

Linguistic and Stylistic Variety Across Genders in Suicidal Notes on Social Media

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ABSTRACT:

This study compares the linguistic and stylistic traits of male and female authors of suicidal notes posted to Reddit directly to the first goal of a larger corpus study investigating gendered discourse features in digital crisis communication. The study is based on the purposively compiled corpus of 400 posts (200 for each gender) from r/SuicideWatch and r/Depression (2022-2024), and uses the stylistic model of Leech and Short (2007) and corpus stylistics methodology to find systematic variation at lexical, grammatical, figurative and discourse levels. Qualitative close reading was used in conjunction with computational tools such as AntConc and WordSmith to produce lists of frequency, KWIC concordance lines, cluster patterns, N-grams and collocational profiles. Results show that female notes contain more words that are relational and emotionally expressive (such as sorry, love, family), have a greater lexical diversity, and show a preference for interpersonal pronouns and pragmatic strategies of apologizing. Male-dominated notes tend to be shorter, with more existential and direct lexical selection and themes of personal failure and emotional restraint. Additionally, syntactic analysis reveals that female posts have longer and more complex sentences, while male posts tend to be shorter and more succinct. The patterns are consistent with existing sociolinguistic theories of gendered language, and indicate that culturally constructed scripts of masculinity and femininity also exist in anonymous digital contexts. The results have implications for suicide risk assessment, AI-based content moderation, and the creation of gender-neutral crisis intervention protocols.

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1- Introduction

The shift of mental health discourse to the online world has completely altered the ways in which researchers, clinicians, and policy makers access

authentic expressions of psychological distress (Ma et al., 2026). In particular, Reddit has become an important socio-digital environment where people openly express suicidal thoughts that are

not often seen in clinical or face-to-face settings (Slemon et al., 2021). Pseudonymous participation mitigates the stigma-related barriers, thereby generating a naturally occurring raw, temporally contemporary, and analytically accessible body of crisis communication (Adil Jaafar and Abdul-Salam Jasim, 2022). These data provide a first-of-its-kind opportunity for linguists to not only look at what distressed individuals say, but how they say it, and whether there are systematic variations across gender lines in the way (Ramzan & Khan, 2024).

Gender has long been acknowledged as a structuring factor in communicative behaviour (Ramzan et al., 2023, 2025). The findings from sociolinguistic studies are always consistent in showing that men and women use language in different ways, especially when it comes to expressing vulnerability, relational identity, and personal agency (Ramzan & Javaid, 2025), which are deeply ingrained in the sociocultural norms that shape their communicative practices (Abdalgane, 2021; Coffman and Marques, 2021). The so-called gender paradox, in which men are more likely to die by suicide and women more likely to attempt it, has been extensively documented at the epidemiological level (Carretta et al., 2023). The actual linguistic form of suicidal expression, however, has received comparatively little systematic attention, with regard to the influence of gendered norms, especially in anonymous digital surroundings.

Existing computational models of digital suicide discourse have focused on detection, training machine learning models to identify high-risk content by surface level lexical cues, without considering the underlying architecture of the discourse in which distress is produced and shared (Shrestha et al., 2021; Haque et al., 2021). Sentiment analysis quantifies emotional polarity but it fails to identify a story of progressive relational erosion from a sharp existential rupture, which are significant clinical and theoretical differences. What is required, then, is an explanatory stylistic model that will reveal the co-constitution of gendered identity and suicidal suffering at the level of language.

To this end, the present study aims at systematically investigating the language of Reddit suicidal notes for gendered linguistic patterns. Specifically, the study aims at the analysis of the linguistic and stylistic differences between male and female posts from Reddit, in relation to Leech and Short's (2007) multilevel stylistic model and corpus stylistic tools. The study investigates how variation in lexical, grammatical, figurative and contextual features contributes to the interpretive understanding of the ways in which the communicative strategies used to signal suicidal distress are gendered in digital public space, going beyond simply examining frequency. The results have implications for academic research in the field of corpus linguistics, forensic stylistics, gender studies, mental health communication, as well as for applied fields such as risk assessment, platform governance, and design of crisis interventions.

2- Literature Review

Suicide notes have long been a feature of forensic and psychological investigations, and early studies of handwritten notes have concentrated on determining the intent of the author, their emotional state, and the relationships surrounding the death (Fata et al., 2021). This body of research developed a framework of recurring thematic signatures (guilt, hopelessness, farewell, and relational accountability) that have informed both clinical and linguistic research. Later, corpus-based research showed that the self-referential pronouns (I, me, my) are found at significantly higher frequencies in such notes, reflecting a feeling of heightened self-focus, which is associated with cognitive constriction during acute psychological distress (Jassim and Jaafar, 2022; Levis et al., 2021).

Suicidal communication has undergone genre-level change as a result of its digitalization, making it difficult to compare directly with traditional notes. Unlike handwritten posts, digital ones are often more fragmented, episodic, and interactive, mirroring the communicative norms of online peer groups but also carrying the emotional urgency of a suicidal crisis (Schoene et

al., 2021; Adil Jaafar and Abdul-Salam Jasim, 2022). Reddit's anonymity lowers the social cost of disclosure, leading to a more emotional expression. However, platform norms, subreddit moderation and community expectations also influence the register and content of posts in ways that make it difficult to interpret (Monselise and Yang, 2022; Slemon et al., 2021).

Language use in crisis communication has been found to be gendered in various methodological approaches (Akram & Abdelrady, 2023, 2025; Amjad et al., 2021). According to the research of Abdulgane (2021), rapport talk is the type of language that women are taught to use, characterized by emotional elaboration and report talk is the type of language that men are taught to use, which is action-oriented. Regarding suicide notes, it has been consistently noted that women's notes tend to be longer and more emotionally charged, with a greater focus on interpersonal relationships and men's notes are more existential, concerning personal failures and loss of control, and briefer (Levis et al., 2021; Coffman and Marques, 2021; Busso and Combei, 2024). The results of corpus analyses support the idea that female-authored posts on Reddit contain more relational vocabulary (family, friends, loved ones) and first-person plural pronouns (we, us), which would indicate a sense of community, while male-authored posts are more likely to contain first-person singular pronouns and existential language (Joseph et al., 2023; Nawaz et al., 2024).

The stylistic level is a significant differentiator in the use of metaphorical language. The figurative constructions, such as drowning in grief and crushed under the weight, have been observed in female writers more than male writers, which are used as a communicative tool for emotional states that are difficult to be expressed literally (Fata et al., 2021). Male notes are more likely to use simple, direct formulations that suggest an emotional constraint as a masculine communication norm. These tendencies are not universal, but they are statistically significant enough to be considered as gender-stylistic tendencies that have interpretative significance

for forensic and clinical practice (Gerczuk et al., 2024).

In spite of all this, there are still many gaps. Most studies are based on small samples or binary measures of sentiment, which are not able to capture the full stylistic complexity of digital suicidal discourse. Stylistic modeling using a multilevel approach (which can address lexical, grammatical, figurative and contextual dimensions at the same time) has not been systematically applied to a large, gender-balanced corpus of Reddit posts. This study fills this gap by drawing on the theories of Leech and Short (2007), gendered language theory (Adalgane, 2021; Koh, 2023), and the empirical results of previous corpus-based studies (Adil Jaafar and Abdul-Salam Jasim, 2022; Jassim and Jaafar, 2022) to offer a thorough account of gendered stylistic variation in digital crisis communication.

3- Methodology

The study is of a mixed-method, corpus-based, stylistic design which combines quantitative linguistic analysis and qualitative close reading. A special collection of 400 posts from the *r/SuicideWatch* and *r/Depression* subreddits was created from January 2022 to December 2023. The subreddits were chosen because they had a long history of being recognized as crisis communication forums and because there were long first-person accounts of psychological distress available. To stratify the corpus, the gender of the users of the posts was considered, with 200 posts from male and 200 posts from female users. Because of the study's conceptualization of gender as a discursively enacted social identity, rather than a biological one, gender classification was based solely on explicit self-identification in post content.

Data was collected through the Reddit Application Programming Interface (API) allowing for systematic and reproducible data retrieval of publicly accessible posts. Filters for suicidal ideation (e.g., I want to die, ending my life, suicidal thoughts) yielded a preliminary list of candidates, which was manually screened for false positives, duplicate posts, posts that were likely written by a bot and posts that did not

contain explicit suicidal or farewell communication. The Corpus was prepared by anonymizing (removing usernames, timestamps, and subreddit identifiers), normalizing (standardizing the text), and dividing it into sub-corpora based on gender. The spelling of words and the irregularity of their spelling were left as they are, because they have potential stylistic and emotional value.

Corpus analysis was carried out with the help of AntConc (Anthony, 2005) and WordSmith Tools. AntConc produced KWIC concordance lines, frequency-ranked word lists, cluster analyses, and N-gram profiles for salient lexemes that were chosen a priori (sorry, love, family, life, feel) and by inspecting wordlists for exploratory purposes (modal verbs can't, must, should; pronouns I, me, my, we, us). WordSmith provided standardized type-token ratio (STTR) measurements, lexical density calculations and keyword salience statistics, which enabled a systematic comparison of the lexical diversity and characteristic vocabulary of male and female sub-corpora. The quantitative data were analysed within the multilevel framework of Leech and Short (2007), which focuses analytical attention

on the lexical, grammatical, figurative and contextual aspects of text and how these aspects contribute to the overall impression.

4- Results And Discussion

Lexical Diversity and Corpus Profile

The key lexical statistics of the two gender sub-corpora, as obtained from WordSmith analysis, are shown in Table 1. The standardized type-token ratio (STTR = 42.7) was significantly greater for female authors of posts, while the token count was significantly higher, suggesting that women use a larger and more diverse vocabulary to describe suicidal distress. The percentage of content words to total words (lexical density) is also higher in female posts (48.6%) than in male posts (43.1%). A further difference between the two sub-corpora is the mean sentence length, which is 18.3 words per sentence in female posts and 11.7 words in male posts. This is consistent with sociolinguistic studies which have shown women to have greater lexical elaboration in emotionally salient communication contexts (Nawaz et al., 2024; Koh, 2023).

Table 1 Lexical Profile Comparison: Female and Male Sub-Corpora

Measure	Female Sub-corpus	Male Sub-corpus	Difference
Tokens (total words)	52,340	38,710	+13,630 F
Types (unique words)	7,821	5,409	+2,412 F
STTR	42.7	38.3	+4.4 F
Mean word length (chars)	4.82	4.51	+0.31 F
Lexical density (%)	48.6	43.1	+5.5 F
Mean sentence length (words)	18.3	11.7	+6.6 F

Note. Frequency per 10,000 words. F = female sub-corpus advantage; STTR = Standardized Type-Token Ratio.

High-Frequency Emotional Keywords

Table 2 presents the normalized frequencies of the seven emotionally salient keywords that were found using the AntConc KWIC and WordSmith keyword salience analysis. Data show a consistent and interpretatively meaningful pattern of gender differentiation. Three of these keywords (sorry, love, family) are significantly more common in

the female posts, with ratios from 1.59:1 to 2.21:1 for the female sub-corpus. These lexemes constitute a semantic field of relational accountability and interpersonal attachment that is typical of female-authored crisis communication. In contrast, three of the keywords are more common in male posts than in female posts, with a male to female ratio of

1.83:1 to 2.87:1. These lexemes correspond to a semantic field of personal failure, social isolation and existential fatigue that aligns with

sociocultural norms of manhood that inhibit the expression of relational vulnerability (Gough et al., 2021; Abdalgane, 2021).

Table 2 Normalized Keyword Frequencies: Female vs. Male Sub-Corpora

Keyword	Female Freq.*	Male Freq.*	Ratio F:M	Primary Semantic Field
sorry	38.4	21.1	1.82:1	Guilt / apology
love	44.2	27.8	1.59:1	Relational attachment
family	31.6	14.3	2.21:1	Interpersonal bonds
feel	29.7	18.9	1.57:1	Affective state
fail / failed	12.1	34.7	1:2.87	Personal failure (M)
alone	14.8	31.2	1:2.11	Isolation (M)
tired / exhausted	16.3	29.8	1:1.83	Existential fatigue (M)

Note. Frequencies per 10,000 words calculated via AntConc wordlist and keyword salience tools. F = female dominant; M = male dominant.

Pronoun Distribution and Relational Self-Positioning

The distribution of the pronouns in both sub-corpora is shown in Table 3. First-person singular pronouns (I, me, my) are also found at similar frequencies in both groups (around 187 to 193 per 10,000 words), indicating that an increased sense of self is an aspect of suicidal language, irrespective of gender. The largest diagnostic gender difference is for the first-person plural pronouns (we, us, our), with the female posts having 12.6 per 10,000 and the male posts having

4.3 per 10,000, or a ratio of 2.93:1. This distributional asymmetry is an expression of the relational self-positioning that is present in all female posts, where the writer creates subjectivity within interpersonal relationships, but not as an individual alone (Joseph et al., 2023; Ferguson and Olechowski, 2023). Second person address forms (you, your) are also much more common in female posts (41.8 vs. 18.2 per 10,000 words), reflecting a more frequent use of a "you" that is a product of an imagined audience and a desire to maintain social identity even in the face of death.

Table 3 Pronoun Distribution Across Gender Sub-Corpora

Pronoun Category	Female Freq.*	Male Freq.*	Ratio F:M	Interpretation
1st sg. (I, me, my)	187.3	193.6	~1:1	Self-focus (both)
1st pl. (we, us, our)	12.6	4.3	2.93:1	Relational self (F)
2nd person (you, your)	41.8	18.2	2.30:1	Audience address (F)
3rd person (they, them)	9.2	14.7	1:1.60	Social distancing (M)

Note. Frequencies per 10,000 words. F = female dominant; M = male dominant; 1st sg. = first-person singular; 1st pl. = first-person plural.

Modal Verb Patterns and Epistemic Orientation

The distribution of the modal verbs in both sub-corpora is presented in Table 4. Female posts show more deontic modals (should/must), which express relational obligation ('I should have been a better mother'; 'you must know this was not your fault'), and which convey an acute moral responsibility to the other person to survive. Male posts, on the other hand, show significantly more instances of the ability/epistemic modal

can't/cannot (52.7 vs. 31.2 per 10,000 words), which signals distress as a state of inability rather than a relational violation. There is also a higher frequency of won't/will not in male posts (16.1 vs. 8.4), indicating a discourse of futility and finality. These modal contrasts have been implemented as a result of the general lexical finding that suicidal discourse by women is more relational in terms of accountability, whereas the discourse of males is more cognitive and agentic in terms of exhaustion (Gough et al., 2021; Busso and Combei, 2024).

Table 4 Modal Verb Distribution Across Gender Sub-Corpora

Modal Verb	Female Freq.*	Male Freq.*	Ratio F:M	Primary Function
should	22.4	10.1	2.22:1	Deontic obligation (F)
must	14.8	7.6	1.95:1	Relational duty (F)
can't / cannot	31.2	52.7	1:1.69	Epistemic inability (M)
would	18.9	11.3	1.67:1	Conditional wish (F)
won't / will not	8.4	16.1	1:1.92	Futility / refusal (M)

Note. Frequencies per 10,000 words. F = female dominant; M = male dominant. Deontic modals signal obligation/permission; epistemic modals signal possibility/ability.

Figurative Language and Stylistic Complexity

In terms of figurative level, it is found that female authors have higher frequency and variety of figurative constructions. Conceptual metaphors of submersion (drowning in sadness, pulled under by the weight of it all), darkness (I have been living in the dark for so long) and physical burden (I am too heavy for this world, carrying everything alone) are significantly more common in female texts. The figurative patterns are found to be in line with Fata et al. (2021) who found that women use metaphor as a tool for communicating emotional experiences that are hard to put into words, thus giving a socially recognizable language to their inner world of

suffering. N-gram analysis confirms that three- to four-word phraseological units centered on emotional metaphors, such as so tired of this, I am falling apart, and nothing left inside me, are characteristic of female posts, forming what Leech and Short (2007) describe as foregrounded collocational patterns that carry cumulative emotional weight.

Male posts are less figurative, but are more likely to be simple and plain statements of pain. The statements I have failed everyone; I am nothing and nobody will notice are more assertive than descriptive evaluations. This style of restraint is reflective of sociocultural norms of emotional stoicism, which discourage emotion and vulnerability in males (Gough et al., 2021; Nawaz

et al., 2024). This relative lack of figurative content in the male posts may therefore be a communication gender norm, rather than a less severe level of distress, and thus have practical implications for risk assessment tools that conflate emotional expression with level of distress.

Discourse-Level and Contextual Patterns

At the contextual and discourse level, the posts written by women are more complex, with a biographical trajectory that can be followed to a recognizable event that triggers distress, relational ruptures, and a temporal trajectory that ends in the present moment of distress. Despite a lack of grammatical coherence, this narrative coherence reflects the psycho-forensic role of the last message as described by Ishfaq et al. (2025): "The creation of a narrative of self that legitimises and explains the action. Male tend to use a presentational style, which is abrupt and doesn't provide any biographical context, but rather a statement of present state, more frequently. This discursive economy aligns with the analysis of Busso and Combei (2024) on the cross-cultural characteristics of suicide note genre, which found that brevity and directness are key features of male suicide notes in various linguistic and cultural contexts.

The two sub-corpora are also distinguishable with respect to audience orientation. Female posts use regular second person pronouns (you need to know that I love you; please take care of yourselves), bring named/implicit readers into a clearly dialogic relational frame and maintain the writer's social identity as a relational being even in extreme circumstances. Male posts are less likely to be directed at a specific audience, and when second-person pronouns are used, they are more likely to be generic or impersonal (whoever finds this; for anyone reading this); this could be either a result of a lower level of relational self-definition, or a disinhibition effect of the Reddit platform, as the platform facilitates the anonymizing of users (Slemon et al., 2021; Monselise and Yang, 2022). All these contextual aspects indicate that female writers define the suicidal act as a relational responsibility and male

writers as a private, existential solution, which they justify interpersonally less frequently.

Critically, the anonymity of the Reddit platform does not seem to remove the stylistic patterning that is gendered. Instead, it gives a context in which gender is enacted by language, and in which the markers of the body and the social context are missing. This is in line with theoretical arguments suggesting that online communities are spaces of discursive gender performance (as cited in thesis by Krendel, 2020), and with Gerczuk et al. (2024) who showed that gender-specific linguistic patterns are still discernible in automated speech analysis of psychiatric patients. This suggests that the analysis of language, which is sensitive to gender, does not lose its diagnostic and interpretive power in anonymous digital settings, as is often thought.

5- Conclusion

The results of this study have shown that there are systematic multilevel stylistic differences between the suicidal notes that are written by male and female writers on Reddit, which are analytically tractable by corpus-based stylistic methodology. Female texts are marked by lexical diversity, relational and apologetic emotional vocabulary, more complex syntactic structures, more elaborate figurative language, and a discourse structure which prioritizes relational accountability and biographical narrative coherence. Male-authored posts feature lexical compression, syntactically minimalist structures, existential and failure-oriented semantic fields, and a presentational discourse mode that places suicidal distress in a private, exhausted position rather than a relational one.

The results have implications for several areas. In their clinical practice, they recommend that gender-specific linguistic sensitivity be considered when interpreting online crisis communication, as risk indicators of a normative nature with a focus on emotional expression can systematically underestimate distress in men. They recommend that lexical and syntactic markers should be used in detection algorithms and can and should be gender-differentiated to enhance the sensitivity of the algorithms across

gender groups, for platform governance and AI-assisted moderation. In the academic research context, the study demonstrates the value of the multilevel stylistic model of Leech and Short (2007) and the use of corpus analytic tools as a framework for studying gendered linguistic variation in crisis discourse, beyond the polarity of sentiment to the linguistic construction of suicidal suffering, its communication, and its possible misinterpretation.

Further studies could expand this analysis to non-binary and genderfluid communities, involve a

diachronic comparison to determine the stability of identified patterns over time, and include a comparison between the gendered stylistic patterns and the community norms on the platforms. Comparisons across languages and across cultures would also help clarify the degree to which the patterns described here are universal in communicative orientations and culturally specific in terms of gender scripts of masculinity and femininity. The current research is a first step towards a more linguistically advanced and gender-inclusive analysis and prevention of suicidal crisis in digital public space.

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