
Prior empathy with characters	—	.25*	.37*
Imitation of characters	—	—	.44*

\*  $p < .001$ .

**Table 3.** Frequency of Different Information Searches by Topic and Media Source.

Information Search	n	Percent of Total (357 Surveyed)
<i>By topic</i>		
Williams's suicide	248	69.47
Williams's depression	214	59.94
Williams's career	146	40.90
Celebrity reactions	132	36.97
Williams's family	112	31.37
General public reactions	98	27.45
Williams's performances	81	22.69
General depression information	30	8.40
General suicide information	24	6.72
General stress information	15	4.20
<i>By media source</i>		
Smartphone	194	54.34
Laptop computer	186	52.10
Facebook	103	28.85
Twitter	99	27.73
Word of mouth	85	23.81
Television	72	20.17
Other social media	52	14.57
Desktop computer	51	14.29
Tablet	49	13.73
Magazine(s)	21	5.88
Newspaper(s)	16	4.48

### Seeking celebrity reactions

One-third ( $n = 129$  or 36%) of respondents sought celebrity reactions about Williams's death. Of these respondents, a larger percentage of respondents (43%) than what was expected (29%) sought celebrity reactions from Facebook,  $\chi^2(1) = 20.86$ ,  $p < .001$ . Also, a larger percentage of respondents (49%) than what was expected (28%) sought celebrity reactions from Twitter,  $\chi^2(1) = 44.90$ ,  $p < .001$ . Likewise, a larger percentage than expected (28% vs. 15%) sought celebrity reactions from social media other than Facebook and Twitter,  $\chi^2(1) = 28.89$ ,  $p < .001$ . The majority of respondents who sought celebrity reactions did so with their smartphone,  $n = 94$  or 73%. Only 24% of the respondents seeking this type of information used television.

### Seeking noncelebrity reactions

More than one-fourth ( $n = 96$  or 27%) of respondents sought general public reactions about Williams's death. Consistent with patterns seen with celebrity reactions, a larger percentage of these respondents (40%) than what was expected (29%) sought public reactions from Facebook,  $\chi^2(1) = 7.37$ ,  $p < .01$ . Also, a larger percentage of respondents (47%) than what was expected (28%) sought public reactions from Twitter,  $\chi^2(1) = 24.01$ ,  $p < .001$ . Less pronounced, a larger percentage than expected (25% vs. 15%) sought public reactions from social media other than Facebook and Twitter,  $\chi^2(1) = 28.89$ ,  $p < .001$ . The majority of respondents who sought general public reactions did so with their smartphone,  $n = 66$  or 69%.

Only 24% of the respondents seeking this type of information used television.

### Seeking general information about mental health issues

Only 15 of the 357 respondents reported seeking general information about stress. Just 23 of the respondents reported seeking general information about suicide. A few more respondents ( $n = 30$ ) reported seeking general information about depression.

### Seeking general information about Robin Williams

The concentration of general information seeking after Williams's death was on him rather than on related health information. About 40% ( $n = 145$ ) of the 357 respondents sought information about Williams's career. Just under one-fourth of the respondents ( $n = 80$  or 22%) sought specific information about his performances, namely, his television shows, movies, and/or standup comedy performances. About 31% of the respondents sought information about Williams's family. Most of this information was obtained via smartphone or laptop and using Facebook or Twitter, indicative of overall information-seeking behaviors reported in the survey (see Table 3).

### Research question 3

The third research question concerned whether people perceived a change in the way they thought about suicide, based

on the information they sought. Overall, about half of the respondents checked yes (= 1) and just under half responded no (= 0) to this item,  $n = 173$  (49%) and  $n = 148$  (42%), respectively. About 10% of the respondents were unsure about any change; these respondents were dropped from the analyses. Chi-squared tests were used to evaluate the interdependence of perceived thought change (no, yes) with each of the four most frequent types of information seeking used in the hypothesis tests.

In comparing information seeking about Williams's suicide with their perceptions of thought change, more people than expected felt their thoughts changed if they had sought information about his suicide,  $\chi^2(2) = 19.41, p < .001$ . Specifically, of those who felt their thoughts had changed, 79% of the respondents had sought information about the suicide, compared to the 69% expected. Of those who perceived no change, fewer than expected (56% vs. 69%) had sought this information.

Differences in thought did not depend on whether people sought information about Williams's depression or career information; both chi-squared tests were nonsignificant. However, thought change did depend on seeking celebrity reactions,  $\chi^2(2) = 8.08, p < .05$ . Similar to the preceding finding, more of the 173 respondents who felt a thought change (43% vs. 36% expected) had sought celebrity reactions. Conversely, fewer of the 148 respondents who perceived no change (28% vs. 36% expected) had sought this information.

Aided by text analyzers identifying most frequent words and two-, three-, and four-word phrases, comments about thought change were analyzed for dominant themes. The majority of comments (90%) focused on only one theme. Thus, the following percentages largely represent the proportion of respondents who indicated a thought change, although 10% of comments were identified as having two themes reflected.

One-third of the comments (36%) highlighted issues with lay diagnosis difficulty; comments included various iterations of "you never know what people are really going through" and "even if someone seems happy externally, on the inside they could be fighting a battle no one knows about." About 30% of the comments focused on susceptibility: "any of us are at risk of suicide," "it can happen to anyone," and "that it is a problem for all age groups." Nearly 16% of the comments indicated the seriousness of suicide. "The magnitude of the disease has been made more real to me" and "suicide is an extremely serious matter" are examples.

Fewer comments (12.5%) indicated a need for action, for example, funding, training, and communication: "We need to continue to fund and promote support groups who provide information to the public about suicide and communication opportunities for those considering suicide ... school personnel should be better equipped to recognize the signs and symptoms and parents need lots of information so they can be proactive." Nearly 11% of the comments speculated on the causes of suicide, most of which identified depression as a cause (e.g., "I understand that people who are depressed often commit suicide," "I haven't linked it as much to depression as before"). Another 11% of comments reflected either lack of understanding of suicide motivations or judgment about

motivations. These comments ranged from "I just don't understand what could be so horrible in someone's life that they cannot tell the people closest to them and seek help" to "I think sometimes people who have thoughts of suicide and depression are selfish and shut people out because they don't want people to help them." Finally, two comments emphasized a need to refrain from passing judgment: "Do not judge those who commit suicide, especially about where they went after this life."

### **Tests of hypothesis**

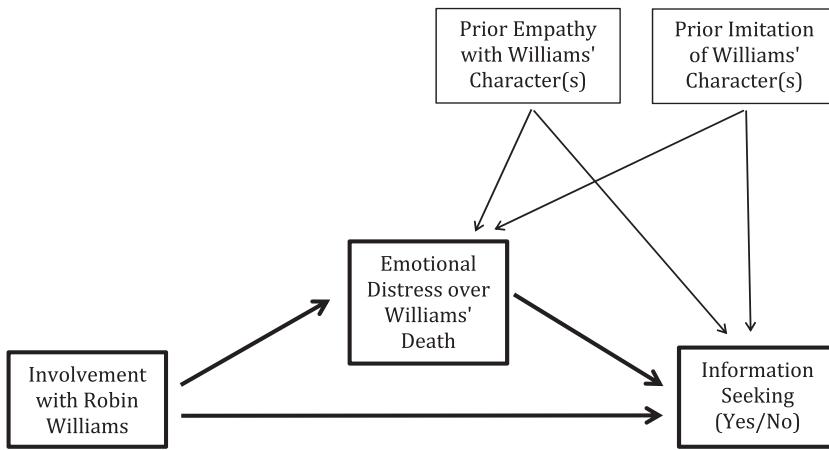
The four most sought-after information topics reported in the survey were Robin Williams's suicide, his depression, his career, and celebrity responses to his death. The other measured categories of information were sought by less than one-third of the respondents. Four logistic mediation analyses were thus conducted to test two relationships regarding the seeking of each of the most popular information searches. Because four tests were conducted to evaluate the hypothesis, a multiple perspective decision rule based on  $p$  values was employed. H1 would be supported if a significant indirect effect of involvement on information seeking was found for three of the four tests and H2 would be supported if a significant direct effect of involvement on information seeking was found for three of the four tests (see Fay & Proschan, 2010).

For each analysis, involvement was entered as the primary predictor. Emotional distress was entered as the mediator. Information seeking, a dichotomous variable, was entered as the outcome (0 = not sought, 1 = sought). Prior empathy for and imitation of Williams's characters were entered as control variables, covarying with both the mediator and outcome variables. Continuous variables were centered for analysis.

The mediation analysis was conducted using model 4 of Hayes's Process procedure for SPSS (see Figure 1), in which a series of regressions (linear with the mediator, logistic to appropriately test with the dichotomous information seeking outcome variable) was conducted and conditional indirect effects were simultaneously calculated using bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals (CIs) based on 1,000 bootstrap samples (Hayes, 2013). Prior to these mediation analyses, the basic relationships between the predictor and mediator, and between the mediator and outcome variable, were assessed to ensure the appropriateness of a mediation test (see MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002). As reported in the following, this initial assessment indicated a possible mediation effect for three of the four tests.

### **Predicting information seeking about Robin Williams's suicide**

The first block predicting emotional distress was significant,  $R^2 = .38, F(3,345) = 69.77, p < .001$ . Involvement had a significant positive relationship with emotional distress,  $B = 3.50, SE B = .44, p < .001$ . Prior empathy with Williams's characters also had a positive relationship with emotional distress,  $B = .88, SE B = .37, p < .05$ . Prior imitation additionally had a positive relationship with emotional



**Figure 1.** Model tested using mediation analysis regressing emotional distress onto involvement with Robin Williams (linear) and regressing information-seeking behavior onto all predictor and control variables (logistic). Control variables are represented with thin lines. Indirect effect (H1a and H1b) and direct effect (H2) tested using Hayes's (2013) Process procedure for SPSS.

distress,  $B = 1.12$ ,  $SE B = .25$ ,  $p < .001$ . Thus, increased involvement with the actor likely led to a higher degree of emotional distress at his death. H1a was supported.

The logistic block showed emotional distress as the only significant predictor of information seeking about the suicide, odds ratio (OR) = 1.09,  $B = .09$ ,  $SE B = .03$ ,  $p < .01$ ; model  $\chi^2(4) = 374.13$ ,  $p < .001$ , Nagelkerke pseudo  $R^2 = .11$ . The mean emotional distress rating was 3.07 ( $SD = .89$ ) for seeking information and 2.54 ( $SD = .91$ ) for not seeking this information. The odds ratio indicates a predicted probability of just over 52%; with each unit increase of emotional distress, respondents had a 2% increase in likelihood over (50/50) chance that they would seek information about his suicide. As such, the indirect relationship of involvement (via emotional distress) with information seeking was significant,  $B = .31$ ,  $SE B = .10$ ,  $CI_{95} = .12$  to  $.53$ . H1b was supported. The direct relationship between involvement and information seeking was not significant, although people who sought this type of information rated their involvement with Williams higher than people who did not seek this information,  $M_{sought\_info} = 3.70$ ,  $SD = .67$ ;  $M_{did\_not\_seek} = 3.42$ ,  $SD = .63$ ;  $B = .20$ ,  $SE B = .24$ ,  $p > .05$ . H2 was not supported.

#### Predicting information seeking about Robin Williams's depression

The first block predicting emotional distress was identical to the analysis of information seeking about Williams's suicide, supporting H1a. Also corroborating the previous analysis, emotional distress emerged as the sole predictor of information seeking about Williams's depression in the logistic model, OR = 1.08,  $B = .08$ ,  $SE B = .03$ ,  $p < .01$ ; Block  $\chi^2(4) = 399.99$ ,  $p < .001$ , Nagelkerke pseudo  $R^2 = .13$ . This finding indicates a predicted probability of nearly 52%, suggesting that respondents who tended to feel distressed over Williams's death more than likely chose to seek information about his depression. Mean emotional distress scores reflected this relationship,  $M_{sought\_info} = 3.13$ ,  $SD = .84$ ;  $M_{did\_not\_seek} = 2.58$ ,  $SD = .96$ . Again, the indirect relationship of involvement with information seeking was significant, supporting H1b,

$B = .28$ ,  $SE B = .10$ ,  $CI_{95} = .08$  to  $.49$ . A direct relationship between involvement and information seeking did not emerge, although mean involvement scores suggested a positive relationship,  $M_{sought\_info} = 3.74$ ,  $SD = .63$ ;  $M_{did\_not\_seek} = 3.43$ ,  $SD = .68$ ;  $B = .16$ ,  $SE B = .23$ ,  $p > .05$ . H2 was not supported.

#### Predicting information seeking about Robin Williams's career

Neither the initial relationship assessments nor the logistic model predicting information seeking about Williams's career showed a direct relationships between either involvement or emotional distress with seeking this type of information. Thus, no indirect path from involvement to emotional distress to career information seeking was present. H1b and H2 were not supported for this type of information seeking. The first block predicting emotional distress was identical to the previous analyses, supporting H1a.

#### Predicting information seeking about celebrity responses

The first block predicting emotional distress was identical to the preceding analyses, supporting H1a. Emotional distress again emerged as the sole predictor of information seeking about celebrity responses to Williams's death in the logistic model, OR = 1.06,  $B = .06$ ,  $SE B = .03$ ,  $p < .05$ ; block  $\chi^2(4) = 416.02$ ,  $p < .001$ , Nagelkerke pseudo  $R^2 = .08$ . This model predicted a probability of about 51% that respondents who tended to feel distress over Williams's death chose to seek celebrity reactions to the death,  $M_{sought\_info} = 3.17$ ,  $SD = .91$ ;  $M_{did\_not\_seek} = 2.76$ ,  $SD = .91$ . The indirect relationship of involvement with information seeking was in line with H1b,  $B = .19$ ,  $SE B = .10$ ,  $CI_{95} = .02$  to  $.42$ . The direct relationship did not emerge, although means suggested a positive association,  $M_{sought\_info} = 3.77$ ,  $SD = .66$ ;  $M_{did\_not\_seek} = 3.53$ ,  $SD = .66$ ;  $B = .09$ ,  $SE B = .23$ ,  $p > .05$ . H2 was not supported.

Based on the results of these four hypothesis tests and given the decision rule indicated earlier, H1a and H1b are considered supported, and H2 is not supported.

### **Overall seeking**

As a final exploratory measure, the four information-seeking variables were added into an overall measure indicating information seeking diversity; 59 respondents sought none of the mentioned types of information, 52 sought just one of the types, most ( $n = 103$ ) sought two of the four types, 98 sought three types, and 45 sought all of the types of information. A mediation analysis configured according to the model above was conducted, which indicated an overall indirect effect of involvement on information seeking through emotional distress, supporting H1b,  $B = .17$ ,  $SE B = .05$ ,  $CI_{95} = .07$  to  $.28$ .

### **Discussion**

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) estimates that 43.7 million American adults, or nearly 20% of the U.S. adult population, reported a mental health disorder between 2011 and 2012 (NIMH, 2014). During the same year, the Centers for Disease Control reported that suicide was a leading cause of death of Americans, claiming 40,600 lives (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2014). Despite their prevalence, depression, suicide, and other mental health issues remain stigmatized in the United States. The purpose of the present study was to learn from public responses to the aftermath of actor/comedian Robin Williams's suicide and identify strategies for harnessing the power of celebrity disclosures in a future public health campaign.

Our findings carry several implications for mental health communication. First, the best placement of messages appears to be with existing material about the celebrity event. Respondents primarily sought information about Robin Williams's suicide, depression, and career. Far fewer respondents sought general information about mental health, suicide, or depression. This finding suggests the surge of calls to both the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline and the National Alliance on Mental Illness the day Williams's death was announced (Taylor, 2014) was relative to a low baseline of calls and the sudden increase in overall information-seeking activity regarding Williams's death.

Specifically, this study suggests an opportunity to educate and encourage conversation among the young adult population about depression and suicide with messages inserted within news sites and Twitter feeds reporting the event, websites about the celebrity and his or her existing works, and Facebook pages dedicated to the celebrity. Compared to television use, many more respondents said they went to Twitter and Facebook on their smartphones or laptops to learn about Williams's death. These usage patterns are not surprising, given that the Internet surpassed television for younger adults as the primary source of news several years ago (Pew Research Center, 2011). Americans also tend to believe that access to digital information has made them more knowledgeable about

various domains from news to products to friends and community (Purcell & Rainie, 2014).

Thus, the second major implication of this study is that efforts might be better placed with online and mobile outlets rather than large-scale television campaigns. Television campaigns tend to take a significant amount of preparation and launch time, in any case, and in unanticipated announcements such as Williams's death, a narrow window exists before people are likely to cease their information search. Recall that the bulk of information seeking for these respondents occurred the day of the announcement and lasted no more than an hour.

The third major implication of this study is that messages in places focusing on the event should acknowledge the emotional states of the media consumer. According to this study, people visiting news sites about Williams's death were likely feeling distressed by the news. Thus, a message placed within a page of information highlighting the death might be more effective if the message responds to the emotional distress by offering empathy or solace.

However, based on this study, people visiting existing sites about the celebrity's career or performances (e.g., an IMDB.com page about the celebrity's movies or television shows) might not be driven by emotional distress to search for this information. Rather, curiosity or memory enhancement might be stronger motivators for this type of information search, rather than emotional distress. In these venues, health messages might not need to acknowledge or reflect negative emotions in the same way messages in venues focusing on the death might need to be crafted.

The final implication of this study is to drive online traffic from news-oriented, social media-oriented, and celebrity-focused digital media venues to educational websites about mental health. We had expected greater use of informational websites about depression or suicide, such as those offered by WebMD.com, MayoClinic.org, NAMI.org (National Alliance on Mental Illness), ASFP.org (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention), or even Wikipedia. However, the greatest number of media consumers interested in seeking information after Robin Williams's death visited sites that ultimately reflected the celebrity status of Robin Williams.

Rapid deployment of strategies that leverage the media activity after a celebrity disclosure is needed to help others avoid self-harm and pursue treatment with less fear of being socially outcast. From the evidence of changing thoughts about suicide observed in this study, audiences might have heightened feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability with regard to suicide, making them particularly open to information about warning signs, possible causes, and possible solutions for seeking or offering help (Anker, Reinhart, & Feeley, 2011; Rains & Tukachinsky, 2015). As such, it is important for mental health advocates to monitor news reports for such announcements and to encourage celebrities to disclose their health issues in a responsible and educational way. As Link and Phelan (2001, 2013) note, increasing communication about a stigmatized issue can potentially decrease the stigma surrounding the issue.

However, a vital cautionary note to public disclosures and subsequent health information about suicides is the threat of

copycat suicide attempts by individuals who feel strong attachment to the celebrity. Dubbed the “Werther effect” (Schmidke & Hafner, 1988), suicides that are highly publicized in mainstream media can trigger a temporary but troubling increase in suicides and suicide attempts, which emulate the publicized suicide. Media reports of political and entertainment celebrities have been most linked to copycat suicide attempts within the first 4 weeks of the reports (e.g., Cheng, Hawton, Lee, & Chen, 2007; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2012). Attempts are especially likely if the reports cover details of the suicide (Niederkrotenthaler, Till, Kapusta, Voracek, Dervic, & Sonneck, 2009), and if the reports are in newspapers (Stack, 2005) disseminated in urban settings (Yang et al., 2013). It should be noted, however, that media reporting devoid of the details of the suicide act tends to mitigate the Werther effect, if not negate the effect altogether (see Hamilton, Metcalfe, & Gunnell, 2011).

Thus, it behooves mental health advocates to monitor how well media professionals are following the recommendations of the World Health Organization (WHO) to avoid reporting specific information about the commission of suicide, avoid portraying suicide as a method of escape, and avoid sensationalized headlines and photographs. Notable deviations from these recommendations include the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences’ tweet of an image of the blue genie Williams voiced in Disney’s animated film *Aladdin* with the text “Genie, you’re free,” and FOX News anchor Shepherd Smith’s labeling of Williams as a “coward” in reference to his suicide (Axelson, 2014). Unfortunately, these deviations are indicative of a general issue with journalists’ non-compliance with suicide reporting guidelines (Lee, Lee, Hwang, & Stack, 2014; Schafer & Quiring, 2015). However, responsible reporting and well-placed public health messages might counteract any potential threats these deviations pose for mischaracterizing suicide and depression.

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