ON DEVELOPING A PRAGMATIC FRAMEWORK TO ANALYSE COMPUTER-MEDIATED
COMMUNICATIONS FOR EVIDENCE OF ENCOURAGED SUICIDE

LILY RAE CALLOWAY

Doctor of Philosophy

ASTON UNIVERSITY

September 2025

<div align="center">

Aston University

On developing a pragmatic framework to analyse computer-mediated communications for evidence of encouraged suicide

Lily Rae Calloway

Doctor of Philosophy

2025

</div>

THESIS ABSTRACT

This research takes a tripartite approach to addressing the ambiguity of encouraged suicide (ES) legislation in the UK and offers a means of identifying whether an offence has taken place. In Stage 1, I seek to provide clearer legal definitions for the acts relevant to ES as a communications offence; these are assistance, coercion, encouragement, persuasion and promotion. I argue that the current definitions of these criteria are ambiguous, facilitating a high degree of subjectivity in prosecuting and sentencing an alleged ES offence. In Stage 2, using one-to-one messaging data, I test two analytical frameworks for their suitability in identifying ES acts. The first of these is appraisal theory, which I conclude is not specific enough to account for the nuances of the different criteria in ES legislation. The second is a novel framework incorporating the pragmatics-based definitions of the ES criteria in Stage 1, which considers them illocutionary acts through the lens of speech act theory. This new tool (the Illocutionary Acts framework) is designed and reliability tested to be suitable for theoretical courtroom application owing to the possibility of future ES cases involving forensic linguists to provide an opinion on whether an offence has been committed based on language evidence. Stage 3 then applies the Illocutionary Acts framework in an exploratory analysis of a pro-suicide forum to suggest whether the language of this data would fall under the criteria of an ES offence in the UK. The findings of this research suggest that there are distinctions and degrees of severity between the ES speech acts in relation to culpability. Further, the Illocutionary Acts framework returns satisfactory inter-rater reliability scores for identifying occurrences of the ES speech acts in both the one-to-one and forum data. Analysis of the pro-suicide forum represents a new overview of this online landscape and offers a comparison with one-to-one ES.

Keywords: Encouraged suicide; suicide forum; Suicide Act; Online Safety Act; pragmatics; illocutionary acts; forensic linguistics; applied linguistics

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is dedicated to my friends; having a sound support system is not something to be taken for granted. Most notably, to Will, for your boundless thoughtfulness, love and kindness.

A resounding thank you to Orla for giving me the tools to nourish and accept myself.

I extend my thanks and gratitude to all my colleagues within the AIFL, and to anyone who has taken the time to ask me about my research or has shown enthusiasm for its necessity. A special thank you to Dr Felicity Deamer for your longitudinal help and for being my greatest champion. Thank you to Dr Robbie Love and Professor Tim Grant for all your advice and feedback. Thank you to Professor Jonathan Charteris-Black for introducing me to forensic linguistics as an undergraduate and for igniting my love of language analysis.

Lastly, this thesis exists in memory of those with no support system, and of those who felt lost without respite.

LIST OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

Chapter 1: Introduction

In England and Wales, the Suicide Act 1961 decriminalised suicide while simultaneously introducing criminal liability for complicity in another person's suicide. Specifically, it is an offence to commit an act that is "capable of encouraging or assisting the suicide or attempted suicide of another person", where the act was "intended to encourage or assist suicide or an attempted suicide". This offence may be committed through any "act" or "course of conduct", including physical acts, or communicative (linguistic) acts.

The Suicide Act doesn't define what is and is not an act of encouraged or assisted suicide (henceforth ES), beyond specifying that these include "threatening" or "putting pressure on" another person to commit or attempt suicide. The Policy for Prosecutors in Respect of Cases of Encouraging or Assisting Suicide (CPS 2014) offers some additional context of relevance to the investigation of linguistic evidence:

- clarifying that the Act applies to "an act undertaken via a website in exactly the same way as it does to any other act"
- noting public interest factors tending in favour of prosecution, including:
  - "the victim had not reached a voluntary, clear, settled and informed decision to commit suicide";
  - "the victim had not clearly and unequivocally communicated his or her decision to commit suicide to the suspect";
  - "the victim did not seek the encouragement or assistance of the suspect personally or on his or her own initiative";
  - "the suspect pressured the victim to commit suicide";

- noting public interest factors tending against prosecution, including:
  - "the victim had reached a voluntary, clear, settled and informed decision to commit suicide";
  - "the actions of the suspect, although sufficient to come within the definition of the offence, were of only minor encouragement or assistance";
  - "the suspect had sought to dissuade the victim from taking the course of action which resulted in his or her suicide";
  - "the actions of the suspect may be characterised as reluctant encouragement or assistance in the face of a determined wish on the part of the victim to commit suicide"[.]

From a linguistic perspective, the wording of the Act alongside the Policy for Prosecutors leave much to interpretation. This means that in instances where an offence has been alleged through a communicative act (for example, through computer-mediated communication (CMC)), rigorous linguistic analysis may be required to (a) determine what counts as an offence under the Suicide Act 1961 and (b) determine the severity of the alleged offence.

Owing to the ambiguity of what constitutes an act "capable of encouraging or assisting the suicide or attempted suicide of another person" (Suicide Act 1961), I argue for greater transparency regarding what this encompasses. Currently, there is no system in place to reliably determine whether an offence has been committed under the Act, and this thesis considers how this may be achieved in

alleged or disputed cases of ES as a communicative act. The vagueness of the current criteria allows for a high degree of subjectivity regarding the decision of whether to prosecute an alleged offence, and further regarding the severity of the given sentence. What determines the criteria of acts of assistance versus encouragement is also rife in the current debate surrounding the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill (HL Bill 112). If passed, assisted dying in the context of persons over the age of 18 suffering from longstanding and terminal illness may be granted the legal right to receive a self-administered drug to end their own life. This new category of legal "assistance" in the context of suicide represents a further argument in favour of assistance and encouragement being treated as two separate concepts rather than one semantic unit.

Regarding ambiguous criteria, similar may be said of the Online Safety Act 2023, in which providers are responsible for moderating content that promotes suicide, yet what this looks like is not defined. While the OSA does not criminalise "acts" in the same way as the Suicide Act, it seeks to regulate "[c]ontent which encourages, promotes or provides instructions for suicide" (s.61(3)) as Primary Priority Content which is harmful to children. The responsibility of moderating this type of content is that of the service provider, with investigatory powers awarded to Ofcom as a regulatory body. Following the introduction of the OSA, websites found to be hosting content encouraging, promoting, or providing instruction for suicide may face being blocked in the UK if they do not comply with these new standards, with investigations launched into the (US-hosted) suicide forum Sanctioned Suicide in July 2025.

Considering both the Suicide Act 1961 and the Online Safety Act 2023, I argue that there exists a need to be able to define which linguistic acts are present in a text, whether any represent greater or lesser degrees of complicity, and to provide reliable criteria for identifying them. With this, I seek to provide less ambiguous definitions for the "acts" featured in the Suicide Act and the OSA, and to design an analytical tool suitable for identifying these criteria in ES communications. In doing so, I aim to exemplify how linguistic analysis may determine firstly whether an offence has been committed, and secondly, the possible degree of culpability involved.

In this thesis, two frameworks are evaluated. The first is an existing framework based on appraisal theory (Martin and Rose 2003; Martin and White 2005), which was used by Calloway (2023) to investigate the presence of encouragement and coercion in evidence from a landmark U.S. case of encouraged suicide, which concerned text messages between Conrad Roy and Michelle Carter, the latter of whom was found to have encouraged and coerced Roy to end his own life. As appraisal offers a view of how concepts, behaviours and ideologies are evaluated, Calloway (2023) considers how these evaluations might be used to influence someone to act in a certain way. Therefore, exemplifying how one person's language may influence someone to act could be used to illustrate how they may have encouraged that person towards suicide. As the appraisal framework has been criticised for its subjectivity, I seek to test whether it is a tool reliable enough to theoretically be used by a linguist in court to demonstrate how words may influence behaviour.

The second framework is inspired by speech act theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1969) and considers the ES "acts" in the context of communications offences as illocutionary acts, meaning the force produced by an utterance. As "encouragement" encompasses multiple different linguistic actions within the Act (including coercion and persuasion), these are treated as separate speech acts owing to their differing pragmatic forces and aims and therefore potential difference in severity. A novel analytical tool based

on these illocutionary acts (the Illocutionary Acts (IA) framework) is proposed and tested for the purpose of identifying the presence of the speech acts featured in the encouraged suicide legislation and delineating the nuances between them. Although pragmatic analysis is subjective, I seek to minimise this subjectivity and achieve an acceptable inter-rater reliability score using this new framework. Owing to its potential as a linguistically realised crime, it is possible that future ES cases could involve forensic linguists as expert witnesses to provide an opinion on whether an offence has been committed according to the language evidence. Because of this, the IA framework has been designed and tested to be suitable for theoretical courtroom application.

In evaluating analytical frameworks for their utility with ES data, I argue that the criteria in the legislation must be better defined as they are somewhat vague and overlapping. As such, this thesis seeks to provide clearer legal definitions for the criteria featured in encouraged suicide legislation, namely, *assistance* and *encouragement* (from the Suicide Act 1961), *promotion* (from the Online Safety Act 2023), and *coercion* (implied by the Suicide Act 1961 s.2A). Persuasion has also been accounted for due to its link with applying pressure and its mention in ES sentencing remarks (e.g. *R v Howe*), as has seeking assistance with the acknowledgement that some individuals actively search for this information, which may prove a mitigating factor in sentencing. The appraisal and IA frameworks are tested for reliability using two prominent types of encouraged suicide data: one-to-one messaging and forum data. These two facets of ES communication are treated as separate datasets due to observed differences in the genres, for example, in audience (one-to-one vs. group discussion).

While cases of one-to-one messaging have already been brought to trial in the context of encouraged and coerced suicide (LaPalme 2018; Sanchez and Lance 2017), the introduction of the Online Safety Act 2023 has resulted in cases of online pro-suicide forum interaction being moderated and blocked in the UK. As such, I ask what the promotion of suicide looks like in these spaces, and whether the content could be illegal under the Suicide Act. Furthermore, I discuss whether removing the content and blocking access to the site will help the wider problem expressed by the forum's users, such as inadequate mental health resources and the lack of opportunity to discuss their feelings in a non-judgemental setting.

In summary, the primary aims of this thesis are:

> **Stage 1:** To provide clearer legal definitions for speech acts relevant to ES legislation (*assistance, coercion, encouragement, persuasion, promotion* and *seeking assistance*)
>
> **Stage 2:** To develop an analytical framework based on the illocutionary acts relevant to ES legislation that is suitable for analysing ES evidence
>
> **Stage 3:** To use this analytical framework to explore possible occurrences of ES on pro-suicide fora.

The contributions of this thesis therefore include:

- Raising the potential issue of the ambiguity of the Suicide Act 1961
- A new application of theoretical pragmatics: how to separate these pragmatically dense concepts
- Offering an analytical tool for this purpose

Before discussing the relevant literature, the cases of Michelle Carter and William-Melchert-Dinkel are outlined to provide some background and context of the data used in this study as publicly available ES interactions. Freedom of Information requests were submitted in attempt to gather UK ES data from the cases mentioned in Chapter 2.8, however, these were rejected on the basis that publishing this evidence has the potential to cause harm to the families of the victims and to other vulnerable individuals. Debates and opinions surrounding these cases are discussed in Chapter 2. Sections 1.3-1.4 detail the nature of encouraged suicide as a crime in England and Wales (Suicide Act 1961), alongside the introduction of the Online Safety Act 2023, and what these mean for online content that may assist, coerce, encourage or promote suicide. The Literature Review continues to discuss a variety of types of online harm alongside the potential of language to influence behaviour, before highlighting some government reports and statistics regarding suicide and online activity. I then provide details and sentencing remarks for some UK and international ES cases. Following this, I introduce the analytical frameworks used in this thesis before providing some background to and discussion of what I refer to as the ES speech acts.

The Methodology chapter details the data, data collection process, and the analytical process for each of the three project stages (as outlined above). The Results and Analysis chapter then provides the new definitions borne out of Stage 1; the results of the appraisal and the illocutionary acts framework reliability tests from Stage 2; and the analysis of the one-to-one and forum datasets from Stages 2 and 3. The findings are considered with respect to the research aims and broader implications for policy in the Discussion, before suggestions for future research and closing remarks in the Conclusion.

1.1 Michelle Carter

Conrad Henri Roy III, of Fairhaven Massachusetts, died by suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning on the 13th of July 2014. Conrad's girlfriend, Michelle Carter, admitted to a friend that he had called her during this process to express his reluctance, at which point Carter instructed him to get back into his car that was filling with carbon monoxide. The subsequent police investigation found a series of text messages between Carter and Roy in which Carter assists in the research of suicide methods; encourages suicide as a positive action; and promotes the idea of death as freedom (Calloway 2023) with the knowledge that Roy had existing mental health issues and had made previous suicide attempts. Carter was convicted of involuntary manslaughter, with the Judge ultimately concluding that there was probable cause to demonstrate the "coercive quality" of Carter's conduct, and that she was

> aware of the victim's history of mental illness, and of his previous suicide attempt[s], and that much of the communication between the defendant and the victim focused on suicide. Specifically, the defendant encouraged the victim to kill himself, instructed him as to when and how he should kill himself, assuaged his concerns over killing himself, and chastised him when he delayed doing so (*Commonwealth v Carter*).

Following her conviction, Carter appealed, stating that her words were protected under the First Amendment and argued that "verbally encouraging someone to commit suicide cannot constitute wanton or reckless conduct" (Heckel 2020: 34). However, the conviction was upheld by the Massachusetts Appellate Court (ibid.), with the Judge stating that Conrad "[broke] the chain of self-causation by exiting the vehicle" (*Commonwealth v Carter*). Carter was sentenced to two and a half years in prison, with this sentence subsequently reduced to 15 months. Carter served 11 months and 12 days in prison before her early release for good conduct in January 2020.

As a state with no law against encouraged suicide, Massachusetts has seen the 2017 and 2019 cases of suicide-by-text resulting in the trials of Michelle Carter and Inyoung You, respectively. In response to Carter's arrest, it was suggested that this case "could set legal precedent for whether it's a crime to tell someone to commit suicide" (Sanchez and Lance 2017), as "[e]ncouraging suicide does not fit cleanly into any category of existing doctrine" in the state (LaPalme 2018: 1463). Additionally, as a matter of time and money for the courts, "[t]he lack of a coercion bill made Carter's court case drag out longer than necessary" (Sokolow 2021), meaning more appropriate legislation could lead to more accurate sentencing (Sanchez and Lance 2017). With the proposal of Conrad's Law in response to this case comes the necessity to develop means of analysing what constitutes ES as a language crime, including for those jurisdictions that already criminalise ES. Should Conrad's Law come into effect, this would become the state's equivalent to the Suicide Act, with the primary difference that Conrad's Law explicitly criminalises the coercion of suicide, while the Suicide Act (s.2A(3)) includes "threatening another person or otherwise putting pressure on another person to commit or attempt suicide", thereby implying coercion.

1.2 William Melchert-Dinkel

William Francis Melchert-Dinkel was charged with "two counts of advising and encouraging suicide, felonies in violation of Minn. Stat. § 609.215, subd. 1" (*State v Melchert-Dinkel*). Mark Drybrough died by suicide by hanging in July 2005, following a series of online conversations with Melchert-Dinkel posing as a nurse by the name of Li Dao. Drybrough posted on a pro-suicide website seeking advice regarding hanging methods, when Melchert-Dinkel responded (as Li Dao) advising in favour of the hanging method. After this initial interaction followed a series of private emails in which each discussed their desire to die, with 'Li Dao' continuing to suggest hanging as the best method, providing advice on suspension hanging from 'her' experience as a "veteran nurse" (*State v Melchert-Dinkel*).

Nadia Kajouji of Ontario, Canada began conversing with Melchert-Dinkel on the MSN messaging service in 2008, following a post from Kajouji on the alt.suicide.methods thread on the News Group site nnseek.com. In this instance, Melchert-Dinkel assumed the online name 'Cami'. During their interaction between March and May 2008, 'Cami' was found to have repeatedly suggested hanging as a suicide method for Nadia, before recommending they hang themselves while on live webcam to each other so that neither will die alone. Ultimately, Kajouji responded that she would prefer for her death to look like an accident for the benefit of her loved ones, and her body was found in the Riedeau River on the 20th April 2008 (*State v Melchert-Dinkel*).

On the 15th March 2011, Melchert-Dinkel was convicted of advising, encouraging or assisting Mark Drybrough and Nadia Kajouji in their suicides. In the concluding remarks, the court stated that the Defendant "intentionally encouraged and advised" both Drybrough and Kajouji to commit suicide; that his actions "imminently incited" both to commit suicide; and that Drybrough's "actions were likely to have that effect" (*State v Melchert-Dinkel*).

This conviction was later reversed by the Supreme Court, stating that evidence was only provided for encouraging and advising the suicide of Kajouji, not assisting (as she had jumped from a bridge and not hanged, as suggested by WMD), despite the violation to Minn. Stat. § 609.215, subd. 1, which states

> [w]hoever intentionally advises, encourages, or assists another in taking the other's own life may be sentenced to imprisonment for not more than 15 years or to payment of a fine of not more than $30,000, or both.

It was concluded that "the Supreme Court has never recognized an exception to the First Amendment for speech that is integral to merely harmful conduct, as opposed to illegal conduct", with acts encouraging suicide representing 'harmful conduct' and suicide itself representing conduct which is no longer illegal (*State v Melchert-Dinkel*). Eventually, Melchert-Dinkel was convicted of assisting Mark Drybrough's suicide and attempting to assist the suicide of Nadia Kajouji. He received a sentence of 3 years imprisonment, of which he served 178 days before his release in 2015.

1.3 The Suicide Act 1961

While suicide as the act of taking one's own life was once itself illegal in England and Wales, this was abolished with the introduction of the Suicide Act 1961 (s1). Section 2 of the Act defines the offence of complicity in another's suicide:

> **2 Criminal liability for complicity in another's suicide.**
>
> [F1(1)A person ("D") commits an offence if—
>
> (a)D does an act capable of encouraging or assisting the suicide or attempted suicide of another person, and
>
> (b)D's act was intended to encourage or assist suicide or an attempt at suicide.

The requirement to prove intent as a mental process can be problematic (as discussed further in 2.9.2), however, the primary critique of this Act comes in response to the practice of physician-assisted dying, in which terminally ill or disabled individuals may choose to travel abroad (for example, to the often debated Dignitas clinic in Switzerland) to end their life under the care of a medical professional. If a loved one were to accompany them or help them with accessibility needs in order to travel there, the loved one would then be complicit in this person's suicide, according to the legislation. In *Purdy v DPP*, Debbie Purdy, a woman with advanced multiple sclerosis, did not want her husband to be liable for assisting her suicide if she were to travel abroad to Switzerland with his help. Due to her decreasing mobility and the advancement of her condition, she believed she would need to travel before she deteriorated further so that she could make the journey without his assistance, although this may have meant dying earlier than she would've otherwise chosen to (Cartwright 2009). Ultimately, the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) ruled that

> (1) The prohibition of assisted suicide in section 2(1) Suicide Act 1961 interfered with the claimant's Article 8(1) right to respect for private life (her personal autonomy and right to self-determination). (2) This interference - in cases of the suicide of a person who is terminally ill or severely and incurably disabled, who wishes to be helped to travel to a country where assisted suicide is lawful and who, having the capacity to take such a decision, does so freely and with a full understanding of the consequences - is not "in accordance with the law" as required by article 8(2), in the absence of an offence-specific policy by the DPP which sets out the factors that will be taken into account in deciding under s2(4) whether to prosecute. (3) Therefore the DPP was required to promulgate such an offence-specific policy (R (Purdy) v DPP [2009] UKHL 45).

Article 8(1) of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) relates to the right for respect of private family life, which in the case of *Purdy,* the DPP deemed was being violated. Mrs Purdy's personal autonomy was seen to be infringed upon in this instance, and the DPP ultimately agreed that she should be allowed to make her own end-of-life decisions. As such, the DPP appears to be considering and liberalising the remit of the Act in relation to assisted dying on a case-by-case basis.

Cartwright (2009: 474) argues that the Act may be in need of reconsidering, stating that "[i]t is questionable whether the Suicide Act, enacted nearly half a century ago, remains fit for purpose to deal with the issues facing modern medicine which were inconceivable to its drafters". In a time where assisted dying is an available option, Cartwright adds that "the debate can no longer be about whether or not we allow for assisted dying but how we regulate what is increasingly common practice, balancing respect for autonomy with the need to protect the vulnerable" (2009: 475).

In discussions of the need for the Suicide Act, it has been suggested that "vulnerable patients may currently be at risk from manipulation from malevolent third parties or may be motivated by feelings of guilt about becoming burdensome and the discussion needs now to turn to how we protect these patients" (Cartwright 2009: 475). However, while this need for safeguarding the vulnerable is emphasised, we are still lacking a definition for what this proposed vulnerability encompasses. Those opposed to a change in the Suicide Act argue that disabled or ill individuals may feel pressured into ending their lives, for example, due to financial pressures involved in their ongoing care (UK Parliament 2015). Others question where the boundaries of assisted dying will lie, and "if Parliament legalises assisted suicide for terminally ill people, how long before it extends further liberalisation of the legislation to those without any such illness?" (ibid.). For example, if assisted suicide was to become legal for the terminally ill, could it eventually be seen as acceptable for potentially remediable physical or mental conditions?

It is worthy of note that the Suicide Act does not mention coercion, despite the existing law surrounding coercive control (Serious Crime Act 2015, s.76). Coercive control is currently only applicable in cases where the suspect and victim are "personally connected" by way of an intimate, familial or co-habiting relationship (Serious Crime Act 2015, s.76(1) and (2)), and therefore does not encompass online coercive conduct between users who are not in a romantic relationship and may have never met face-to-face. Additionally, according to the Suicide Act 1961 (s.2A), encouragement encompasses "threatening another person or otherwise putting pressure on another person to commit or attempt suicide", arguably, a definition of coercion. While it could be argued that coercion is a sub-category of encouragement due to the shared influence on behaviour, one difference between encouragement and coercion could be an ethical one. For example, in encouraging someone to die by suicide, one could be acting in accordance with the will of the victim who may have expressed existing suicidal ideation. On the other hand, in coercing someone to die by suicide, there is an implied element of force applied to the individual to act according to the will of the addresser. This notion of threat, force, or pressure suggests that coercion is an inherently nefarious act. As such, whether an offence under the Suicide Act falls into the category of encouragement or coercion holds the potential to affect the severity of sentencing due to the nature of the offence. As noted by the CPS's Policy for Prosecutors in Respect of Cases of Encouraging or Assisting Suicide (2014), factors in favour of prosecution include if:

> (3) the victim had not reached a voluntary, clear, settled and informed decision to commit suicide
> (4) the victim had not clearly and unequivocally communicated his or her decision to commit suicide to the suspect [...]
> (6) the suspect was not wholly motivated by compassion; for example, the suspect was motivated by the prospect that he or she or a person closely connected to him or her stood to gain in some way from the death of the victim
> (7) the suspect pressured the victim to commit suicide

The nature of force involved in an act of coercion as well as the application of pressure to act according to the will of the suspect and against the initial will of the victim (possibly due to personal gain) are relevant to these public interest factors. Owing to these elements, this thesis argues that the coercion of suicide should appear as a distinct criterion of the Suicide Act, and one that may be viewed with greater consequence than the encouragement or assistance of suicide. Because of this, there exists the need to reliably distinguish between assistance, encouragement and coercion.

While most of the debate surrounding the Suicide Act centres around the "assisting" aspect of the law, little information is available regarding criteria of specifically "encouraged" suicide, despite this being a term increasingly appearing in news reports, especially concerning online spaces (Hall 2025; Laver 2024; Mitchell 2025; Yousif 2025). This could suggest that the notion of encouragement, the facets of what it entails, and how it is realised may be ambiguous and overlooked. For example, if persuasion and coercion are both considered under the umbrella of encouragement, persuading someone who is already somewhat committed to the prospect of suicide may be worthy of a lesser sentence than coercing someone into suicide. Therefore, there exists the need to be able to define what these acts consist of and how they may be realised. To illustrate this, *R v Howe* and *R v Finnegan* both represent cases in which offenders have been sentenced for encouraging and assisting suicide under the Suicide Act 1961. In sentencing, the respective judges note the influencing factors of harm and culpability on the severity of the given sentences. Lord Justice Treacy in *R v Howe* states "[t]his is not a case of forcing the victim to act, albeit it is a case where the attempt at suicide could not have taken place but for the Appellant's actions", thereby implicitly acknowledging a distinct property of coercion. He adds, "evidence of threats, pressure or persuasion applied to the victim will have a bearing on culpability" (*R v Howe*), suggesting that these facets (which may be described as coercion) could receive stricter sentencing. He also states that "the extent of encouragement provided or assistance given" is relevant to determining culpability (ibid.). Furthermore, Lord Justice Treacy explains,

> The guidance we give relates to what can be described as face to face encouragement or assistance as opposed to cases involving remote encouragement over the internet, which may take the form of encouragement given to multiple individuals unknown to the encourager. That class of case involves some different considerations from the present one, and has features which may need to be addressed on another occasion (*R v Howe*).

At the time of writing, this presupposed occasion doesn't appear to have taken place; however, the Policy for Prosecutors in Respect of Cases of Encouraging or Assisting Suicide (2014) states that "[a] prosecution is more likely to be required if":

> the suspect was unknown to the victim and encouraged or assisted the victim to commit or attempt to commit suicide by providing specific information via, for example, a website or publication[.]

Relevant to the focus of this thesis on computer-mediated encouragement, it also states that:

> The amendments to section 2 of the Suicide Act 1961 are designed to bring the language of the section up-to-date and to make it clear that section 2 applies to an act undertaken via a

website in exactly the same way as it does to any other act.

The sentencing remarks in *R v Gordon* (which is discussed further in 2.8.2 below) state that Gordon's agreement to be the victim (Matthew Burkinshaw)'s suicide partner "was capable of encouraging that man and it did encourage him, to kill himself". Gordon arrived at the suicide site with Burkinshaw before stating she no longer wanted to proceed, while Burkinshaw died by suicide after she left. In assessing Gordon's culpability, the judge raised the following questions:

> Firstly, did you have a genuine settled intention to take your own life at the time that you told Matthew Burkinshaw you would accompany him and did the acts of encouragement. Secondly, what impact did your encouragement have on Matthew? In other words, did he have a settled intention to take his own life irrespective of your encouragement and subsequent actions in accompanying him to the suicide site?

By separating the actions of encouraging Burkinshaw and accompanying him to the site, this suggests that accompanying him to the site does not constitute an act of encouragement. It is reported that Gordon and Burkinshaw met on a suicide forum (*R v Gordon*)*,* although details of messages posted to the forum or messages sent between the victim and offender are not publicly available, and my Freedom of Information Act request for this information was declined. The sentencing remarks do however note that Gordon gave "the impression of joining a genuine agreement to kill yourself while you were also exploring the viability of the "charcoal method" as part of the discussions you had been having with other people on the internet for months" (*R v Gordon*). The judge further suggests that "the fact that you said you were willing to take your own life with [Burkinshaw] was a key factor in his progressing his plans so swiftly", and "[i]t is clear therefore that your encouragement did influence his actions", adding that without the suicide pact, Burkinshaw may not have taken his life that day (*R v Gordon*). It is noted that "[t]here is no Sentencing Council guideline for this offence" (ibid.), but the Court cites *R v Howe* for guidance in determining sentence. In stating factors relating to culpability (or blameworthiness), premeditation, persistence of the defendant, solicitation of assistance, and "whether there is evidence of settled voluntary and informed intention on the part of the deceased to die" are mentioned (*R v Gordon*).

1.4 The Online Safety Act 2023

Following the suicide of UK teenager Molly Russell, who was found to have interacted with a large quantity of pro-self-harm and pro-suicide social media content (further discussed in 2.2), the Online Safety Act 2023 seeks to regulate content including that which incites violence, promotes or facilitates suicide, and promotes self-harm (Gov.uk 2022). According to the Act, platforms now need to prevent children from accessing harmful content such as online abuse, cyberbullying or harassment, or "content that does not meet a criminal level but which promotes or glorifies suicide, self-harm or eating disorders" (Gov.uk 2022). Additionally, adults are able to moderate the kind of content viewable to them, so it is possible to filter out pro-eating disorder, suicide, or self-harm content if one feels affected by it (Online Safety Act 2023 s.15, s.16).

According to the UK Government, the Act places responsibility for protecting children online in the hands of the social media platforms on which the content is shared. The Act aims to:

- remove illegal content quickly or prevent it from appearing in the first place, including content promoting self-harm
- prevent children from accessing harmful and age-inappropriate content including pornographic content, content that promotes, encourages or provides instructions for suicide, self-harm or eating disorders, content depicting or encouraging serious violence or bullying content
- enforce age limits and use age-checking measures on platforms where content harmful to children is published
- ensure social media platforms are more transparent about the risks and dangers posed to children on their sites, including by publishing risk assessments
- provide parents and children with clear and accessible ways to report problems online when they do arise (Gov.uk 2023).

Additionally, s.10 of the Act introduces a series of new Communications Offences, including false communications with the intent to cause physical or psychological harm, threatening communications, offences of sending or showing flashing images electronically (due to the harm caused to people with epilepsy), offences encouraging or assisting serious self-harm, and sharing or threatening to share intimate photos or film (i.e. 'revenge porn'). As a result of these new guidelines, service providers are now responsible for moderating or removing "primary priority content that is harmful to children" (s.61), inclusive of "[c]ontent which encourages, promotes or provides instructions for suicide" (s.61(3)). This means that pro-suicide fora may become completely inaccessible in the UK if they are found to fulfil these criteria.

Social media and forum-type platforms are referred to in the Act as "user-to-user services", meaning "an internet service by means of which content that is generated directly on the service by a user of the service, or uploaded to or shared on the service by a user of the service, may be encountered by another user, or other users, of the service" (s.3(1)). S.22(1) highlights the consideration of how the Act will comply with the right to freedom of expression in relation to regulated user-to-user services. S.22(1-4) states that there exists a duty "to carry out an assessment of the impact that such measures or policies would have on a user's right to freedom of expression within the law" when deciding on such safety measures and policies, implying that this should occur on a case-by-case basis. In accordance with the Act, regulated services are responsible for providing risk assessments of potentially harmful content (s.27) and risk assessments of services likely to be accessed by children (s.28). Additionally, broadcasting regulatory body Ofcom (Office of Communications) is responsible for establishing and maintaining a "risk profile" relating to a service's user base, the level of risk associated with users accessing harmful or illegal content through that service, and the nature and severity of harm that might be suffered by users of that service, amongst other factors (s.9(5)).

While the protection of vulnerable individuals and moderation of potentially harmful content may seem like a positive step, criticisms of internet safety proposals such as the Online Safety Act are multitudinous. For example, in relation to deeming what kind of content is appropriate for children under 18, Huddelston (2023: 3) argues that, in order to comply with the age-appropriate monitoring aspect of online safety laws in general, ticking a box to say you are over the age of 18 or providing a date of birth is inadequate, and websites should require verification by means such as government identification, therefore increasing the risk of identity fraud or more nefarious harm by hackers. Furthermore, Huddleston highlights "the ambiguous definition of what is age-appropriate" according to online safety laws (2023: 3), suggesting this could limit teens' ability to access information regarding issues of sexuality and gender. Human rights charity Article 19 have also raised concerns

surrounding the "insufficient" explanation of how the OSA will protect "users' freedom of expression and privacy rights" (2022). They further query the notion that platforms are required to remove content that is not necessarily illegal, but that which is considered harmful (for example, content that "depicts real or realistic serious violence against a person" (s.62(6)(a)). They claim that the vagueness of the definitions of offences in the Act mean that "they fall short of the legality requirement under international human rights law", adding the following statement before the OSA came into law:

> We remind the UK Government once more that legal speech is protected speech and that legislation requiring online platforms to censor legal speech fails to comply with international freedom of expression standards (Article 19 2022).

Despite its critics, the Online Safety Act received Royal Assent on the 26th October 2023, with the UK government claiming this new legislation makes "the UK the safest place in the world to be online" (Gov.uk 2023).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a broad overview of the nature of online harm. Firstly, the issues surrounding pro-harm content concerning suicide and eating disorders (pro-ana) are discussed. Other instances of online harm such as trolling, cyberbullying, and grooming are defined in 2.4 to provide further context for nefarious online communications. Debates and controversies surrounding the cases of Michelle Carter and William Melchert-Dinkel are then discussed as these form the dataset for the one-on-one interaction section of this project, while further examples of online and offline encouraged suicide are given.

Finally, the linguistic frameworks of appraisal analysis and speech act theory are explained with reference to their previous applications, and the speech acts of assistance, coercion, encouragement, persuasion and promotion are defined.

2.2 Pro-Suicide Content Online

Contrary to instances of one-to-one interactions, pro-suicide content published online is available to a wide audience (particularly if on the clear web, i.e. not the dark web, and if the content is viewable without creating an account), while both types have the potential for pseudo-anonymity through usernames. Dedicated pro-suicide websites allow for contributions of multiple authors through comments sections and fora, and meme content is shared and searchable by hashtags and promoted by social media algorithms, although some effort has been made to moderate these (Picardo et al 2020). This section focuses on the rife discussion of pro-suicide content online, those who access it, and the possibility of the suicide forum as a place of recovery.

Online interactions have been of great interest to linguistic research owing to the fact that "activities on social media primarily consist of language use" (Gnach 2018:195), and consequently, "words have the potential to cause enormous amounts of different kinds of harm" (Baker et al 2021: 1). While speech acts (Carr et al. 2012; Falomir, 2015), provocative content (Matley 2018) and the detection/removal of fake news (Lia and Shu 2019; Mayoob et al. 2021) have received much attention in the linguistic study of social media, only recently has the subject of pro-suicide and pro-self-harm content been brought to the foreground. Perhaps the landmark example of pro-suicide online content in the UK is the case of Molly Russell. In November 2017, the 14-year-old committed suicide, and the resulting inquest into her death uncovered a large quantity of suicide, self-harm and depression-themed content had been liked, shared or saved to her social media accounts (Milmo 2022). As a response to Molly Russell's case and others like it, pressure is being applied to social media companies to increase their protective measures for managing potentially harmful content, some of which is promoted by their user algorithms. It is under this premise that in addition to cases of one-to-one ES, this thesis draws focus to the potential language devices used in online pro-suicide content, with the aim of suggesting which language patterns are repeated and whether/where these types of content fall under the criteria of the Suicide Act 1961 and the Online Safety Act 2023.

2.2.1 Exposure to pro-suicide content

Much of the literature surrounding pro-suicide websites comes from the field of psychology and suicidology. As a result of such research, actions have been proposed in attempts to regulate these sites, including "the use of voluntary guidelines and the self-regulation of sites, the use of filtering software, collaboration between the mental health sector and the mass media, the development of alternative websites that promote help-seeking behaviour, and legal controls" but these are yet to

withstand rigorous and reliable testing (Pirkis and Nordentoft 2011: 531), therefore there is little evidence of their efficacy. Considering evidence in support of the 'Werther effect', a sociocultural phenomenon in which an increased rate of suicides (actual and attempted) occurs following the depiction of suicide in the media (Phillips 1974; Pirkis and Nordentoft 2011: 531), Pirkis and Nordentoft synthesise the findings that suicide rates are accentuated when there are similarities between the deceased and the reader/viewer (Stack 1990a); particular sub-sections of the population, such as young people and sufferers of depression may be more vulnerable to suicidal behaviours (Cheng et al. 2007; Phillips and Carstensen 1986; 1988); and, most relevant to the interests of this thesis, detailed description of a suicide method may lead to an increased rate of attempted or actual suicides using that method (Ashton and Donnan 1979; Phillips and Carstensen 1986, 1988; Cheng et al. 2007). This latter finding is relevant to this thesis as if detailed accounts of suicide methods are leading to increased suicidal behaviours, the pro-suicide forum may have the potential to be an active collaborator in assisting or encouraging suicide and raises the question of whether actual suicides would have occurred without the instruction given by Michelle Carter, William Melchert-Dinkel, or others like them. In essence, online communities that exist to glamorise and promote harmful behaviour may be contributing to the acts themselves through the nature of their existence. However, in critique of the Werther effect is the reality that there is no way of disproving the possibility of an ecological fallacy (Durkheim 1951), meaning "it is not possible to determine whether any increase in attempted or completed suicide following a media stimulus can be attributed to those individuals who actually viewed the media stimulus" (Pirkis and Nordentoft 2011: 536).

Regarding whom may be exposed to pro-suicide content, Minkkinen et al. (2016) investigated whether being a victim of violence and/or online victimisation correlates with exposure to pro-self-harm and pro-suicide websites (p.15). Their study involved a survey of 3,513 participants aged 15-30 from the USA, the UK, Germany, and Finland. They found that "38.1% of the respondents reported having been a victim of offline violence and 21.5% had been victimized online in at least one way", while 6.8% of respondents had been exposed to both pro-self-harm and pro-suicide sites (4.2% had been exposed to pro-self-harm sites only and 1.7% to pro-suicide sites only) (p.19). As accounted for by the survey, it was found that the factor of low self-esteem could affect the decision to enter a pro-suicide or pro-self-harm site; however, this link appeared only prevalent among their German participants (p.20). They concluded that offline and online victimisation "were more common among individuals who were familiar with both pro-self-harm and pro-suicide sites" (p.20). This research does, however, take a more exploratory approach and considers factors such as country of residence, belonging to primary groups, level of education, living arrangement, and occupation as possible factors in engaging with pro-self-harm and pro-suicide sites, therefore its aims and outcomes become muddied and little attention is given to the possibility of why a link between online and offline victimisation may exist.

2.2.2 Forum membership

In a qualitative linguistic study of pro-suicide forum users, Baker and Fortune (2008) conducted a series of interviews via email to 10 participants who frequently visited pro-suicide and pro-self-harm websites. In conducting the interview via email, they determined this to be the best means of data collection as it allowed the participants the "freedom to express views considered unacceptable offline" (Baker and Fortune 2008: 119). Using discourse analysis, three key themes were prevalent in the interview data: self-harm/suicide websites as places of empathetic understanding; of community; and as a way of coping. In identifying these themes, they suggest how these websites could provide users with an opportunity for respite and support, while acknowledging the obvious potential for negative implication (Baker and Fortune 2008: 121). In noting the ease of access for

users in comparison to the difficulty of accessing professional psychological or psychiatric help, this paper neglects the ease through which disinformation and potentially harmful advice can be spread amongst users, as in the case of William Melchert-Dinkel, who provided supposed medical advice under the guise of being a nurse. In writing this thesis, attention is drawn to the prospect of the suicide forum as a place of understanding amongst its users and considers the forum to be a symptom of a wider problem, rather than the core problem itself. As illustrated in the Analysis and Discussion chapters, users express their belief that the open discussion encouraged by the forum has in fact stopped many suicides from occurring by decreasing users' feelings of isolation and being misunderstood by others.

Framing the suicide forum as "a possible cause of acts of self-destruction" (Niezen 2013: 307), Niezen describes the observation of a 'cohort effect' in suicidal behaviour, as previously witnessed in the Cross Lake community of aboriginal Canada (Niezen 2009). In observing a high concentration of 'self-destructive' behaviour in the village, he argues that the cohort (or community) plays a part in normalising the idea of suicide by "providing examples of suicidal acts for others to witness—and even to follow" (Niezen 2013: 307), somewhat relevant to the Werther effect in the way that exposure to an act may influence an individual's behaviour. As such, he argues the existence of a link between exposure and suicidal behaviour "in which suicidal individuals were finding a sense of belonging with other suicidal people, in some instances acting on their decision to die in communication[...]with others" (ibid.).

Dilkes' (2022) empirical study considers whether the pro-suicide forum Sanctioned Suicide is indeed the immediate threat to life that those such as Niezen (2013) present it to be, or whether it can function as a supportive and preventative measure to some of its users. By providing a platform through which open discussions may be had about suicide without the common judgements of those who talk about suicide not being at risk of it, or that its motivations are borne from seeking attention (O'Connor 2021), Dilkes explores the possibility that having a community with which to share one's problems may be remedial. As such, Dilkes' study considers the "change over time of the language style of participants", focusing on "the pronouns and emotion words that have found to be associated with mental health more generally" (2022: 3). This study works on the assumption that participants who regularly engage with the forum over a length of time have a decreased criticality of suicidal ideation, perhaps compared to when they joined the forum. As social media research regarding linguistic choices has suggested patterns of "an increased use of first-person singular pronouns, and the pronoun "I" in particular, with increased depression and self-focus", while "increased use of first-person plural pronouns has been associated with better mental health" and suggestive that the individual is feeling connected to the group (Dilkes 2022: 3), pronoun usage is one of the linguistic factors Dilkes accounts for. Meanwhile, the use of positive/negative emotion words "have been associated with emotionality, with positive and negative emotion words associated with better and worse mental health respectively" (Dilkes 2022: 3). This study considers the range of pronouns used at post-level, alongside categorising the emotion words into one of eight emotion categories: anger, anticipation, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, surprise, and trust (based on the Canadian National Reseach Council's emoticon lexicon).

Accounting for any users who may contribute a small number of posts before leaving the forum, the analysis compared all users to users who had contributed more than 10 posts to Sanctioned Suicide (7,594 users), the results of which ended up being almost identical. Dilkes found that increased participation in the forum was associated with "decreased use of first-person singular pronouns, and increased use of the first-person plural pronoun we" (2022: 38), alongside increased use in the second-person pronouns you/your, and the third-person pronouns they/their. As noted by Dilkes,

psychological and linguistic research has suggested that an increased use of first-person plural pronouns can be associated with better mental health and connectedness with a social group, as could an increased range of pronouns demonstrate the ability to empathise from different perspectives, which she also found in this analysis. Additionally, Dilkes found that there was an increased use of all negative emotion variables over time but also an increased use of the variables falling under the emotion categories of joy and trust. Finally, she notes that "the most dramatic change for all the linguistic variables investigated occurs in the first few posts" made by a user, and that the rate of change after this point levels off, meaning that a more consistent language style is established by a user by around their 100th post on the forum (Dilkes 2022: 8). This research supports the belief that being able to discuss an otherwise taboo emotional issue with other like-minded and non-judgmental individuals may help to ease the criticality of the suicidal ideation being experienced. Once one user feels they are in a more comfortable and relaxed mental state, they too may begin to help others in their recovery. While this aspect of the forum exists, the reality remains that a large part of the forum appears to be a platform through which users "share information with others about specific suicide methods" or indirectly encourage another user's plans, "be that continuing to live, or ending their own life" (Marsh et al. 2021: 4).

2.3 Pro-Ana

"Pro-ana" refers to content encouraging or glamorising the process, behaviours and effects of eating disorders (ED). In one study, Ging and Garvey (2017) performed a content analysis of a sample of pro-ana posts on Instagram. Some of the thematic categories identified in this analysis included pro-ana linked with depression; tips on maintaining and concealing an ED, and pro-ana linked with self-harm and suicide (p.6). The image-centric nature of Instagram as a sharing platform also allows for image/meme content analysis, as demonstrated below in Figure 1. The gamified examples in Figure 2 demonstrate easily sharable content with the potential of encouraging or suggesting harmful behaviours the user many otherwise not have considered, for example, not eating a particular food for a month.

Figure 1) Examples of thinspiration images sourced from Instagram (Ging and Garvey 2017:1186-1187)

Figure 2) Examples of gamified and interactive images sourced from Instagram (Ging and Garvey 2017:1186-1187)

Using the chosen hashtags of #ana, #starve, and #fasting, the categories with the greatest number of related posts were text-based quotes (such as discouraging eating, lyrics, poetry, etc.) (26%) and thinspiration (25%), which often consists of images of protruding bones like those above. "Thinspiration" refers to pro-ana motivations, "but also covers more mainstream dieting practices, in itself an indication of how the boundaries have become blurred between pro-ana and more acceptable regimes of food restriction" (Ging and Garvey 2017: 1182).

Despite these findings, Ging and Garvey argue that the prevalence of these types of posts is beneficial as they highlight the widespread nature of body dissatisfaction, particularly amongst girls and young women (p.2). This aligns with the feminist arguments posed by Day (2010), who suggests that moderating pro-ana content is a further act of "self-control, self-discipline and self-surveillance, […] in line with culturally dominant ideals of femininity" (p.245). The lines here become somewhat blurred, as it may be called into question whether the "patriarchal constructions of female bodies" (ibid.) are those suffering to adhere to a culturally idealised standard of beauty through thinness, or those being told when and what to eat by a doctor or psychologist in order to gain weight. Arguments of personal agency aside, there exists medical evidence to suggest the danger of anorexia and malnourishment, the scope of which is beyond this project. The call to allow pro-ana communities to continue is, however, echoed by Yeshua-Katz and Martins (2013), who found users would consider the sites beneficial for their purpose as a coping mechanism, effect of catharsis, and as means of self-expression. Despite this view, the Online Safety Act 2023 now seeks to moderate (and if necessary, block) "[c]ontent which encourages, promotes or provides instructions for an eating disorder or behaviours associated with an eating disorder" due to being harmful to children (s.61), and states that user-to-user services have a duty to allow users to control or moderate the kinds of content visible to them, including that which "encourages, promotes or provides instructions for [...] an eating disorder or behaviours associated with an eating disorder" (s.16).

2.4 Other Harmful Online Communications

This section provides an overview of some of the most prevalent types of harmful online communication (or computer-mediated harm) to provide the landscape on which pro-suicide content lives. In this, some of the issues highlighted by problematic online communications are given, alongside where they might fit in with the legislation, and how they have been analysed and evaluated thus far. Where pro-suicide and pro-ana have the potential to focus of self-harm, the

content discussed in this section represents interactional harm towards another individual. Cyberbullying, grooming and trolling also exemplify language-based forms of online harm, while the sharing of images and other materials can additionally contribute. In considering what makes online language harmful, factors of individual distress, risks to real-world safety, and reputational damage can all contribute.

2.4.1 Cyberbullying and Cyberbullicide

While this thesis is not centred on the concept of cyberbullying, it is necessary in the discussion of problematic online communication to discuss the existence of cyberbullicide, alongside the suggested link between bullying and suicide in young people (e.g Brunstein-Klomek, Sourander and Gould 2010). The concept of cyberbullicide is defined by Hinduja and Patchin (2010: 207) as "suicide indirectly or directly influenced by experiences with online aggression". In this instance, suicide is a consequence of the bullying as opposed to the aim of the perpetrator as in instances of encouraged or coerced suicide, for example, a message such as "*Nobody wants you here*" does not encourage the act of suicide, however, it's apparent that this kind of hateful statement could carry influence on somebody's will to live. In a study of 2,000 American middle school students, Hinduja and Patchin (2010) suggest that "experience with traditional bullying and cyberbullying is associated with an increase in suicidal ideation" (p.216) and, as such, "a suicide prevention and intervention component is essential within comprehensive bullying response programs implemented in schools" (p.217). Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying means that perpetrators of online abuse have "constant access to their victims" (Brooks 2018: 4). This means that bullying no longer ends at the school gates (for example) and victims can be targeted whenever their phones or computers are in reach. Undoubtedly, this can become overwhelming, with Dorol-Beauroy-Eustache and Mishara (2021) adding that this risk of suicidal ideation may further increase in victims with "physical disabilities, specific medical conditions, identify as LGBTQ+, and while experiencing stress or loneliness" (p.10). Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic saw an increase in cyberbullying in teens and young adults, typically attributed to an increase in screen time and social media usage (Karmakar and Das 2021; Security.org 2021); meaning now more than ever, addressing issues arising from online communication holds importance in the wellbeing of young people.

This thesis focuses on short-form messages relating to encouraged suicide and therefore follows the suggestion that research should "explore the differential impacts of different forms of cyberbullying, rather than considering all forms of bullying using digital technologies as the same" (Dorol-Beauroy-Eustache and Mishara 2021: 10). By taking a fragmented approach to different forms of harmful online communications, identifying and defining these different categories may assist in feature analysis for the programming of AI software to moderate online activity, such as those already in place for censorship on Facebook and Instagram. Likewise, by considering the individual types of harm, these issues can be assessed specifically (rather than with a catch-all approach) and it may become more apparent how best to help people access the support they need dependent on the problem. In doing so, communicating online may become less harmful for vulnerable groups, including children and those with mental health conditions.

2.4.2 Grooming

With the ease of communication provided by the internet and social media comes the ease of access for nefarious groups to potential victims. Much like the reality of cyberbullying, the ubiquity of internet access means that child sex offenders are no longer limited to face-to-face interactions for grooming opportunities, and victims can be reached while in their own homes and physically under adult supervision. As described by Lorenzo-Dus and Izura (2017), "Online Grooming is the process whereby an adult gains the trust of a minor in order to exploit him/her, through the use of

cybertechnology" (p.68). It has been suggested that "the time spent in front of a screen, both on videogames and social media and applications, is the main predictor for the involvement of kids in online grooming" (Tintori et al. 2023: 14), suggesting an increased cause for concern as one recent study of US children aged 8-18 showed an average screen time for entertainment purposes of 7.5 hours a day, compared to the recommended time of two hours per day (SlickText 2024).

According to the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (s.15):

> 1)A person aged 18 or over (A) commits an offence if—

> (a)A has met or communicated with another person (B) **[**on one or more occasions**]** and subsequently—

> (i)A intentionally meets B,

> (ii)A travels with the intention of meeting B in any part of the world or arranges to meet B in any part of the world, or

> (iii)B travels with the intention of meeting A in any part of the world,

> (b)A intends to do anything to or in respect of B, during or after the meeting mentioned in paragraph (a)(i) to (iii) and in any part of the world, which if done will involve the commission by A of a relevant offence,

> (c)B is under 16, and

> (d)A does not reasonably believe that B is 16 or over.

> And;

> 15A Sexual communication with a child

> (1)A person aged 18 or over (A) commits an offence if—

> (a)for the purpose of obtaining sexual gratification, A intentionally communicates with another person (B),

> (b)the communication is sexual or is intended to encourage B to make (whether to A or to another) a communication that is sexual, and

> (c)B is under 16 and A does not reasonably believe that B is 16 or over.

> (2)For the purposes of this section, a communication is sexual if—

> (a)any part of it relates to sexual activity, or

> (b)a reasonable person would, in all the circumstances but regardless of any person's purpose, consider any part of the communication to be sexual[.]

Furthermore, the Online Safety Act adds a new section (s.66A) to the Sexual Offences Act, making it illegal for a person to send photos or videos of genitals knowing it may cause harm or distress to the recipient, and in the instance that the sender is gaining sexual gratification from this interaction.

From a linguistic perspective of online grooming, Black et al's (2015) computational analysis of themes present in groomer discourse included friendship, relationships, risk assessment, exclusivity, and terms of sexual contact. Similarly, in the move analysis of offenders' identity performance conducted by Chiang and Grant (2018), 19 different rhetorical moves (Swales 1990) were identified, including rapport building, assessing and managing risk, immediate sexual gratification, and meeting planning. The common practice of assessing risk present in both studies suggests that offenders are

typically aware that they are committing an offence and therefore aim to conduct themselves with some degree of covertness. The inclusion of meeting planning in the discourse is suggestive of s.15(1)B of the Sexual Offences Act 2003, in that the offender is intending to make real-world contact with the victim following their online interaction. Meanwhile, the sexual nature of the contact is in violation of s.15A of the Act, as demonstrated by the 'sexual gratification' and 'sexual rapport' moves identified by Chiang and Grant (2018) and the 'sexual contact' category in Black et al. (2015).

As one of the forms of common online harm with the potential for the most devastating real-world consequences, online grooming communities are heavily observed and regularly infiltrated by undercover officers. In working with a UK undercover online officer (UCO) training programme, Macleod and Grant (2020) suggest how a child's online identity can be assumed (authorship synthesis) by an officer in order to arrange a meeting and make an arrest. In this situation, a child is identified as being at risk from an offender following sexualised online messaging. The police remove the child from contact with the offender; and the child's online role is filled by a UCO until an in-person meeting is secured. To avoid suspicion, the UCO must communicate in such a way that the offender is not aware that they are no longer speaking with the child. Teaching the facets of authorship synthesis "comprises a three to four-hour session covering aspects of vocabulary, orthography, pragmatics and topic development" (Macleod and Grant 2020: 92). The linguistic concepts of speech act theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1969) and topic development (Gumperz 1982) are also introduced, with trainee UCOs instructed to consider the fine details of how the child interacts in natural conversation with the offender.

Macleod and Grant (2020) noted several challenges in this; for example, UCOs using variants not used by the child (e.g. *what* instead of the child's preferred *wht* (p.94)), and difficulty in UCOs initiating sexualised conversation while assuming a child's identity (when this is a pattern in the child's communication). Nevertheless, following the training programme, officers "showed consistent improvement" (Macleod and Grant 2020: 96) in obtaining information about an offender and arranging a meeting place in a way that would arouse minimal suspicion.

2.4.3 Trolling

As a form of online harm, trolling hasn't received as much attention as others falling into this category. Fichman and Sanfilippo (2016) argue this is perhaps owing to its existence as a fairly new concept, or due to the nature of its evolving definition. Online trolling may be defined as "repetitive, disruptive online deviant behaviour by an individual toward other individuals and groups" (Fichman and Sanfilippo 2016: 6), reflective of its etymology which draws on the character trope of the lurking, monstrous creature who preys on the unexpecting. Another likely source of the term comes from the domain of fishing, in which trolling refers to a method of baiting a fish. When mapped onto the context of online discussion, the victim user is the one who is 'baited' by a troll, then subsequently mocked upon 'biting', with the troll left to be entertained by the struggle (Donath 1999; Golf-Papez and Veer 2017). This definition of "repetitive, disruptive online deviant behaviour" (Fichman and Sanfilippo 2016: 6) is often either expanded on or disagreed with, with some suggesting that the label of trolling can be applied more broadly to "the process by which one is deceived" (Phillips 2015: 17). Furthermore, Hardaker (2010: 237) adds that a troll is someone "conveying pseudo-sincere intentions, but whose real intention(s) is/are to cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purposes of their own amusement".

The possible motives for trolling are manifold, including the purposes of activism or ideology, enforcing social status, entertainment, malevolence and psychological factors (Fichman and Sanfilippo 2016: 2). Additionally, Tepper (1997: 41) suggests that trolling may be used to distinguish

an online community's in-group from a suspected out-group, with those who 'bite' signalling a lack of in-group membership. Fichman and Sanfilippo (2016) also suggest enabling factors of trolling, such as "particular platforms and communities, such as anonymity, online disinhibition, lack of accountability, technical features, cultural aspects, and other social dimensions" (p.2). Trolling can produce real-life consequences for the victim, such as damage to personal property (Golf-Papez and Veer 2017), an impact on emotional wellbeing (Fichman and Sanfilippo 2016) and damage to the reputations of businesses as victims (Golf-Papez and Veer 2022).

2.4.4 Conclusion

In summary, likely owing to the degree of anonymity or facelessness provided by communicating online, "the possibility of deception, whether intentional or accidental, or self- or other-imposed, is greatly increased in CMC" (Hardaker 2010: 223; Spears and Lea 1992; Preece 2000). The metaphorical shield provided by communicating through a device rather than face-to-face can therefore result in individuals opting for more extreme, dangerous, or uninhibited behaviour than they would usually demonstrate in the real world, relevant to the practices of cyberbullying and trolling. Likewise, the internet facilitates the globalisation of interest groups that would otherwise have limited contact with each other; for example, indecent child images can be circulated much faster and amongst a wide-reaching audience of sex offenders, and people with pro-ana tendencies who wouldn't otherwise meet have access to a platform through which to share their experiences with likeminded people. The same may be said of the online pro-suicide community as a means through which experiences can be reported, advice can be given, and users can provide encouragement and assistance in favour of life or death.

Following this introduction to the general subject of harmful online communication and the more specific nature of pro-suicide content, 2.5 considers how the expression of a chosen ideology has the potential to influence the views and behaviours of others (for example, in favour of suicide).

2.5 Language as Ideological Influence

"Language influences our perceptions of what is good or bad, lawful or criminal, real or illusory" (Baker et al 2021: 1). This section provides a brief overview of how language can function to promote the ideology of a specific faction or social group in order to maintain a community, further their motives or extend their reach. Influencing behaviour can also take place on an individual level, for example, coercing suicide for personal gain such as inheriting money.

2.5.1 Nefarious Online Communities

In his introduction to Aristotle's *The Art of Rhetoric*, Lawson-Tancred stresses the function of persuasion as a tool to "influence the private and public activities of men and women, for whatever ends" (1991: 1). Aristotle adds on the application of persuasive and influential language devices that "if one used these well one might do the greatest possible good and if badly the greatest possible harm" (1991: 69). In pro-harm and other online communities, there exists the construction and maintenance of an in- vs out-group narrative to vilify those with opposing beliefs or actions that do not fit the worldview of the in-group; for example, the online involuntary celibate ('incel') community which promotes "an essentialist ideology where physical appearance, as well as gender and racial hierarchies, determine human value" (Yoder et al 2023: 1). In this online community, neologisms and naming strategies serve to distinguish in-group from out-group members, for example, women are referred to as "foids", a portmanteau of "female humanoid". This naming practice seeks to strip women of human qualities by likening them to robots (Calloway et al, forthcoming), similar to the incel tendency to refer to women in animalistic terms such as "vermin",

"bitches" and "landwhales" (Bogetic et al 2023). According to Steuter and Wills (2009), by describing an enemy in inhuman terms, they are easier to incite hatred towards, emphasising the influential function of metaphor also noted by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) as "conceptual systems" that "govern thought" by merging ideas (Steuter and Willis 2009 pp.6-7), "making them appear the same even though they are literally distinct" (ibid. p.7). By this measure, referring to women as animals or inhuman entities minimises any held emotion, morality or empathy, therefore establishing an easier target of hatred and violence. The most well-known instance of real-world incel violence is the 2014 mass shooting enacted by self-professed incel Elliot Rodger. Owing to the content of his manifesto in which he explained his desire to harm women for rejecting him (Witt 2020), the attack in which six people were killed and 14 injured has been labelled an act of extremism and one of misogynistic terror (Gentry 2022).

Regarding reference to incels as the in-group, Calloway et al (forthcoming) observe the use of "subhuman" as a self-referent to stake claim to a low rank in the social hierarchy as a form of self-pity. Being a self-described "subhuman" asserts legitimacy and belonging in the incel community, and therefore expert membership status (Paltridge 2015). By explicitly delineating between the in-group and the out-group, similarities between them are minimised and differences are foregrounded, for example, using "subhuman" as a self-referent based on factors of appearance (and supposedly therefore socioeconomic disadvantage) "reinforces the ideological belief within the incel community that society is inherently lookist, equating physical attractiveness with social success" (Calloway et al, forthcoming). In perpetuating this divide, "hateful, violent, and angry attitudes towards women and mainstream society" are maintained (ibid.), with those like Elliot Rodger to perform real-world harm to women praised and upheld by the community.

In the context of far-right extremist texts, Holbrook (2015) proposes an Extremist Media Index "to grade ideological media material conveying religious-political sentiments according to some very basic criteria concerning stages of activism and the nature of religio-political discourse" (p.57). In doing so, some degree of standardised classification system is sought, much like in this PhD, with the aim of exploring "'gradients' of content" (ibid.) and "social scientific ways of organising discourse and language into categories in a systematic way" (Holbrook 2015: 58). This grading system is "based on the extent to which the texts advocated violence (Extreme), isolationism or hostility (Fringe) or no expression of animosity (Moderate)" (Baker et al 2021: 12).

In this context, Holbrook argues that "systematised grading offers opportunities to explore relationships between mere consumption of ideological content on the one hand and active engagement in terrorism on the other" (2015: 59), i.e., whether the type or severity of the content may influence participation. Regarding how an audience is reached

> [s]omeone may have no existing extreme views and find such a text by accident, through a reasonably innocent online search. Another person may have the text shown to them by a friend or family member who encourages them to accept it uncritically. Someone else may hold a radical perspective and be actively looking for texts that provide further validation of them, helping to 'flesh out' aspects of the ideology (Baker et al 2021: 11).

The same could be true for a myriad of harmful online content, such as pro-suicide or misogynistic texts. In "actively looking for texts that provide further validation" (ibid.) of already held views, this can fall into an ideological echo chamber effect in which the problematic views are not questioned and are instead subject to confirmation bias. This echo chamber can then "act as a mechanism to reinforce an existing opinion within a group and, as a result, move the entire group toward more extreme positions" (Cinelli et al. 2021: 1).

Regarding influence on an individual level, Calloway (2023) considers how the language used by Michelle Carter may have affected the decision of her boyfriend, Conrad Roy, to take his own life. In doing this, consideration is drawn to "how linguistic means of coercion and encouragement can be manifested" (ibid., p.166). Using appraisal theory (discussed further in 2.9.1 below), Calloway (2023) highlights how evaluations of feelings, behaviours and concepts may have a persuasive effect. For example, by presenting suicide as a positive action, romanticising death and relating it to freedom from suffering, Carter's evaluation of suicide serves to make it appeal to Roy (who she was aware was suffering from mental health issues). Carter promises Roy peace and happiness in the afterlife, with the implication that suicide is the "only way" this can be achieved (Calloway 2023: 168-69).

It is also noted that Carter gives a significantly negative evaluation of Roy's tenacity, that is, frequently expressing doubt regarding his reliability, dependability, and commitment (Martin and Rose 2003; Calloway 2023). With this, he is deemed "hesitant, overthinking and avoiding/delaying" (Calloway 2023; 170). While Roy's indecision regarding suicide could be viewed as a potential desire to live, Carter's "negative evaluation of tenacity could contribute to persuasion or coercion by misrepresenting suicide as admirable" (ibid., pp.170-171). Carter further questions his morality, accusing Roy of being deceitful and dishonest with messages such as "[y]ou better not be bull shitting me and saying you're gonna do this and then purposely get caught" (Calloway 2023: 171). This implies that the way to rectify this dishonesty and to fulfil his word (and therefore, increase his moral standing) is to die by suicide. As an element of pressure and force is present, this judgement of character is coercive in nature.

An analysis of Carter's conceptual evaluation reveals a "significantly positive appreciation of suicide as an act", paired with a "significantly negative appreciation of CR not killing himself" (Calloway 2023: 172). Both sentiments can be seen in the example "[t]he question is, would you rather be in pain your whole life, or just a few hours?". This question is rhetorical and bargaining, with minimal time spent in pain implied as the most logical and rational answer, leaving Roy to arrive at the conclusion that death must be the best option for him.

The examples given appear calculated and manipulative and serve the purpose of urging Roy towards a specific behaviour. This application of the appraisal framework illustrates how language can implicitly direct and persuade someone to act in a desired way through accentuating the perceived positive values and minimising any potential negative qualities. Likewise, appraisal analysis can exemplify how having one's behaviour criticised by someone (particularly a loved one) may elicit feelings of guilt and the need to rectify this behaviour. Based on this existing research into language use in an ES case, this thesis further explores the potential use of appraisal theory as a tool to reliably classify how encouragement and assistance are realised through language (whether through evaluations of feelings, character or concepts).

2.6 will now consider the research and statistics both supporting the Online Safety Act 2023 and questioning the existence of a correlation between increased social media usage and suicidal behaviours in young people.

2.6 Suicide Statistics and Government Reports

Recently published statistics by Samaritans (2023) show a 41% increase in suicide rates in 10 to 14-year-olds from 2022 to 2023, a 5% increase in 15 to 19-year-olds, and a 1.7% increase in 20 to 24-year-olds in the UK, with suicide as "the second leading cause of death in youth aged 10–24 years old globally" (Sedgwick et al. 2019: 534). Meanwhile, Ofcom's *Children and Parents: Media Use and*

Attitudes Report (2021) found that 87% of 12 to 15-year-olds use social media platforms. While some studies have reported a correlation between increased social media use and an increased rate of teenage suicides, researchers have struggled to establish the likelihood of causation, owing to the multitude of factors capable of affecting mental health in young people alongside social media, such as "increasing academic pressures, and broader concerns about job prospects, financial security, and global politics" (Bould et el. 2019: 117). In their study of US 10-17-year-olds, Mitchell et al. (2014) found that "exposure to self-harm and suicide sites that encourage such behaviours were related to a seven-fold increase in likelihood of concurrent reports of thoughts of suicide and an 11-fold increase in likelihood of thoughts of self-harm" (p.1341), with the acknowledgement that further longitudinal research is needed to determine whether exposure to websites encouraging self-harm and suicide "increases the probability of actual behavior before we can consider their risks in more than just an exploratory way" (p.1342). In the UK, the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee (2019) reported a "limited quantity and quality of academic evidence available" to suggest whether social media use is harmful to children and young people, and "recommended that the Government commission research into this area" (Coleman 2022). A 2023 report as part of the National Confidential Inquiry into Suicide and Safety in Mental Health (NCISH) found that "suicide-related online experience was reported in 24% (n = 128/544) of suicide deaths in young people between 2014 and 2016, equivalent to 43 deaths per year", and "[i]n 2019, the suicide rate in girls and young women under 20 was the highest since recording began in 1981" (Rodway et al. 2023: 4434-35; ONS 2020).

Compiling UK-wide mortality data of young people aged 10-19 who died by suicide or expected suicide over a span of three years (1st January 2014-31st December 2016), Rodway et al. (2023) found that the most common type of suicide-related online experience was researching suicide methods, with the most common suicide methods in young people known to have suicide-related online experience being hanging/strangulation, and multiple injuries ("mainly jumping from a height or being struck by a train") (p.4437). Four dichotomous (yes or no/unknown) variables were observed to define a suicide-related online experience in this instance:

1. Searching the internet for information on suicide method

2. Visiting website(s) that may have encouraged suicidal behaviour (including chat rooms)

3. Communicating suicidal ideation or intent online

4. Online bullying (as a victim)

Presence of these types of experience were reported by the police, "who have the legal powers to search the young person's electronic media during their investigation for the coroner" (p.4463), while additional information was provided through reports of inquest hearings and coroner reports.

Additionally, it was found that those using the internet to research suicide methods had "higher rates of social isolation, mental or physical illness, and self-harm (including a serious recent episode of self-harm requiring treatment), and suicidal ideas or intent" (p.4439). Rodway et al. also note that 10% of 10–19-year-olds in this study used the internet to convey suicidal ideas or intent, comparable to the 9% of young people with history of self-harm using the internet as a platform to discuss their self-harm or suicidal ideation reported by Mars et al. (2015) (p.4440).

Chapter 2.7 will now discuss some issues arising from pro-suicide content online; namely, the ease with which it can be accessed, and the ideology of those in favour of suicide.

2.7 Issues with Pro-Suicide Content

The use of pro-suicide (or 'pro-choice') websites as discussion platforms on which individuals can openly talk about suicide and suicidal ideation has been observed since the emergence of pre-world wide web Usenet group *alt.suicide.holiday* in the early 1990s (Marsh et al. 2021). Despite appeals from the families of victims and the media outcry which often follows the publicised suicide of one of its users, pro-suicide fora remained easily accessible in the UK through a simple clear web search until August 2025 (due to intervention from Ofcom in accordance with the Online Safety Act (Ofcom 2025)). One such forum, Sanctioned Suicide, began as the Reddit community r/sanctionedsuicide in 2013. Following the subreddit's ban from the site in 2018 for 'encouraging violence', sanctionedsuicide.com was established (Dilkes 2022). This domain was also banned in 2021, resulting in the forum's latest incarnation as sanctionedsuicide.org. The apparent difference between Sanctioned Suicide and other suicide fora is the leniency with which users can discuss and even recommend suicide methods (Love 2020).

The forum name 'Sanctioned Suicide' is a "reference to the idea that certain forms of suicide are culturally sanctioned, for example Japanese seppuku" (Dilkes 2022: 2), or the practice of suttee (or sati) in India, where a widow was expected to throw herself onto her husband's funeral pyre until its ban in 1829. As these culturally permitted forms of suicide are not linked to mental illness, it is argued that they should not be met with judgement and shame, unlike a traditional suicide (Pierre 2015; Dilkes 2022).

By self-labelling their ideology as 'pro-choice', suicide forum users align themselves with the 'pro-choice' (and opposition to 'pro-life') movement in favour of safe, legal abortions. In doing so, they indicate their belief in bodily autonomy in the context of suicide, with the view that the decision of the individual should be respected. Marsh et al. explain that "as well as expressing their own thoughts of suicide, participants also share information with others about specific suicide methods, and sometimes the indirect encouragement of others' plans through the prevalent idea of respecting a person's choice – be that continuing to live, or ending their own life" (2021: 4). Despite the self-professed openness for discussion of both life and death on the platform, it is suggested that the fora lean toward "the negation of life and affirmation of the positive value of self-inflicted death" (Niezen 2013: 305). As such, pro-suicide fora "tend to be rigorous, rational, and instrumentally effective when it comes to exchanging information on the techniques of self-inflicted death" (ibid., p.304).

O'Connor and Knock (2014: 77-79) note the possible psychological and cognitive deficiencies that might be present in suicidal individuals, such as "being cognitively rigid or inflexible", "impaired decision making", "deficits in both interpersonal problem solving and coping", and "impaired positive future thinking". When placed in an ideological echo-chamber (in which others' opinions reflect and do not question your own), this content may create a confirmation bias whereby users' beliefs are confirmed without giving different points of view (Peckham 2023), thus reinforcing the view of suicide as a viable option and not challenging any potential cognitive inflexibility (O'Connor and Knock 2014).

Conversely, it has been reported that users of suicide fora view the community as a place of support, with the ability to discuss otherwise taboo feelings with like-minded people, having a possible preventative effect and helping users to feel more positive (Niezen 2013; Wiggins et al. 2016; Lundström 2018; Marsh et al. 2021). Additionally, Wiggins et al. (2016: 22) discuss the suicide forum as a platform for "supporting those who ask for help, but providing people with a space in which they can help others", suggesting that the ability to provide support for another suicidal individual can allow users to "re-position themselves as strong enough to do so" (ibid.). While Westerlund

(2011) presents the opposing view that all suicide fora exist to use "persuasion and peer pressure to encourage suicide plans" (p.766), the suicide forum can be seen by those who use it to be a place of support and understanding where resources like therapy and other psychological services are scarce or unaffordable (Wiggins et al. 2016; Lundström 2018).

2.8 Additional Cases

Chapters 1.1 and 1.2 detail the background and sentencing in the cases of Michelle Carter and William Melchert-Dinkel, the textual evidence from which form what is referred to in this thesis as the "one-to-one" data. This chapter discusses some additional cases of ES to provide further insight into the issue, although the textual data for these cases are not currently accessible for analysis. While the cases of Carter and Melchert-Dinkel are among the most prominent, and certainly those with the most publicly available data, several instances of encouraged suicide (both online and otherwise) have been reported globally.

2.8.1 Hayden Jennings Berkebile

In the US, 29-year-old Hayden Jennings Berkebile (Indiana) and 19-year-old Grace Anne Sparks (Tennessee) were involved in a romantic relationship, during which Berkebile was alleged by investigators to have "exerted sexual control over the victim causing her to engage in dangerous and demeaning acts" (Wildmoon 2021). Despite knowledge of her history of suicidal ideation, Berkebile was found to have directed Sparks to engage in a Russian roulette-style game over video chat, leading her to hold the gun to her head and pull the trigger, ultimately resulting in her death (Kellar 2022). Owing to his lack of previous convictions, the maximum sentence available to Berkebile was two years imprisonment minus time served, therefore reports at that time stated he would be due for release "after serving seven months plus six days, less 91 days" for the conviction of criminally negligent homicide (McLaughlin 2022). This case represents one in which online evidence was heavily relied upon, through a combination of chatlogs, images, and details of phone and video calls.

The couple communicated primarily through digital means such as Facebook Messenger, video calls, text messages, Snapchat, and phone calls, with Sparks travelling to Indiana on one occasion to meet Berkebile in person (*State v. Hayden Jennings Berkebile*). The court noted the couple's engagement in "suicide play" in which Sparks would pretend to take her own life for the "Defendant's sexual pleasure" (ibid.). The couple engaged in sexually explicit message and photo exchanges, often centred around the theme of death and suicide. Sparks expressed feelings of suicidality which received praise from Berkebile for being "hot", adding that he would either like to watch her suicide or kill her himself (*State v. Hayden Jennings Berkebile*). In the days leading up to Sparks' death, the fantasies described by Berkebile became increasingly aggressive and violent, stating his desire to "end" her or watch her "blow [her] head off" (ibid.).

On the day of Sparks' death, she apologised for previously asking for some time away from suicide play as it began to affect her, leading Berkebile to ask, "Are you sorry enough to pull the trigger?" and subsequently stating "I want to watch you pull the f[***]ing trigger [c*]nt" (*State v. Hayden Jennings Berkebile*). On the 29th September 2019, Grace Anne Sparks was found dead by a gunshot wound in her bedroom, found to have taken place during a video call with Berkebile.

At trial, the Court stated that "this whole idea of somebody committing suicide, to achieve sexual release is – is the height of evilness, in this [c]ourt's mind," claiming a longer sentence would have been given if permitted by the law (*State v. Hayden Jennings Berkebile*).

2.8.2 Natasha Gordon

In the UK, Natasha Gordon and Matthew Burkinshaw met online after Burkinshaw posted on a forum in search of a suicide partner (Glasgow Law Practice 2018). After agreeing to die by suicide together using Gordon's suggestion of the "charcoal method" in their respective cars, the two met face-to-face. Gordon expressed that she had changed her mind about going through with the attempt, and Burkinshaw gave her some money to get a taxi home; she then watched as Burkinshaw got in his car. Gordon alerted her partner that she was feeling suicidal, who then called the police to collect her. The judge's sentencing remarks in this case state that Gordon did not initially tell the police she had been with Burkinshaw, then "[w]hen the alarm was eventually raised, Matthew was found too late" (*R v Gordon*).

In sentencing, Mrs. Justice Cheema-Grubb stated (in reference to Gordon agreeing to be Burkinshaw's suicide partner) that her "agreement was capable of encouraging that man and it did encourage him to kill himself". The judge concluded that Gordon did not have a settled intention to take her own life on agreeing to be Burkinshaw's suicide partner, based on the fact that on the day of the suicide, Gordon's phone activity showed that she was making plans for the future. It was also found that soon after leaving Burkinshaw during the time that his suicide was taking place, Gordon was already in contact with another man discussing suicide methods. As Burkinshaw had made previous attempts on his own life, it was argued that he may have made a further attempt at suicide, however, it was due to Gordon's encouragement, influence, and suggestion of method that the suicide took place on that particular occasion. Natasha Gordon was sentenced to "one of four years imprisonment", half of which was to be served in custody, then she was to remain on license for the remainder of the four-year period (*R v Gordon*).

In a discussion of the factors considered when sentencing in an encouraged suicide case in the Judiciary of England and Wales, the sentencing remarks of Mrs. Justice Cheema-Grubb suggest some criteria under consideration, while there are no Sentencing Council guidelines for this offence (*R v Gordon*). In this instance, the notion of intent is brought into question (Suicide Act 1961 s.2 (b)) in the context of whether Gordon had also planned to take her own life or just lead Burkinshaw to take his. Here, intent of encouragement is deemed to be present owing to the evidence of Gordon making future plans and arrangements with others, alongside continuing to discuss suicide methods with others online shortly after. What constitutes encouragement is not unpacked in specific detail, however, agreeing to be a suicide partner (without the intention of enacting suicide) and the suggestion and facilitation of a suicide method appear to meet the criteria for encouragement and assistance in this case.

2.8.3 Charlotte May Cole

In New Zealand, somewhat reminiscent of the Carter/Roy case, both Cole and her husband, Will Leyden, suffered from psychological issues (Kidd 2022). Leyden died by suicide in 2019 and suspicions from his family led police to investigate the relationship between him and Cole. On reviewing the messages sent between the couple, those sent by Cole to Leyden were deemed to be "callous" in nature, considering her awareness of his mental health issues and vulnerability (Ontago Daily Times 2022). The exact contents of the messages have been permanently suppressed by the judge due to the potential of danger to others reading them (Kidd 2022), and the incitements to suicide are said to have persisted for the three months preceding Leyden's death. Cole pled guilty to inciting suicide and was sentenced to four months' community detention (ibid).

This case exemplifies why much of the textual data surrounding cases of encouraged suicide are not accessible, even for research purposes. Much like the Inyoung You case, messages of this nature are

concealed due to the potential harm they could cause to vulnerable pockets of individuals, alongside the possibility of causing further distress to the victims' families.

2.8.4 Inyoung You

In a case often cited alongside that of Michelle Carter (and also taking place in Massachusetts), Inyoung You was convicted in 2021 of the involuntary manslaughter of her boyfriend, Alexander Urtula. Urtula died by suicide on the 20th May 2019 following a "constant and inescapable barrage of cruel messages" from You, in which she repeatedly called him ""worthless," threatened physical violence, and urged him to "do everyone a favor and go [expletive] kill [him]self"" (McArthur et al. 2024: 1309). Witness statements and a forensic review of Urtula's phone led investigators to determine that

> the defendant became physically, verbally, and psychologically abusive towards Urtula during their year and a half long relationship, that the abuse intensified in the days and hours leading to Urtula's death, and that the defendant's abuse was the cause of Urtula's suicide (*Commonwealth v. Inyoung You*).

You's messages escalated to repeated commands for Urtula to kill himself, expressions of her desire to take her own life because of his behaviour, and violent descriptions of the desire to harm herself and to harm him, for example, "I'M LITERALLY GOING TO FUCKING SLASH MY THROAT AND TAKE A VIDEO SAYING IT WAS BEVAUSE OF YOU AND THAT I WANT YOU TO SEE IT IS THAT WHAT YOU FUCKING WANT[?]" (*Commonwealth v. Inyoung You*).

The *Commonwealth's Statement of The Case* attests to the asymmetrical power dynamic of the relationship, with reference to how You "owned" Urtula; that she would threaten to hurt or kill herself if he ended the relationship; and made him block a number of friends and colleagues on social media in order to cease contact with them (*Commonwealth v. Inyoung You*). Subsequently, Inyoung You pled guilty to the charge of involuntary manslaughter and received a 10-year suspended sentence.

2.8.5 Tyler Webb

In the first conviction of encouraging serious self-harm under the Online Safety Act (s.184) (and also charged under the Suicide Act), Tyler Webb admitted to encouraging self-harm and suicide at Leicester Crown Court in May 2025 (CPS 2025). Webb and the victim met through an online forum discussing mental health difficulties, which suggests he was aware that she was vulnerable (CPS 2025). The victim reported that Webb would encourage her to cut herself and to die by hanging, threatening to block contact if she would not comply.

The CPS needed to demonstrate that

> Webb committed an act that encouraged serious self-harm, or encouraged suicide, and was intended to do so; or that he believed his acts were capable of encouraging suicide or self-harm (CPS 2025).

In doing so, they cite Webb's knowledge of the victim's vulnerability; her cutting herself on his request as evidence that she would act on his request; and evidence of an audio recording demonstrating his persistence (CPS 2025). Webb's mindset was evidenced by his requests for photos of the victim's injuries, which "the court heard he would use [...] for his own sexual pleasure" (Hunt 2025).

Much as in the case of William Melchert-Dinkel, Webb requested that the victim hang herself while on a video call to him so that he could watch (Hunt 2025). This case also has similarities to that of Michelle Carter, as the encouragement of suicide spanned both messaging services and verbal communication, with Webb making "persistent efforts to get [the victim] to end her own life" via phone call (Hunt 2025).

The victim has been praised by law enforcement for her bravery in reporting the offence, with officers emphasising how her "actions have undoubtedly safeguarded other vulnerable people from being targeted" by Webb (Hunt 2025).

Webb was sentenced to nine years and four months (eight years and two months for encouraging suicide and one year and two months for encouraging self-harm), a portion of which is to be served in a hospital facility before being transferred to prison.

2.9 Analytical Frameworks

This chapter will now detail the analytical frameworks used to analyse the data in this thesis, namely, appraisal theory and speech act theory. Examples are provided of their application in the field of forensic linguistics, alongside acknowledgement of their critiques and limitations.

2.9.1 Appraisal Theory

Appraisal analysis concerns "the kinds of attitudes that are negotiated in a text, the strength of the feelings involved and the ways in which values are sourced and readers aligned" (Martin and Rose 2003: 25, see Figure 3), and was developed with the aim of creating "a comprehensive framework for analyzing evaluation in discourse" (Martin 2003: 171). As Martin and Rose explain, in systemic functional linguistics (SFL), "discourse analysis interfaces with the analysis of grammar and the analysis of social activity, somewhere between the work of grammarians on the one hand and social theorists on the other" (2003: 3), while Leech adds that interpersonal meaning is "most appropriately handled by pragmatic rather than by grammatical description" (1983: 70). Appraisal theory (AT) may be simplified as "SFL's model of evaluation (covering values, stance, hedging, intensity and the like" (Martin 2016: 46). At its core, the appraisal framework considers evaluations of things; how these are expressed and to what degree; and whether the evaluation is personal or comes from another source (i.e. *attitude, amplification*, and *source*). Simply put, "[a]ll acts of appraisal are in essence expressions of the appraiser's positive or negative feelings about something" (Thompson 2008: 171). As a system of "negotiating attitudes", appraisal corresponds with the interpersonal metafunction of language (ibid. p.7; Halliday 1976) owing to the processes of establishing and progressing relationships and the way in which this allows the speaker a platform "to influence [sic.] behaviour, to express our viewpoint on things in the world, and to elicit or change [another's']" (Thompson 2004: 30).

In developing the appraisal framework, Martin and Rose (2003: 1) held that

> [s]ocial discourse rarely consists of just single clauses, rather social contexts develop as sequences of meanings comprising texts. Since each text is produced interactively between writers and (potential) readers, we can use it to interpret the interaction it manifests.

Additionally, Page (2003: 221) claims that appraisal can be "realized by a single word, phrase or a whole proposition". This is echoed by Black's (1993) preference of dividing discourse according to individual 'thought units', not strictly bound by sentence, punctuation or clauses, but by units representative of a cohesive thought. However, as noted by Fuoli (2018), classifying expressions into

appraisal categories is "a difficult and subjective task", and "multiple interpretations for textual items are possible and the boundaries between the categories are not always clear-cut" (p.2).

Regarding the sub-division of attitude, this can be further divided into the categories of *affect*, *judgement* and *appreciation.* Appraisals of attitude can take place either implicitly or explicitly, meaning that something can be read as either positively or negatively evaluated regardless of the use of explicit evaluative terms (Hunston 1993). For example, Martin (2000) cites the example in British culture of the saying "that child tears the wings off butterflies" to express negative judgement regarding the child's behaviour by ascribing destructive qualities to the child.

Martin and Rose (2003) define affect as "resources for explaining feelings" (p.24), the binary positive/negative coding of which Wilson summarises "is assessed on the basis of whether or not the feelings are culturally understood as good or bad" (2011: 95), or as Thompson describes it, "the feelings and values of a culture, the attitudes which it is 'normal' for members of that culture to have and the parameters within which they 'place' their experiences" (2008: 172). In a very basic example, "the boy was happy" would be coded as positive affect and "the boy was sad" would be coded as negative affect (ibid.). Affect can further be segmented into the subtypes of *un/happiness* (e.g. down vs cheerful)*, in/security* (e.g. anxious vs confident) and *dis/satisfaction* (e.g. bored vs curious), representative of various "emotional dispositions" (Martin and Rose 2003: 60-61). In essence, affect is concerned with participants' expression of the emotional states of themselves and others (Calloway 2023).

The sub-category of judgement can be defined as "a set of meanings by which speakers appraise the behaviour of human individuals" (Martin 2003: 35), or implicit or explicit judgements of people's personal or moral character (Martin and Rose 2003: 28). In evaluating the behaviour of others, the five facets of normality, capacity, tenacity, veracity and propriety are considered as judgements of either social esteem (admiration vs. criticism) or social sanction (praise vs. condemnation) (Iedema et al. 1994; Martin and Rose 2003: 62):

> [j]udgements of esteem have to do with normality (how unusual someone is), capacity (how capable they are) and tenacity (how resolute they are); judgements of social sanction have to do with veracity (how truthful someone is) and propriety (how ethical someone is).

For example, the impropriety of someone's behaviour may concern "vengeance" or "retaliation" (Martin and Rose 2003: 37), while judgements of tenacity could involve calling someone "brave" or "reliable" (ibid., p.62).

In the final sub-category of attitude, appreciation is defined by Martin and Rose (2003: 32-33) as attitudes expressed towards 'things', whether a concrete object or an abstract concept (Wilson 2011). As such, appreciation is concerned with factors such as aesthetics, quality, and social valuation. Types of appreciation can include *reaction* (impact and quality, e.g. "*did it grab me?*" and "*did I like it?*"), *composition* (balance and complexity, e.g. "*did it hang together?*" and *"was it hard to follow?"*), and *valuation* (e.g. *"was it worthwhile?"*) (Martin and Rose 2003: 63). For example, describing a "beautiful relationship" (ibid., p.33) represents an appreciation of reaction: quality.

Figure 3) A basic system for appraisal (adapted from Martin and Rose 2003:28)
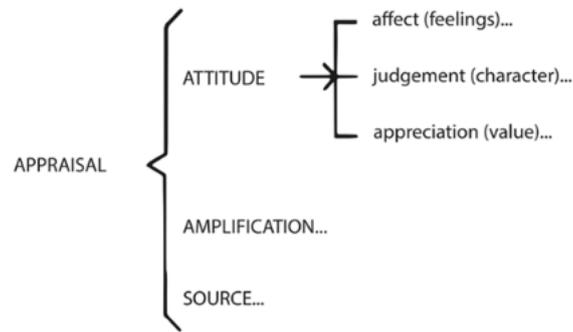
Calloway (2023) employed the attitude branch of appraisal theory ("a domain concerned with the linguistic expression of positive and negative attitudes" (Painter 2003: 184)) in the context of ES. Du Bois famously states that "[o]ne of the most important things we do with words is take a stance" (2007: 139), which, according to Gales (2020), "is especially true in contexts where the safety, stability and competence of discursive participants are at stake" (p.675). Calloway (2023) therefore argues that the process of stance-taking can "be considered a tool of persuasion or encouragement, particularly with participants in a vulnerable mental or emotional state" (p.163). Using Calloway (2023) as a starting point, this thesis also considers evaluations of attitude and their potential to influence behaviour in the context of ES communications.

The unavoidable element of coder subjectivity is the primary critique of appraisal theory (Thompson 2008; Bloom 2011) which, as a result, could negatively influence the replicability of the method. This is exemplified by the preference of Martin and White (2005) to classify 'surprise' under the in/security subtype of affect, whereas Bednarek (2008) classes it as neutral. This distinction highlights the necessity to "take the context and co-text of a sentiment into account when classifying it" (Calloway 2023: 165), raising the further question of exactly how much context is necessary (ibid.). Nevertheless, inter-coder subjectivity can be reduced through inter-rater reliability testing, through which some boundaries of classification can be agreed before coding the entire dataset, for example, whether the study in question will consider the mental state of surprise to be positive, negative or neutral. A further degree of inter-coder subjectivity is present in classifying the boundaries of an evaluative expression, with Fuoli (2018) noting that "there is no well-established, standardized annotation protocol", therefore posing "a challenge to achieving transparent and replicable analyses" (p.2).

Furthermore, Thompson (2008) notes the blurred boundaries between classifying human behaviour as either a matter of judgement or appreciation, depending on whether it is represented as "an action/state or product" (p.178) and citing the nominalization of behaviour as the primary source of this confusion. For example, in the statement "His catching was brilliant", is the process the thing being evaluated (i.e. catching) and does this constitute human behaviour, or is the product of the behaviour being evaluated (i.e. the catch) (Thompson 2008: 179)? One suggestion to help remedy this is "to group together all appraisals of behavior as involving JUDGEMENT, irrespective of the formal characteristics of the wording" (ibid.).

Despite its critiques, appraisal theory is routinely used for textual analysis due to its ability to "provide an economical handle on central aspects of meaning in text which other forms of analysis

would not be able to capture" (Thompson 2008: 174) and remains the primary conceptual framework for analysing stance.

2.9.2 Appraisal Theory in a Forensic Context

While AT has been used in a forensic context to analyse suicide notes (Grundlingh 2018), cross-examinations of witnesses at trial (Gales and Solan 2017), and threats (Gales 2011; Hurt and Grant 2018), no linguistic research to-date has considered using the appraisal framework in relation to the legal definition of encouragement. Grundlingh (2018) applies AT to distinguish authentic from fabricated suicide notes, finding that in a small corpus, negative appreciation, alongside the judgement category of propriety, occur "with greater frequency in the authentic suicide notes" (p.9). This suggests the potential suitability of appraisal analysis to predict will; a factor also considered by Hurt and Grant (2018) in a comparison of realised and non-realised threats. An additional aspect noted by Hurt and Grant, however, is the element of means; for example, if an individual has the will to perform an illegal act, they may not necessarily possess the practical means to do so, therefore adding additional dimensions as to whether a threat was intended to be realised.

In each instance, it should be noted that intent, as a mental process, is not wholly possible to determine prior to action (Hurt and Grant 2018; Singer 2014); such is the case for the England and Wales legal definition of encouragement, which states:

> [F1(1)A person ("D") commits an offence if—
>
> (a)D does an act capable of encouraging or assisting the suicide or attempted suicide of another person, and
>
> (b)D's act was intended to encourage or assist suicide or an attempt at suicide.
>
> (Suicide Act 1961, emphasis added).

As highlighted by Hurt and Grant, intent exists as "a quality the legal system not only assumes to exist, but one that can be detected and measured" (2018: 23). The notion if intent is encompassed by *mens rea* in the judicial context, meaning "criminal intention" (LexisNexis 2024), and encompassing the potential mental states of purposeful, knowing, reckless, and negligent (MPC 1962) in relation to the individual (supposedly) enacting a crime.

Furthermore, Hunter and Grant (2022) employ the attitude branch of AT in examining the writings of serial murderers with known mental health diagnoses. These findings were mapped against the individuals' set of psychological traits (or psychopathology), which "impacts how they interpret information and interact with the world and the people in it, which, in turn, influences myriad facets of their functioning" (Hunter and Grant 2022: 49). This study aimed to gauge whether and how a person's psychological traits may influence their chosen descriptions and evaluations, i.e., their stance (Biber et al. 1999; Martin and White 2005; Du Bois 2007), and therefore provide "a bridge between forensic psychological and forensic linguistic assessments of texts" (Hunter and Grant 2022: 50).

The attitude branch of appraisal is focused on in Hunter and Grant (2022) as the system concerning the "core feelings of the stances" and "personal emotions" (pp.53-54). As in this thesis, the data were coded using *UAM CorpusTool* (O'Donnell 2019), with the unit under analysis as the "word or phrase which contained an attitude" (Hunter and Grant 2022: 55). The coding decisions were discussed by the authors at points of contention; however, no inter-coder reliability measures were calculated (ibid.). Connections were found between expressions of attitude and elements of the

individuals' psychopathology. For example, in the writings of Aileen Wuornos, "the most salient pattern was the high proportions of *-security*, *+tenacity*, and *-capacity*", representing anxiety surrounding her environment, the determination of others to inflict harm, and both realised and imagined intention to harm, respectively.

Also focusing on the attitude branch of appraisal, Calloway (2023) offers a preliminary suggestion of a potential taxonomy of short-form messages encouraging suicide. From the analysis of Michelle Carter (MC)'s text messages to Conrad Roy (CR), Calloway (2023) draws the following conclusions:

1. MC uses conflicting and sometimes confusing identity roles to position herself as knowledgeable
2. MC is persistent in seeking a response
3. MC's use of affect tends to misalign with the cultural norm
4. Irrealis modals are used to present a negative consequent as a result of CR's lack of action
5. Examples of affect in MC's messages largely relate to the fields of UN/HAPPINESS and DIS/SATISFACTION
6. MC's significant instances of judgement are negative tenacity and negative veracity
7. MC evaluates the concepts of suicide and the afterlife as positive
8. CR not committing suicide is evaluated negatively

These conclusions were achieved by analysing devices of modality and appraisal. These complementary analytical frameworks were chosen owing to their potential to suggest the effects of encouragement or coercion, with the effect that the message has (or could have) as the element under observation. As such, the ability to evoke an emotional response or influence another's behaviour through evaluations of concepts such as feelings or character may be uncovered during appraisal analysis. Additionally, Calloway (2023) suggests the use of irrealis modals may also have the effect of encouraging behaviour through presenting a hypothetical positive or negative scenario, for example, "If you do/n't do x, then y will happen". Expanding on the analysis concerning the appraisal branch of attitude in Calloway (2023), considering the affect, judgements and appreciations of conversational participants as they build on each other and develop over time could provide valuable insight as to how encouragement and persuasion is achieved in pro-suicide discourse.

To further the research concerning appraisal in this context, this thesis seeks to assess whether linguists reliably categorise the way in which appraisals manifest in ES data. If so, appraisal could be a useful tool in indicating where broadly linguistic 'encouragement' occurs. This presupposes that evaluative language can influence behaviour (Calloway 2023; Dillard and Seo 2012). If considering encouragement as a broad category which encompasses persuasion and coercion (as the Suicide Act 1961 currently implies), appraisal may help to illustrate where influential language of this kind is present and the form it takes (for example, criticising someone's indecision to die or presenting suicide as a positive action). If treating encouragement, coercion, persuasion and assistance as separate acts, a more bespoke framework is needed to distinguish between these concepts. As argued above, due to the possibility of different (in this case, linguistic) acts being treated by the criminal justice system with varying degrees of severity, the stance of this thesis is that there should be reliable means with which to identify them. For example, if encouragement of suicide that includes force (i.e., coercion) could result in a stricter sentence, then there exists the need to be able to define what coercion is and how it is exemplified. This could therefore contribute to the precision with which linguistic crimes are described. In considering these acts as separate entities, a pragmatic approach is adopted.

2.9.3 Speech Act Theory

In developing a novel coding scheme to differentiate between assistance, encouragement and acts currently absorbed by the category of encouragement (such as persuasion and coercion), these must be defined according to their purpose and how they are realised. As I am solely concerned with ES as a language crime (rather than one involving physical action), these terms are considered in their iteration as speech acts and will henceforth be referred to as ES speech acts or illocutionary acts. The decision to use speech act theory in the design of this analytical framework stems from the focus of pragmatics regarding "[w]hat the speaker intends" and "what is accomplished through language" (Herring 2004: 18).

The development of speech act theory spawned from "the assumption of philosophers that the business of a 'statement' can only be to 'describe' some state of affairs, or to 'state some fact', which it must do either truly or falsely" (Austin, 1962: 1). The philosophy of language at this time focused primarily on "the truth or falsity of statements, and a corresponding neglect of the way speech is used to *do* things in the world" (Weston 2022: 81, original emphasis). Speech act theory expands on this idea that language is used to perform actions and serve functions. According to the theory originally posited by Austin (1962) and expanded by Searle (1969), utterances (or speech acts) are said to encompass the following elements (adapted from Genova 1971: 65-66):

a) The utterance itself – consisting of words, sentences, morphemes, etc.
b) The propositional act – what is being expressed, for example, what is asserted in the illocutionary act of assertion.
c) The illocutionary act – e.g., the act of asserting, promising, evaluating, requesting, etc. performed by the utterance.
d) The perlocutionary act - the effect or consequence of c). For example, persuading, warning, convincing, etc.

In critique of Austin's (1962) taxonomy of illocutionary force, Searle defines the five basic illocutionary acts as represented in Table 1. Searle further suggested Austin's model included confusion between verbs and illocutionary acts, and Searle criticised the overlap in Austin's originally proposed categories of verdictive, exercitive, commissive, expositive, and behabitive speech acts. In further attempt to remedy the confusion of the categorisation of illocutionary acts, Searle sought to identify the ways in which speech acts might differ from one another; a sample of these 12 ways are exemplified in Table 2. In response, some argue that Searle's development and "interpretation of the theory is at times taken as the definitive view of speech acts" (Collavin 2011: 377).

Table 1) Illocutionary acts as described by Austin (1962) and Searle (1976)

Illocutionary Act (Austin 1962)	Description	Illocutionary Act (Searle 1976)	Description
Verdictives	'in delivering of a finding'	**Representatives**	'to commit the speaker to something being the case'
Exercitives	'the giving of a decision'	**Directives**	'attempts...by the speaker to get the hearer to do something'
Commissives	'to commit the speaker to a certain course of action'	**Commissives**	'to commit the speaker...to some future action'
Expositives	'involving the expunding of views, the conducting of arguments and the clarifying of usages'	**Expressives**	'to express the psychological state specified in the sincerity condition about a state of affairs specified in the propositional content'
Behabitives	'the notion of reaction to other people's behaviour and fortunes'	**Declarations**	'bring about some alternation in the status or condition of the referred to object or objects solely in virtue of the fact that the declaration has successfully been performed.'

Table 2) Examples of ways in which illocutionary acts may differ (Searle 1976)

Ways in which illocutionary acts differ according to Searle (1976)	Example
Direction of fit between the words and the world	*Assertions aim for the words to match the world; promises and requests aim for the world to match the words.*
Acts that require extra-linguistic institutions vs. those that don't	*The institutional ability of a priest to bless; a general to give orders; a boss to fire.*
Acts where the corresponding illocutionary verb has a performative use vs. those where it doesn't	*'I hereby announce' vs. *'I hereby threaten'; 'I encourage you to' vs. *'I persuade you to'.*

Considering the distinguishing factors in identifying the propositional indicator and the illocutionary indicator, Genova (1971) considers the evaluative phrase "*John is good"*. Here, both the proposition (what is being expressed) and the illocution (what is being performed) are both represented by the

evaluation of John. Therefore, in simple evaluative acts such as this, Genova argues that with no clear differentiation between the propositional and illocutionary indicator, the propositional content comes from the evaluative "*good*" itself.

Furthermore, if we consider that "evaluations presuppose *assertions* of their propositional content (Genova 1971: 68, original emphasis), the example of *X is good* demonstrates the assertion that the speaker believes this statement to be true, meanwhile expressing an evaluation of the quality of *X* as opposed to questioning the value of *X,* for example. If illocutionary acts of evaluation presuppose acts of assertion (and vice versa), in the context of pro-suicide content, evaluating the concept of suicide as positive asserts the author's belief in this to be true. As such, this thesis focuses on the illocutionary acts present in the ES legislature and how they may be realised in context.

While illocutionary acts of evaluation can represent the way one views the world, perlocutionary acts represent the ability to change something in the world, for example, altering someone's mental state and/or causing them to act. While conceptually revolutionary, the work of Austin and Searle can only take pragmatic analysis so far, particularly in unpacking speech acts with blurred boundaries and ambiguous definitions like those in the ES legislation. With the ES speech acts, there exists the need to delineate which mental states or worldviews are being represented, and in turn, how this may alter an interlocutor/reader's own mental state or actions.

In performing a speech act, there are "necessary conditions to be satisfied" (Austin 1962: 14) which determine whether the speech act was successful. In Austin's example of performatives, if someone is pronounced married but they are married already, then this marrying "is not successfully performed at all, does not come off, is not achieved" (Austin 1962: 16). Likewise, in stating "I promise", if one does not actually intend to maintain such promise, a legitimate act of promising has not taken place. Austin refers to these conditions preventing speech acts from being fulfilled as "infelicities" (ibid.). The conditions required to make a speech act felicitous are summarised by three primary categories: 1) preparatory conditions; 2) sincerity conditions; and 3) essential conditions (the fulfilment condition may also be considered, but this requires evidence of the perlocutionary effect or the response of the addressee, which may not always be available).

Preparatory conditions encompass "whether or not the circumstances of the speech act and the participants in it are appropriate to its being performed successfully" (Allan 1997: 397). Searle (1969) considered the preparatory conditions of some common illocutionary acts, such as:

> (a) requests—S believes H is able to do the act requested;
>
> (b) assertions—S has evidence (reasons for believing etc.) the truth of p;
>
> (c) thanks—S is grateful to H for having done deed D;
>
> (d) advice—S believes there is reason for H to do A and that it will benefit H
> (adapted in Allan 1997: 398).

Simply, the preparatory conditions of an illocutionary act may be summarised as the specific set of circumstances necessary to performing the act (Allan 1997: 398). Regarding the sincerity condition, this concerns the psychological intention of the addressee. It suggests that an illocutionary act such as a promise is successful only if the speaker intends to fulfil that promise (Searle 1969: 63). Lastly, the essential condition is achieved by producing the utterance (Searle 1969) and concerns the addresser and addressee's mutual understanding of the utterance, for example, the addressee being placed under obligation to fulfil a task specified by the addresser (ibid.).

The interplay between these felicity conditions can be seen in Searle's example of giving an order, in which

> The preparatory conditions include that the speaker should be in a position of authority over the hearer, the sincerity condition is that the speaker wants the ordered act done, and the essential condition has to do with the fact that the speaker intends the utterance as an attempt to get the hearer to do the act (1969: 64).

It is possible that the conditions involved in making an illocutionary act felicitous could be used to exemplify the differences between them. Allan (1997) states that "different kinds of illocutionary acts involve different kinds of sincerity conditions" (p.400); meanwhile, Searle (1976) holds that "essential conditions form the best basis for a taxonomy" (p. 2-3) regarding illocutionary acts' distinct purposes.

2.9.4 SAT in a Forensic Context

In terms of legal encouragement, this may be where persuasion begins to differ as a speech act. While persuasion may involve the changing of a belief, encouragement implies the belief may have already been seeded, and according to Walton's definition, "[i]t isn't really persuasion if the respondent is already committed to the proposition" (Walton 2012: 56). For example, if someone is visiting a pro-suicide forum, they may have already committed to the proposition that their life is not worth living.

Macdonald and Lorenzo-Dus (2020) use SAT to further the legal understanding of encouragement in the context of terrorism. To do so, they highlight two key criteria central to the legal boundaries of what constitutes encouragement: "encouragement is intentional; and, it is performative" (p.476). It is noted that the definition of encouragement cannot only contain direct speech acts, as this would only criminalise unnaturally formed performative statements such as those beginning *I encourage you to[…]* (p.492-493)*.* Furthermore, "the meaning of a given statement of encouragement depends not only on the specific locution act but also the circumstances in which it is performed" (p.493), highlighting the importance of context and co-text in determining whether a speech act constitutes encouragement.

Additionally, Woodhams and Grant (2006) use a pragmatic approach in analysing the speech of rapists, owing to the focus on "what an individual is trying to do with language rather than the actual words spoken" (p.249). Woodhams and Grant (2006) sought to test the reliability of an existing system (Dale et al. 1997) in categorising rapists' speech for the purposes of offender profiling and identifying possible links between offences. Similar to the aims of this thesis, they then looked to develop a "new coding system to capture the qualitative differences between speech acts that may fall into the same broad categories" (Woodhams and Grant 2006: 251). Dale et al.'s (1997) system (also for the purpose of offender profiling) is based on the notion of rape as an activity type; therefore, "sequences of action which can be divided into phases" (p.660.). The phases in this instance are "approach, maintenance and closure" (ibid.), with multiple sub-phases of each, delineated by discourse strategy. Examples of these 21 sub-phases (speech strategies) include threats, lying, bargaining, compliments, excuses, apologies, and justifications (Dale et al. 1997). Regarding Dale et al.'s (1997) classification system, Woodams and Grant note that "the large number of categories made the system difficult to use since remembering all of the categories was cognitively intensive" (2006: 257). It was also found that some utterances were best suited to multiple coding, which the system does not allow for (ibid.)

The system developed by Woodhams and Grant (2006) focused on the speech acts used by an offender in a victim's account. It was therefore concerned with "what the offender was trying to do rather than the literal meanings of the words" (p.250). They therefore sought to design "a system which at a higher level would categorize an utterance by its pragmatic force but which at a lower level would capture how it qualitatively differed from, for example, other directives" (Woodhams and Grant 2006: 250). This system is based on the pragmatic categories of constatives/assertives, directives, commissives, acknowledgements/expressives, and interrogatives. The system is represented in Table 3 below. It was found that the new, pragmatics-based coding framework returned a greater degree of inter-rater reliability, while both received satisfactory scores. However, the pragmatics-based system is advantageous for its "ability to classify a greater number of utterances [...] when the system's potential use for crime linkage and offender profiling is considered" (Woodhams and Grant 2006: 258).

Table 3) Definitions of speech acts and examples from the pragmatics-based system (adapted from Woodhams and Grant 2006: 252)

Speech act	Definitions and examples
Constative/Assertive	An utterance has constative force if it is capable of being true or false. Examples: affirming, answering, claiming, concurring, denying, disagreeing, disclosing, reporting, and stating
Directive	An utterance has directive force if it indirectly or directly gets someone to do or stop doing something. Examples: admonishing, asking, begging, dismissing, forbidding, instructing, ordering, permitting, requesting, scripting, and suggesting.
Commissive	An utterance has commissive force if it commits to some degree the speaker to do or not do something. Examples: agreeing [to do], bargaining, guaranteeing, offering, and promising.
Expressive/Acknowledgement	An utterance has expressive force (is an acknowledgement) if it expresses the speaker's attitude (or apparent attitude) to some event that is thereby being acknowledged. They acknowledge that a state of affairs or behaviour has occurred but they also outline how the speaker relates to this psychologically. Examples: apologizing, complimenting, congratulating, excusing, greeting, insulting, justifying, and thanking.
Interrogative	An utterance has interrogative force if the speaker is requesting information from the hearer.

Also in a forensic context, Stygall (2010) considers informing and warning as the speech acts present in pension plan litigation due to the necessity to inform plan holders of a negative aspect of the policy (pp.53-55). Additionally, Dumas (1992, 2010) discusses consumer product warnings and their distinction from promises or threats, highlighting that in a promise, "the future action is not in the

hearer's best interest", while in a threat, "the future action will be the result of the hearer's actions, not the action of the one doing the threatening" (Dumas 2010: 365). Much as distinctions between warnings, promises and threats have been made (Fraser 1975, 1998), this thesis seeks to deduce the differences between the speech acts of assisting, coercing, encouraging, persuading, and promoting; how they are realised and the functions they fulfil as so far these terms have been used somewhat interchangeably.

Considering that linguists may be asked to determine whether a threat is present in a text, Fraser (1998) suggests that the felicity conditions necessary to a threat are:

> 1 the intention to perform an act;
>
> 2 the belief that the state of the world resulting from that act is unfavourable to the addressee;
>
> 3 the intention to intimidate the addressee (p.162).

Despite this, due to the existence of implicit threats and the fact that threats are not realised performatively (i.e. '*I threaten you with/by…*'), he notes that it is "virtually impossible […] to determine with certainty when a threat has been made" (Fraser 1998: 162). Likewise, a threat may be intended by the speaker but not successfully communicated to the hearer. Regarding the distinction between a threat and a promise, there are noted differences in the speaker's intention:

> 1 intention to act versus commitment to act;
>
> 2 an unfavourable act intended to instil fear versus a favourable act intended to promote good feeling (Fraser 1998: 164).

Owing to the commitment to act involved in a promise, and the lack of subsequent good feeling if the promise is broken, there may be recourse involved in a broken promise, while a broken threat will likely go unsanctioned (ibid.). Meanwhile, the difference between a threat and a warning is less clear:

> 1 the belief that some unfavourable state of the world exists ('The ice is thin') or will exist ('I'm going to turn on the sprinklers');
>
> 2 the belief that this state of the world is unfavourable to the addressee's best interests;
>
> 3 the intent to inform the addressee before a harmful effect can ensue (Fraser 1998: 164).

Key distinctions between a threat and a warning include that a "warning need not be a situation that is under the speaker's control", for example, a weather warning (ibid.); and that a "warning doesn't require any special status or power, but the content of the warning must be suitable between the parties" (Fraser 1998: 164-165). To this latter point, one could, for example, warn a manager at work that their coffee was about to fall over. A further notable difference between a threat and a warning is that a warning is not intended to intimidate the listener (ibid.), whereas a threat seeks to establish or exploit a power asymmetry.

In determining whether a threat has been made, it must be considered whether the alleged threat is "actionable under the circumstances, or is it merely a blip on the screen and not worthy of further consideration?" (Fraser 1998: 170). Deducing this relies on factors such as the state of mind of the speaker, hearer's interpreted seriousness of the threat, and the conditionality. On the subject of conditionality, "[c]onventional wisdom has it that the easier it is to fulfil the condition, the less serious the speaker is about carrying out the threat" (Fraser 1998: 171).

Considering the forensic application of SAT, while Stygall (2010) and Dumas (1992, 2010) use it to analyse contracts, litigation, and consumer warnings, they do not benefit from having the response of the intended audience. In the case of forum data, there is the added possibility of being able to see whether the illocutionary act has been successful and the perlocutionary act has taken place - i.e., has the user been successfully warned, persuaded, advised, etc. according to their written response, if one has been given. Macdonald and Lorenzo-Dus (2020) progress the discussion of what constitutes legal encouragement, while also highlighting the issue of proving intent, as mentioned by Hurt and Grant (2018). Additionally, Fraser (1998) considers the felicity conditions involved in seemingly similar speech acts to illustrate their distinction. In utilising SAT for the analysis of pro-suicide fora, this thesis aims to provide a useful and effective application of the framework in the hope that the topics chosen by users to "introduce, recycle and omit give the clearest available clues to their intentions" (Shuy 2010: 560).

2.10 To Assist, Coerce, Encourage, Persuade or Promote

While speech acts such as encouragement, persuasion and coercion share similarities, it is important to distinguish them in legal contexts. Considering the Suicide Act 1961 s.2A, the legislation states that an offence has been committed when an individual's action is "capable of encouraging or assisting the suicide or attempted suicide of another person", inclusive of "threatening" or "putting pressure on" another person to commit or attempt suicide. Likewise, the Online Safety Act 2023 notes that "[c]ontent which encourages, promotes or provides instructions for suicide" (s.61(3), emphasis added) must be risk-assessed by Ofcom to minimise the risk of children accessing potentially harmful online material (s.29(3)). This section argues that distinct legal definitions are needed for speech acts used in legislation, as without legal definitions we are reliant on the dictionary definitions of these illocutionary acts, which are often used interchangeably with ambiguous and seemingly (although not wholly) synonymous terms. Also, with multiple speech acts being considered under the umbrella of 'encouragement', this neglects any pragmatic differences between them. I argue that the way in which (online) harm is caused through language needs to adopt a more fragmented approach for transparency in the criminal justice system and to minimise the potential for misunderstanding. As such, I seek to approach the potential ambiguities in what the law encompasses in Stage 1 of this project.

The legal use of encourage and assist are discussed in MacLeod (2023) in the context of encouraging or assisting an offence under the Serious Crimes Act 2007 s.44 (emphasis added):

> (1) A person commits an offence if— (a) he [sic] does an act capable of **encouraging** or **assisting** the commission of an offence; and (b) he [sic] intends to **encourage** or **assist** its commission.

> (2) But he [sic] is not to be taken to have intended to **encourage** or **assist** the commission of an offence merely because such **encouragement** or **assistance** was a foreseeable consequence of his [sic] act[.]

With this, she draws comparison to the similarly unhelpfully cyclical definition of *incitement* of which an individual is guilty if "they incite another" (p.4, emphasis added):

> A person is guilty of **incitement** to commit an offence or offences if: They **incite** another to do or cause to be done an act or acts which, if done, will involve the commission of an offence or offences by the other; and

> They intend or believe that the other, if he acts as **incited**, shall or will do so with the fault required for the offence(s) R v Claydon [2006] 1 Cr. App. R. 20.

MacLeod adds that this definition includes seeking to "persuade another to commit a criminal offence or offences" (CPS 2021). As such, a link is drawn to the Aristotelian artistic proofs of *ethos*, *logos* and *pathos* and rhetoric as the art of persuasion (see 2.10.4 below).

Regarding the notion of "encouraging or assisting" as stated in the Suicide Act, this type of binomial expression is referred to by Bhatia (1994) as "a useful tool for making a legislative statement all-inclusive" (p.144). This involves pairing two semantically linked words in the context of legislation such as "advice and consent", "wholly and exclusively", and "sold or transferred" (ibid.) for the purpose of precision. While these pairings can aid in clarity, these nominalisations can conversely make the law "more dense and hence difficult to interpret" (Bhatia 1994: 142). In cases like "aid and abet" and "null and void", these binomial expressions consist of near-synonymous pairs and can amount to fixed expressions (Tiersma 199). In the instance of "encourage and assist", I argue that these concepts are not synonymous.

The notions of encouragement, persuasion, coercion and promotion have been used somewhat interchangeably in this thesis until this point, so it is necessary to establish some distinction when using the terminology for a legal application. In the context of the ES legislation speech acts, I pose the same question asked by Austin regarding the delineation of questions, commands, and statements: "What are the limits and definitions of each?" (Austin 1962: 2). Some suggestions for defining features are provided below, and examples are given regarding their legal use.

2.10.1 Assist

While the act of assistance is not overtly referenced in much UK legislation aside from the Suicide Act, its likeness can be seen in the Accessories and Abettors Act 1861 (s.8), which states:

> Whosoever shall aid, abet, counsel, or procure the commission of [**F1**any indictable offence], whether the same be [**F1**an offence] at common law or by virtue of any Act passed or to be passed, shall be liable to be tried, indicted, and punished as a principal offender.

Here, assistance is synonymous with "aid" (as per the dictionary definition) in determining accessory liability, with "counsel" in this context likely referring to the act of advising. The archaic transitive verb "abet" is defined as "[t]o encourage or assist (a person) to do something" (OED Online), providing an instance of crossover in the use of "encourage" and "assist" as acts as though they are terms to be used interchangeably (much like "aid" and "abet" are). As such, the themes of "help", "cooperation" (Cambridge Dictionary), "support", "aid" (Merriam-Webster) and advice are present under the category of assistance. One well-known application of "assist" in the legal context is in laws surrounding assisted suicide and assisted dying, which will be discussed next.

2.10.1a Assisted Suicide and Assisted Dying

Assisting suicide is an offence under the Suicide Act 1961 (s2(1)); however, cases have been brought to the DPP seeking exception, "particularly in the context of disabled or terminally ill people who are unable to end their lives without assistance from family, friends or doctors" (Lipscombe et al. 2024: 6). Such cases have seen varied outcomes (e.g. *Purdy v DPP; Pretty v the United Kingdom*). Additionally, June 2025 saw a Commons-backed "change in the law in England and Wales to allow assisted dying" proceed to the House of Lords for consideration (Mason 2025).

The Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill has initiated rife disagreements regarding the terminology, with opponents arguing for the label of "assisted suicide" or "assisted killing" rather than "assisted dying" (Mason 2025). In calling the practice "assisted suicide" or "assisted killing", a more nefarious connotation is ascribed. While dying can be viewed as a natural process, the acts of killing and suicide are linked with murder, self-murder and premature death. Article 2 of the Human Rights Act 1998 (the right to life) expresses that an offence has taken place following the "intentional deprivation of life by a third party" (Papadopoulou and Wicks 2025: 94). The Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill seeks to navigate this with a doctor providing the individual with the "approved substance [...] with which the person may end their own life" (s25(2)). Meanwhile, "[a]ssisted suicide, by definition, involves only assisting a person to end their own life and thus is unlikely to be prohibited by the negative obligation in Article 2" (Papadopoulou and Wicks 2025: 94). This distinction provides further evidence to suggest that abetting a suicide consists of two separate categories – encouraging and assisting – which are not synonymous and should not be used interchangeably.

Some of those advocating against the bill include disability rights groups, who fear "vulnerable people could be put under pressure to end their lives" (Clarke 2025). Likewise, "individuals may feel forced to end their lives earlier than they would have wished in order to ensure they were still physically able to do so" (Papadopoulou and Wicks 2025: 92). Conversely, those in favour of the bill (such as the Dignity in Dying campaign group) argue that the statistic of up to 650 terminally ill people dying by suicide each year in the UK, "often in lonely and traumatic ways", is cause for change in the law (Clarke 2025).

Outside of the Terminally Ill Adults Bill, assisting a suicide is a criminal offence under the Suicide Act 1961. Regarding assisting suicide online,

> [i]n the context of websites which promote suicide, the suspect may commit the offence of encouraging or assisting suicide if he or she intends that one or more of his or her readers will commit or attempt to commit suicide" (CPS 2014).

Assistance in this context could include the publishing of online suicide guides and the sale of "suicide kits" or chemicals intended for use in suicides (Crawford and Smith 2024). Providing instruction, clarifying methodological steps, or providing resources to aid in a suicide may also fall under acts of assisting suicide online.

2.10.2 Coerce

In his philosophical exploration of coercion, Wertheimer (1987) considers the moral and legal status of coerced actions, for example, a marriage, contract, confession or promise subject to "undue influence" or made "under duress" is invalid (p.3). Werthimer cites *United States v. Bethlehem Steel* (1938), in which the Supreme Court defines duress as implying "feebleness on one side [and] overpowering strength on the other". A party accused of coercion can gain its power from a variety of sources: governmental, economic, institutional, political, social, or physical (Wertheimer 1987), to name but a few. Threats and exploitation may be considered under the bracket of coercion on the premise that "illicit pressures […] compromise informed consent" (ibid., p.64). Furthermore, a distinction is drawn between coerced action and involuntary action for which we are responsible (for example, "what we do while drunk" (Wertheimer 1987: 224)), while it is noted that "cognitive defects can compromise the voluntariness of one's consent" (ibid.).

Both persuasion and coercion suggest the effect of the addressee performing an action they initially did not want to do or showed hesitance towards. The difference comes in the notion of "force or threat" involved in coercion (Merriam-Webster), indicating the addressee's state of mind has not changed, but they feel obliged to complete the action regardless, perhaps owing to the forceful or intimidating nature of the addresser, with the possibility of threats or consequences if the action is not performed. Cambridge Dictionary also notes the difference between persuasion and coercion (as well as their similarity) by defining *coerce* as "to persuade someone forcefully to do something that they are unwilling to do". This definition highlights an act of coercion as going against one's initial will through force, yet neglects that the outcome of coercion is not in fact persuasion for the very reason that the will or mind of the addressee has not been changed.

Regarding the OED definition of *coerce,* "to constrain or restrain" implies the existence of obligation or pressure applied by another party. This can leave the individual feeling like there is no other option but to comply with the action they are being coerced or pressured into doing, much like that of feeling the need to stay in a coercively controlling relationship. The illocutionary act of coercion is in need of a more extensive and encompassing definition in the context of coerced suicide, in the same way that coercive control has received CPS attention in detailing the offence.

2.10.2a Coercive Control

Perhaps the most common occurrence of *coerce* in a legal setting is the notion of coercive control, as introduced to the Serious Crime Act 2015 s.76, in which:

> (1) A person (A) commits an offence if—
>
> (a) A repeatedly or continuously engages in behaviour towards another person (B) that is controlling or coercive,
>
> (b) at the time of the behaviour, A and B are personally connected,
>
> (c) the behaviour has a serious effect on B, and
>
> (d) A knows or ought to know that the behaviour will have a serious effect on B.

Falling under the SCA section covering domestic abuse, coercive control carries a comparatively lesser sentence than other possible language-based crimes such as threats to kill and encouraged suicide (as shown in Table 4), despite the knowledge that instances of domestic coercive control have led to both murders and suicides of victims of this kind of abuse (Stark 2007; Midson 2016), alongside threats of suicide from the abusive party as means of keeping an individual in a relationship (Flannery 2023). Coercive control spans forms of relationship abuse ranging from verbal to physical, including "digital surveillance technologies, sustained verbal threats and abuse, including so-called 'revenge porn' style threats, practices of isolation (such as from friends and family members) and deprivation (including depriving access to medication, phone and internet usage) and economic abuse" (Barlow et al. 2020: 168-169). With the introduction of the Online Safety Act 2023, some of the technologically facilitated acts of abuse as mentioned by Barlow et al. are additionally criminalised in England and Wales, such as 'revenge porn'.

Table 4) Maximum sentences in England and Wales of coercive control, threats to kill and encouraging or assisting suicide

Offence	Maximum Sentence
Coercive control	5 years' custody (Sentencing Council 2023)
Threats to kill	10 years' custody (Sentencing Council 2023)

Encouraging or assisting suicide	14 years' custody (CPS 2014)

In further exploration of the online facilitation of coercive control, Harris and Woodlock (2019: 533) propose the term "digital coercive control" (DCC) "in reference to the use of devices and digital media to stalk, harass, threaten and abuse partners or ex-partners (and children)". As noted in the abovementioned nature of cyberbullying, the same feature of constant access is present through the digital medium of DCC.

While Stark (2007), Hester (2010), and Harris and Woodlock (2019) present coercive control as a gendered male—female crime, the present thesis is hesitant to take this binary stance owing to the ever-evolving spectrum of gender identities and the frequent misnomer of gender when referring to biological sex. As such, this study considers the asymmetrical power distribution between parties as more noteworthy for this linguistic analysis, with the acknowledgement that there is an asymmetrical power distribution between men and women which is based upon (and often excused by) misogyny and contributes toward the perpetration of male violence towards women (Womens' Aid et al. 2021).

2.10.2b Coerced Suicide

In the context of this thesis, evidence of *coerced* suicide is considered alongside that of *encouraged* and *assisted* suicide, despite *coerced* not being a descriptor in the Suicide Act 1961 (although implied by s.2A(3)), and arguably more sinister due to the application of force. This thesis therefore argues that coerced suicide should form its own criteria under the Suicide Act 1961. This section seeks to explain some historical background of coerced suicide.

Historical instances of coerced suicide have been documented as far back as ancient Greece and Rome, with the forced consumption of poisonous hemlock as an early embodiment of the death penalty for a criminal charge. It has, however, been debated whether suicide can truly be coerced or forced. In Japanese literature, samurais can be condemned to commit *seppuku,* an act of "ritual disembowelment" (Tolhurst 1983: 114). Tolhurst (1983) therefore argues that coerced suicide is possible, giving the example of being faced with either the prospect of a long and painful death by torture, or a quicker death by one's own hand, despite Beauchamp's (1980) assertion that coercion and suicide are conceptually incompatible. Beauchamp claims that

> [a]n act is a suicide if a person intentionally brings about his or her own death in circumstances where others do not coerce him or her to the action, except in those cases where death is caused by conditions not specifically arranged by the agent for the purpose of bringing about his or her own death (p.76).

This definition suggests suicide cannot be the result of coercion but must take place under the volition of the individual. Beauchamp adds:

> [c]onsider...a captured soldier who, given the "choice" of being executed or of executing himself, chooses self-execution. Since coercion is heavily involved in this intentional self-killing, we do not classify it as a suicide, just as we do not think that Socrates committed suicide by intentionally drinking the hemlock, thereby causing his death (1980: 77).

Here, Beauchamp refers to the soldier's death not as a suicide, but as a "self-execution" and an "intentional self-killing"; arguably how one might define a suicide. Tolhurst considers why this view of coercion and suicide as incompatible concepts may be formed, positing that "the presence of altruistic motivation and of coercion in a case of self-killing has a marked affect on its moral status"

(1983: 115). Suicide is viewed societally as immoral, meaning those coerced into suicide may be seen as less "selfish and blameworthy" than those who commit suicide not due to altruistic motivation or coercion (ibid.). In response to this, Tolhurst (1983) advises not to deny the existence of coerced suicide, but to "reconsider the moral status of suicide" and those who fall victim to it (p.115).

While discussing the pros and cons of life or death may not explicitly surmount to encouragement, assistance or coercion of suicide, the nature of encouragement or possible coercion is added by the contextual and linguistic framing surrounding the presentation of these choices, for example, through irrealis modality (e.g., *if you don't do X, then Y will happen/if you don't kill yourself, then life will be long and painful*).

2.10.3 Encourage

Common definitions of *encourage* include "to inspire with courage" (OED Online; Merriam-Webster) as a literal reading; likewise, to give "confidence" (Merriam-Webster; OED Online; Cambridge Dictionary) or to "embolden" (Merriam-Webster; OED Online). Cambridge Dictionary suggests *to encourage* is "to make someone more likely to do something, or to make something more likely to happen". While the likelihood of the action or event actually occurring is outside the remit of encouragement, it is possible for this to be true in some cases, but not a necessary condition. For example, I could encourage someone to learn the piano, but this need not increase their willingness to do it; alternatively, my encouragement could be the motivating factor for them to start.

Merriam-Webster suggests encouragement is an "attempt to persuade". Considering the definitions of both encouragement and persuasion discussed in this chapter, this may not hold true in all cases. For example, by inspiring courage and confidence through exclaiming "*You can do it!*" as a parent supporting their child at a sporting event, the parent is not trying to change the child's mind. Perhaps if the child did not want to attend the sporting event, "*You can do it!*" might appear as a sentiment in a larger attempt at persuading them to go; however, urging (Merriam-Webster) or inspiriting (OED Online) the child is not synonymous to persuading them to change from mental state A to mental state B.

From a psychological perspective, Wong (2015) highlights encouragement as a valuable process for expressing support to others, while acknowledging that "the conceptual boundaries of encouragement as a construct remain fuzzy and are in need of clarification" (p.179). Due to the blurred and uncertain working definition in psychological literature, Wong sought to synthesise and consolidate the relevant theoretical literature surrounding encouragement to propose an integrated definition.

This compilation of encouragement research begins with Adler (1956), who "believed that human beings are intrinsically oriented toward social interest—a desire to belong and contribute to others and society" (Wong 2015: 180). If this social interest is lost, it is argued that people are in need of encouragement, in particular to engage with others (Dreikurs 1971). Drawing on the work of Alderian scholars, Wong notes such definitions of encouragement as "to inspire or help others" (Sweeney 2009: 90); "a non-verbal attitude that communicates esteem and worth" (Wong 2015: 181; Nikelly and Dinkmeyer 1971); and "the process of facilitating the development of a persons' inner resources and courage toward positive movement" (Dinkmeyer and Losoncy 1996: 7). While those such as Carns and Carns (2006) argue that the definition of encouragement can be fluid and change from person to person, Wong argues that for encouragement to be used as a psychological concept, it must have clearly defined boundaries – this must also be the case if it is going to be used in legislation. As such, Wong proposes the conceptual definition of encouragement as

the expression of affirmation through language or other symbolic representations to instil courage, perseverance, confidence, inspiration, or hope in a person(s) within the context of addressing a challenging situation or realizing a potential (2015: 183).

This definition draws on the previously noted Alderian theories of encouragement such as acts capable of instilling courage, confidence or hope, while adding that this affirmation must be expressed through language or other symbolic representation (e.g. gestures or art). Regarding the link between encouragement and persuasion, Wong acknowledges that "although encouragement can be conceptualized as a form of persuasion in that the encourager intends to influence the recipient's attitudes or behaviour, not all forms of persuasion are directed at instilling courage, perseverance, confidence, inspiration, or hope in others or are affirmative" (2015: 183-184). This notion of instilling courage, perseverance, confidence, inspiration, or hope may provide a sound foundational conceptualisation of encouragement, however not one perfectly equipped to tackle the incitement of a negative or nefarious act in a legal context.

In the law of England and Wales, encouragement can often be found alongside assistance, for example, "encouraging or assisting" an offence under the Serious Crime Act 2007. The law states:

> (1)A person commits an offence if—
>
> (a)he does an act capable of encouraging or assisting the commission of one or more of a number of offences; and
>
> (b)he believes—
>
> (i)that one or more of those offences will be committed (but has no belief as to which); and
>
> (ii)that his act will encourage or assist the commission of one or more of them (Serious Crime Act 2007 s.46(1)).

This is similar to the unhelpful legal definition of incitement as noted by MacLeod (2023). In this instance, someone is guilty of encouraging or assisting an offence if they do an act capable of encouraging or assisting an offence. A line may be drawn between the two actions in the sense that in encouraging someone to do something, a particular behaviour is recommended with positive evaluation, or merely an imperative command (such as '*do it*'). Meanwhile, in assisting in an action, practical help is given with the aim of achieving a desired outcome. LaPalme (2018) further exemplifies the distinction between encouraged and assisted suicide in suggesting that "[t]he entirety of Michelle Carter's conduct was virtually talking her boyfriend into committing suicide" (p.1459) is representative of the encouragement category. Meanwhile, the historic example of Dr Kevorkian's 'suicide machine' involved the voluntary use of Kevorkian's provided means of suicide, and therefore represents assisted suicide "[w]here a defendant merely is involved in the events leading up to the death" (ibid.). While this demonstrates the differences between the broad category of 'encouraged' suicide versus assisted suicide, I argue that 'talking into' (coercing or persuading) represents a more severe example of pro-suicide discourse than simply supporting (encouraging) a behaviour without trying to change the victim's mind or argue against their hesitance.

2.10.4 Persuade

In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle discusses the science of the art of persuasion in the contexts of deliberative (or political), judicial (or forensic), and epideictic (or ceremonial) speech. He clarifies that the function of

rhetoric is not persuasion itself, "[i]t is rather the *detection of the persuasive aspects of each matter*" (Aristotle 1991: 69-70). Aristotle defines the inartistic and artistic *proofs*, meaning persuasive devices present before rhetoric and those which are "furnished through speech" (ibid., p.74). The inartistic proofs are those which "pre-exist, such as witnesses, tortures, depositions, and such like" (ibid.). For example, DNA evidence or witness statements presented at trial would fall under the inartistic category. The artistic proofs realised by speech are appeals to *ethos* (the morality of the speaker), *logos* (a logical and reasoned argument) and *pathos* (relating to the emotion of the hearer). In order for persuasion to take place, he argues that "one must do this without being noticed and give the impression that one is speaking not artificially but naturally (for the latter is persuasive, the former the reverse[...])" (ibid., pp.218-219); indicative of rhetoric being used as a pejorative term, for example, a politician's speech being described as '*mere rhetoric*'. In analysing the use of these devices, we can begin to see how a text designed for the purpose of persuasion seeks to achieve the goal of urging the addressee in a particular direction or toward a desired response. Rhetorical devices are not limited to deliberative, judicial or ceremonial contexts, but these are modes through which we can gauge whether persuasion has been achieved, for example, by a jury returning an innocent or guilty verdict. Considering the speech act of persuasion, Simons et al. (2001: 7) define this as "communication designed to influence the autonomous judgements and actions of others". With reference to *logos*, Walton (2012: 54-55) describes the three key elements of persuasion as:

1) A structurally correct argument (the conclusion of which follows on from the premise(s).
2) The commitment of the respondent to the premise(s), and therefore the conclusion.
3) A proposition designated as the conclusion of the argument.

Walton (2012: 46) argues that persuasion "involves some sort of change of opinion or acceptance of a belief, from an initial state to a new state" while persuasive messages can "depend on the capability of the respondent to recognise and interpret actions and statements as being forms of rational argument connecting sequences of meaning" (ibid. p.48). The logical structure of a persuasive argument may also demonstrate assertions or evaluations. Likewise, a speech act that is 'directive' in illocutionary force (Searle 1976; Table 3 above) may result in the perlocutionary effect of persuasion owing to the attempt to get the addressee to do something resulting in a change of opinion (i.e. the addressee may have initially not wanted to do 'something', but has been persuaded into doing so through a change in belief). This differs from an act of coercion, in which the addressee's state of mind may be unchanged, yet they feel obliged to act as directed by the coercer due to consequences borne from threats, for example. Persuasion also differs from encouragement by this definition, as encouragement can take place by instilling confidence (for example) without providing the reasoning that might be expressed through an artistic proof; for example, "*You should vote for me*" is a statement of encouragement, whereas "*You should vote for me because I'm the kindest*" is an act of persuasion owing to the added appeal to ethos.

In linguistic analysis, Charteris-Black (2018) considers persuasion as a concept "central to all critical analysis of discourse" (p.87). In his definition of persuasion, "[w]hen we say that someone has been persuaded, we usually mean that they have changed their point of view about a topic according to the influence of a persuasive agent" (ibid. p.99). Considering the persuasive aim of political speeches, Ponton (2020) notes the prevalence of 'advice-giving' modals such as "*need*, *have to*, and *should*" frequently adopted by Tony Blair (p.30, original emphasis). These modals convey a degree of both necessity and correctness, as also demonstrated by *'must'* in stating "Britain **must** be at the centre of Europe" (Ponton 2020: 34, original emphasis). In declaring a state of absolute truth, this leaves little room for negotiation on the part of the addressee. Likewise, in claiming authority to the knowledge of how things '*should*' be, Blair presents himself as a moral character representative of

the best interests of the public, thereby making an appeal to the artistic proof of *ethos* in his argumentation and seeking to gain trust. In this example, "[t]he proposal will, therefore, be convincing according to the degree on which his audience share their view of the situation" (p.38), with appeals to *ethos* alluding to a shared belief system (ibid.).

Persuasion may also be defined as "an active attempt to change a person's attitudes, beliefs, or behavior" (Cacioppo et al 2018: 129). As well as the political sphere, persuasion research lends itself to the world of advertising in which the aim is to influence the consumer to act in a certain way or to buy a particular product. As in the political context, consumers typically have an awareness that tactics are being employed in attempt to influence them, as highlighted by Friestad and Wright's (1994) Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM). With the PKM, they suggest that prior research into persuasion in advertising focused only on the language and behaviours of the marketers, ignoring the knowledge and agency brought by the consumer. As such, persuasion attempts by advertisers can elicit undesirable reactions from the consumer, including "[r]eactance, distrust and avoidance" (Verlegh et al 2015: 3), for example, using ad-blockers or actively boycotting a product or company.

Considering emotion (or *pathos*) as a core facet of persuasion, Rocklage et al (2018) suggest that "as individuals navigate their world, they recognize and learn the influence emotion has on others" (p.750). They link this notion to Friestad and Wright's PKM (1994) due to the idea that "people amass experience with persuasion across their lifetime", thereby developing "a learned association between persuasion and emotion" (Rocklage et al 2018: 750). In a quantitative study using a linguistic scale of words ranked by perceived emotionality, they found that participants with an intent to persuade used greater emotionality than those without persuasive intent (Rocklage et al 2018), providing illustrative support for Aristotle's artistic proof.

Dictionary definitions of *persuade* include "to induce to believe or accept a statement, doctrine, etc." (OED Online); "to move by argument […] to a belief, position, or course of action" (Merriam-Webster), and "to make someone do or believe something by giving them a good reason to do it" (Cambridge Dictionary). These definitions share the commonality of a shift in beliefs by some way of 'talking into' or convincing through argumentation. This implies an initial mental state (A) held by the addressee, where work is done by the addresser in order to change the initial mental state to a new one (B). In attempt to change the addressee from state A to B, the addresser may draw on the artistic proofs to "convince", "urge" or "assure" them of the benefits of state B (OED Online).

2.10.5 Promote

Promotion as a concept features in multiple laws in England and Wales. For example, the Companies Act 2006 (s.172) states that a company's director "must act in the way he considers, in good faith, would be most likely to promote the success of the company for the benefit of its members as a whole". This is for the benefit of the company's reputation and the "interests of its employees" (ibid.). This encapsulates the facet of definitions concerning furthering "growth", "development" (OED Online) and "prosperity" (Merriam-Webster). Promotion also appears in the Equality Act 2006, in which, the Commission for Equality and Human Rights is said to "promote understanding of the importance of equality and diversity", "promote equality of opportunity", and "promote awareness and understanding of rights" (s.8(1)). This usage relates to the definition of *promotion* as "support" of "a process" and the encouragement of positive change (OED Online).

Merriam-Webster states that "promote suggests an encouraging or fostering" or to "advance" for the purpose of "bringing about a desired end". Meanwhile, Cambridge Dictionary likens promotion to advertising: "to encourage people to like, buy, use, do, or support something". This definition

lends itself to the promotion of a concept or ideology, relevant to the promotion of suicide as an action, and the ideological promotion of the 'pro-choice' standpoint.

Much of the literature regarding promotion as an act revolves around either self-promotion (Harwood 2005; Martin and León Pérez 2014; Wang and Yang 2015; Dayter 2021) or promotion in advertising (Wernick 1991). In both cases, the thing being promoted (be it an individual, an ideology, or a product) is in receipt of positive evaluation and praise. Dayter (2021) defines self-promotion as "an expressive speech act that explicitly or implicitly gives credit to the speaker for some attribute or possession which is positively valued by the speaker and the potential audience" (p.30; Dayter 2016), with an expressive speech act indicating a state of affairs (Searle 1976). Dayter (2021) cites instances of job interviews, political address, and dating apps to be instances in which self-promotion is expected (and necessary), while in everyday Western life, self-promotion can be viewed as "something undesirable or even rude" (p.30).

Furthermore, Lu et al. (2024) highlight how dangerous products and ideologies can be promoted through online advertising. A 2022 update to its Inappropriate Content Advertising Policy instated Google's duty "to enforce against the promotion of skin-lightening products that imply the superiority of one skin tone over another" (Google 2022). Prior to this, Google Ad results could be seen to promote skin-lightening products implying "the superiority of one skin shade over another" (Lu et al. 2024: 812). This therefore acts in alignment with colourism as "a discriminatory ideology and practice that privileges people with lighter skin shades and systematically disadvantages people with darker skin shades" (ibid.). By hosting ads "associating lighter skin with sociocultural and economic privileges" (Lu et al. 2024: 817), discriminatory ideals are supported and maintained, alongside the sale of products with potentially toxic ingredients (ibid.). Despite the implemented policy, Google still allows the sale of skin-lightening products.

Regarding the promotion of harm online, George (2019: 9) suggests that "adolescents who frequently promote self-harm material on social media are likely at risk for engaging in those behaviors offline". She further suggests that "[i]n the context of self-harm, adolescents whose online peers are posting frequently about self-harm may view these behaviors as more normative or positive" (George 2019: 9). In normalising the concept of self-harm or ascribing positive qualities to it through glamourising and gamifying the process (see Ging and Garvey 2017), it is promoted by means of supporting the process (and the possible result). Pro-harm content can be seen to be further promoted through social media algorithms via recommendations of additional pro-harm material and thereby providing implicit encouragement.

2.10.6 Conclusion

This section has sought to exemplify some of the distinctions between the pragmatic concepts of assistance, coercion, encouragement, persuasion, and promotion. Nevertheless, there do exist some shared criteria, particularly regarding implicit meaning – for example, if I am encouraging a behaviour, does this mean I am also implicitly promoting the outcome? In separating these "acts", it becomes apparent that coercion is an inherently nefarious concept due to the features of threats, applied pressure, and a likely asymmetrical power dynamic through which one party may be manipulated. Considering this, it is reasonable to assume that a coerced suicide would be more likely to be prosecuted (considering the CPS's Public Interest Factors (2014)) and would perhaps be in receipt of a more stringent sentence than an encouraged suicide.

What is clear from this chapter is that the current legal definifitions regarding encouragement and assistance are ambiguous, cyclical, and vague. In order to transparently conclude whether an offence has been committed, its defining criteria must be more precise. This thesis argues that in communications offences, linguistic analysis should be able to determine whether an offence has taken place, and ideally, the severity of this offence based on the content of the law itself and on the Policy for Prosecutors (CPS 2014). To achieve this, the "acts" constituting the offence must be made clearer.

2.11 Contributions of this Thesis

This chapter will outline the aims and rationale of this research borne out of the issues raised in the Literature Review.

2.11.1 Approach

This research takes a three-pronged approach to addressing the ambiguity of the Suicide Act 1961; the definition and analysis of different forms of ES language; and exploring how these may manifest on a pro-suicide forum.

> 1. Firstly, I seek to provide clearer legal definitions for speech acts relevant to ES legislation (*assistance, coercion, encouragement, persuasion, promotion* and *seeking assistance*). Currently, the criteria of what constitutes an ES language offence is under-described. I therefore aim to account for a more exhaustive list of speech acts that are currently encompassed by 'encourage' and 'assist' for the purposes of determining nuance, transparency in the criminal justice system, and possible effects regarding factors of harm and culpability.

> 2. I then look to develop an analytical framework based on the illocutionary acts relevant to ES legislation that is suitable for analysing ES evidence. Appraisal theory is first applied to the one-to-one ES data to gauge how linguists categorise CMC that may influence behaviour, and whether this can be done reliably. Following this, a new framework (the IA framework) is designed and tested for reliability. This framework represents the necessity for distinguishing these speech acts outlined in Stage 1, and the need for more precision in understanding how language crimes are realised. The IA framework is proposed as a tool with which a forensic linguist could theoretically analyse the presence and extent of ES communication in court.

> 3. Finally, this analytical framework is applied to explore possible occurrences of ES on pro-suicide fora. The forum data is analysed using the IA framework to explore this additional type of ES data and where its content sits alongside the current ES legislation. While at the time of writing no ES forum cases have gone to trial, this research queries whether this is a possibility in future owing to the nature of the content.

2.11.2 discusses the motivations of this thesis in further depth, alongside details of the two datasets and their differences.

In conducting this research, I aim to provide a tool suitable for the linguist to determine whether a computer-mediated ES offence has taken place, and to what extent. This tool should return an acceptable degree of reliability when used by different coders. To aid in its reliability, I seek to address the ill-defined acts of assistance, coercion, encouragement, persuasion and promotion. In the context of the Suicide Act 1961 and the Online Safety Act 2023, there also exists the need to clarify precisely what constitutes an ES offence or ES content requiring moderation, and an appropriate way to identify this. If language holds nuance capable of affecting the public interest in prosecution or the severity of sentencing in an ES case (due to factors of harm and culpability), it is necessary to illustrate, for example, "*This constitutes encouragement **because**"* or "*This is an act of coercion **because**".* Thus, there is a need to define how the speech acts in the legislation are realised.

With regards to computer-mediated communication encouraging and/or assisting suicide, there appears to exist two primary genres: one-to-one messaging (text messages, private emails, etc.) and forum interaction (multiple participants publicly contributing). Additionally, one-to-one ES cases have seen trial and prosecution, while at the time of writing, no ES forum cases have. As of July 2025, Sanctioned Suicide announced it was self-moderating its visibility in the UK due to an investigation by Ofcom (Sanctioned Suicide 2025). An exploratory look at the ES forum considers how promotion of suicide manifests and whether other acts of ES occur within this online space.

Owing to the differences in audience and delivery (and possible legality status), these two strands of ES communication are treated here as separate datasets. On initial examination, there appear to be further differences in the language use between the two genres, some of which are outlined here.

At first glance, the language used to encourage suicidal ideation and behaviours appears emotive and personalised in a one-to-one interaction such as in the Carter/Roy data: the participants know each other; they have established knowledge of each other's wants and fears; and they have some knowledge of the social and environmental factors contributing to their depression. Conversely, a pro-suicide forum like Sanctioned Suicide is based around a group dynamic – user comments are visible to others (whether registered members of the site or not), other users can decide to reply to them or even change the subject. The conversations are by no means private, but contributors have the choice of relative anonymity through usernames. The forum platform can create a sense of community among regular users; in this instance, the community consists of likeminded people who believe that the choice to die by suicide is a human right. The one-to-one dataset, on the other hand, consists of private, closed conversations with an intended audience of the two participants only.

An initial browse of Sanctioned Suicide threads reveals more instructional messages and claims to knowledge of the 'best' ways to commit suicide or hide self-harming behaviours when compared to the Carter/Roy data – although there is a slight crossover when Carter begins researching methods to recommend to Roy. These claims to knowledge include where the poster learned of such method (e.g., in the military; from a friend who successfully committed suicide; from another user, etc.), however there is no evidence necessary to reinforce them and the poster is typically trusted, despite it being apparent that they have not used the method to completion themselves. Additionally, the forum users do not appear to exhibit emotive pressure on each other to die by suicide, in contrast to Carter's negative judgement of Roy's character when he questions whether suicide is the right choice for him (Calloway 2023). While forum users (seemingly unanimously) promote the ideology that dying by suicide is a human right, they do not appear to attempt to convince each other that

suicide is the step they should take, more that it is an available option. There is also a section of the forum dedicated to recovery, and indeed, recovery is celebrated. This comes in contrast to Carter's assertion that Roy is not capable of getting better (Calloway 2023).

As both genres of ES data are relevant to the criteria of the Suicide Act and the OSA, it is possible that one analytical framework may be suitable for both. This is owing to the criteria being based around the illocutionary acts present in the messages or posts. Owing to the existing analysis of the Carter/Roy data in Calloway (2023), the suitability of appraisal theory for this task is tested first. Following this, a further framework is developed specific to the ES legislation which is first trialled with the one-to-one data before being used for an exploratory analysis of the forum data.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter discusses the data collection and analytical methodology for each stage of the research. The workflow is demonstrated in Figure 4 below. The aims of each stage of the research are:

Stage 1: To provide clearer legal definitions for speech acts relevant to ES legislation (*assistance, coercion, encouragement, persuasion, promotion* and *seeking assistance*)

Stage 2: To develop an analytical framework based on the illocutionary acts relevant to ES legislation that is suitable for analysing ES evidence

Stage 3: To use this analytical framework to explore possible occurrences of ES on pro-suicide fora

Figure 4) Workflow of this thesis
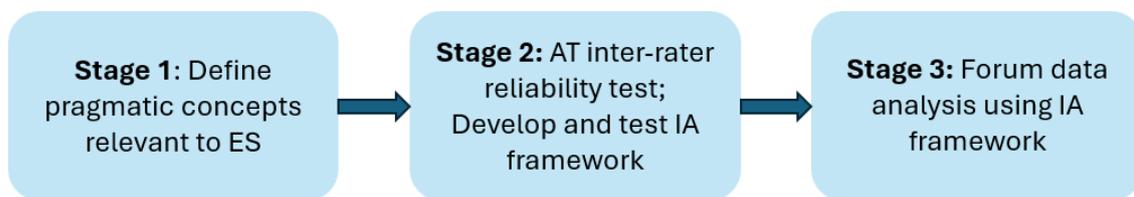
3.1 Data and Collection

3.1.1 One-to-One Data

As used in Stages 1 and 2, the one-to-one data consists of the 2,769 text messages sent between Michelle Carter (MC) and Conrad Roy (CR) from the 1st July 2014 until his death on the 12th July 2014, and all messages and emails published by the Supreme Court of Minnesota (*State v. Melchert-Dinkel 2014*) between William Melchert-Dinkel (WMD), Mark Drybrough (MD) and Nadia Kajouji (NK), respectively. The one-to-one text message data between Michelle Carter and Conrad Roy are publicly available in the courtroom evidentiary format from the following link: https://htv-prod-media.s3.amazonaws.com/files/carter-exhibit-30-1497356322.pdf; this is also currently stored in the Aston FoLD database. Similar to the Carter/Roy data, excerpts of Melchert-Dinkel's correspondence with Mark Drybrough and Nadia Kajouji have been published by the court and are available through the following link: https://caselaw.findlaw.com/court/mn-supreme-court/1660689.html. This data was stored in a secure cloud server, before suitable excerpts (i.e. those not directly glorifying the concept of suicide as per the request of Aston University's BSS Ethics Committee) were compiled to create the questionnaire for the methodology testing participants.

The texts between Carter and Roy have been deemed appropriate for analysis in the context of this thesis owing to the comments made in *Commonwealth v Carter* in regarding the coercive nature of Carter's messages regarding suicide, alongside the critiques of the lack of ES legislation in the legal literature (e.g. LaPalme 2018). As noted in Chapter 1, while Melchert-Dinkel's initial conviction was overturned in favour of one of assisting and attempting to assist suicide, owing to the Supreme Court's decision that advising and encouraging suicide should be regarded as integral to 'harmful conduct' as opposed to 'illegal conduct' (as suicide is not a crime), despite the WMD's violation of Minn. Stat. § 609.215, subd. 1, which states

> [w]hoever intentionally advises, encourages, or assists another in taking the other's own life may be sentenced to imprisonment for not more than 15 years or to payment of a fine of not more than $30,000, or both.

The data of WMD's interactions with Drybrough and Kajouji are nevertheless included in this research as they represent short-form messages that have been concluded to advise and encourage suicide, despite the Supreme Court's rejection of this constituting a crime in this instance. For the purpose of this research, this data meets criteria of an offence under the Suicide Act 1961 and therefore has been deemed acceptable for this analysis.

Freedom of Information requests were submitted for the purpose of gathering additional UK-based data, however, these were rejected due to the opinion that publishing this evidence has the potential to cause harm to the families of the victims and to other vulnerable individuals. The analysis in this research comes with the acknowledgement that these are data gathered from only U.S ES cases, which will therefore limit the generalisability of the one-to-one findings. This is the first analysis of its kind and may be replicated to further effect once additional ES data is published.

3.1.2 Forum Data

Pro-suicide fora may be thought to be confined to the dark web inasmuch as we may expect content of this kind (i.e., that with the potential, if not, aim, of causing harm) to be blocked by browser and/or search engine moderators upon gaining notoriety. For example, the site alt.suicide.holiday (the pro-suicide community favoured by William Melchert-Dinkel) is not accessible via searching Google, however, a link to its current domain is easily found through alt.suicide.holiday's Wikipedia entry, as well as a multitude of publicly available Reddit threads. Likewise, Sanctioned Suicide does have a history of moderation and censorship and can occasionally be found to change domain from .org to .net (presumably in attempt to escape such censorship). At the time of data collection, a Google search for 'sanctioned suicide' from a UK IP address returned an initial prompt for Samaritans and a helpline; followed by the Papyrus UK suicide prevention website; with sanctioned-suicide.net as the third returned result. Language data from these fora can be accessed without special permissions, member accounts, or subscriptions. On revisiting the site in August 2025, a message from the website's administrator declared that it was no longer accessible in the UK due to an investigation by Ofcom, and administrators have chosen to block access to the UK themselves to "protect" its current users. As of September 2025, the page receives a "This site can't be reached" error message when trying to access the site through a Google Chrome browser in the UK (Sanctioned Suicide 2025). Despite this, it is still accessible using a VPN or proxy browser.

Using the third-party company Forensic Pathways, the language data alone (i.e., without embedded hyperlinks, images, etc.) was requested for scraping from pro-suicide fora to provide a scope of topic threads. Of the example sites provided to Forensic Pathways, they found Sanctioned Suicide was amenable for scraping, while some counterparts feature anti-scraping measures, meaning the data cannot be easily collected as a text file. A test dataset of 10,944 posts (500 pages) was first collected and reviewed, before proceeding to scrape the entire site, which, at the time of writing, consists of approximately 908,000 posts. Use and application of this data has been approved by the Aston University BSS Ethics Committee.

3.2 Stage 1: Provide clearer legal definitions for speech acts relevant to ES legislation

3.2.1 Rationale

While assisting and encouraging suicide are explicitly criminalised by the Suicide Act 1961, the notion of encouragement currently encompasses "threatening" or "otherwise putting pressure on another person to commit or attempt suicide" (s.2A(3)). Due to the possibility of the type of (what is currently considered) encouragement affecting whether a prosecution is sought and the extent of the given criminal sentence, this thesis argues that these different types of speech need to be clearly defined. If a dispute should arise regarding the nature and the severity of the encouragement of a suicide, there should be transparent means of categorising this. As the law is currently ambiguous in its definition of encouragement, I seek to separate this from the other types of influential language it is currently suggested to encompass. In doing so, I aim to add to the precision with which language crimes are treated, on which the law currently falls behind. As these actions (encouragement, coercion and persuasion) can have differing pragmatic forces, intentions and implications, I argue that they are not all examples of encouragement.

Similarly, the Online Safety Act 2023 seeks for the moderation of online language that promotes suicide and self-harm, and a clear definition of the promotion of suicide is sought to separate this conceptually from the types of ES language which may constitute a criminal offence. Furthermore, the development of an analytical tool in Stage 2 relies on these concepts being adequately and separately defined.

3.2.2 Methods

In determining the contextual barriers between different speech acts relating to ES, their dictionary definitions are first consulted. The below are given as an example and are taken from the OED online. Further examples can be found in Chapter 2.10.

Table 5) Oxford English Dictionary Online definitions relevant to ES legislation

ES verb	Definition
assist	*transitive*. **II.6.** To help, aid: **II.6.a.** A person in doing something; frequently with adverb or adverbial phrase denoting that in which the assistance is given; to second, support. **II.6.b.** A person in necessity; to succour, relieve. **II.6.c.** An action, process, or result; to further, promote.
coerce	*transitive*. To constrain or restrain (a voluntary or moral agent) by the application of superior force, or by authority resting on force; to constrain to compliance or obedience by forcible means; 'to keep in order by force' (Johnson).
encourage	*transitive.* **1.** To inspire with courage, animate, inspirit. **2.b.** To incite, induce, instigate; in weaker sense, to recommend, advise. **3.a.**To stimulate (persons or personal efforts) by assistance, reward, or expressions of favour or approval; to countenance, patronize; also, in bad sense, to abet. **3.b.** To allow or promote the continuance or development of (a natural growth, an industry, a sentiment, etc.); to cherish, foster.
persuade	*transitive.* To urge successfully to do something; to attract, induce, or entice to something or in a particular direction. Also: to talk into[…].
promote	*transitive*. To further the growth, development, progress, or establishment of (a thing); to advance or actively support (a process, cause, result, etc.); to encourage. Formerly also with *on*.

As detailed further in the Analysis, despite their apparent differences, there is overlap in how these concepts are defined; for example, to induce, encourage, promote, assist or support occur multiple times throughout. This may begin to explain the confusion in their current interchangeable usage surrounding ES. To separate these definitions, I focus on the pragmatic force as the dictionary definitions are not adequate for a legal context due to the blurred conceptual boundaries, before considering the felicity conditions distinct to each. While Austin's speech act theory provides a valuable starting point, it is not all-encompassing regarding the realisation and effects of speech acts in terms of affecting the mental state of the interlocutor. Chapter 2.10 demonstrates some of the

distinctions between the ES verbs (which I refer to as speech acts in analysing ES as a language crime), while the Analysis examines some of the difficulties in trying to separate them definitively.

3.2.3 Considerations

For the purposes of transparency in determining whether an offence has occurred and the possible effect on sentencing, one should be able to suggest, for example, '*This constitutes encouragement because*' or '*This is an act of coercion because*'; thus exists the need to define how these speech acts are realised and the distinctions between them. Adding to the blurred lines between these concepts is the notion of directionality: to encourage or assist involves some kind of promotion (as encouragement or assistance of suicide presuppose the addresser's belief that suicide is good or just), however, to promote does not necessarily mean to encourage or assist. Therefore, if 'doing' encouragement, one can also be said to be 'doing' promotion; as such, encouragement presupposes promotion, and an individual may be performing both acts simultaneously. Despite this, promotion does not presuppose encouragement, so the directionality in this instance is one-way. These factors have been taken into consideration in producing the new definitions and subsequently putting them into practice.

3.3 Stage 2: Develop an analytical framework based on the illocutionary acts relevant to ES legislation that is suitable for analysing ES evidence

3.3.1 Rationale

As cases ruled to have encouraged suicide, Michelle Carter and William Melchert-Dinkel both demonstrate one-to-one interactions eventually culminating in the suicide of the interlocutor. This study builds upon Calloway (2023), in which appraisal theory is used to analyse the stance and attitudes communicated that may contribute towards encouraging suicide by presenting it as a desirable option for the other party, and therefore influencing behaviour in favour of suicide. This research seeks to expand on this suggestion by testing the replicability of the appraisal framework when used by different coders. In assessing whether linguists categorise the way in which appraisals manifest in ES data reliably, this could suggest that appraisal is a useful tool in indicating where and how generally 'encouraging' (as it exists as a broad category in the Suicide Act) language occurs.

To test this, researchers at the Aston Institute for Forensic Linguistics (AIFL) are asked to complete a coding task in the form of a multiple-choice questionnaire to gather insight as to whether experienced forensic linguistics researchers would agree on the appraisal categories present in the data, or whether appraisal analysis is too subjective to glean consistent inter-coder responses in this instance. An acceptable inter-rater reliability score would indicate that appraisal may be a useful tool to exemplify how language might encourage suicide through evaluating emotive states, behaviours and concepts. For example, if hesitance towards suicide is appraised negatively, this has the potential to encourage someone towards suicidality through judging behaviours. Poor inter-rater agreement would suggest that appraisal is not suitable for this purpose, as if (for example), half the coders believe a statement is [+Affect] and half believe it represents [+Judgement: capacity], this indicates a lack of accuracy in the method's application for this purpose (stating which appraisal categories are contributing towards encouragement in a particular instance).

3.3.2 Methods: Appraisal

Following the collection of the one-to-one text data, a questionnaire was produced for completion by 10 voluntary participants from the AIFL, which was circulated via Jisc. This questionnaire includes

an introduction to appraisal theory and how to apply it using the simplified coding system in Figure 5 below. The detailed coding scheme in Figure 7 was made visible for participants throughout the questionnaire, meaning they could refer back to it at any time.

Participants were then presented with a series of extracts (taken from the one-to-one data discussed above) and asked to code the data in accordance with the provided scheme using a multiple-choice tick-box system (with the ability to select more than one answer per extract), along with an additional qualitative response box if participants wished to add any comments. This data was separated into thought units (Black 1993) for ease of comparing each respondent's analyses, and to compare with the results in Calloway (2023), which also segmented the data for coding in this way. This comes with the acknowledgement that some context and co-text will be absent, and this does not represent how a large body of data would be analysed (for example, by a linguist as an expert witness). This method was chosen to provide an efficient, easily accessible and easily distributable way of presenting the data for analysis by multiple coders. The sequential stages of this process are illustrated in Figure 6.

Figure 5) A basic system for appraisal (adapted from Martin and Rose 2003:28)
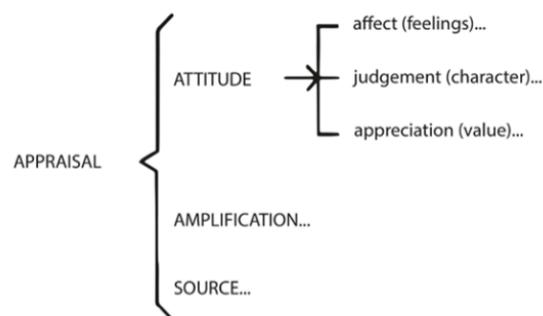
Figure 6) Workflow for testing AT for replicability
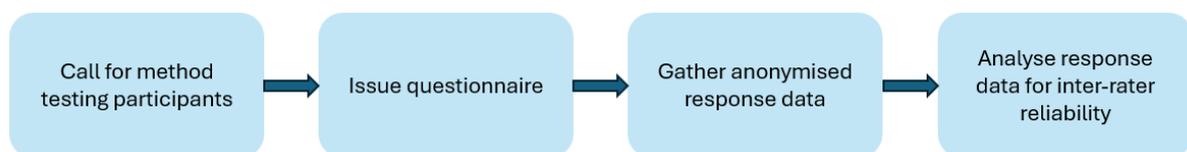
3.3.3 Participants

10 participants were recruited from the AIFL staff and PhD on-campus and distance learning programmes. This subject pool was chosen due to the experience of working with applied linguistic data, and the shared access to the AIFL department psychologist if participants felt affected by the nature of the data. A call-to-participants email was circulated within the department, containing the link to the Jisc questionnaire for those willing to participate. Of the 36 people contacted, 10 proceeded to participate.

3.3.4 Questionnaire

At the beginning of the Jisc questionnaire (after the information sheet and consent form), it was recommended that the individual does not proceed to the data if they have had experiences of suicidal ideation or self-harm. They were then asked whether they would like to proceed to view the data, which would not appear until the participant had confirmed they are happy to proceed. If participants did not wish to proceed at this point, the questionnaire was terminated, and their participation was complete.

On agreeing to proceed, participants were presented with the next page of the questionnaire, where they were provided with a detailed explanation of the coding scheme, so they had the necessary information to proceed with the analysis. Instances of appraisal were graded in a format showing the direction of the evaluation (i.e. positive or negative) and the type of attitude (affect, judgement or appreciation). For example, [-Judgement] or [+Affect]. Martin and White have previously encouraged the adaptation of the appraisal framework to gauge evaluations in a variety of contexts and genres, instating their scheme as a "reference point for those with alternative classifications" (2005: 46). As such, the framework for coding appraisal has been adapted to focus on the system of attitude as "resources for expressing personal emotions and societally-shaped assessments" (Hunter 2022: 58), as demonstrated in Figure 7. By streamlining the appraisal system to focus on this one aspect of the framework, an attempt is made to increase the likelihood of user agreement in coding by disengaging the less relevant systems of engagement and graduation in this particular case, as it is not the expressed degree of the statement under evaluation, but the attitude (or assessment) expressed within it. While the extent of the encouragement is of note regarding sentencing (as in *R v Howe*), this may also be assessed in terms of wider contextual and co-textual factors of the complete dataset (for example, how persistent the suspect is), so this can still be accounted for without adding an additional level of coding at this stage. It was therefore determined that the engagement and graduation systems as those stating the author's degree of commitment or certainty (Hunter 2022) may prove unnecessarily arduous for this purpose. Likewise, the subsystems of affect (*un/happiness, in/security* and *dis/satisfaction*) and appreciation (*reaction, composition* and *valuation*) were omitted from this coding scheme in order to reduce the cognitive demand on participants. These facets were considered to be less relevant to this analysis than the subsystems of judgement (*normality, capacity, tenacity, veracity* and *propriety*) as evaluations of behaviour, as the primary focus of using this method is to examine the potential to influence behaviour.

Figure 7) The appraisal coding scheme provided to participants
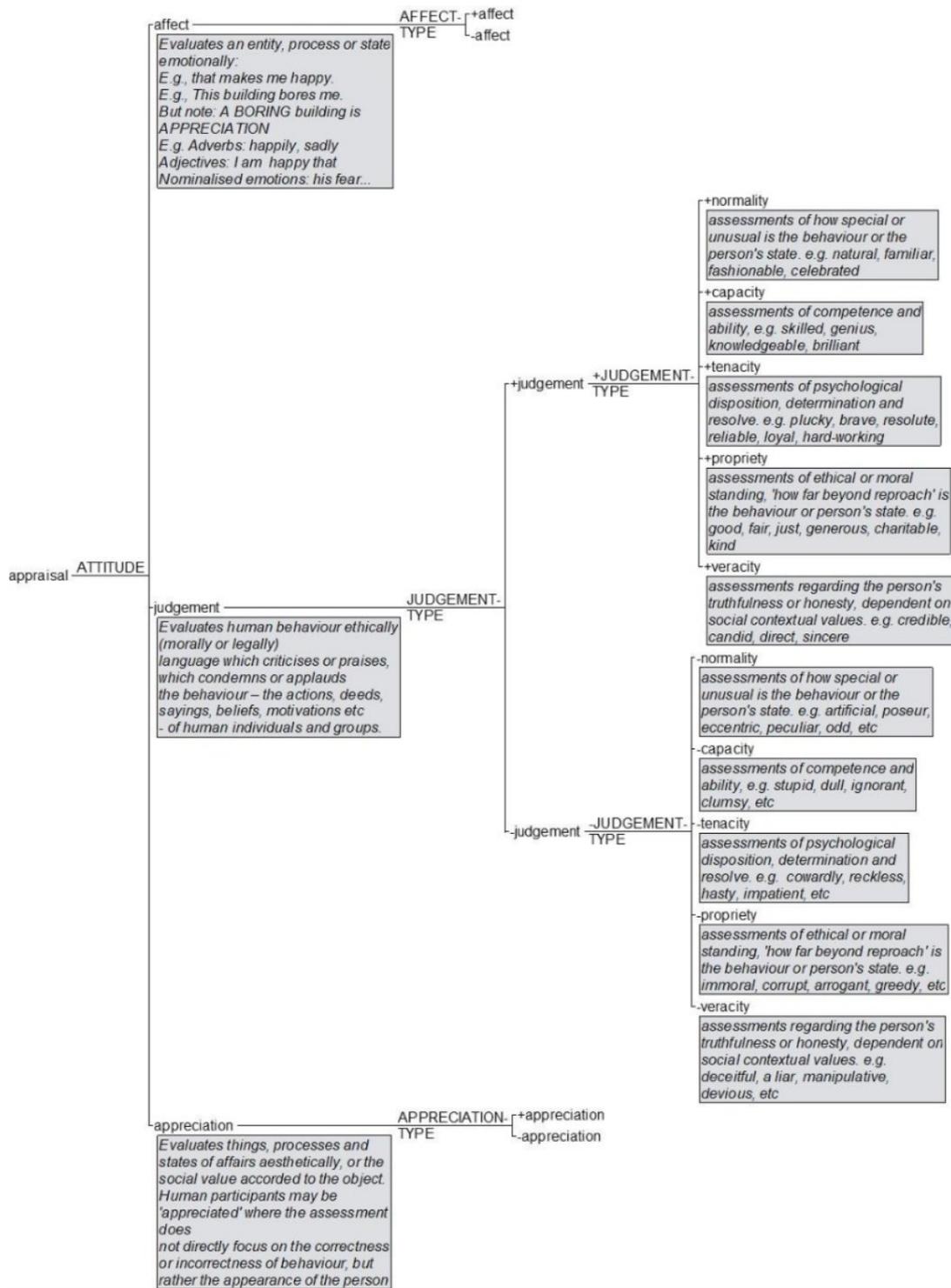
In Calloway (2023), appraisal categories are assigned to what Black (1993) refers to as "thought units", that is, discoursal units not necessarily delineated by punctuation, but those which represent a complete thought. The extracts presented in the questionnaire were therefore segmented in this way to ensure participants were provided with concise segments and to avoid the additional subjective task of dividing the evaluative expressions into segments (Fuoli 2018). For example, a sentence with multiple clauses could result in several different intertwining instances of appraisal,

which would be difficult to code for the participants with the limited functionality of the questionnaire programme (Jisc), compared to the ability to highlight and code individual elements in specific software (for example, UAM CorpusTool). Nevertheless, to allow for the possibility of multiple appraisal categories occurring in one extract, participants are able to assign multiple appraisal categories to each extract, but not to mark the boundaries of where they occur.

Participants are presented with 24 extracts of the one-to-one message data from Michelle Carter/Conrad Roy and William Melchert-Dinkel/Mark Drybrough/Nadia Kajouji, and asked to determine which categories of appraisal are present in each extract, and the direction of the evaluation (+/-). All participants are provided the same set of extracts. The questionnaire is formatted so that each extract is shown individually with multiple choice options representing the coding categories in the coding scheme in (Figure 7). Efforts have been made to select extracts that do not directly glorify suicide for any potentially vulnerable participants who have decided to proceed to view the data (on the request of Aston University's BSS Ethics Committee).

Following the task, participants are provided with signposts to resources for help if the participant has found the data distressing in any way; these include Samaritans, how to book an appointment with the AIFL staff psychologist, and Aston University wellbeing services. Participant responses are then analysed quantitatively to evaluate the suitability of the coding scheme for identifying appraisal categories present in the ES dataset.

On receipt of the completed and anonymised questionnaires, the responses are reviewed for any repeated inconsistencies due to the subjective nature of the appraisal framework (Thompson 2008) and an inter-rater reliability test is performed. A high agreement rate between participants could suggest that appraisal theory may be replicable for use in future ES analysis in illustrating the realisation of influential language in favour of suicide.

Regarding the calculation of agreement, while Cohen's Kappa is suitable for measuring agreement between two coders, Fleiss' Kappa is suitable for measuring agreement between three or more coders as a comparable Kappa coefficient. These coefficients account for the likelihood of coders agreeing by chance and consider the data can be mutually exclusive; for example, a unit may be coded as assistance only. Both produce results on a scale of −1 to 1, with a score of -1 indicating less than chance agreement and 1 indicative of perfect agreement.

3.3.5 Designing a New Analytical Framework

As suggested in Stage 1, the Suicide Act should be appropriately detailed for transparency of the criminal justice system; in this instance, concerning the language crimes it encompasses. These discrepancies could also have an effect on sentencing, as mentioned in *R v Howe*. Likewise, if a linguist were required to present language evidence regarding the Suicide Act 1961 or the Online Safety Act 2023, the terminology present in each law must be well-defined. As appraisal doesn't account for features of encouragement where an evaluation does not take place (for example, an explicit command such as '*do it*'), if criteria of the Suicide Act need to be identified in presenting analyses to a judge and/or jury, appraisal is not capable of distinguishing these concepts, but may be viewed as a tool to illustrate influential language in a more general sense.

The verbs determining the offence (in the context of a language crime) take the form of illocutionary acts, that is, the action performed by the utterance (see Table 6 below). I therefore seek to design and implement a novel coding scheme to identify the presence of these illocutionary acts. This

coding scheme is then tested for reliability using a secondary coder before being applied to the wider datasets.

Table 6) Illocutionary acts relevant to the Suicide Act and the Online Safety Act

Relevant Legislation	Illocutionary acts present
Suicide Act (1961)	Encouraging, assisting [suicide] "threatening another person or otherwise putting pressure on another person to commit or attempt suicide" (s.2A(3)) [coercion] "evidence of threats, pressure or persuasion applied to the victim will have a bearing on culpability" (*R v Howe*) [coercion and persuasion]
Online Safety Act (2023)	Promoting, encouraging [harm; suicide]

While currently applying pressure, threats and persuasion are considered under the umbrella of encouragement in the Suicide Act, I argue in Stage 1 that these are separate linguistic acts with varying aims and realisations, with pressure and threats being encompassed by coercion. While persuasion represents a change in the state of mind of the individual, coercion suggests the person may not agree with the notion or idea but feels a level of force to comply. A factor tending against prosecution is whether "the suspect had sought to dissuade the victim from taking the course of action which resulted in his or her suicide" (CPS 2014), meaning persuasion in favour of life is also relevant. With the factor of "pressure" tending in favour of prosecution (CPS 2014) and having "a bearing on culpability" (*R v Howe*), it is also possible that instances of coercion may be viewed with greater severity than encouraging someone who "had reached a voluntary, clear, settled and informed decision to commit suicide" (CPS 2014).

Additionally, the act of seeking assistance is included in the framework with the acknowledgment that these illocutions do not happen in a vacuum and that individuals can ask for advice either in favour of life or death. Furthermore, if "the victim did not seek the encouragement or assistance of the suspect personally or on his or her own initiative", this is an aggravating factor for prosecution (CPS 2014).

In summary, the IA framework comes in response to the need for law to catch up with how crime is realised through language and the discrepancies between different types of speech act. Employing this framework in the Analysis is therefore an endeavour to illustrate the nuances in categorisation of 'language that encourages suicide', and how this can hypothetically be achieved in a forensic context if necessary.

3.3.6 Methods: Designing a New Analytical Framework

Using the definitions established in Stage 1, a coding scheme is designed using the UAM CorpusTool (ver 3.0) software. Separate projects are created for each case (i.e. one project for Michelle Carter, and one for William Melchert-Dinkel). In the Melchert-Dinkel project, the data is separated into two files, one for the interaction with Mark Drybrough, and one for the interaction with Nadia Kajouji to allow for comparison between the two cases if needed. The coding scheme based on the definitions of the ES speech acts (henceforth referred to as the IA coding scheme or the IA framework) is added as a layer (Figure 9), and the coding is completed manually by the researcher. Following this, the

software provides total counts for each illocutionary act, with each coded segment visible using the Annotation Search function. The most commonly occurring categories are qualitatively analysed with examples in the Analysis.

Following this, samples of the data are analysed by a second coder, a senior lecturer in forensic linguistics. An inter-rater reliability measure is performed using Cohen's Kappa. This facilitates insight into the extent of the subjectivity of the novel coding scheme and whether it is appropriate for this dataset or needs reconsidering. Several rounds of coding are performed, with changes made to the framework where deemed necessary for factors of accuracy, clarity and reliability (see Chapter 4.2.5). This process is then repeated using the forum data to test the degree of inter-rater reliability on this second genre of ES communication. I then analyse the one-to-one dataset using the new framework.

The method of inter-rater reliability testing differs for the new framework compared to appraisal, as this one takes place between two coders as opposed to 10. The reason for this is because with the design of a new framework, it is anticipated that there will be several rounds of coding and re-designing of elements of the framework based on debrief meetings after each round. This would not be possible with 10 coders due to factors of time, lack of will to participate longitudinally without renumeration, and other logistical factors.

3.4 Stage 3: Use the new analytical framework to explore possible occurrences of ES on pro-suicide fora

3.4.1 Rationale

This stage of the research seeks to take an exploratory approach to the pro-suicide forum Sanctioned Suicide and the illocutionary acts performed by its users. As such, the analysis focuses on the illocutionary acts which, in the context of being pro-suicide, could constitute an offence under the Suicide Act 1961, or be subject to moderation/blocking by Ofcom under the Online Safety Act 2023. Therefore, the illocutions under analysis are to *assist*, *coerce*, *encourage*, *persuade, promote.* The act of *seeking assistance* with a suicide method or attempt, or conversely, assistance with mental health resources, has also been considered with the acknowledgement that the speech acts in question are not one-sided and may be prompted by an initial request from another user, and this may be a mitigating factor in sentencing under the Suicide Act (CPS 2014). The aim is to consider whether speech acts take place on the forum relevant to the Suicide Act (with the acknowledgement that this is only enforceable in England and Wales), and whether there are additional facets present relevant to the Act or the OSA.

In first browsing the forum content, the promotion of suicide as a viable and reasonable option appears to be realised much more implicitly than in the one-to-one examples and seems more instructional and advisory in nature. Conversely, as detailed in Calloway (2023), the one-to-one data has a distinctly personal expression of affect relating to suicide and repeated judgements of the interlocutor. The concept of suicide is so normalised on the Sanctioned Suicide site that scarcely is the attitude of the individual communicated, rather, the appreciation of the notion of ease with which a particular method results in death gains the focus of the community, as exemplified in the sample analysis in Table 7 below.

3.4.2 Sample Analysis

To illustrate how appraisal analysis may not provide an adequate level of detail in analysing the presence of ES in the forum context, this sample analysis was conducted before proceeding with the

more bespoke framework. This also offers a degree of comparison with the appraisal analysis of the one-to-one data undertaken in Stage 2.

Table 7) A randomly selected sample of 15 posts from one Sanctioned Suicide thread

Post No.	User	Post
1	user1	Why not heroin from the dark net? I've read markets there have more pure products [+appreciation: social valuation]. A heroin overdose after ingesting other sedatives should work [+appreciation: social valuation] for someone with no tolerance [-judgement: capacity], right?
2	user2	Where can I buy sn or sodium cyanide from
3	user3	Oh sorry [-affect: security], I wasn't talking about the dark net, I was talking about your local neighborhood drug dealers (that was what I meant by street drug dealers). But yes if you can find trustworthy sources [+appreciation: reaction], the dark net would be better [+appreciation: social valuation] for getting drugs with higher purity [+appreciation: composition]. I think if you want to go with the Heroin route, best to mix it with alcohol [+appreciation: composition], benzos (at least that's what I've read from Wikipedia), and depending on how you take the Heroin, I'd recommend an anti-emetic as well to reduce chances of vomiting [+appreciation: social valuation].
4	user4	Inert gas is the best method available by a very wide margin [+appreciation: reaction].
5	user5	Gunshot
6	user6	This is the correct answer [+appreciation: social valuation]. Some people may suggest different "painless" [+appreciation: social valuation] methods. When it comes to pain [-appreciation: security], N or N is the way to go! [+appreciation: security]
7	user7	Nitrogen, CO2, SN, hanging (if you hit the right spot [+appreciation: reaction]), jumping (from a really hight spot), SN
8	user2	What is sn What is N
9	user8	SN is sodium nitrite. It's commonly used to conserve food, such as meat, but there is a lethal dose [-appreciation: social valuation]. Look for the SN megathread to know more about it. N is nembutal or pentobarbital. Usually used for euthanasia (for humans and also animals). For what I have known, it's not available nowadays [-appreciation: social valuation]. There are plenty of informations here on the forum and on google.
10	user9	This man knows what he's talking about [+judgement: capacity]. The
11	user10	Painless and reliable not just painless [+appreciation: reaction]. N and SN are painless [+appreciation: social valuation] but both highly unreliable due to scams, requiring complex requirements [-appreciation: social valuation] and supporting substances. Most painless but very reliable I'd say 1) Suspension hanging 2) CO 3) H2S [+appreciation: social valuation].

In the above extract, the suicide methods under discussion are positively appreciated under the branch of social valuation owing to their efficacy and value to the community, as per the gloss in the appraisal coding scheme in Figure 7. The concept of a "lethal dose" in this instance has been coded

as [-appreciation: social value] owing to the cultural agreement that an overdose is a negative thing, however, in this instance, it represents a positive outcome for this group whose supposed desired outcome is death. This discrepancy is one likely to recur throughout the dataset as concepts relating to death are discussed casually with the mutual understanding that the community agrees that this is a positive action without the need for additional means of appraisal when mentioning death. For example, in the case of Conrad Roy, he showed hesitance that death was his chosen option and therefore the conversation between him and Michelle Carter involved a change in state of mind. Conversely, Sanctioned Suicide members predominantly appear to visit the forum having already made a decision in favour of suicide, which may account for some difference in illocutionary acts.

The nuances of the illocutionary acts are not apparent through coding in this way, nor is their sometimes-implicit realisation as appraisal analysis predominantly relies on coding the literality of the phrase. What can be gleaned from this sample analysis using appraisal is that a suicide method is ascribed value by the community due to factors such as ease and painlessness; however, it does not allow us insight into the individual aims at post-level. As such, appraisal is useful here to exemplify the ideology of the site, but the instructional nature of many Sanctioned Suicide threads does not reveal much in the way of user's affect or judgement, meaning little emotional evaluation is expressed. In the group dynamic of the forum, we see less relevance to the interpersonal metafunction, i.e., less evidence of establishing and progressing interpersonal relationships (Halliday 1976) than we would expect to find in a private conversation. Consequently, the forum may hold fewer examples of language which explicitly aims "to [influence] behaviour, to express our viewpoint on things in the world, and to elicit or change [another's']" (Thompson 2004: 30); therefore, the appraisal framework does not feel wholly appropriate for application in this context. In summary, if appraisal analysis is replicable for use with one-to-one ES data, this doesn't ensure its applicability to the forum data as this represents a different genre.

3.4.3 Method

3000 posts from the total forum data are selected in consecutive sections of 500 posts, ranging across a variety of different threads in order to represent the variety of topics under discussion. These 3000 posts are coded according to the perceived illocutions of the post, as per the IA framework. In doing so, the illocutionary acts (e.g. encouraging, persuading, assisting, etc.) may be deduced from the user(s) contributing to the forum, along with the potential for real-world consequences of this discourse.

3.5 Methodological and Data Limitations

As with any study, this one is not without its limitations. The primary critique of the appraisal theory framework is its subjective nature, that is, there is a possibility for the outcome to vary from researcher to researcher. This element of subjectivity has been acknowledged in the differences in classifications of the notion of 'surprise' as either a negative or a neutral concept (Martin and White 2005; Bednarek 2008), however this is variation could be owing to the context in which it appears. Thompson (2008: 178-9) further criticises the blurred boundaries between the categories of judgement and appreciation, providing the below examples:

a) He was catching the ball brilliantly.
b) His catches were brilliant.

Thompson suggests that sentence a) is exemplary of [+Judgement: capacity], while b) should be coded as [+Appreciation: reaction]. He posits one way to determine which category of attitude is

being represented is to question whether it is the process of human behaviour under evaluation (e.g., the process of catching), or the 'thing' itself (e.g., the catch). He assesses the cause of this issue is due to the nominalisation of behaviour, as "when behaviour is nominalised it moves into a grey area between action and product" (p.179). Furthermore, he suggests grouping together all appraisals of behaviour under judgement "irrespective of the formal characteristics of the wording" (p.179), but wherever possible, "the wording should be taken as the basis for the initial assignment of categories" (p.180). In relation to the scope of this project, Thompson adds that unless the categories are further defined "we are merely providing an idiosyncratic and impressionistic commentary on discourse rather than a replicable linguistic analysis" (p.185); therefore, close attention was paid to establishing parameters for application of the framework and its categorisations to my participants. This kind of subjective classification with slightly blurred conceptual boundaries further illustrates the need for a classification system of influential language with more clearly distinguished categories.

Owing to the impracticality of using participants with strong proficiency in appraisal analysis (this would leave a very small subject pool, and inevitably even fewer willing to participate due to the subject matter or personal schedules, for example), my participants were chosen based on their experience in analysing forensic texts using a variety of linguistic frameworks. The ethical agreement for this project also requires proof that participants have access to help resources should they feel affected by the subject matter, which AIFL staff and students have. This comes with the acknowledgement that a lack of experience with appraisal analysis may affect my participants' degree of agreement and confidence in using the framework. The possible lack of experience in my participants using appraisal analysis was attempted to be mitigated by providing an introduction to appraisal analysis and its background at the beginning of the questionnaire, alongside encouraging participants to consult the coding scheme when coding each extract. While retrospectively, including an additional question where participants indicate their level of experience with the appraisal framework in months or years, or a scale from 'no experience' to 'very experienced' would provide additional insight regarding experience and application, this is not possible retroactively due to the terms of the University's ethical approval requiring I collect no individual participant contact information.

In applying the new IA framework in a forensic setting, there exists the legal hurdle of 'intent'. In order for an act capable of encouraging or assisting suicide to be criminalised under the Suicide Act 1961, this act must demonstrate the *intention* of encouraging or assisting suicide. While this study will not attempt to claim the ability to prove or disprove intent as a mental process (Singer 2014; Hurt and Grant 2018) (this would also not likely fall under the remit of the linguist), it will aim to suggest perhaps alternative means by which language-based crimes can be assessed, as "[n]o science can get inside the minds of speakers, but the topics they introduce, recycle and omit give the clearest available clues to their intentions" (Shuy 2010: 560).

As noted above, the data in this study comes from US cases of ES, as no UK data is currently publicly available. Freedom of Information requests regarding one-to-one correspondence of UK ES cases were rejected during the data collection process, citing factors such as the potential for the release of this data to cause distress or harm to the families of the victims, or to other vulnerable individuals. This comes with the acknowledgement that UK data would be more suitable for triangulation with the legislation and the sentencing remarks for a more complete picture of how ES is tried, prosecuted and sentenced in the UK.

Finally, I acknowledge the limitation to the generalisability of any results from the methodology test as the participants in this study are PhD students and AIFL staff to test the AT framework in this

context, as opposed to specific individuals with experience in providing analysis for expert testimony. My primary reason for doing this is because this allowed me a bigger and more accessible pool of participants, all of which have a working knowledge of forensic texts and a robust support system for working with potentially challenging data (e.g. the AIFL staff psychologist and Aston Wellbeing services). One shortcoming of this is that the results gained may differ from those the framework is intended to be used by (possibly due to the factor of experience); however, one aim in streamlining the framework is its ease of application.

Chapter 4: Results and Analysis

4.1 Stage 1: To provide clearer legal definitions for speech acts relevant to ES legislation (*assistance, coercion, encouragement, persuasion, promotion* and *seeking assistance*)

4.1.1 Introduction

As detailed above, this thesis takes the stance that the minutiae of linguistic acts featured in legislation should be differentiated. This is for the primary purposes of transparency regarding precisely what constitutes an offence, and in considering the factors of harm and culpability in sentencing (*R v Howe, R v Finnegan*). This analysis considers the literature surrounding assistance, coercion, encouragement, persuasion and promotion in Chapter 2.10, and the issues involved with relying on dictionary definitions for clarification. In separating these actions (in the context of linguistically realised ES), I consider them through the lens of speech act theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1969) as separate illocutionary acts with differing potential effects (perlocutionary forces) on the addressee. New definitions are proposed according to the purpose and actions performed by each.

4.1.2 Issues with Ambiguity

If we use the OED definitions (see 3.2.2) of these speech acts in a legal context, then *assist* and *promote* are related (through the commonalities of *support* and *promote*); *encourage* and *persuade* are related (through the commonality of *induce*); and *encourage* and *promote* are related (through the commonality of *encourage*), as illustrated in Figure 8 below (where the ES verbs are presented at the top, their shared definitive terms at the bottom, and connecting lines indicate the crossovers). This demonstrates that while *encourage/persuade* and *encourage/promote* are directly linked by definition, as are *assist/promote* (and logically, might be used interchangeably)*, respectively, the links between *assist/encourage* and *persuade/promote* are slightly more tenuous (although there is certainly argument for their likeness). *Coerce,* on the other hand, shares no synonymous definitive terms with the others, perhaps due to the undercurrent of manipulation, force or pressure it implies. This is, however, represented in the Suicide Act 1961 (s.2A(3)) which encompasses threats and applied pressure, albeit under the bracket of encouragement, while encouragement does not imply threats or pressure. In the case of persuasion, for example, an individual's state of mind may actually change as the perlocutionary effect (e.g. *He persuaded me to go camping rather than caravanning*), whereas if an individual is coerced, their state of mind or initial will may be unchanged, yet they feel obliged to act as instructed by the coercer; coercion also carries a connotation of the action being negative or sinister in some way (e.g. *He coerced me into staying with him*).

Figure 8) A diagram to show the commonalities in definition of assist, encourage, persuade and promote
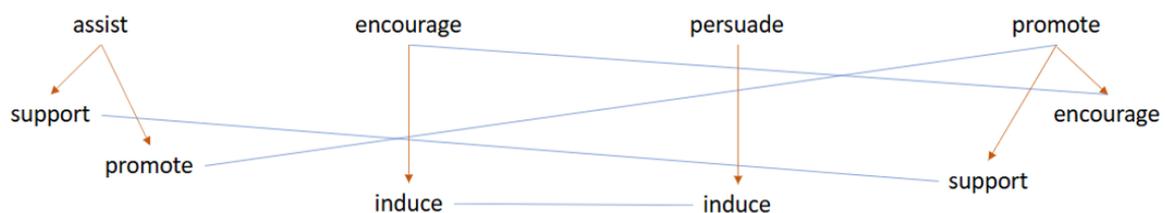
While dictionary definitions were sought in Chapter 3.2 to provide a base understanding of these concepts, ultimately, these are insufficient in their ability to delineate these actions as speech acts. Firstly, the definitions overlap – for example – if to assist is to promote and to promote is to encourage, is to encourage also to assist? It could be reasonably argued that one can encourage someone without assisting them in any way, for example, '*you can do it*' does not provide help or

advice. The act of supporting also appears across multiple definitions, however, this could be divided into support of an action (assist), support of a behaviour (encourage), and support of a goal/concept/ideology (promote). To induce may be absorbed by the categories of encouragement and persuasion owing to its archaic nature and lack of mention in the ES legislation.

4.1.3 Defining the Speech Acts

> We normally think of definitions as the stuff of dictionaries. Yet the quest for precision, along with the desire to reduce the length of documents, has led to a growing dependence on definitions in legal drafting, especially in formal written texts (Tiersma 1999: 115).

With dictionary definitions representing a prescriptive view of "how words *ought* to be used" (Tiersma 1999: 115, original emphasis), the nuance of the descriptive (or *actual*) use of language is lost. Based on the literature in Chapter 2.10, a simplified version of the apparent defining features (which may be deduced as the purpose) of the ES speech acts is provided in Table 8 below.

Table 8) The deduced purposes of ES speech acts

ES Speech Act	Key Purpose
Assist	To help, support (an action), advise
Coerce	To compel, force, apply pressure or assert asymmetrical power
Encourage	To express belief in another, support (a behaviour), inspire confidence
Persuade	To talk into or convince (mental state A to mental state B)
Promote	To positively evaluate (a concept), support (a concept)

In establishing these definitions, the verbs appearing in the ES legislation are treated here as illocutionary speech acts – that is – the action performed by the utterance. Under Searle's classification, the ES speech acts may be considered directives as "attempts [...] by the speaker to get the hearer to do something" (1976: 11), with the exception of promotion as an expressive, in which, "the truth of the expressed proposition is presupposed" (ibid., p.12). The speech acts themselves are not illicit – for example – one could be encouraged to go for a run or assisted in writing a CV. The nefarious layer is added by what it is the addresser is attempting to get the addressee to do as the perlocutionary effect. This comes with the exception of coercion, which, as described above, carries sinister connotations.

By separating the illocutionary acts in this way, there may be less confusion and overlap when categorising language units accordingly. As a unit may fulfil more than one of these speech acts (for example, a statement that both assists and encourages suicide), a coding system developed from these new definitions would allow for this.

Fraser (1998) explored the conditions necessary in acts of threatening, promising and warning to illustrate the differing speaker intentions required for each to take place successfully. Considering the felicity conditions of the ES speech acts, if "different kinds of illocutionary acts involve different kinds of sincerity conditions" (Allan 1997: 400), the sincerity conditions (amongst the preparatory

and essential conditions) of these illocutionary acts may provide further clues to the distinctions between them. Likewise, regarding the difference in purpose between speech acts, Searle believes that "essential conditions form the best basis for a taxonomy" (1976: 2-3). Based on these assumptions, the felicity conditions of the ES speech acts are explored in Table 9.

Table 9) Felicity conditions of ES speech acts

Felicity Category	Conditions	Assistance	Coercion	Encouragement	Persuasion	Promotion
Preparatory	The addresser advocates suicidal ideation	X	X	X	X	X
	Resistance is expressed by the addressee		X		X	
	The addresser believes in the addressee's ability			X		
	The addresser supports the addressee	X		X		
Sincerity	There is a desire to change intent towards suicide		X		X	
	The addresser intends to help the addressee	X				
	The addresser seeks to create or exploit an asymmetrical power dynamic		X			
	The addresser seeks to foreground positive outcomes of suicide		X		X	X
	The addresser intends for the addressee to attempt or die by suicide	X	X	X	X	
Essential	The addressee receives information or resources to further the goal of suicide	X				
	The addresser urges the addressee to act		X	X	X	
	The addressee feels obliged to act		X			
	The addressee understands the addresser's advocation of suicide	X	X	X	X	X

I have deduced the above felicity conditions using a process similar to that of Macdonald and Lorenzo-Dus (2020) and Fraser (1975, 1998). This involves synthesis of the literature in 2.10 and my own intuition based on experience in pragmatic analysis. In mapping the conditions of the speech acts, the aim is to determine the conditions similar to and distinguishing of each.

The conditions deemed necessary for assistance include the intention to help the addressee, backgrounded by the factor of the addresser supporting their action as suggested by the notions of "aid" and "counsel" (Accessories and Abettors Act 1861 (s.8)). In the context of assisting suicide, this takes the form of knowingly providing the victim with information or resources to further the goal of suicide, with the addressee aware of the addresser's advocation of suicide.

Central to an act of coercion is the preparatory condition that resistance is expressed by the addressee, and the sincerity condition that the addresser desires to change their intent towards suicide, typically through means of "constrain[t] or restrain[t]" (OED Online), or "illicit pressures" (Wertheimer 1987: 64), resulting in the essential condition that the addressee feels obliged to act. The existence of a more powerful participant as noted by Wertheimer (1987) is accounted for by the condition of exploiting a power asymmetry, while the addressee's experience of obligation relates to the action being made "under duress" (ibid., p.3). In their advocation of suicide, the addresser (A) "knows or ought to know that the behaviour will have a serious effect on B" (Serious Crime Act 2015 (s.76).

Turning to encouragement, the addresser also advocates suicide, this time with the preparatory condition that the addresser believes in the addressee's ability to carry out the act. The effect of this is the desire "to inspire or help" (Sweeney 2009: 90) by urging the addressee to act. The addresser's support is communicated by "the expression of affirmation through language" (Wong 2016: 183) in the context of verbally encouraging suicide. Owing to the intentional nature of encouragement (Macdonald and Lorenzo-Dus 2020), the addresser intends for the addressee to attempt or die by suicide, which is understood by the addressee.

Considering the conditions necessary for persuading suicide, a degree of resistance must first be present in order to "change a person's attitudes, beliefs, or behavior" (Cacioppo et al 2018: 129). Likewise, the addresser must have the desire to change the speaker's intent in favour of suicide. As with coercion, the addresser seeks to foreground positive outcomes of suicide and present it in a favourable light (possibly through appeals to *ethos, logos* and *pathos*). In a successful act of persuasion, the addressee is urged to act while circumventing the undesirable outcomes of unsuccessful persuasion, like "[r]eactance, distrust and avoidance" (Verlegh et al 2015: 3). Promotion appears comparatively simplistic (possibly owing to being an expressive speech act rather than a directive), with positive evaluation of a concept taking the form of the addresser's advocation, the foregrounding of positive outcomes, and the addressee's understanding of the addresser's point of view.

While the felicity conditions required for illocutionary acts to be successful may prove useful in identifying the distinct circumstances, intent and communicative outcomes of some of these speech acts, it also highlights their similarities. For example, advocating suicidal ideation, the presence of resistance, the desire to change intent towards suicide, the foregrounding of positive outcomes of suicide, intent for the addressee to attempt or die by suicide, and the addresser urging the addressee to act are all common to coercion and persuasion. Despite the identification of these

similarities, Table 9 demonstrates the differences between coercion and persuasion in the establishment of an asymmetrical power dynamic and the addressee feeling obliged to act fulfilling an act of coercion but not persuasion (similar to threats versus warnings in Fraser (1998)). In a successful act of persuasion, the addressee would not feel obligation to act due to external pressure but would feel that the decision to act was logical and in the best interest of themselves and/or others; in other words, their mind has been changed without "duress" or "illicit pressures" (Wertheimer 1987). This represents the change of will involved in being persuaded versus the obligation to act against one's initial will involved in being coerced.

Moreover, in illustrating an argument that coercion is indeed distinct from encouragement, the addressee's resistance, a desire to change intent, power asymmetry, foregrounding positive outcomes of suicide, and the addressee feeling obliged to act are all conditions of coercion but not of encouragement. This demonstrates the elements of force and pressure involved in an act of coercion, while encouragement involves belief in the other person's ability to enact a suicide in this context.

Considering the felicity conditions for the ES speech acts is less helpful when considering promotion. While the preparatory condition of advocating suicide is present, an act of promotion does not necessarily involve trying to convince someone to act or to help them achieve a desired outcome. A personal advocation of suicide may take place, however, this does not need to equate to influencing an addressee. For example, an utterance like "suicide is the only way I'll achieve peace" conceptually promotes the idea of suicide and the outcome of "peace" as positive, yet its purpose is not to affect the addressee, rather to express a personal worldview. The addresser must be sincere in their belief in suicide as a positive choice, and to achieve this, the preparatory condition of them being an advocate for suicide must exist. What is less obvious from the felicity conditions is how promotion differs from the other ES speech acts, where others fulfil a felicity condition distinct to them. Persuasion is also lacking in a felicity condition unique to itself, however, it is importantly made distinct from encouragement and coercion.

The primary aim of this definition task is to illustrate the nuances of coercion, encouragement and persuasion as all are currently considered under the bracket of "encouragement" in the Suicide Act. The distinction of promotion is also important as the OSA includes acts promoting suicide in its Primary Priority Content considered harmful to children and therefore in need of moderation. The promotion of suicide does not constitute a criminal offence unless also occurring alongside encouragement or assistance. Therefore, if someone in the UK was accused of encouraging suicide online in saying, for example, '*suicide is the only way to free myself*', this involves a promotion of suicide conceptually (i.e., belief in it as a personal choice). Meanwhile, it does not encourage this behaviour in others, nor does it provide instruction or advice on how to enact suicide and should therefore not be considered an offence under the Suicide Act. It does, however, mean that service providers hosting content like this are responsible for moderating the content by means such as age verification, or removing the content completely. As has been seen recently with Sanctioned Suicide, if the service provider fails to comply, an investigation is opened regarding assessing the potential harm to users in the UK (Ofcom 2025), despite it being a US-based site.

The elements of force and pressure to die by suicide are currently considered acts of encouragement under the Suicide Act (s.2A(3)). I have illustrated above (in addition to Chapters 2.10 and 3.2) that in

the context of linguistic acts, threats, force, and pressure are more conducive to illocutionary acts of coercion than encouragement. In considering that "evidence of threats, pressure or persuasion applied to the victim will have a bearing on culpability" (*R v Howe*), it is reasonable to suggest that coercing suicide may be considered more immoral than encouraging suicide and may therefore be sentenced more severely. By including persuasion in the category of acts affecting culpability, this also makes it necessary to define. Persuasion involves influencing a change in mindset or an attempt to convince someone in order to achieve a desired outcome. Conversely, in coercing someone, they may not be persuaded to act in a certain way, but they may feel obliged to through intimidation or other factors. Additionally, one considering dying by suicide but showing some reservation could then be further persuaded to act; whereas in coercing someone, they may have come to the conclusion that they do not want to proceed at that time, only to be manipulated into it regardless. If there was to exist a scale of severity of these speech acts in ES communication for the purpose of determining culpability, due to the factors mentioned here, I would suggest that coercion is the most sinister, followed by persuasion, followed by encouragement.

Assistance is more difficult to grade as this appears to be the ES speech act most reliant on contextual factors, such as the notion of compassion as a mitigating factor in favour of the suspect regarding sentencing (CPS 2014), and whether "the victim had reached a voluntary, clear, settled and informed decision to commit suicide" (ibid.). For example, if an individual had expressed their voluntary and informed decision to commit suicide and someone provided them with instruction on how to do so (or encouragement in favour of their decision), this would likely be treated more favourably than persuading someone to die by suicide and then providing them with the means to do so. The culpability denoted by assistance therefore appears to depend on the presence (or absence) of other ES speech acts.

4.1.4 Conclusion

Stage 1 has sought to provide less ambiguous and further delineated definitions of the actions in ES legislation in the context of language crimes. While there are similarities in the ways in which these illocutionary acts manifest, there are some important distinctions to be made between them when assessing the factor of culpability in an ES offence. I argue that coercion is the most nefarious of these speech acts owing to the elements of force, threats, pressure, intimidation and manipulation. I therefore argue that it is not synonymous with encouragement (or a subtype of it), wherein encouragement has the potential to inspire confidence and express support in favour of an action. Persuasion involves an attempt to change an opinion or mindset, while the promotion of suicide relates to the support and positive evaluation of a concept. While assisting a suicide denotes advising or helping someone to end their life, it appears to be more ambiguous as a standalone concept when considering culpability (for example, whether the assistance was borne out of compassion), as such, its moral standing may depend on the presence of other ES speech acts.

Overall, due to the overlapping terminology and vagueness, the dictionary definitions of these concepts are inadequate for use in a judicial context where the focus should be on transparency and accuracy in determining the presence and degree of an offence. As a result, I have proposed alternatives in Table 8 which consider the nuances of how this type of communications offence may be realised.

4.2 Stage 2: Develop an analytical framework based on the illocutionary acts relevant to ES legislation that is suitable for analysing ES evidence

4.2.1 Introduction

The aims of Stage 2 are twofold: to assess the suitability and replicability of the appraisal framework in identifying categories of evaluative language in ES communications, and to design and test a new framework specific to identifying the ES speech acts (as outlined in Stage 1).

Calloway (2023) uses appraisal analysis and the texts of Michelle Carter and Conrad Roy to suggest how evaluations of feelings, behaviours and concepts may elicit a persuasion response (namely "positive affect surrounding themes of suicide", "judgements of personal negative tenacity and negative veracity" and "positive appreciation of being in the afterlife" and "negative appreciation of the victim not killing themselves" (p.179)). This stage of my analysis explores the potential of appraisal as a tool to reliably identify instances of influential language in ES communication.

'Influence' here is used to refer to the broad category of encouragement currently encompassed by the Suicide Act. I neglect to refer to this as encouragement due to the nuances between the different (speech) acts currently referenced under the label of encouragement discussed in Stage 1. As such, I ask whether appraisal may be useful in identifying the 'macro' level of language that potentially influences suicide, whereas a more detailed framework is necessary to exemplify the 'micro' level of how this is realised through different linguistic acts.

The latter part of Stage 2 involves the design and testing of a new framework based on the illocutionary acts in the ES legislation (assistance, coercion, encouragement, persuasion, promotion, and seeking assistance). This is borne from the argument developed throughout this thesis that in order to effectively identify ES through language evidence, the criteria it encompasses must be clearly defined for the purposes of transparency within the criminal justice system, justifying the severity of criminal sentences, and to provide further insight into how computer-mediated harm is realised through language. Owing to the consideration of ES as a language crime, this framework is designed and reliability tested as a hypothetical tool for the forensic linguist should they be asked to provide an insight regarding an ES case.

4.2.2 Results of appraisal inter-rater reliability test

Due to the factor of space, the responses of each of the 10 participants to all 24 extracts are not included in full. Instead, tables are included demonstrating the extracts which returned the most and least agreement from coders (Tables 10 and 11). One extract received agreement from all 10 coders (Extract 7), while 11 extracts did not receive a majority agreement (i.e. five or less coders agreeing on a categorisation). Of the extracts with the greatest degree of agreement, the most common subsystem is Judgement.

The outcome of the reliability rest shows an unsatisfactory degree of inter-rater agreement, returning a Fleiss' Kappa score of 0.29 with a possible range of -1 to 1, where a score of 1 is equal to perfect agreement and -1 is indicative of no agreement between raters. While this reaches the threshold of 'fair' agreement in Kappa statistic interpretation of reliability studies (Landis and Koch 1977), this falls below the desirable range of 0.61-0.8 or greater (Acklin and Fuger 2016).

This section discusses some of the extracts that returned the highest and lowest agreement rates between coders and suggests possible reasons for these classifications based on the definitions provided in the coding scheme.

Table 10) The top 10 extracts with the greatest degree of coder agreement

Extract	Assigned Code	Agreement (no. Of coders)
7. You can find a place I know you can	+Judgement: capacity	10
6. There's no way you can fail	+Judgement: capacity	9
15. You're finally gonna be happy	+Affect	9
22. You better not be lying to me	-Judgement: veracity	8
16. I think you'll do fine	+Judgement: capacity	8
14. You better not be bull shitting me and saying you're gonna do this and then purposely get caught	-Judgement: veracity	8
4. Its gonna drive you even more insane	-Judgement: capacity	7
23. It is scary	-Affect	6
1. You're just gonna get worse and worse	-Judgement: tenacity	6
11. Suspention hanging is by far the best and surest method to do	+Appreciation	6

The greatest degree of agreement relates to Extract 7 of the 24 in the questionnaire. All participants coded *You can find a place I know you can* as [+Judgement: capacity], meaning all considered this to be an instance of MC deeming CR capable of the task in question. This may be due to the presence (and reinstatement) of "can" as a modal auxiliary verb indicating ability. Similarly, Extract 6 saw agreement between nine of ten participants as [+Judgement: capacity], with one coder selecting [-Judgement: capacity]. While it's understandable to classify *There's no way you can fail* as [+ Judgement: capacity] due to this being an expression of belief in CR's competence, it could be

possible that one coder determined "no way" as a negation and therefore an instance of negative judgement, with the other possibility of an accidental selecting of the negative option as opposed to the positive one.

While Extract 15 sees an agreement of nine participants in favour of [+Affect], there is some variation in additional codes being selected simultaneously, for example in addition to [+Affect], respondent A chose [+Judgement: normality] and [+Appreciation], respondent E [+Judgement: normality], and respondent J [+Appreciation]. Likewise, the respondent disagreeing with [+Affect] chose [+Appreciation]. The rationale for coding this statement as [+Judgement: normality] could be owing to the definition in the coding scheme in relation to how "special" the person's state is, with happiness perhaps considered a "special" state in this instance. Discrepancy between [+Affect] and [+Appreciation] may arise from all examples in the coding scheme of Affect being in the first person, with note that "[h]uman participants may be 'appreciated' where the assessment does not directly focus on the correctness or incorrectness of the behaviour" in the definition of Appreciation; the latter, does however come with the caveat of focusing on "the appearance of the person" as opposed to the behaviour. This difficulty in classification of third-person appraisal is noted by Thompson (2008), who questions whether third-person instances should be classified as appraisals at all, before concluding that the illustrative clauses provided in Martin (2000: 149) "clearly [indicate] that they should" (Thompson 2008: 175). Regarding the blurred boundaries between Affect and Judgement, Thompson (2008) suggests that Affect can be used to either evoke or provoke Judgement. For example, in describing someone as "<u>not unhappy</u> with media attention" (p. 176, original emphasis), this could facilitate "supporting the judgement of her 'vanity'" (ibid.), while primarily expressing her emotional state. Therefore, the decision of two respondents to this questionnaire to code Extract 15 as [+Judgement: normality] may be due to the existence of "experiential representations of emotion which often serve as provoking tokens of JUDGEMENT" (Thompson 2008: 176). If this is the case, then the notion of "finally [being] happy" could suggest that CR's happiness would indicate the "special" state as mentioned in the definition of [+Judgement: normality]. Also worthy of note is the mention of a "state" in the definitions of Affect, [Judgement: normality] and Appreciation in the CorpusTool coding scheme for appraisal based on Martin and White's (2005) original model. The repetition of this term throughout different coding categories could cause confusion if not reading through (or memorising) every option when coding each extract. However, the coding scheme does clarify that Affect relates to emotions (and therefore emotional states); Judgement to behaviour (and therefore behavioural or social states); and Appreciation to things and processes (and therefore "states of affairs aesthetically"), as such, while some statements will be more ambiguous, clauses which directly reference one of these types of "state" should be less likely to fall to user error.

Extract 16 sees eight of ten raters agree on [+Judgement: capacity] as another assessment of CR's ability to do something. It also sees additional codes across the other two Attitude subsystems with four coding for [+Affect] and three for [+Appreciation]. In terms of Appreciation, CR being "fine" could be considered to be relating to his appearance in the context of someone appearing to be "doing fine"; however, this would rely on interpreting "the appearance of the person" in the coding scheme not to be relating to the value of aesthetics as in the definition provided, but in the emotional state of "fine", in which case, this would logically be deduced to be relating to Affect. By

the definition of Appreciation in the coding scheme, if a painting or a car was evaluated as "fine", this would fall into this category, however, as it is confidence in the result of a future behaviour or action that is being assessed – one based on the belief in an individual's ability to achieve such result (as marked by "I think") – [+Judgement: capacity] does appear to be the most logical classification here.

Regarding Extract 23, *It is scary* has been coded by the majority as an example of [-Affect]. While matters of Affect refer to emotional states, in this case, being scared, it could be argued that this is a [-Appreciation] as an evaluation of a "state of affairs". Without any additional context or co-text of this statement, raters are left to deduce what "it" is referring to (Martin and Rose note co-text as being important to facilitate analysing appraisal in "prosodic terms" (2003: 35-36)), with the lack of co-text acknowledged as a shortcoming of presenting the data for coding in this segmented way). Owing to "it" being a pronoun used to reference an object or non-human entity, this feels best placed in the realm of Appreciation as an evaluation of a "thing", rather than of an emotive state. While "scared" describes the state of being frightened, "scary" describes the quality of something as fear-inducing. As Extract 23 labels "it" as "scary", there is a strong argument in favour of this being [-Appreciation], as the remaining four participants all selected. In perhaps a misinterpretation of how to apply the coding scheme, rater A coded this extract as [-Affect], [+Judgement: veracity] and [-Judgement: tenacity]. Regarding veracity, the statement *It is scary* as a unit could be considered an expression of honesty through the individual admitting to finding something intimidating, which could amount to coding this statement as veracious on the part of the author, rather than the thing being evaluated. Likewise, in coding this as [-Judgement: tenacity], the coder may themselves be making a judgement on the author's mental resolve (perhaps due to the feature of "cowardly" as an example in the coding scheme under [-Judgement: tenacity]), rather than analysing the assessment made by the statement itself.

While Extracts 1 and 4 both imply the process of CR's mental state deteriorating, they have been coded by the majority as [-Judgement: tenacity] and [-Judgement: capacity], respectively. Owing to its definition in the coding scheme making a direct reference to "psychological disposition", it is somewhat surprising that Extract 4 (*Its gonna drive you even more insane*) was only coded as [-Judgement: tenacity] by one rater, with [-Judgement: propriety] being selected by three. The decision of [-Judgement: propriety] could be owing to the mention of being "beyond reproach" in its definition, with raters considering insanity to fall within this, however, insanity is arguably less concerned with the "ethical or moral standing" associated with propriety (with the exception of collocational phrases such as "criminally insane"). Regarding the majority decision to code Extract 4 as [-Judgement: capacity], the process of being driven insane could be reason to suggest a lack of "competence and ability" on the part of the person being evaluated, although it could be argued that a Judgement regarding someone's mental state may be better placed in the "psychological disposition" category, which was selected by the majority for Extract 1 (*You're just gonna get worse and worse*).

While similar to Extract 4 in essence as both represent an assessment of the decline in CR's mental state, there are grounds to argue that *You're just gonna get worse and worse* indicates a lack of belief in CR's ability to get better. The comparative adjective "worse" implies the belief that CR is already "bad", with the assertion that he is going to "get worse and worse" implicitly suggesting a

disbelief in his capability of improving, and therefore an evaluation of [-Judgement: capacity]. As Extract 4 follows a similar pattern of suggesting CR is already "insane" with the assertion that a future action (or lack thereof) will propel him further into this negative state, there exists the implied notion that he is not capable of recovery.

4.2.2b Least agreement

Table 11 provides all 11 extracts in which a majority agreement was not reached in coding for appraisal categories. In some instances, there were multiple categories that received a low degree of agreement, and in some cases, one category was agreed upon by up to half of the raters.

Table 11) All extracts which did not receive a majority agreement

Extract	Most assigned codes	Agreement (no. of coders)
3. *The longer you wait in fear of it not working,, the longer you're gonna keep thinking about it*	[-Affect], [-Judgement: capacity], [-Judgement: tenacity]	3
10. *I have trialed it 5 times now with very good results*	[+Judgement: capacity], [+Affect]	4
18. *You do deserve it though*	[+Appreciation]	4
21. *there isn't anything anyone can do to save you*	NA	4
9. *you can easily hang from a door using the knob onw side to tie the rope to*	[+Judgement: capacity], NA	5
12. *If u don't do it now you're never gonna do it*	[-Judgement: tenacity]	5
2. *I don't even think you can get any worse at this point.*	[-Judgement: tenacity]	5
17. *in 7 years I've never seen a failed hanging that is why i chose that*	[+Appreciation]	5
19. *You do deserve it though*	[+Judgement: tenacity]	5
20. *that method for me is so fast and so certain*	[+Appreciation]	5
24. *We want what's best for each other*	[+Judgement: propriety]	5

Extract 3 returned the lowest degree of agreement, with [-Affect], [-Judgement: capacity], [-Judgement: tenacity] each selected by three coders. The mention of "wait[ing] in fear" relates to [-Affect] as it serves the purpose of describing CR's emotional state as one of apprehension. As in Extract 15 above, this could be considered another example of "experiential representations of emotion" as "provoking tokens of JUDGEMENT" (Thompson 2008: 176), owing to CR's fear being represented as cowardice, with "cowardly" included in the definition of [-Judgement: tenacity]. Likewise, regarding evaluation of capacity, Extract 3 implicitly claims that if CR fails to act now, things will worsen for him and he will continue with this inactivity which could be construed as a criticism of his ability to improve things for himself, thereby representing an appraisal of [-Judgement: capacity]. This statement may have been more confusing due to consisting of two clauses and a future tense cause-and-effect relationship (irrealis modal). The coercive nature of this statement appears to have been lost in analysing it for appraisal, suggesting this is not the appropriate framework with which to identify instances of coercion. With this statement, MC is disregarding CR's fear and reluctance to die by suicide and presents a negative consequence which appears to be designed to persuade him to act by her will. As such, the nuance of the pragmatic makeup of an act of coercion has been missed by analysing it for appraisal only.

Extract 10 sees four raters each code for [+Judgement: capacity] and [+Affect]. In considering this statement a judgement of character by way of capability and competence, this would mean a Judgement of the author themselves (which is allowed for by appraisal theory) as they are the one reporting to have trialled the method successfully. Additionally, perhaps the mention of assessing someone as "skilled" in the coding scheme may have also caused raters to link this statement with an evaluation of ability due to the idea of a successful outcome being produced by human effort; however, arguably, the thing being assessed here is the efficacy of the method; the "social value" of it in terms of the results it produces being described as "very good", which would align with an appraisal of [+Appreciation]. It is unclear how this extract relates to Affect, but it is possible that the coding scheme definition mentioning the evaluation of a "process" under Affect has been acknowledged, with the emotional nature of the criteria being missed by the raters; or alternatively, "very good" being classified as an emotional assessment rather than an evaluation of a concept.

Another lack of agreement can be found in Extract 21, in which WMD states *that method for me is so fast and so certain.* Four raters coded this as NA, meaning they consider no appraisal to be present in this statement. Extract 21 appears to be an explicit positive evaluation of the qualities of the method in question, and therefore logically [+Appreciation]. "Fast" and "certain" relate to the speed and reliability of "that method" as expressed by WMD, thus awarding it a positive social valuation. Alternatively, raters may have struggled to determine contextually whether speed and certainty were desirable qualities as they were aware that the subject matter of the extracts involved suicide (albeit they were informed of the context of encouraged suicide, and therefore suicide would likely be presented as the desirable outcome). The decision of four raters to code this as NA is indicative of a lack of clarity in the glosses and definitions provided in the CorpusTool coding scheme, especially as the similarly constructed evaluation in Extract 11 was coded by the majority as [+Appreciation]. While the current definition notes the evaluation of "things, processes, and states of affairs aesthetically, or the social value accorded to the object", perhaps it would benefit from the reinstatement of this being inclusive of concrete objects and abstract concepts (Wilson 2011).

Regarding the statement *We want what's best for each other* in Extract 24, the idea of "wanting what's best" has been deemed an appraisal of "ethical or moral standing" by five raters as [+Judgement: propriety]. In this, both parties in question are ascribed noble, moral status through the implication that they are willing to help and support each other, possibly to the detriment of other parties or external matters. Conversely, three coders considered this to be [+Affect] and two [+Appreciation]. The choice of [+Affect] may arise from the emotional state of wanting; the positive will associated with wishing someone well as opposed to wishing them ill or envying them. Regarding its potential as a matter of [+Appreciation], it could be possible that the two raters were considering "what's best" as a positive abstract concept.

4.2.3 Conclusion

While the inter-rater reliability test of the appraisal framework using examples of ES communications was 'fair' (Fleiss' Kappa =0.29), but typically considered unsatisfactory for replicable analysis (Landis and Koch 1977; Acklin and Fugler 2016; Cole 2023), there were some instances of greater agreement among the ten participants. Where raters appear to agree on categorising appraisals are primarily evaluations of [+Judgement: capacity], perhaps owing to the modal auxiliary "can" in Extracts 6 and 7 and "will" in 16 as indicators of belief in CR's ability to succeed. Other high rates of agreement stem from explicit statements of emotion (like "happy" in Extract 15), and vocabulary distinctly from the field of truthfulness in relation to [-Judgement: veracity] (such as "lying" in Extract 22 and "bull shitting" in 14).

In the examples of least successful agreement (i.e., those which did not receive a code agreed by the majority), it becomes apparent that the crossover in terminology between appraisal categories could cause confusion and uncertainty amongst raters in determining how to classify a unit of text. Likewise, the distinction between evaluations of emotion, character, and things, concepts, or processes could be made more explicit in attempting to establish a harder boundary between these systems. For example, four raters coding Extract 10 as an example of [+Affect] where no emotional assessment is given may be an indication that the coding scheme is lacking in clarity. This lack of clarity appears particularly prominent regarding the Appreciation subsystem, as some explicit evaluations of the quality and value of concepts are not coded as such (for example, Extracts 10 and 21), while others are (such as 11, and to a lesser extent, 17 and 20).

Perhaps streamlining the scheme further and collapsing the Judgement categories would produce a greater degree of agreement, however, at the expense of accuracy and specificity in determining the nature of influential evaluative language. If a pattern of coercive or encouraging appraisals of suicide were to arise, it would arguably be most expected to occur in the subsystem concerning behaviour. With additional rounds of coding and subsequent editing and fine-tuning of the coding scheme, improvements in the reliability of the framework may occur; however, there is a lot of work to be done to reach a level of inter-rater agreement within the desirable Kappa range of 0.61-0.80 or greater (Landis and Koch 1977; Acklin and Fugler 2016; Cole 2023). It should also be noted that a greater familiarity with the appraisal framework (Martin 2000; Martin and Rose 2003; Martin and White 2007) and having studied the coding systems in depth may lead to increased accuracy and confidence in its application, while this particular test relied on participants with experience of forensic linguistic data as opposed to expertise in appraisal analysis (a much smaller and less accessible potential subject pool). An additional contributing factor may be similar to Woodhams

and Grant's (2006) finding regarding Dale et al.'s (1997) rapists' speech classification system, in that a large number of categories can make the system difficult to remember and prove "cognitively intensive" (Woodhams and Grant 2006: 257).

Furthermore, as noted in the discussion of Extract 3, the appraisal framework lacks the insight of pragmatics in relation to analysing instances of coercion, and confusion may arise from coding coercive or persuasive statements made of multiple clauses due to the difficulty of synthesising them back together as one unit of meaning containing different appraisal categories. While a level of appraisal analysis could prove a useful complementary tool in ES cases for identifying the potential for the behavioural influence of language from an SFL perspective, a framework designed around the pragmatic concept of speech acts holds the possibility of deducing the worldviews being represented by the author and the expected action or reaction of the reader or interlocutor, rather than simply suggesting which objects of evaluation may represent the ability to influence behaviour.

4.2.4 Designing the IA framework

The first part of Stage 2 identified the difficulties involved in categorising how general 'encouragement' manifests through the appraisal of emotions, character and concepts. While it may be suggested that evaluative language has the potential to influence behaviour (Calloway 2023), in this instance, appraisal analysis is not a reliable means of illustrating how this is achieved. In the context of identifying language that may influence suicide, I suggest an approach that considers the actions within the ES legislation as distinct speech acts.

Using the definitions of assistance, coercion, encouragement, persuasion, and promotion established in Stage 1 (and with the addition of seeking assistance and an NA option where none of these occur), a coding scheme was created in UAM CorpusTool for the purpose of coding these speech acts digitally. This initial version of the scheme allowed for coding whether the illocutionary act is realised implicitly or explicitly, along with whether it occurs in favour of life or death (e.g. encourage-life versus encourage-death).

Furthermore, in considering ES online as a language crime, the IA framework is developed with the aim of being a tool for reliable forensic analysis should a linguist be required to give evidence regarding whether an offence has taken place, and to what degree of severity. While England and Wales does not hold explicit forensic evidentiary standards (like *Daubert* in the U.S (e.g. Fenner 1996)), the CPS does provide some criteria regarding the admissibility of expert evidence; for example, the expert must have relevant expertise and be impartial - and, relating to matters of methodology – evidence of its validity, margin of uncertainty, and reliability (Criminal Practice Directions 2023 7.1.1; CPS 2024). The Forensic Science Regulator Act 2021 (FSR) has sought to establish a code of conduct for forensic sciences in England and Wales, with responsibility assigned to the Regulator to determine which forensic sciences are included within this (s.2).

Despite the position of applied linguistics as "a robust field that relies heavily on peer-reviewed journals for dissemination of new work" (Tiersma and Solan 2002: 225), there is a history of "some expert disciplines [being] perceived to be more exact than others" (Gray 2010: 596), with a "negative attitude towards interpretive sciences" (ibid.). It is for this goal of providing reliability measures for qualitative social scientific methodology that the appraisal framework is tested for inter-rater reliability using one-to-one ES data.

The definitions (or glosses) of the ES speech acts featured in the new framework are based on their key purposes in Table 8 and finalised during inter-rater reliability testing. Defining the acts in this way carries the aim of a greater degree of clarity between them, greater accuracy in coding the data, and confidence in the coder applying the framework. The finalised coding scheme can be found in Figure 9.

Figure 9) The Illocutionary Acts framework for analysing computer-mediated ES
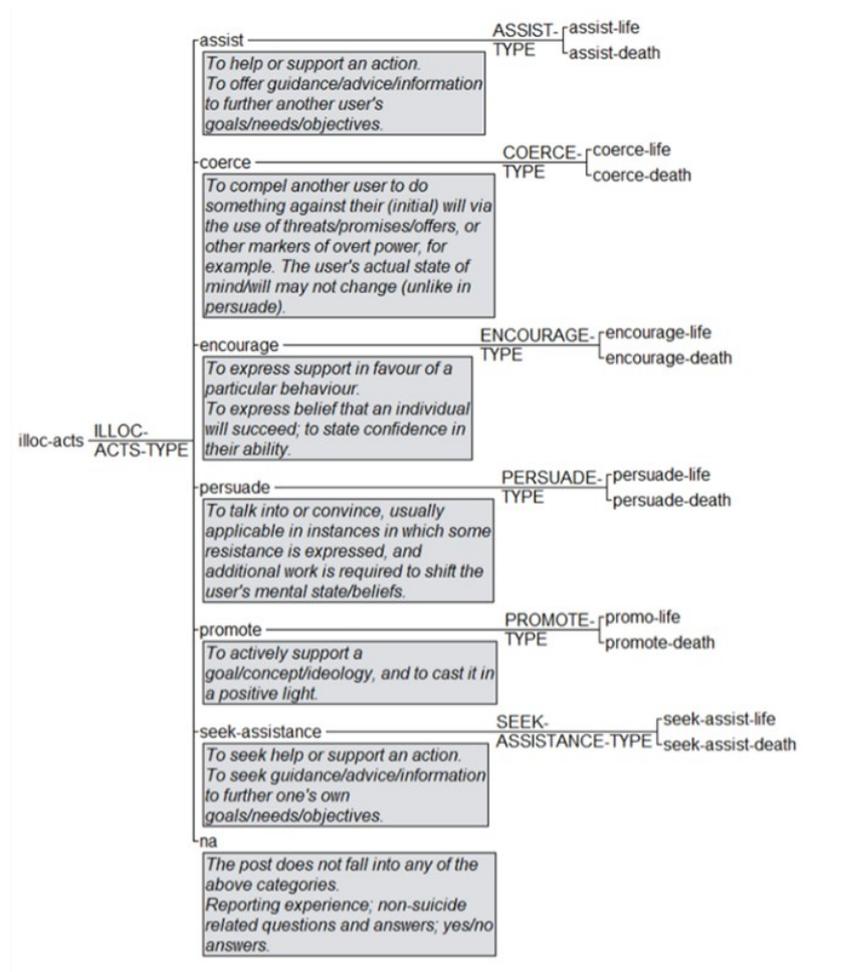
4.2.5 Inter-rater reliability testing the IA framework

The second coder (a senior lecturer in forensic linguistics) and I took the same sample of 30 MC/CR texts and 200 Sanctioned Suicide posts (relative due to size of datasets) and coded them according to whether they were either implicit or explicit acts of assistance, coercion, encouragement, persuasion, promotion or seeking assistance of either life or death, or not applicable. Additionally, we had the option to assign multiple codes to any post in the instance a single post appeared to, for example, both implicitly promote and explicitly assist death. In calculating the rate of agreement, if there was an overlap in the coding decisions, this was classified as 50% agreement. For example, the below occurrence would classify as an inter-coder agreement, due to the crossover in agreement of explicitly encouraging death:

Table 12) An example of 50% inter-coder agreement using the IA framework

	Coder 1	Coder 2
Post 1	exp enc death	imp promo death exp enc death

This decision comes with the acknowledgment that one of the coders may be over-reaching their judgement, or the other may be under-reaching, or there may be uncertainty due to the aforementioned similarities in the definitions of the illocutionary acts. Owing to the subjective nature of pragmatic analysis, ultimately, the existence of partial agreement was deemed acceptable in this case.

Likewise, as the posts and messages were coded according to whether the speech acts are realised implicitly or explicitly, this was predicted to cause some disagreement between coders. As such, two measures of agreement were taken: one measure of whether agreement was reached in terms of identifying the speech act itself, and another measure of whether the implicit-or-explicitness of the act was also agreed upon. For example:

Table 13) An example of partial versus total inter-coder agreement using the IA framework

	Coder 1	Coder 2	Agreement (imp/exp)	Agreement Speech Act
Post 2	imp promo death	exp promo death	0	1
Post 3	exp assist death	exp enc death	0	0

This example shows that to classify as agreement in terms of the implicit/explicit measure, agreement of the speech act must also be fulfilled. As a result, two coder agreement scores are provided, one for total agreement (i.e. both implicit/explicit realisation and the speech act are agreed upon), and one for agreement of speech act only, in the instance that the implicit/explicit realisation may not be relevant in the courtroom evidentiary context.

The resultant agreement scores from the first round of coding were 54.5% for total agreement (*n*=109) and 69% for agreement of speech act only (*n*=138). As somewhat predicted by the difficulty in delineating the differences between the speech acts in Chapter 3.2, the most common points of disagreement (aside from the distinction between implicit and explicit realisations) are the distinction between promoting/assisting; promoting/encouraging; and encouraging/assisting.

In an attempt to increase the replicability and reliability of the coding scheme, the next step was to further define these acts with clearer boundaries, despite the prior acknowledgement that this is already a point of contention. To achieve this, a discussion took place between both coders where

agreements were made regarding the degree of clarity required to delineate the speech acts in order to minimise ambiguity, resulting in the glosses in Figure 9.

Additionally, before the final round of coding, the decision was made to discontinue the process of coding for whether an act is realised implicitly or explicitly. The reason for this was that in trying to create greater distinction between the definitions of the illocutionary acts, we found that to explicitly assist in suicide (for example) inherently involved the implicit promotion of suicide as a concept. The double-coding of instances such as this was one of the most commonly occurring reasons for disagreement between coders, therefore, to improve the reliability of the scheme, the implicit/explicit divide was disregarded in the final coding task on the basis that whether a speech act takes place explicitly or implicitly may not be of relevance to the court in the theoretical practical application of this framework. In this instance, if the coders agreed on one categorisation but not another, the agreement would be valued at 50% as in the example below:

Table 14) An example of 50% inter-coder agreement using the IA framework

	Coder 1	Coder 2	Agreement
Post 4	Promote death	Promote death	1
Post 4	Assist death / encourage death	Assist death / promote death	0.5

This final round showed an increased rate of inter-coder agreement, with the latter version of the coding scheme returning an agreement rate of 70% (*n*=21) and a Cohen's Kappa of 0.68 for the one-to-one messages. A sample of 200 forum posts were then coded using the scheme, resulting in an agreement of 71.5% (*n*=143), a Cohen's Kappa of 0.69.

Cohen's Kappa takes the observed probability (the percentage of agreement) and the expected probability (the number of coding options available) scores to provide a measure of opportunity for agreement minus opportunities of agreement by chance (see Figure 10). Cohen's Kappa works on a range of –1 to 1 as possible outcomes, with a score of -1 indicating less than chance agreement, and 1 suggesting perfect agreement. There are varying opinions as to what qualifies as an acceptable score for inter-rater reliability across different fields. Generally speaking, in social scientific research, a Cohen's Kappa score between 0.61 and 0.8 is suggestive of substantial agreement (Landis and Koch 1977; Cole 2023).

This model (as with the Fleiss' Kappa measure) presumes all categories to be independent of each other; for example, if asking if an object is black or white, if it is black, it therefore cannot be white. In the case of the IA coding scheme, these options are not independent of each other, as exemplified by the possibility of a post or message being multi-coded (e.g. if a post is coded as assist-death, it can also be coded as promote-death, etc.). Based on the categories not being independent, the Cohen's Kappa score would be expected to be slightly low, however the existence of 13 coding categories in this framework would mean a minimal difference in the observed and expected frequencies based on the formula below, as *pe* is calculated by 1/number of coding options (1/13 in this case).

Figure 10) Formula for Cohen's Kappa

$$\kappa = \frac{p_0 - p_e}{1 - p_e},$$

Further reason for the Cohen's Kappa score not falling into the higher range is owing to the subjective nature of the coding scheme. Stage 1 argues that the illocutionary acts in the ES legislation are inherently difficult to distinguish, and while several rounds of coding tasks each followed by a discussion between coders as to how the scheme can be improved saw the coders' agreement from the initial iteration of the framework agreement increase from 54.5% to 71.5%, this is a subjective and qualitative pragmatic analysis. Nevertheless, the subjectivity of the analysis has been reduced somewhat, however application of this coding scheme in any additional contexts would need to be re-tested for inter-coder agreement within that specific context or genre (for example, using spoken data or regarding a different type of online harm).

4.2.6 Applying the IA framework: one-to-one data

In this analysis, the findings of using the novel IA framework to code the one-to-one ES data are presented and discussed in the context of the legislation. In doing so, I simulate how a forensic linguist may arrive at conclusions when applying the framework practically. Examples from the data are provided to illustrate how the illocutionary acts are realised.

The below tables show the results of coding the one-to-one dataset using the IA framework in CorpusTool (excluding segments coded as NA). These are ranked by order of most commonly occurring in the data.

Table 15) Results of coding the MC/CR data using the IA framework

MC/CR	% of total coded units[1]	N	Rank
promote-death	6.77%	185	1
assist-death	5.82%	159	2
coerce-death	3.51%	96	3
encourage-death	2.49%	68	4
seek-assist-death	1.83%	50	5
persuade-death	1.43%	39	6
promo-life	1.28%	35	7
encourage-life	0.18%	5	8
assist-life	0.15%	4	9
persuade-life	0.11%	3	10
coerce-life	0.04%	1	11
seek-assist-life	0.00%	0	12

---

[1] N.B. 23.61% of total coded units were coded as NA

Table 16) Results of coding the WMD data using the IA framework

WMD/NK/MD	% of total coded units[2]	N	Rank
promote-death	11.04%	36	1
assist-death	5.83%	19	2
encourage-death	2.45%	8	3
seek-assist-death	0.92%	3	4
promo-life	0.31%	1	5
persuade-death	0.31%	1	5
coerce-death	0.31%	1	5
assist-life	0.00%	0	-
coerce-life	0.00%	0	-
encourage-life	0.00%	0	-
persuade-life	0.00%	0	-
seek-assist-life	0.00%	0	-

The results show that promoting suicide is the most commonly occurring of the ES speech acts, followed by assisting suicide. Speech acts in favour of life are particularly scarce. The illocutionary act of coercion is the third most common in the MC data, which involves attempts to urge CR to act as though his beliefs have been shifted (while his actual state of mind may remain unchanged). The next sections discuss the realisation of each speech act in the data.

4.2.6a Promotion

The most commonly occurring illocutionary act from the framework in both the MC and WMD data is promote-death. Promotion of death or suicide is the sharing of opinion or worldview, and is therefore difficult to police, monitor or moderate, and is the most problematic of the given illocutionary acts in terms of freedom of speech. If abiding by the crossover in the dictionary definitions of assist, encourage and promote, the policing and prosecution of acts which assist and/or encourage suicide may also fall to this issue. If using the definitions in the IA coding scheme, it could be argued that promotion is separate to assistance and encouragement, and the promotion of suicide online is therefore not illegal without the presence of assistance, coercion or encouragement (as promoting suicide is regarded as Primary Priority Content under the Online Safety Act, and not explicitly an offence under the Suicide Act). In the IA framework, to promote is:

> To actively support a goal/concept/ideology, and to cast it in a positive light.

In the WMD data, promotion is realised primarily as the endorsement of a particular suicide method (namely, hanging streamed via webcam), although WMD and NK both promote the concept of suicide itself, as in 1a.

---

[2] N.B. 21.17% of total coded units were coded as NA

[1a]
NK: since I decided that I will go this weekend, I have felt much better
WMD: great im at peace too

In this example, both parties view the concept of suicide as a viable option; one which allows them to feel "better" and "at peace" to know they have available. As such, suicide is presented with the remedial quality of a solution to a problem. Regarding the promotion of a method, WMD makes repeated reference to streaming the suicide via webcam meaning the individual won't die alone as another party will be (virtually) present. In his interaction with MD, WMD recounts a (presumably fictitious) story involving "a friend" from England who requested his suicide be watched by WMD online to ensure he did not die alone. WMD mitigates this statement with the comment "[a]t first I thought he was mad crazy", before concluding the experience of watching this person die as "very peaceful", adding "I was pretty pleased I could make this guys last moments special for him?". This depicts the process as a comfort for both parties, while implying WMD is a non-judgemental and caring person. The efficacy of hanging is also emphasised on several occasions, as in 1b-e below.

[1b]
WMD: suspention hanging is by far the best and surest method to do

[1c]
WMD: so about 8 months ago I started looking for methods to let go with and since ive seen every method used possible at work as a emergency ward nurse I know what does and don't work so that is why I chose hanging to use ive tried it in practice to see if it hurt and how fast it worked and it was not a bad experience

[1d]
WMD: that method for me is so fast and certain i cant think of no ohter way for me

[1e]
WMD: with my hanging it is painless and unconsciousness is so fast

The method is advocated by WMD due to the expressed qualities of being "fast", "certain", "painless" and the "best and surest" method. Additionally, WMD claims knowledge and experience of "every method possible" due to their professional position as an emergency ward nurse. This reinforces the claims through anecdotal evidence which can be difficult to dispute, despite the fact these claims cannot be proven. Ownership and personal belief are instated in the method by referring to it as "my hanging" and declaring "i cant think of no ohter way for me". Through the explicit recommendation of hanging, these examples fall into the promotion of suicide category. It could also be argued that if the addressee in extracts 1b-1e were showing hesitance through fear of it not working, these factors could contribute towards persuading them to proceed. Likewise, there is room to suggest that the behaviour of hanging is being implicitly encouraged in addition to the concept of hanging being promoted.

Promotion of a suicide method is also present in the MC/CR data:

[1f]
MC: Hanging is painless and takes like a second if you do it right

[1g]
MC: [...] you'll die within like 20 or 30 mins, all pain free

In endorsing a suicide method throughout both datasets, elements presented as appealing include painlessness, peacefulness, speed, and efficacy. This has the potential to cross into the category of persuasion as the factors of painlessness and peacefulness cannot be proven or quantified, therefore the addition of these qualities appears to serve the purpose of convincing someone of the benefits of the method in question. Although the motive behind this recommendation can be unclear, it gives the impression that the promoter is knowledgeable on the topic and trustworthy in their claims, having researched the area.

Another way in which the concept of suicide is promoted in the MC/CR data is through the romanticisation of death, as demonstrated in 1h-j.

[1h]
MC: [...] I wanna live my life for you. Everything I do its gonna be for you. You're the love of my life, I always knew we were special. You're mine forever

[1i]
MC: [...]when I accomplish things, I'm always gonna look up to the sky and know you're smiling down on me. Its gonna be for you

[1j]
MC: wrap your arms around me and let me know you're watching over me, and I'll always smile back

As per the IA definition of promotion, this casts the idea of CR's death in a positive light. Without his death, the "special" Romeo-and-Juliet status of their relationship will not be achieved, nor will the imagery of him "smiling down" at MC. As noted in Calloway (2023), their shared Christian beliefs are appealed to through promises of heaven, CR being cared for by Jesus, CR watching over MC, and the prospect of the couple reuniting one day in the afterlife. MC makes repeated reference to CR as her guardian angel and "a hero" in heaven, again, statuses that cannot be achieved while he is still alive. As such, by romanticising heaven as a byproduct of death, CR's suicide is promoted. Additionally, MC makes several references to the celebrity actor couple Cory Monteith and Lea Michele and draws comparisons between their relationships. Monteith died of an accidental drug overdose in 2013, with MC using this as explicit reasoning for her recommendation of CR accessing heroin. She further states that Michele's song, named after Monteith's final words to her (*If You Say So*), is their song.

MC also supports the goal of CR's death by reinforcing CR's decision to persevere with his suicide attempts. His actions to progress his suicide receive approval, for example, "I'm happy to hear that", and "it's probably the best time now", while the gravity of the situation is minimised through statements such as "[i]t's not a big deal". These examples also crossover into the realm of encouragement as the suicidal behaviour is being applauded and celebrated (encouragement) in tandem with the intended outcome (promotion). The concept of suicide is being supported (promotion), meanwhile, the actions involved in achieving this goal are encouraged. His death is also presented as inevitable and rational through MC's choice of phrases like "it's time babe" to position herself as wise and accepting of the concept of fate. CR also contributes to the promotion of suicide, for example, stating suicide "kinda feels like the only option", and suggesting that he "kinda [has] to

try something at this point", although the addition of "kinda" in both statements may be viewed as an expression of doubt or uncertainty. He also expresses a degree of willingness and active support of the goal of suicide, for example, "well I'm more confident [i]n doin it now"; "I want to deprive myself of oxygen"; and "I'm more than ready".

Perhaps surprisingly, life is also promoted a total of 35 times in the MC data and once in the WMD data. In the latter, WMD expresses hope that it "is not too late, that you are still here" to MD, although this could be interpreted contextually as a hope that MD can still be persuaded to use WMD's proposed hanging method. In the former, CR appears to feel positive about life after smoking marijuana:

> [1k]
> CR: optimistic about the future, and happy who I was. and trust me I haven't felt that good in a while

MC then offers proactive support by suggesting that CR should "find something healthy that makes [him] feel just as good". CR's promotion of life could be seen as evidence of his state of mind and willingness to live, for example, "I keep thinking this is a very bad idea" in relation to one of the suicide methods they plan together. Furthermore, he states that MC "need[s] to get out of it" in reference to her own mental health issues. He also wishes that he were a baby so that he could "start over". In these examples, life is promoted as the favourable outcome over death.

4.2.6b Assistance

The second most commonly occurring illocutionary act in both datasets is assist-death. This is perhaps more useful to law enforcement, as assistance is transitive (i.e. one person assists another, as opposed to promotion in which a concept is advocated, not necessarily targeting an individual). The assistance of suicide is also explicitly criminalised by the Suicide Act 1961. In the context of the IA framework, to assist is

> To help or support an action. To offer guidance/advice/information to further another user's goals/needs/objectives.

In the MC/CR data, a high concentration of assist-death can be found at moments in which the couple are discussing and researching suicide methods, for example:

> [2a]
> MC: Do you have heroin? You can overdose on that and drink a lot of alcohol

> [2b]
> MC: Yes I think it will work. You say generators produce a lot of CO, so if you just turn it on in your car, take some beneryls before just incase, and then you'll breathe it in and pass out and die very quickly and peacefully with no pain at all

In particular, 2b is in violation of the Suicide Act 1961, as the process of using a generator in his car to create carbon monoxide is ultimately what caused CR's death. This excerpt provides explicit assistance on how to achieve death through carbon monoxide poisoning, again, 'selling' the method through claims of speed and painlessness. While the Suicide Act states an offence has been committed under Section 2 "whether or not a suicide, or an attempt at suicide, occurs", this example is particularly indicative of a violation not only because it provides guidance and instruction

on how to commit suicide, but it was also the method used in this case to cause an actual self-inflicted death. As such, in England and Wales, this would constitute criminal liability for complicity in another's suicide. In providing assistance followed by an assessment of the method, 2b could be considered encouraging as the instruction followed by the positive evaluation of the intended outcome may be deduced as support of the suicidal behaviour.

Likewise, WMD also assists with guidance and description of suicide method:

> [2c]
> WMD: Unconsciousness is ion 10-15 seoconds or so, brain death in 4 minutes after unconsciousness and death in 1 minutes hope this helps. If you have any questions please e-mailme back I'll get back to you asap

This example appears self-aware of its illocutionary act through use of "hope this helps" and "any questions please e-mail me back", demonstrating explicit assistance. In providing help and support, WMD is offering knowledge and experience in order to further the outcome of suicide. Additionally, WMD leaves himself open to the prospect of future assistance by requesting they email him to seek further guidance.

Interestingly, in both datasets, the accused state that they are not telling the other party how to commit suicide:

> [2d]
> WMD: im not trying to tell you how to do it just my experiences and opinions that all

> [2e]
> MC: I'm not telling you to do anything. Its up to you to tell yourself to do it. But yeah, if you take like 4 benedryls, you'll fall asleep in like 15- 20 mins. So I'd take those, wait like 10 mins, then take all the Tylenol, more than last time if you want this to work. Then idk if you wanna do the bag or not but then I'd tape the bag and then you should fall asleep not long after

These claims come despite the guidance and advice preceding and following them. In the case of WMD, this follows the endorsement of hanging in 1d and the offer to help NK tie the rope correctly, while MC's message in 2e demonstrates explicit assistance through advising CR how she would proceed with the suicide attempt were she in his position. These assertions of not telling the other party what to do may be reflective of an awareness that assisting suicide is illegal. Likewise, in both cases, the accused present themselves as moral characters, and as such, assisting suicide may not coincide with the beliefs they hold of themselves or the impression of a caring person they are trying to establish.

4.2.6c Coercion

Where the data begin to differ in their illocutionary acts is in the third most commonly occurring category. The MC data features coerce-death in the number three position, while the WMD data has encourage-death in this position. As defined in the IA coding scheme, to coerce is

> To compel another user to do something against their (initial) will via the use of threats/promises/offers/provocation, or other markers of overt power, for example. The user's actual state of mind/will may not change (unlike in persuade).

The repeated acts of coercion in the MC data may be reflected by the proposed criminalisation of coercing someone to commit (or attempt to commit) suicide within Conrad's Law. As the Bill was created in response to the *Carter* case, the MC data was likely used as a foundation for the types of communication the Bill hopes to encompass. Regarding coercive conduct in *Commonwealth v Carter*, the Court states:

> we conclude that there was probable cause to show that the *coercive* quality of the defendant's verbal conduct overwhelmed whatever willpower the eighteen year old victim had to cope with his depression, and that but for the defendant's admonishments, *pressure, and instructions*, the victim would not have gotten back into the truck and poisoned himself to death (474 Mass. 624 2016, emphasis added).

This concerns the phone call Carter recounted to her friend, during which she told Roy to "get back in the car". Using the IA framework, it could be argued that this standalone statement is coercive due to the overt power suggested by an imperative command, in conjunction with this being an instruction for Roy to go against his initial will to cease the suicide attempt (as demonstrated by him exiting the car and phoning Carter). Additionally:

> the grand jury heard evidence suggesting *a systematic campaign of coercion* on which the virtually present defendant embarked — captured and preserved through her text messages — that *targeted the equivocating young victim's insecurities* and *acted to subvert his willpower* in favor of her own (474 Mass. 624 2016, emphasis added).

The notion of a "systematic campaign of coercion" implies a purposefully planned strategy designed to break Roy's will. The Court suggests that Carter intentionally persisted in her coercion of Roy until the aim of his death was fulfilled. The suggestion that she "targeted the victim's insecurities" aligns with the appraisal analysis in Calloway (2023), in which CR's tenacity receives significantly negative evaluation ($p = 0.004$), as does his veracity ($p = 0.001$). By questioning the value of his character, whether intentionally or otherwise, MC is further depleting the self-worth of her suicidal interlocutor, presenting him with the view that he has no strength of will, is unreliable, immoral, and a liar. The interplay between coercion and negative appraisal of character can be seen in the examples below.

> [3a]
> MC: I'm fine for now, but are you really gonna try hard to do this? Or are you just telling me you're gonna and pretend that you just failed ?

> [3b]
> MC: By saying you're just gonna vomit tho, I can tell you don't want this bad. Saying you'll vomit is kinda like a safe way out

> [3c]
> MC: You keep pushing it off and you say you'll do it but u never do. Its always gonna be that way if u don't take action

In 3a, the implication is that until now, CR has not been trying very hard in his suicide attempts. One potential reading of this situation is that CR does not in fact wish to proceed in killing himself, possibly due to fear, the physical pain incurred, or having a change of heart. Instead of questioning

the reason for not "trying hard", MC instead appears to take offence to this outcome of CR still being alive and accuses him of deceiving her by pretending to have made a suicide attempt and telling her that it was unsuccessful. Similarly, in 3b, MC claims knowledge that she is aware CR doesn't want to proceed with the attempt and again accuses him of making excuses, therefore negatively evaluating his tenacity and veracity. In this sense, if CR is unwilling to commit suicide and this is the reason for his reluctance, MC is coercive in her attempt to compel him to do something against his will. While no threats or offers are made in 3a and 3b, MC appears to use goading or provocation means to elicit her desired action from CR.

Conversely, 3c is an example of coercion via a threat/promise, indicated by the irrealis modal in the form of *'if you don't do X, then Y will happen'.* In this example, if CR doesn't follow through with his suicide, then the suggestion is life will become increasingly difficult in the cycle of thinking about suicide, then ultimately not going through with it. Owing to the context of MC's repeated assertions that an attempt must be made, a reasonable inference of "take action" would be "commit suicide".

In 3d, an attempt at bargaining is made by MC after CR expresses hesitance due to how his family will react to his suicide and the pain it will cause them. MC states that she and "everyone" will "take care" of CR's family, minimising the effect his death will have on them. By insisting they "will be okay and accept it", this implies that the family will be understanding and make a full recovery from such an event, while also implicitly suggesting that they won't mind him not being present in their lives anymore, an insecurity CR may already hold as a suicidal individual. As such, CR is compelled to ignore his doubts, with the possibility they remain present and unresolved in his mind (hence, the difference between coercion and persuasion).

Also in 3d, being referred for psychiatric help is used as a threat as CR previously expressed this was something he found unhelpful in the past. The use of "need to" as a modal auxiliary to demonstrate the necessity of his action puts the onus and pressure on CR to decide between the two options he is presented with: suicide or help, with help assigned to the less favourable position in the clause and acting as a further example of an irrealis modal.

> [3d]
> CR: I do want to. but like I'm freaking out for my family. I guess
> CR: idkkk
> MC: Conrad. I told you I'll take care of them. Everyone will take care of them to make sure they won't be alone and people will help them get thru it. We talked about this, they will be okay and accept it. People who commit suicide don't think this much and they just do it
> CR: I know I know lol. thinking just drives me more crazy
> MC: Exactly. You just need to do it Conrad or I'm gonna get you help

Furthermore, Conrad's legitimacy and commitment are again called into question by MC's reference to "people who commit suicide". By insisting those who commit suicide "don't think this much" and "just do it", it is implied that CR is not going to go through with the attempt due to his overthinking, and if he does wish to end his life, he should stop considering the consequences of his actions. While CR appears to be the more rational party here for thinking through such an irreversible decision, MC is positioned as the more knowledgeable of the two through her offering of advice and instruction, however ill-informed.

One implicitly coercive device present in the MC data is the use of repeated and persistent questioning, namely, when CR is going to make another suicide attempt. While the content of the message, for example, "Are u doing it now?", is not coercive without context, this raised questions when coding regarding whether to include the potential coercive effect of such persistence. While coercing suicide is not explicitly criminalised by the Suicide Act 1961, s.2A(3) states an offence can constitute "putting pressure on another person to commit or attempt suicide", which MC's persistence could be argued to fall under. Ultimately, as this does not constitute coercion through the lexical content, this was not coded; however, it should be mentioned in linguistic expert testimony on such a case as this appears relevant to the notion of a *systematic campaign of coercion* noted by the court. Coding for persistence would be very difficult to keep track of, for example, if MC asks *why haven't you done it yet?*, then poses the same question three days later, this would be hard to identify as the coder would have to remember that this question was posed three days (and possibly hundreds of messages) prior. Yet, when performing a detailed analysis of the types of coercion that occur, persistence in the form of repeated statements or sentiments should be noted and could form an additional layer of future iterations of the IA framework if necessary.

In the WMD data, only one instance of coerce-death is present:

> [3e]
> WMD: give though to everything we talked about love
> NK: I definitely will
> NK: thank you again
> WMD: im just tryin to help you do what is best for you not me your welcome

This occurs following an exchange in which WMD advises and promotes the notion of death by hanging as opposed to NK's preferred method which she has planned for. While not coercion into death itself (as NK's decision of suicide appears to have already been made), WMD makes several attempts to promote the method of suicide by hanging via webcam so that he may watch. This is presented under the guise that it is a less lonely way to die, and in this example of coercion, he expresses that he (or rather, his online persona, Cami) knows what's best for NK as a marker of power, maturity, and experience in an attempt to change NK's mind.

4.2.6d Encouragement

Encourage-death is the third most commonly occurring IA in the WMD data, and the fourth in the MC/CR data. The Law Dictionary defines encouragement in criminal law as:

> To instigate; to incite to action; to give courage to; to inspirit (sic.); to embolden; to raise confidence; to make confident.

With this in mind, the definition of encouragement suggested in the IA framework is:

> To express support in favour of a particular action/behaviour. To express that an individual will succeed; to state confidence in their ability.

The notion of incitement has been excluded from the IA definition of encouragement due to the vague and cyclical nature of its own legal definition (Macleod 2023), as discussed in Chapter 2.10. Furthermore, the somewhat archaic concepts of inspiriting and emboldening an individual are absorbed by the expression of confidence in that person's ability and belief in their success. While it

cannot be proven that the addressee's confidence has been raised, it can be suggested that the language used has been selected to express the addresser's confidence in that person.

In 4a, MC's encouragement of CR's suicide is realised through the expression of her belief in CR's mental resolve (or tenacity, in appraisal terms). His actions are praised, while possible doubts he may have about himself owing to stereotypes of suicidal individuals as "weak" or "selfish" are negated. Likewise, in 4b, the idea of mental strength is used as an idealised state to aspire to. An air of necessity is ascribed to the notion of tenacity and strength of will ("[y]ou gotta be strong") in achieving the desired outcome. Bargaining is again used in 4b in the acknowledgement that CR may experience pain, but it is suggested that the pain will be fleeting, with MC having no available knowledge or evidence to support this claim. By reminding himself that "the pain is temporary" and "will subside", this too appears to encourage CR to practice persistence and determination in his action, with the implication that this will allow him to succeed.

> [4a]
> MC: [...] I don't think you're weak at all. This doesn't make you selfish or a coward or weak or anything. I think you're so strong

> [4b]
> MC: You gotta be strong and tough it out and remind yourself that the pain is temporary and it will subside.

Another way MC expresses encouragement is through stating confidence in CR, as in 4c. Having previously determined CR a liar and untrustworthy for not following through with his suicide attempts, MC explicitly states belief in CR's "yes" response to her asking "[y]ou're actually doing this tonight right?". As a result, MC conveys absolute confidence in CR's ability to end his life with the method they have been discussing through the statement "there's no way you can fail". This not only denotes confidence in CR's ability, but in the efficacy of the method itself. Subtextually, MC is also implying that if CR does "fail", this is his fault, and MC will be left feeling disappointed again.

> [4c]
> MC: Okay, and there's no way you can fail so I believe you

Generic set phrases of encouragement are also used in the context of CR's death, including: "[y]ou're ready", "I believe in you", "[y]ou can do this", "it's gonna be okay", and "[y]ou can't be afraid to fail". These phrases are motivational and goal-orientated in nature, amounting to a strong argument in favour of encouragement, according to both the current legal and IA definitions due to the common use of these phrases to inspire confidence in an individual's ability to succeed.

The themes of success and failure are also present in the WMD data coded as examples of encouragement. In 4d, confidence in NK's ability to "succeed" in a suicide attempt is expressed, with the concept of her suicide implicitly supported. The casual nature of "youll do fine" as a statement is usually reserved for a somewhat mundane but moderate-stakes life event such as preparing someone for a job interview or an exam, with the severity of suicide being dramatically minimised. The outcome of suicide here is awarded a positive status, with someone's death portrayed as a "fine" result. Similarly, in 4e, the success versus failure frame is used to equate not dying from an attempt as a failure. The outcome of suicide is actively supported with the essence of WMD's statement as *I don't want you not to die.*

[4d]
WMD: but I think youll do fine

[4e]
WMD: and I don't want you to fail ever!

[4f]
WMD: try to come on early Monday so we can do it if you want to

Furthermore, the example in 4f shows WMD's encouragement of use of the hanging method. Despite NK's repeated statements that she is planning on using an alternative method, WMD continually pushes the proposition of hanging under the guise that it is the most "effective" method (detailed further in 4.2.6a). In this instance, a behaviour is encouraged to further WMD's own desire with the illusion of being helpful.

There are occasions in which MC encourages against suicide if it's something CR doesn't want to go through with, for example, "[o]kay then, don't do it!", and "[i]f you don't wanna do this, don't do it!", however, both of these statements in support of living are then contradicted by questioning CR's honesty ("I thought you wanted to do it I mean you bought all the stuff") and his ability to recover ("I just know you'll always be thinking about it and you're just gonna get worse if you don't get help"). These latter statements are manipulative and coercive as they seek to get CR to proceed with his suicide attempt, despite following his declaration that he doesn't want to.

4.2.6e Seeking Assistance

In the IA framework, seeking assistance is defined in parallel to the illocutionary act of assisting:

> To seek help or support with an action. To seek guidance/advice/information to further one's own goals/needs/objectives.

Regarding factors tending against prosecution under the Suicide Act, whether "the victim had reached a voluntary, clear, settled and informed decision to commit suicide" is noted for consideration (CPS 2014). Therefore, if someone seeks assistance having "clearly and unequivocally communicated his or her decision to commit suicide to the suspect" (CPS 2014), this could result in a lesser sentence or a lack of prosecution based on public interest factors.

Additionally, if assistance with life is being frequently sought, this may be indicative of a conversation aimed more towards recovery. In the one-to-one data, the occurrence of seeking assistance was not inordinately high, however, this may be another area in which the one-to-one and the forum data differ. Nevertheless, the notion of seeking assistance implies some degree of commitment of the individual to suicide, whether at the stage of methodological planning or initial research.

In the WMD data, NK demonstrates a total of three instances of seeking assistance:

> [5a]
> NK: my parents don't live in this city, so how will that work? My family lives about a 6 hour drive away.

[5b]
NK: who will pick up the stuff in my apartment?

[5c]
NK: What sort of rope, etc will need?

In 5a and 5b, assistance is sought from WMD regarding arrangements following her death, namely, how her family will be informed of her death, how they will identify her body, and who will assume possession of her belongings. As WMD is a nurse (as is his forum persona) and has claimed experience of witnessing suicides (both attempted and actual), he has positioned himself as the more knowledgeable party on the subject and may therefore know the steps that take place after a person has died. The aim of these questions appears to be to allow NK to make the process easier for her parents; for example, WMD states that her body may be difficult to identify after trauma and being in a body of water, therefore, NK says that she will carry identification on her in a zipped pocket. The more explicit example of seeking assistance in 5c is specific to the discussion of suicide method and gaining advice regarding this; a repeated occurrence in the MC data.

Much as WMD is positioned as the omniscient advisor, MC assumes the same role in conversation with CR. CR's requests for assistance range from asking MC to research methods either for or with him (5d), seeking advice regarding what MC would do (5e), and requests for specific details regarding suicide methods (5f, 5g), the latter being the most common.

[5d]
CR: can you do some more research with me, like my brain is fried

[5e]
CR: if you were in my position. honestly what would you do

[5f]
CR: so talk me through the whole process again.

[5g]
CR: like I take the sleeping pills first wait awhile then the Tylenol ?

The argument exists that CR was overwhelming MC with his desire to commit suicide and she was unable to tolerate the pressure put on her by CR (Sanchez and Lance 2017). While this view was not accepted in court, there is evidence to suggest CR is applying pressure to MC to assist in his suicide, for example, in his statement "I'm putting all my trust in you. I don't trust myself". Other assertive and imposing examples of CR seeking assistance can be found in 5h to 5k below.

[5h]
CR: your gonna help me tomorrow with this

[5i]
CR: but I'll trust you'll find another way out

[5j]
CR: wanna help me ?

[5k]
CR: maybe you could help me get it to work

5h appears somewhat coercive in nature as a demand, however, observing the message in context shows MC replying "With what?", with CR then responding "Idk lmao". While the statement seems forceful, it does not develop into an attempt to manipulate MC into helping him. Similarly, elevating MC to a position of being responsible for determining his suicide method (5i) is a lot of pressure to apply to someone, ultimately meaning it will be her responsibility if the method does not work as described.

4.2.6f Persuade

While not explicitly mentioned in the Suicide Act or the Online Safety Act, persuasion has been included in the IA framework owing to its inclusion in the Policy for Prosecutors regarding encouraging and assisting suicide (CPS 2014), and it is also mentioned by the judge in the sentencing remarks of *R v Howe* ("evidence of [...] persuasion applied to the victim will have a bearing on culpability") as a UK ES case. It is also important to distinguish between an act in which an individual's mind or will has been changed (persuasion) and an act in which the individual's mind or will remains unchanged, yet they feel obliged to act as instructed (coercion) as this too may have an effect on the given criminal sentence. For example, the application of force or threat involved in coercion may be treated more severely than an attempt to persuade someone who was already on the verge of suicide, based on the Policy for Prosecutors (CPS 2014). As per the IA definition, to persuade is

> To talk into or convince, usually applicable in instances in which some resistance is expressed, and additional work is required to shift the person's mental state/beliefs

For example, MC provides CR with an anecdote in which, following the death of her grandmother, her grandfather experiences grief but overcomes it, using this to illustrate her claim that CR's mother "will definitely be sad and lost for a few weeks, but she will get better".

[6a]
MC: When my Grammie died, my grandfather felt like he got hit by a truck. He was so sad for a while, but now he's better. He's happy and moving on, keeping her in his memory forever. That's what your parents will do.

MC claims this ability to move on and eventually resume happiness is how CR's parents will feel after his death. As such, she is trying to convince him that the death of a child is something a parent can and will recover from. Resistance is met when CR mentions his reservations surrounding the effect on his family, at which point MC proceeds with an attempt to change his mind by stating that "they will get over it and learn to accept it", adding "[t]hey will be okay I promise". While she is not overtly trying to make him perform an action, she appears to be trying to alter a belief that he holds (which, in turn, could result in him performing an action as the perlocutionary effect).

Likewise, persuasion is realised through logically structured arguments, as per the Aristotelian artistic proof of *logos* (see Chapter 2.10.4 for further detail). In 6b, MC responds to CR's worry that an overdose will not result in death due to some information he found online.

[6b]

>MC: Those statists say it may not work because those people either got sick or they were found. You won't be found, and you won't get sick

Here, MC refutes CR's claim that "the statistics show you won't die from it you'll just get really sick" by deducing (accurately or otherwise) that the reason for the low reported deathrate for overdoses on the webpage in question is unreliable. These factors are individually counterargued, namely that CR won't be found during his suicide attempt (if, as previously stated by MC, he does it at a time when his family is not home), and he won't get sick (providing he takes a fatal amount). In approaching an argument with logic and reason, this makes it difficult for the interlocutor to dispute.

4.2.7 Discussion

In both examples of the one-to-one ES data in this study, the promotion of suicide is the most commonly occurring ES speech act. This often takes the form of promoting a particular suicide method by foregrounding the seemingly desirable qualities of painlessness, peacefulness, speed, and efficacy. The romanticisation of suicide and death also serves to elevate and idealise these concepts, ascribing positive qualities to them, for example, the imagery of CR "watching over" MC cannot be fulfilled until his death. In the MC data, CR's goal of death is applauded as a reasonable and admirable solution. As a result, his actions to progress towards this goal receive praise ("I'm happy to hear that") in the intersection between promotion and encouragement. As the goal is being promoted, the behaviours involved in progressing towards that goal are being encouraged. This serves as a useful reminder in the delineation between promotion and encouragement: the goal, outcome, concept or ideology is the thing being promoted, while the actions or behaviours (and/or the individual's ability to succeed in them) are the things being encouraged. While promotion concerns the conceptual realisation, encouragement concerns the actions leading to how this is achieved. It is therefore possible to promote suicide conceptually without strictly encouraging it, a potential shortcoming of the current wording of the Suicide Act. In instances wherein promotion and encouragement occur simultaneously, this would constitute an offence under the Act, whereas promotion alone would not. However, without the additional context and co-text of the corpus of MC/CR data (in which assistance, encouragement and coercion also occur), perhaps standalone instances of suicide being promoted conceptually would not hold the same potential to harm. Meanwhile, the 'macro' view of the encouragement, assistance and coercion throughout the data would reasonably be considered criminal conduct under the Suicide Act in England and Wales.

In CR's promotion of suicide, he also makes reference to his determination and confidence in his ability: "I want to deprive myself of oxygen"; "I'm more than ready". While the former example demonstrates the desire and will to achieve the goal of suicide (and therefore promotes it conceptually), the latter concerns the behaviour necessary to achieve the goal and is therefore characteristic of encouragement (while encouraging oneself is not an offence). In this case, CR is expressing faith in and commitment to his suicidal ideology. In England and Wales, the Prosecution Guide states whether "the victim had reached a voluntary, clear, settled and informed decision to commit suicide" as a mitigating factor in prosecuting someone for ES (CPS 2014), so this element could reduce the degree of offender culpability.

The difficulty with the pragmatic concept of promotion in the context of the ES legislation lies in the right to freedom of expression in the ECHR, similar to the First Amendment in the U.S. While this

right is qualified "in the interests of national security and for the prevention of disorder or crime, provided that the derogation is prescribed by law and necessary in a democratic society" (Macdonald and Lorenzo-Dus 2020: 474), it is uncertain whether conceptually promoting suicide will constitute a significant infringement on the safety of online users, despite its inclusion in the OSA (which includes promoting suicide in its Primary Priority Content considered harmful to children, rather than illegal content). This is due to the observation that "legislation requiring online platforms to censor legal speech fails to comply with international freedom of expression standards" (Article 19 2022), meaning the support of goals, concepts, or ideologies may not reasonably be censored online. Yet, as demonstrated in the above analysis, encouragement and promotion can intertwine and isolated incidents of promotion may form part of a 'macro' campaign of encouragement, assistance, or coercion (and therefore a criminal offence, rather than simply harmful content).

Conversely, instances of assistance, coercion and encouragement may be more useful in the application of ES legislation, as these speech acts demonstrate active participation in the furthering of a behaviour or action. For example, an act of assistance may provide guidance, description, and instruction relating to the enactment of a suicide method for the purpose of helping an individual to succeed in taking their own life. While not currently featured in the OSA or the Suicide Act (but implied in the Suicide Act), coercion indicates perhaps the most nefarious of the ES speech acts owing to the aim of compelling someone to act against their initial will, yet this initial will may remain unchanged. An individual may remain unconvinced that suicide is the correct resolution, yet due to the presence of power markers such as threats or promises, the person feels compelled to act as instructed. Coercion explicitly features as a speech act in the proposed Conrad's Law in the state of Massachusetts (which was drafted following *Carter*) and is alluded to in the Suicide Act s.2A(3). Considering the prevalence of coercion as an illocutionary act in possibly the largest dataset of one-to-one ES publicly available, it feels like somewhat of an oversight to not explicitly include this speech act in the Suicide Act, especially if its presence may be an aggravating factor in favour of prosecution or result in stricter sentencing.

Furthermore, while not explicitly realised by the lexical content, coercion can be exemplified by persistence and repeated messaging. For example, "Are u doing it now?", "Are you gonna do it now?", and similar messages being sent over a period of time can reasonably be described as "putting pressure on another person to commit or attempt suicide" in line with the Suicide Act 1961, s.2A(3), and contribute towards what the Court in *Carter* described as a "systematic campaign of coercion" (474 Mass. 624 2016). With such persistence, it becomes clear how one's "willpower" may be "subverted" (ibid.) in order to cease the application of pressure and provocation by submitting to what the interlocutor is forcefully influencing one to do.

Likewise, the presence of encouragement demonstrates an active participation in furthering the goal of suicide by providing supportive, motivational affirmations and expressing confidence in the interlocutor's ability to succeed in their aims. Rather than the culturally expected response of providing help resources or trying to dissuade suicidal ideation, WMD and MC both demonstrate words of support concerning actions to further the goal of suicide, and inspirational belief in their interlocutors' capacity to achieve it, as demonstrated by encouraging fixed phrase expressions like "I believe in you", "[y]ou can do this", and "youll do fine [sic]". Again, these are clear illustrations of encouragement due to the support expressed for the behaviour in question and the confidence in the individual's ability to succeed.

The illocutionary act of seeking assistance is included in the IA framework with the acknowledgement that in the ES data available, communications are not wholly predatory and one-sided. In the WMD data, one party is seeking assistance and advice regarding a suicide and owing to the initial communications taking place on a suicide forum, WMD then invites them to message privately where he proceeds to assert his influence. Following this and WMD's promotion of the hanging method, this prompts more questions from MD and NK, thus their seeking of assistance. Conversely, MC and CR undergo a longitudinal discussion of suicide, during which, each professes their ideation for such. While a lot of the early discussion centres around the promotion of suicide as the potential solution to their respective mental health issues, it at one time becomes an exchange between the couple of seeking assistance regarding suicide methods and providing assistance in terms of resources and links to a variety of equipment. Eventually, perhaps due to the asymmetrical power dynamic between them as established by MC's assertion to knowledge, CR turns to MC with very specific questions that she is expected to knowingly hold the answers to, for example, "I take the sleeping pills first wait awhile then the Tylenol ?". The main difference in seeking assistance as a speech act and further rationale for its inclusion in the framework is due to it being suggestive of a curiosity at the least and a commitment at the most on the part of the seeker with regard to suicide, therefore, it would be reasonable to expect a greater frequency of occurrence of this speech act within the forum data due to the shared interest and aims of a multitude of users. Moreover, an interlocutor seeking assistance with suicide is evidence of their vulnerability (with knowledge of the victim's vulnerability proving to be a factor in the 2025 Tyler Webb case, see 2.8.5), or conversely, evidence suggesting they have reached a "voluntary, clear, settled and informed decision" to die (a mitigating factor in favour of the suspect (CPS 2014)); while seeking assistance with life may be evidence of striving for recovery.

Despite the unreliability of appraisal analysis as a replicable framework for a judicial context, the attitudinal concepts - particularly regarding judgement - can be useful in exemplifying how an illocution may influence behaviour (the eventual perlocutionary force). For example, propriety, veracity and tenacity in appraisal terms can help in demonstrating *how* something can be coercive; in this instance, through provoking someone by questioning the morality, honesty or dependability of their character. Similarly, judgements of normality and capacity can be linked with encouragement – in calling someone "special" or insisting they have the ability to succeed, they are celebrated, and their actions are commended. While appraisal may be too subjective and unspecific to ES to use as the primary methodology, it may be useful as a supplementary method in the illustration of how these illocutionary acts have the potential to influence behaviour as a perlocutionary force. This means that while it could prove valuable in exemplifying where the 'macro' level of influence occurs, a more bespoke tool is required to identify the 'micro' level of how specific ES communications manifest.

4.3 Stage 3: Exploring the ES speech acts in a pro-suicide forum using the IA framework

4.3.1 Introduction

Following the application of the IA framework to identify instances of ES speech acts in one-to-one messaging data, this section turns to the other prevalent genre of ES data: the pro-suicide forum. In applying the framework to this dataset, it may be gleaned whether posts within the forum fall into

the 'illegal' category in the context of the Suicide Act 1961, or Primary Priority Content in the Online Safety Act 2023. As in the case of one-to-one ES, if a language practice is going to be criminalised, there needs to exist a reliable means of analysing this type of evidence. At the time of writing, no known cases of encouraged suicide via forum post have been brought to trial in the UK; however, with the introduction of the Online Safety Act in England and Wales, online platforms are now required to protect users from content promoting suicide (Gov.uk 2024), while the Suicide Act encompasses acts which intentionally encourage or assist suicide, regardless of whether the parties know each other and regardless of whether an attempt is actually made (s.2).

This analysis provides an insight into the frequency with which the ES speech acts are used on the forum and how they are realised, while taking an exploratory approach to the landscape of the forum.

4.3.2 Applying the IA framework: forum data

Much as in the one-to-one data, the results show that promoting suicide is the most commonly occurring ES speech act. This is again followed by assisting suicide, especially closely in the forum data. While speech acts in favour of life rarely occur within the one-to-one data, the promotion and encouragement of life rank comparatively highly in the forum data. The illocutionary acts of persuasion and coercion are rare on the forum, both of which involve attempts to either shift the interlocutor's beliefs, or to urge them to act as though their beliefs have been shifted (while their actual state of mind remains unchanged).

Table 17) Results of coding the forum data using the IA framework

Forum	% of total coded units	N	Rank
promote-death	14.92%	619	1
assist-death	14.90%	618	2
seek-assist-death	10.07%	418	3
promo-life	1.93%	80	4
encourage-death	1.83%	76	5
encourage-life	0.89%	37	6
assist-life	0.48%	20	7
persuade-life	0.22%	9	8
seek-assist-life	0.10%	4	9
persuade-death	0.05%	2	10
coerce-death	0.02%	1	11
coerce-life	0.00%	0	-

4.3.2a Promotion

As in the one-to-one messaging data, the promotion of suicide is the most commonly occurring ES speech act within the forum data. In the promotion of suicide, death is viewed as the solution to a problem:

[7a]
There's no getting better for me [...] I've lived long enough so I'm ready.

[7b]
[...] ending my suffering

[7c]
It works! This feels like freedom!!!

Health conditions, living conditions, mental illness, the treatment of LGBTQ+ people, relationship breakdowns, old age, and career issues are some of the frequent reasons expressed by users for wanting to die. Without the necessary support or help resources available, users detail their feelings of hopelessness (as in 7a), depression, and isolation, with suicide upheld as the only guaranteed means of ending these problems, as expressed by the feeling of "freedom" in 7c and the "ending of suffering" in 7b. Conversely, friends, pets, nature, and care responsibilities are given as reasons to live, be they sources of happiness or moral obligations.

The outcome of death is promoted as a kind of 'holy grail': the shared sought-after goal of most users (discounting those in the 'recovery' subset of the forum). Examples 7d-e demonstrate the expression of desperation that can occur alongside promoting suicide as a concept.

[7d]
If death was instantaneous I'd do anything to make it happen

[7e]
I'm ready to die. Every day I beg the universe to have mercy and to let me pass in my sleep or get hit by a semi.

These represent very personal experiences of promoting suicide. The concept is not being promoted in a general sense (for example, as discussed below in relation to freedom of choice) but is instead being expressed as an individual desire based on personal circumstance. In 7d, the user states they would take any action possible for a guaranteed instant death, whereas the user in 7e believes their eventual death would be a merciful relief. It stands to question where this type of communication would fall in the context of the Online Safety Act 2023 in relation to freedom of speech, as users are conveying an opinion without explicitly trying to influence the beliefs or actions of others. This type of sentiment appears to serve as a sharing of experience rather than an attempt to outwardly influence the wider userbase, yet by presenting suicide as desirable and rational, it stands to promote the concept to any potential reader. As noted in 4.2.7, statements like this could be considered part of a 'macro' campaign of encouragement or coercion if these speech acts occur alongside them, but as standalone messages, examples like 7d and 7e are not suggestive of a criminal offence.

While for ease of identification the forum here is referred to as 'pro-suicide', many users choose to label their views as 'pro-choice', akin to the movement for abortion rights and reflective of the belief in individual bodily autonomy (one user repurposes the "my body my choice" slogan in this context). I hesitate to refer to the forum as 'pro-choice' to avoid confusion with the abortion rights group, however, it should be noted that some users reject the notion of being 'pro-suicide', arguing that this connotes the idea that they are seeking to convince others into suicide, rather than discussing

the options of life or death and respecting the decision of the individual without trying to sway them into living a life they do not want. The ranking of promotion of life as the fourth most common ES speech act in the data could therefore be reflective of the 'pro-choice' stance of the users, with life seen as a viable option for some but perhaps not for others. One possible reason for the promotion of life for some could be owing to what one user describes as "the difference between someone who [is] determined and ready to end their life versus someone having a crisis and trying to scream for attention or help", demonstrated by the response in 7f.

> [7f]
> If ur not sure , then dont do it . Only ctb [catch the bus] when you are fully committed and willing to do so .

A 'chosen' death is viewed as carrying dignity that may otherwise be compromised by continuing until a natural death, for example, due to a long illness or other terminal condition that may cause prolonged suffering, yet is not portrayed as the rational option for users appearing panicked or rushed with regard to dying quickly, perhaps due to external pressures.

Also relevant to the 'pro-choice' notion is the double-coding of posts containing the promotion of both life and death:

> [7g]
> I hope you find comforting and peacefull way to either live or go if needed. Wish you well

In this context, users can be seen to wish each other peace "either way", "whatever you choose", or "however it may come". As such, life and death are both presented as viable options dependent on the decision of the individual and contrary to the mainstream societal reaction to dissuade suicidal ideation or recommend urgent help resources.

As predicted for a website that circulates information regarding suicide methods, the promotion of specific means of suicide are commonly occurring, much as in the one-to-one data. For example:

> [7h]
> this method just sounds too good to give up on it.

> [7i]
> It's really seems a good alternative to the other methods and it seems completely free of pain.

> [7j]
> Im gonna be frank. Id rather hang. It might hurt sure but heck at least im sure ill be out like a light.

As in the one-to-one data, methods are praised for their efficacy, reliability, and supposed painlessness. In asserting confidence in a method, a user has the possibility of influencing others in their choice while presenting themselves as knowledgeable, experienced, and trustworthy on the topic. While it is not possible to hold absolute certainty in the outcome of any particular method (primarily due to the user making the claim not having died by suicide using the method themselves), users state factors such as having done extensive research, medical training, or knowledge of others dying by this method to reinforce their claims. As in 7h and 7i, fellow users

regularly communicate feelings of confidence in the advice delivered by others that convincingly present the method in a positive light.

4.3.2b Assistance

Again, mirroring the ES speech act occurrences in the one-to-one data, assist-death is the second most frequent in the forum data. In exploring the act of assistance in the suicide forum, recurrent subtypes became apparent which were then coded to aid in the description of how assistance is realised in this landscape. These subtypes refer to the *topic* of assistance – the specific aspect of suicide that is being assisted with. These are represented in Table 18.

Table 18) Topics of assistance in the suicide forum data

Topic	Definition	Examples
Type of method	Referring to recommendation for/against a suicide method	*This method is useless* *Have you considered something less scary?* *It is almost impossible to die from SSRI overdose, don't bother with it.*
Type of equipment	Referring to materials to be used for suicide	*I have bean bags, the heavy kind they use for bean bag toss.* *He used plastic bags as insurance*
Source/acquisition of equipment	Where and how to purchase materials to be used for suicide	*If you just read the whole thread, you would see some links from amazon* *I got mine from ebay* *I actually think it would still be possible to post N to some countries.*
Time/location	When and where to practice or carry out a suicide	*I wouldn't recommend doing it with the bright sun still shining outside lol but at night it should be fine.* *My main concern would be the limitations of the environment in terms of being discovered early and rescued.*
Method enactment	Details regarding the steps of a method (inclusive of how to use equipment)	*You should start seeing black and going numb/tingly/wobbly in about 10 seconds if you're standing up.*

		Sounds like a great idea to fold the empty parts of the bags once.
		If you google 'carotid artery neck location' youll get a lot of images showing you of its location.
Other	Contextually unclear due to missing URLs/multimedia sources being referred to which are not included in the text data; recommendations of external sources to assist in suicides	*This is currently being discussed in another thread, there are some helpful links in comments.*
		It is long but, I hope this helps.
		anything to do with exit or exit forum is a waste of time and money . i have been on both . useless in my opinion

Table 19 below shows the frequency of occurrence of the types of assistance present in the data under the assist-death category, with method enactment (details of how to perform a suicide method) being the most common.

Table 19) Frequency of assistance topics

Assist-Death	M	N	Rank
method-enactment	6.97%	289	1
equipment-type	2.72%	113	2
method-type	2.63%	109	3
equipment-source/acquisition	1.98%	82	4
time/location	0.46%	19	5
other	0.14%	6	6

The high occurrence of assisting in method enactment and equipment type are unsurprising considering that the forum hosts a series of threads dedicated to offering help and instruction in carrying out or practicing with a particular method of suicide, in which many occurrences of assistance can be found. In offering guidance, imperative commands are used to form instructions on how to carry out a task.

> [7k]
> Start with your fingers, then with whatever padding you're going to use using your hands, then add the ratchet once you're confident.

The type of assistance demonstrated in 7k is explicit and directed at all reading the post, as opposed to being a reply to an individual user. This serves as an example of assisting in method enactment as methodological steps are provided, including how to use a type of equipment. A more collaborative, advisory tone is adopted when users provide more personalised feedback to requests for help, as in 7l-7n.

[7l]

How thick are the towels? I'd try to make the towels harder and the belt looser, especially if you've been putting enough pressure on your trachea to restrict air flow

[7m]

Why not just get super small square pillows. I have two of these that I'm hoping works.

[7n]

It shouldn't hurt. Your ligature is probably too low on the neck and compressing your windpipe.

7l comes from a back-and-forth exchange between users as one experiences trouble with the method in question; the response is a personal recommendation, indicated by "I'd try". Similarly, the user in 7m offers a suggestion ("Why not") based on personal circumstance and presumably includes either a link to or image of the type of pillows to which they are referring as a recommendation of equipment. The assistance demonstrated in 7n appears to be based on experience, either from personally trying the method, information gathered from others on the forum, or external research. In doing so, this user positions themselves as knowledgeable on the subject, therefore, the original poster may return to them for additional advice. Users also provide information to further the goals of others through first-person accounts of their own experiences or plans:

[7o]

I have actually managed to pass out in 10 seconds doing this.

[7p]

I'm going to try filling some wash cloths with dried beans and tying them close with elastic bands.

[7q]

Usually takes about 5-10 seconds for me to start seeing black and losing control of my body when I practice

A post such as 7p in which a user states provisional plans serves not only to advise others but also welcomes feedback. For example, if a user states, "I'm going to try *X*", this leaves the floor open for another user who perhaps has tried *X* to give their input. As such, they may respond with a construction like "I've tried *X* with no luck, but I did get the desired effect from *Y*". This type of exchange is somewhat regular on the forum and blurs the boundaries of assistance and seeking assistance, much as 7p does. This is because while at surface level the user is offering a suggestion of an action that other users may be inspired to try, they are also stating that they are yet to test this method, implicitly inviting anyone who might have already tried it to share their experience of it.

In addition to advising in favour of a method type, users can also be seen to advise away from plans for suicide attempts that appear to be particularly reckless or ill-informed, as in 7r.

[7r]

User A: Guys I am going to die by hanging without a noose. Will this image below work for me as suicide by hanging? Hanging with no noose.
User B: You should NOT do that! That is absurd.

A common theme in advising against a potential suicide method is the possibility of the user sustaining lifechanging injuries as a result. This exhibits a sense of care for the wellbeing of the original poster, despite the exclamation and accusation of absurdity provided by User B. Alongside not wanting a user's quality of life to deteriorate, forum members make repeated reference to taking the act of suicide very seriously and seek to spread accurate information so as not to further tarnish the already questionable reputation of the community.

The sourcing of equipment category encompasses a common theme of where and how to acquire the necessary materials to enact a suicide. One recuring topic of discussion is the purchase of chemicals from covert online sources. Users can be seen to invite others to message them privately in order to obtain a link to one such source to avoid law enforcement or online moderators being directed to the supplier. Additionally, advice is shared regarding possible scam sites (7s), delays in shipping chemicals (7t) or issues with international customs (7u):

> [7s]
> From what I'm aware there is no way to obtain N, instead there are just scams.

> [7t]
> Communication has always been bad and some people didn't hear anything until the package showed up suddenly.

> [7u]
> Only problem with N is you have to get it from Mexico so sometimes there are problems with it crossing the border.

The nature of equipment sourcing posts is very collaborative; users seek to help each other in getting the materials they are looking for while citing benefits and shortfalls of different means. Individuals appear willing to share covert sources without reservation, provided this is done via private message. Equipment sourcing posts are also common in seeking assistance with suicide, as discussed further in 4.3.2c.

Discussions of suitable times and locations for suicides are less common, but occasionally the subjects of windows of opportunity (7v), places where assisted dying is possible (7w), and types of location arise (7x).

> [7v]
> You do need to make sure you're not disturbed for about half an hour with partial suspension hanging as well.

> [7w]
> I think I found the answer to this question: Switzerland

> [7x]
> If the hotels in your area are open, it should be easy to book a high room.

These kinds of discussion tend to revolve around factors of knowledge acquired from research (particularly in the case of correct-answer topics like countries with legalised assisted dying), user experience such as having attempted suicide in a certain way before, or more frequently, somewhat abstract or unsupported claims to knowledge (for example, "Might be best to try gain access around

3am as security will be watching TV or sleeping"). This type of assistance appears in alignment with a group of people sharing ideas and trying to work things out together, as opposed to the instructional tone of the other types. This could be in part due to the opportunistic nature of theme of time/location rather than being grounded in science like how a method is performed or the use of a combination of chemicals. As a result, some of the language choices are vague and uncertain, such as the "if" and "it should be" conditionals in extract 7x.

While assisting in the continuation of life is comparatively uncommon on the forum (mean 0.49% of coded speech acts), it does occur. One such instance takes the form of imperative instructions, similar to extract 7k. In this case, one user is responding to another's request for advice in managing self-harm and suicidal impulses:

> [7y]
> Fill up a sink with the coldest water you can stand, dip your face in the cold water and hold your breath. Making sure the eye area is in contact with water is very important. [...] It helps to lower your heartrate, breathing, etc.

This stands in favour of the 'pro-choice' beliefs conveyed by some forum users, reinforcing the platform's function as a place of understanding and support, regardless of whether the desired outcome is one of life or death. The original poster actively seeks help with the aim of continuing their life, then receives a flurry of responses from other users trying to assist in this goal. In this case, suicide is not advised, promoted, or encouraged (for example), and focus is drawn to aiding the recovery of the individual.

4.3.2c Seeking Assistance

The seek assistance category was also coded in accordance with the types of assistance present in 4.3.2b, this time relating to kind of assistance being sought. These can be found in Table 20 below.

Table 20) Frequency of seeking assistance types

Seek Assist Death	M	N	Rank
method-enactment	4.19%	174	1
equipment-source/acquisition	1.90%	79	2
equipment-type	1.61%	67	3
method-type	1.16%	48	4
other	0.41%	17	5
time/location	0.05%	2	6

Similarly, the most commonly occurring is method enactment, however in the seeking assistance category, the sourcing of equipment is more frequent than both method type and equipment type.

In seeking assistance with how to perform a method, users can frequently be seen posing a question to "someone" in the forum more generally, rather than a specific person in the thread:

> [8a]
> Can someone share some good links for finding carotid artery?

[8b]
Can someone give me advice or precautions before doing It please?

The vagueness of this approach is furthered by the request for nondescript "good" links in 8a and the equally unclear call for "advice or precautions" in 8b. This indicates a confidence in the community being willing and able to provide support and assistance to its members. More specific advice is sought, both to particular users and regarding finer methodological details:

[8c]
Can you post pics of your set up by chance? Especially the rope and knot you're using. Your post has inspired confidence in me.

Here, a very direct request is posed for pictorial evidence of another user's "set up" in order to gain details regarding the types of rope and knot they have chosen. This user appears not only to be seeking assistance, but to have gained encouragement from the other user's previous post through the statement of having "inspired confidence" in their ability to proceed with this method.

Regarding the sourcing of equipment, a high number of occurrences can be seen for seeking assistance with this when one user claims to have a reliable source from which to order chemicals.

[8d]
heyy please could you also send me the link :)

[8e]
Can you PM me what's IC's sister site? I don't think I have that one. TIA

[8f]
Hi , If it isn't too much trouble, could you also PM me the sister site for IC?

[8g]
Sorry to bother you, would you mind PMing me the link for IC?

In this thread, a stream of users request a link for the source to be sent to them via private message. The original poster does not reply on the thread, so the result is a consecutive list of other members filing their requests. Most appear to do this with heightened politeness and friendliness, perhaps in the hope that this will increase their chances of the user with the link sending it to them. For example, the familiarity indicated by "heyy" and the emoticon in 8d, and the abbreviation "TIA" (thanks in advance) in 8e. Likewise, the users in 8f and 8g mitigate their requests with the hyper-polite "If it isn't too much trouble", "Sorry to bother you" and "would you mind". While this is the most common realisation of seeking assistance regarding sourcing equipment, questions regarding pricing, shipping, and reliability of sources also occur (similarly to 4.3.2b).

When seeking advice on types of equipment, users often ask for alternatives to the materials initially suggested by the original poster (8h-j), or more explicitly, ask if equipment they have is considered adequate (8j and 8k):

[8h]
is there any alternative to the bags?

[8i]
So, I could just use gorilla tape instead of the ratchet?

[8j]
Could I use a thick cord? I have a lot of those lying around and don't have any money.

[8k]
Which one of these is ok?

The reasoning provided for seeking alternatives tends to centre around themes of convenience, accessibility, and cost. For example, in 8j, the user appears to justify their reasoning for wanting to use thick cord, perhaps in case this is considered an unreasonable substitution by another user. By adding that they "don't have any money", this appears to urge users to accept the proposal regardless of whether they think it is viable or not, or to at least deter criticism from others if the suggestion is impractical. In posts seeking assistance with equipment, many appear to refer to multimedia links that are not visible in the data due to the collection method of scraping the text data only, as in examples 8k-m

[8l]
I found this ratchet. is it good? haven't bought it yet

[8m]
Is this it?

In asking whether the items in question are "ok" or "good", the user refers not to the traditional function of the object, but to its suitability for use in a suicide. In doing this, the user assumes someone else will be better informed as to what makes the item effective in fulfilling this role and is prepared to trust their authority, despite the obvious fact that any user replying to them has not died by suicide in this way. As users provide feedback on "practice" they have had with a method, the poser of the question is presumably asking whether anyone has used it in a trial run and to what extent they found it suitable for purpose.

Under all topics in Table 19, users are found to provide assistance more frequently than seek it. This is likely because a user will begin a thread querying details of a method or seeking advice (for example) regarding which method others would recommend, then the majority of the thread will comprise of other users giving their advice and opinions on which method(s) they would choose or recommend. Extracts 8n and 8o illustrate how a request for advice can springboard a thread dominated by assisting with a type of method.

[8n]
Does anyone know about this method?

[8o]
Looking for people own methods.

In threads discussing possible methods, users then intermittently pose questions in response to the suggestions provided by the respondents. For example:

[8p]
Can this be a quiet method or is loud noise 100 percent going to happen?

8p is classified as seeking assistance with a method type as opposed to method enactment as it is not asking for specific details of how to perform the method but instead appears to be weighing up the pros/cons of the method in question. Therefore, if someone was to reply that the method can be quiet, the user may accept this as a recommendation. Likewise, if someone were to reply that the method always results in loud noise, the user would be deterred from this and would likely seek an alternative option.

Regarding seeking assistance under the topic of time/location, this only occurs twice in the dataset. Both instances explicitly invite input from other users to aid in determining a suicide location:

> [8q]
> Hotels or other places for full suspension hanging. So I'm in Europe and location is everything... The place I live in, the ceiling is just too low. [...] I guess some hotel rooms might be suitable, others are not. Comments?

> [8r]
> Can anyone help me in choosing a building I would be able to jump from in the UK. I would prefer it in Berkshire and I would prefer to be jumping onto concrete not water. I'm ready, but I don't know where to jump from. Also I was wondering how to access the top of buildings.

In 8q, the opening sentence acts as a subject line to the post. This serves as an implicit request for the recommendation of "Hotels or other places". The user then provides some background information regarding their individual circumstances and why they are seeking a hotel, before inviting other users to respond with recommendations, advice and assistance in terms of location by asking for "Comments?". 8r serves as an explicit request for "help" with location, specifically buildings in the UK. This is followed by a subsidiary implicit request for information on accessing tops of buildings. There is an element of uncertainty present in the address to "anyone" to "help [...] in choosing", added to by the act of "wondering", despite the user declaring their readiness. This comes in contrast to some of the other posts seeking practical solutions in terms of methodology where finer details are under scrutiny; here, 8r appears to be looking for more 'macro-assistance' with the broader logistics of a more public suicide with multiple variables, as opposed to the finer details of a comparatively private suicide using methods such as hanging or ingestion.

4.3.2d Encouragement

Encouragement as the expression of support of suicidal actions and behaviours is the next most common ES speech act in the forum data. One way in which this manifests is through suicide being presented as an act of bravery:

> [9a]
> So happy for you! I hope you feel empowered ??

> [9b]
> There's no shame, that's already a great deal to have the courage to try.

> [9c]
> Good luck my friend. I hope you are more courageous than me.

Following the report of having acquired chemicals for a certain suicide method, 9a demonstrates confidence in the user by suggesting they feel "empowered" by having the chemical to hand. Emotional support is exclaimed by "So happy for you!", much in the way a friend or loved one may celebrate the good news or achievement of another. Extract 9b comes in response to a user feeling disheartened following a suicide attempt. The user's courage for carrying out the attempt is applauded; therefore (as also in 9c), the action is supported, and courage is explicitly inspired. Likewise, persistence with attempts is encouraged though phrasing such as "Don't give up!". The theme of wishing luck recurs throughout acts of encouragement in the dataset, with users wishing each other success in their aims:

[9d]
Good luck and a good hanging.

[9e]
well, good luck with it, finding the sweet spot takes a bit.

[9f]
Best of luck and may the god(ess) of death be kind to you !

[9g]
I wish you find peace. Good luck on your journey.

One observation to emerge from this theme is the jovial and casual nature with which the potential death of a community member is met. For example, 9d shows one user genially wishing another "a good hanging", through which any gravitas or darkness of the situation is minimised. Similarly, the laid-back nature of "well, good luck with it" in 9e further reflects this relaxed approach. 9f and 9g additionally suggest that the kind of luck being wished is not only in achieving the desired outcome of death but also in any presentation of afterlife that may follow.

Also encouraged on the forum is the act of practicing or trialling a suicide method.

[9h]
You'll want to practice a lot first.

[9i]
I don't see any problem with it as long as you practice it enough.

[9j]
i guess technique is the key with these things, if you don't succeed, try, try again!!!!

In 9h, the encouragement is realised in the suggestion "You'll want to", indicating that fulfilling one's goal requires practice and perseverance; similarly, in 9i, the user adds that they will need to practice "enough" in order to succeed. Additionally, in 9j, the adage of "try, try again" is used in relation to practice with a suicide method. These examples demonstrate the encouragement of repeated behaviours known to result in suicide, for example, pressing on one's carotid artery until losing consciousness. From a forensic point of view, this represents a clear expression of an individual encouraging suicidal behaviour in the knowledge that enacting it could cause another's death (as per the Suicide Act 1961). The recommendation of pursuing these actions and the expression of belief in the individual's ability to die using them exemplify the potential for words of encouragement to

have an influence on behaviour through positive motivation and affirmation – i.e. how belief from another can influence belief in the self.

In the forum data, explicit references are made to acts of encouragement, for example:

[9k]
I hope you'll get the encouragement for it whenever you're ready to move on

[9l]
I'm very skeptical about giving direct advice or actively encouraging people that the decision to CTB is the correct one, unless you know them and their reasons very well.

9k is an interesting construction as it wishes encouragement for an individual from another source – that is to say encouragement is not coming from this user, but they hope for someone else to be able to provide encouragement at a time in the future when the original poster feels they are in need of it. As such, 9k may not be considered an act of encouragement in itself, more an act of promotion of suicide as a concept, with suicide as the objective ("it") being anaphorically referenced.

The user in 9l appears cautious of advising or encouraging suicide in a wider forum context due to a lack of information regarding individual circumstances. This statement acts in acknowledgement that some posts from other users on the forum could be construed as "giving direct advice or actively encouraging people" in favour of suicide. The implication behind not knowing the individual or their reasons for wanting to end their life is that someone may be facing external pressures to do so or may be acting irrationally in the moment, as opposed to having taken time and consideration regarding their decision, as many users claim they have. Elsewhere on the forum, users can be seen to staunchly disagree with and defend against the suggestion that suicide is being encouraged, as in 9m where it is met with sarcasm.

[9m]
UserC: Ahhh I see now. You're one of those members with special glasses. When you view the board, you see an abundance of people encouraging others to commit suicide. I don't have a pair of those glasses so that's not what I see.

As in the one-to-one data, this suggests an awareness that the encouragement of suicide is a moral issue on one level, and a legal issue on another. By rejecting the notion that suicide is being encouraged on the forum, UserC presents themselves as moral in character and assuming a higher level of intelligence and understanding than those who see the forum through the metaphorical "special glasses" that suggest encouragement is present. While the data tell us that encouragement is not the most frequent problematic speech act on the forum, this analysis does provide evidence of its presence.

Despite the encouragement of death for some, users do demonstrate concern for each other's welfare. When a user appears rushed or panicked in their apparent want to die, this can be met by the encouragement of life instead:

[9n]
UserD: What if we don't have enough time to practice and its mandatory to attempt it immediately and succeed in the first attempt.. ??

> UserE: Hey, Please take some time to think. If it is temporary, u can overcome it. Please dont be desperate

While the stereotypical view of a pro-suicide forum may be a 'death for everyone' attitude, this is not the case, and concern for an individual can be exercised. 9n is an example of expressing belief in recovery and the ability to "overcome" a "temporary" hardship (raising the question of exactly what UserE classifies as a temporary issue). UserE attempts to calm UserD by suggesting they slow down and consider the situation rather than rushing into an irreversible decision. The attempt to inspire confidence in UserD by declaring their ability to overcome the issue is offset by labelling their initial post as "desperate". The mention of desperation in this context appears derogatory and somewhat belittling, perhaps suggesting that UserD is going to be taken less seriously than other users for the way they have conducted themselves through the phrasing of their post, rather than having extensively researched the subject of suicide as others appear to, or offering long-term give-and-take contributions to the forum. As such, the support for a user's decision to end their life appears conditional rather than universal, somewhat contradictory to the 'pro-choice' stance. In addition to the presence of encouragement of life, life and death can paradoxically both be encouraged within one post:

> [9o]
> I hope you find even a bit of hope to continue. But if not, I hope you suffer as little as possible.

> [9p]
> Well, I hope you are able to reach the right decision for you, whatever that is..... If you want to discuss anything or if we can help out in some way, then let us know.....

In 9o, the user expresses support for the original poster's continuation of life, willing them to persevere. This encouragement of life is however mitigated by the addition of wishing minimal suffering should the original poster choose to die. This is again reflective of the 'pro-choice' stance of the forum which emphasises respect for the decision of the individual, whether life or death, as can also be seen in 9p. There is an ambiguity in 9p as the possible outcomes of either continuing to live or dying by suicide are not explicitly stated. By adding "if we can help out in some way, then let us know", it is not clear whether they are offering assistance in terms of recovery and help resources, or advice regarding a suicide method. This feels purposefully ambiguous so as not to influence the original poster towards one outcome or another; while expressing they have the support of the forum either way. When a user appears to have stated a compelling enough case for their reasons for suicide, approached the subject with a calm and matter-of-fact attitude, or demonstrated their seriousness by exemplifying their research into factors such as methods and equipment, they are in receipt of support from other users, in contrast to the less considered approach taken by UserD in 9n. Nevertheless, some forum users do express a belief in recovery and an eventual improvement of quality of life, and as such, posts dedicated to the encouragement of life are present.

> [9q]
> hope you get over the past and feel better

> [9r]
> Just let people live, it ain't so hard. Fck em all, live your life.

[9s]
If you can find will within yourself to stay alive, I think it is already a huge achievment and I reallly mean it.

In a similar vein to the wishing of luck in 9d-g, 9q inspires hope in the ability to recover from past negative experiences and trauma, expressing belief in the individual's capability of feeling "better". 9s connotes the idea of bravery and courage, much like 9b-c, however this time pertaining to living being the admirable outcome. By presenting staying alive as a "huge achievment [sic]", the will to live is portrayed as admirable and desirable; something users should strive towards. This comes in contrast to 9b-c, in which the ability to follow through with a suicide attempt is presented as a positive and enviable quality. 9r opts for a more motivational approach, dismissing the negativity of others who interfere with peoples' lives and encouraging users to disregard them and choose to live in a way that makes one happy.

Also under the category of encouraging life, some users offer advice pertaining to how others may improve their lives:

[9t]
Try life without the relationship, it might feel better after a while.

[9u]
Dump boyfriend, keep cat. See what happens

[9v]
if you know a partner can make life worth living for you, what makes you not want to try to find another?

By offering suggestions of practical solutions, the aim appears to be to discourage suicidal behaviour (at least temporarily), and hope that the individual considers the advice and makes positive changes with the goal of improving their quality of life our outlook on it. In 9t-v, all appear to offer things to try long-term, for example in 9t-u, both follow the pattern of '*Try X and see how you feel',* meaning the original poster will need to give this change some time in order to gauge any effect, therefore prolonging their life. In contrast, 9v offers room for consideration and discussion surrounding the suggestion of trying to form a romantic relationship. As the original poster stated they were once happy when in a relationship, the user implies that they should try to form a similar connection again to "make life worth living", although this solution would reasonably require even greater commitment than 9t-u before any effect may be seen.

4.3.2e Persuasion

Regarding the occurrence of acts of persuasion, this is the only instance in either the one-to-one or forum dataset that an ES speech act occurs more frequently in favour of life than of death, ie., there are 9 instances of persuade-life, and no instances of persuade-death.

[10a]
I don't think you should ctb if you can find some sort of support to cope or get better...

10a occurs in response to one user detailing their history of being abused as a child and stating, "Im a fucking monster I deserve death [...] i need a really painful method that even my soul suffers from it..". Some users respond with messages assisting or encouraging life, suggesting this person should

not be ruled by their past; wishing them a life in which they can feel better and recommending they seek counselling. The user in 10a demonstrates an act of persuasion in accordance with the IA framework in that they attempt to convince the original poster that they should not commit suicide. While not an extensive or lengthy act of persuasion, it does challenge the original poster's beliefs and resistance to think differently, as marked by "I don't think" and provides the alternative option of finding "some sort of support".

> [10b]
> I don't know it just feels wrong killing ur self for this woman that doesn't even know that ur missing her cos u could still live the good stuff it's never too late for that

10b represents a crossover in persuasion and encouragement of life. The user expresses an appeal to both logic and morality in stating "it just feels wrong". This also demonstrates an attempt to convince the original poster to see things from a different perspective, who states they are planning to kill themself for missing the opportunity for a potential romantic partner. The user in 10b tries to express that the woman may not even be aware of the situation, therefore, it seems "wrong" for this to constitute a reason for ending a life. Additionally, they express confidence in the original poster's ability to succeed in finding happiness as an act of encouraging life, stating that they could "still live the good stuff".

> [10c]
> I think a number of members, including myself, just feel like perhaps you may be letting your resentment towards him utterly consume you to the point of suiciding to hurt him, when perhaps it doesn't to be that way. That's why the option of confronting him, and telling others what he did, might be a useful first strike before you need to consider anything more drastic. I guess you just come across as so completely obsessed by vengeance that it is hard to believe you would feel that way after things came to a head and were revealed.

The post in 10c is representative of the additional work required to shift the user's mental state/beliefs (as in the definition of persuasion in the IA framework). The user expresses their own opinion in combination with the views stated by "other members" that the original poster's apparent motive of revenge is not a sound reason for suicide. They present other viable options ("confronting him, and telling others what he did"), and make suggestions of how they may be acting irrationally due to being "completely obsessed by vengeance". They present a logically structured argument in favour of not pursuing suicide for this reason in that they have other options available which they should exhaust first, and that the original poster may feel different once these options have been fulfilled. While it is possible that labelling someone as "completely obsessed by vengeance" could be considered insulting or inflammatory and therefore cause further pushback and resentment from the original poster, this does not appear to happen in this instance. They do, however, remain steadfast in their plan, yet put less emphasis on the idea of suicide for revenge, and instead change their focus to their ongoing health issues. In this case, it could be argued that the perlocutionary force of someone being persuaded not to enact a suicide for revenge was met, but the illocutionary act of persuading someone to continue living was unsuccessful.

The examples in this subsection somewhat contradict the pro-choice standpoint expressed by some users as certain reasons for suicide are not considered legitimate and are called into question. However, this does counteract the 'wild west' reputation of the forum and demonstrates that its

purpose is not just as a platform on which suicide is encouraged and assisted; there is some degree of internally agreed upon moral structure in play and support can be conditional.

4.3.2f Coercion

Acts of coercion are the least common of the ES speech acts in the forum dataset with only two occurring, both in favour of suicide.

> [11a]
> The more you postpone pain the bigger it grows and the less tolerance you have for it but Im sure you know that.

11a comes in reference to one user expressing their feelings of being stuck in a depressive cycle and suffering with painful memories. The user writes of trying to distract themselves but struggles to function with daily tasks like showering. Others contribute to the thread sharing their similar feelings and experiences, when the user in 11a interjects. Due to the context, the implicature gleaned from this comment is that by postponing suicide, the pain they are experiencing will continue to get worse until it becomes too much for them to handle, therefore, suicide should be enacted sooner rather than later. Were this same comment to occur on a thread promoting therapy or other psychological intervention for the purpose of recovery, it would hold a different implicature. For example, the pain being referenced could still be the difficult memories the individual is experiencing, however, rather than suicide being the answer to stopping it from growing, professional intervention is instead presented as the solution due to the context, as opposed to the lexical content alone. This example is illustrative of irrealis modality, as in 3c in the Carter/Roy dataset, loosely following the pattern of '*If you do X, then Y will happen';* in this case, the implication is '*If you don't kill yourself, the pain will get worse'.* In this particular thread, the original poster hadn't expressed specific plans for a suicide attempt and can be seen gaining comfort from another user who shares similar experiences; they even expressed a desire to become friends. The user in 11a had not previously been involved in this conversation yet takes the opportunity to join the thread with this standalone potentially coercive statement.

> [11b]
> Think of it this way. Do you want to endure years in which you're going to have negative experiences over and over again while being stuck in a limbo where you want to die, but are too scared to do it or endure pain for one final moment to end your own life

11b is also similar in structure to the examples of coercion in the MC data. The original poster is presented with an ultimatum: either they live and face continued negative experiences, or they experience one final act of pain, resulting in their death. As such, suicide is presented as the more desirable of the two options as it is portrayed as causing a minimal amount of pain when compared to prolonged emotional suffering. This user shows awareness of the hesitance and unconvinced state of mind of the original poster by acknowledging that they are "scared", and rather than trying to talk them out of their suicidal ideation, pushes them towards it. This demonstrates an act of trying to compel someone to act against their initial will, even if their initial state of mind remains unchanged (in this instance, fearing suicide and not committing to doing it), as per the definition in the IA framework.

4.4 Discussion

This chapter has provided an exploratory analysis of a pro-suicide forum to gauge whether the content is host to offences under the Suicide Act 1961 and the Online Safety Act 2023. The analysis reveals occurrences of all illocutionary acts featured in the ES legislation, plus the additional ones (persuasion and seeking assistance) in the IA framework, with the promotion of suicide as the most common. While content promoting suicide is criminalised under the OSA, the question remains of how this will be moderated and when such moderation becomes an infringement on the right to freedom of speech.

Promoting suicide conceptually appears to primarily take the form of users expressing why they feel suicide is the correct option for their individual circumstance as opposed to an attempt to impose a particular worldview on an audience. However, when debates occur regarding topics like freedom of choice or assisted dying, users are prone to rally the act of suicide in a more general sense. In the promotion of death and suicide, forum members occasionally provide their reasons for wanting to die, which could prove valuable in suggesting constructive ways to alleviate their problems. Sometimes this does happen, and users offer each other support in favour of life, however, the "pro-choice" stance of the forum dictates that users do not try to convince or persuade each other one way or the other. The primary rule of the space appears to be to respect the decisions of others, lest they be assigned the derogatory title of "pro-lifer". References to being pro-choice are numerous, what's more, this attitude is exemplified through the illocutionary acts of promotion and encouragement regarding one's suicidal ideation. The analysis illustrates examples of the occurrence of promoting or encouraging both life and death within the same post, reflective of the belief in not making attempts to explicitly influence another user's decision yet facilitating further contemplation of the options available to them.

Extracts 7a-c show personal expressions of belief in suicide as the correct choice for these users. As this means of promotion does not encroach on the decision-making of others, this raises questions of whether all instances of promoting suicide should be held to the same standard. Censoring the sharing of an opinion or worldview online gives rise to the risk of violating human rights via freedom of speech (if not contributing towards a broader example of encouraging/assisting/coercing suicide). While some degree of moderation may be necessary, perhaps a statement of what one considers best for the self rather than prescribing this to the other is not the most pressing issue and a graded system of what constitutes 'harmful' promotion according to Ofcom and the OSA should be established. As Sanctioned Suicide also hosts content encouraging and assisting suicide, this is suitable for moderation under the OSA.

Suicide methods are a frequent object of promotion, as in the one-to-one data, while method enactment is the most common form of assistance given and sought. Users state factors such as having done extensive research, medical training, or knowledge of others dying by this method to reinforce their claims. As in 7h and 7i, fellow users regularly communicate feelings of confidence in the advice delivered by others that convincingly present the method in a positive light and therefore providing evidence of the perlocutionary force of the method being successfully promoted or advised. If the speech act of promoting suicide as an idea or concept is difficult or unethical to police due to the right to freedom of expression, perhaps there exists a way for this to be linked to

promoting a method of suicide as a mitigation to this rule on the grounds of "prevention of disorder or crime" (Macdonald and Lorenzo-Dus 2020: 474). For example, if it is permitted to express belief in suicide as an option for some, this may fall under freedom of expression, however praising the speed or efficacy of a named suicide method could be considered a criminal offence due to the specificity of the recommendation. This in turn raises the question of whether removing sites such as this due to the promotion and assistance of suicide would in fact lead to a decrease in attempted suicides or instead lead to greater instances of ill-informed attempts with an increased likelihood of lifechanging injuries as a result. As much of the advice involves assisting in private means of suicide such as chemical ingestion or hanging and advising users away from public means of suicide such as jumping due to the possibility of causing harm to others, would this also lead to an increase in public suicides with the risk of adding psychological damage to a greater pool of people?

As the third most common ES speech act in the forum data, seeking assistance in favour of death also centres around the theme of method enactment, with the difference in frequency between assist-death and seek assist-death presumably owing to certain requests for help being met with multiple responses (n=289 vs n=174). The assistance sought with method enactment can often be seen taking the form of explicitly asking for advice, requesting photos or videos, or seeking help with how to use a variety of equipment types. Questions regarding the sourcing of equipment are the second most common, with several threads dedicated to the sharing of allegedly reliable sources for a variety of chemicals. This illustrates a noteworthy facet of the computer-mediated nature of the communication: the ability to direct another user to a secondary site via a hyperlink. This is also indicative of a change in audience – what is initially a group discussion with multiple contributors has the possibility of becoming a one-to-one interaction in the form of a private message, much like in William Melchert-Dinkel's messages above. The active seeking of links to external sources creates a form of power hierarchy within the forum – those with the knowledge of and access to covert contacts are in receipt of the respect and politeness of their fellow users who wish to ask the favour of sharing these sources.

Acts of persuasion and coercion are rare, possibly due to the shared aims and beliefs of the members. They are there willingly and voluntarily, therefore opportunities to persuade or coerce someone into suicide are uncommon if users are already open to the idea, meaning their initial will is already in alignment with the views of fellow users. In contrast to the Carter/Roy data, users of the forum rarely express doubt or hesitation with regard to suicide. When CR expresses that he doesn't want to die yet, this is when MC tends to employ coercive language and constructs. This type of interaction doesn't happen frequently on the forum (although it can be seen in 11a-b), which could be indicative of a difference in motive between MC and suicide forum users.

Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings

5.1 Introduction

This thesis comes in response to the ambiguities of the actions encompassed by the Suicide Act when considering it as a language crime.

In synthesising the intricacies of *Carter*, the discussion of moderation brought by the OSA, and the lines between different forms of assisted and encouraged suicide, recurring issues arise. These are:

A) Vague definitions of ES offences
B) Uncertainty of how to identify/analyse an ES offence
C) Contextual nuance of acts of assistance, coercion, encouragement, persuasion and promotion

This thesis has sought to address the above issues in the following stages:

> **Stage 1:** Provide clearer legal definitions for speech acts relevant to ES legislation (*assistance, coercion, encouragement, persuasion, promotion* and *seeking assistance*)

This concerns issue A by seeking to provide less ambiguous definitions in ES law. As the extent and severity of what is currently encompassed by the term 'encouragement' in the Suicide Act can bear an effect on the likelihood of prosecution and the degree of sentencing, the law needs to be transparent in what these facets are. For example, if coerced suicide warrants a greater sentence than encouraged suicide, coerced suicide needs to be defined and explicitly mentioned in the legislation. This uses the approach of speech act theory to consider the actions performed by these types of utterance.

> **Stage 2:** Develop an analytical framework based on the illocutionary acts relevant to ES legislation that is suitable for analysing ES evidence

Stage 2 addresses issues A and B by applying the definitions borne out of Stage 1 in the design of an analytical framework encompassing the ES speech acts. It then involves testing this framework for inter-rater reliability for the hypothetical purpose of presenting linguistic evidence at trial.

> **Stage 3:** Use this analytical framework to explore possible occurrences of ES on pro-suicide fora

Issue C is the focus of this stage, which takes an exploratory approach to the ES forum. It asks which ES speech acts are found in the forum data and whether some may prove more harmful than others.

This chapter will summarise how this thesis argues in favour of a pragmatic approach to defining the criteria of computer-mediated ES offences. It further argues the viability of analysing ES evidence using speech act theory and the rationale for designing a new tool for this purpose. I will also discuss the nuance involved in determining when language may reasonably constitute criminal conduct.

5.2 The landscape

As explored in Chapter 2.4, the digital sphere has given rise to various types of illicit communication. Platforms such as chatrooms and fora offer pseudo-anonymity with usernames and avatars in place of personally identifying information. This veil of anonymity is suggested to facilitate online disinhibition and a lack of accountability (Fichman and Sanfilippo 2016), meaning behaviours that one may not exhibit in the physical world are easier to enact online. Even when communicating under one's own name and identity, the physical distance created by computer-mediated communication has been suggested to greatly increase "the possibility of deception, whether intentional or accidental, or self- or other-imposed" (Hardaker 2010: 223). Additionally, criminal communities such as traffickers, sex offenders, and extremist groups can communicate with ease and have a platform for sourcing other group members and carrying out illegal activity (for example, distributing indecent images). Furthermore, pro-harm groups such as those promoting eating disorders, self-harm and suicide have easy access to dedicated pools of likeminded individuals worldwide. This section revisits the genres of forum communication and one-to-one messaging relating to ES and discusses their differences gleaned from the Analysis (Chapter 4).

5.2.1 Forum communication

While the genres of fora and chatrooms can be (and often are) used for recovery purposes (Dilkes 2022), they can also be host to ideological echo chambers in which harmful behaviour is glamourised, gamified (Ging and Garvey 2017) and celebrated. In many such cases, these communities are accessible through the clear web and without creating an account; for example, the ability to view pro-ana hashtags via Instagram or access pro-suicide forum threads without becoming a member.

Rather than "pro-suicide", Sanctioned Suicide users refer to themselves as "pro-choice", thereby aligning themselves with the abortion rights group under the shared belief in bodily autonomy. Emphasis is placed on how they do not seek to incite others to die by suicide, nor is suicide the most favourable option for everyone. Some users also express a belief in their own recovery or the recovery of others; however, some claim that this is not possible for their personal situation. Users can be seen discouraging suicide if the issues expressed by a suicidal individual appear short-term or solvable. The forum is internally moderated and has rules, conventions, and structure; in short, it is not an ungovernable "wild west" community as portrayed by the media, and support in favour of suicide appears conditional rather than universal, contrary to the insistence of being pro-choice. What cannot be minimised is that the forum is host to a wealth of threads that explicitly provide detailed instructions for a variety of suicide methods, with a noted leniency regarding the recommendation of suicide methods (Love 2020). This includes information regarding the materials needed, where to source them, and how to use them to the desired effect. As the forum is clear web and open access (i.e., it is accessible via a normal web browser and the content is visible without creating an account), anyone can view it, including children.

As demonstrated by the analysis, the primary intended perlocutionary force of the forum data doesn't appear to be influencing others to die by suicide, unlike the one-to-one data. Contributing users seem to be steadfast in their beliefs surrounding suicide and therefore do not require convincing to adopt the forum's ideology, similarly noted by Baker (2021) in instances of extremist communities online. Obvious instances of encouraging suicide are present, for example, in users

wishing each other luck with their attempts. Some users seek to influence the choice of suicide method and the steps involved in the process. In doing this, users provide rationale for why their advice should be trusted over others, for example, having (or knowing someone with) a medical background, or having practiced with the method themselves. In providing detailed instructions for a suicide method, the offence of assisting a suicide is clearly met. Moreover, the "pro-choice" ideology of the forum is heavily promoted and scarcely questioned, while the opinions of "pro-lifers" are disparaged and antagonised. This establishes both a sense of in- versus out-group membership within the community and an echo chamber effect in which views are met with confirmation bias, as can be seen in other illicit online groups (see Chapter 2.5). Owing to its accessibility via the clear web, if a child or vulnerable person was to read the forum, this stance could stand to influence the individual on the basis that this appears to be the majority worldview and the users' claims to morality. Users can also be seen to state that the forum has led to more recoveries than it has actual suicides, however, the ease with which children can access content providing instruction for suicide is in need of urgent address, as reflected by Ofcom's recent investigation into Sanctioned Suicide (Ofcom 2025).

5.2.2 One-to-one communication

Computer-mediated influence to take one's life can also take place in a more private, one-to-one exchange. Chapter 2.8 demonstrates how online acquaintances and romantic partners have been found to incite the other to suicide. Examples of one-to-one ES appear to stem from either a place of understanding (as in the forum context), or one of hatred and violence (unlike the forum context). For example, in the case of Natasha Gordon, the pair met online in search of suicide partners. It stands to question whether her intent to die by suicide herself was genuine, however, leaving Matthew Burkinshaw to take his own life did not appear to be borne of a personal vendetta towards him. Conversely, Charlotte May Cole's messages to her husband revealed that she encouraged his suicide for months leading up to his death, similar to Inyoung You's "constant and inescapable barrage of cruel messages" (McArthur et al. 2024: 1309) to her boyfriend, Alexander Urtula.

Michelle Carter appears to border the line of the understanding, "pro-choice" approach to suicide and of encouraging it out of frustration. At first, she and Conrad bond through their shared mental health issues and feelings of being misunderstood. Suicide is discussed as means of achieving freedom from suffering, as it is in the forum data. Also akin to the forum (and under the umbrella of assistance), Michelle shares resources with Conrad to help him achieve his goal. This supportive attitude then changes when Conrad expresses uncertainty and resistance, and over time, Conrad's character is criticised for his hesitance, indecision and supposed dishonesty (Calloway 2023). This pattern of building a bond of trust with a vulnerable person, then to manipulate that trust and coerce them to act against their will and instinct is arguably the most nefarious exhibit of ES. Instead of help being sought for someone in crisis, they have been steered towards an irreversible outcome. The Court in *Carter* labelled the conduct a "systematic campaign of coercion" (474 Mass. 624 2016), highlighting the targeted and persistent approach said to overwhelm Conrad's willpower (ibid.).

Cases of one-to-one ES like those of Michelle Carter and William Melchert-Dinkel demonstrate the pragmatic functions involved in potentially influential discourse. With the promotion of suicide as the most commonly occurring ES illocutionary act in the data, this evaluation of suicide as a positive concept asserts the perpetrator's belief that this is correct. Similar to Genova's (1971) example of "John is good", WMD describes hanging as the "best and surest method", both evaluating the

method as reliable (rather than critiquing or questioning it) and asserting his belief in the accuracy of this statement. If we consider that "saying something will often, or even normally, produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience" (as a perlocutionary effect), it begs the question of the author's "design, intention, or purpose of producing them" (Austin 1962: 101). Particularly in the case of one-to-one ES, one individual has chosen to target another to communicate these evaluations to, as opposed to the forum genre in which information is shared publicly and often without a specified recipient. While language evidence alone cannot provide a full explanation of why someone would want to encourage suicide, it can examine the component parts of how this is done (the illocutionary act) and the aforementioned (perlocutionary) effects on the recipient's "feelings, thoughts, or actions" (Austin 1962: 101).

6.3 The need for a new methodology

The illocutionary acts (when considering ES as a language crime) relevant to the legislation discussed in this thesis (Suicide Act 1961 and the Online Safety Act 2023) are to assist, coerce, encourage, persuade or promote an act of suicide. While persuasion does not appear in the legislation explicitly, it has been implied as a factor relevant to sentencing, as in the judge's remarks in *R v Howe* and in the application of pressure to die by suicide (CPS 2014). The act of seeking assistance as the process of requesting help in achieving the outcome of suicide has been considered alongside these, also relevant to the perceived degree of suspect culpability as relevant to sentencing (CPS 2014). This is also included with the acknowledgement that pro-suicide discourse is not solely predatory; individuals can be seen asking for help and advice in favour of suicide. If the presence of a speech act is to be used to determine whether a crime has been committed (or whether content needs to be moderated under the OSA), these speech acts need to be clearly and concisely defined for both the transparency of the law and for triers of fact to reliably conclude whether an offence has taken place. Furthermore, the new Communications Offences of the Online Safety Act 2023 (s.10) are also in need of careful and considered definition due to the critique that their vagueness means that they currently "fall short of the legality requirement under international human rights law" (Article 19 2022).

While Calloway (2023) suggests that appraisal theory can be used to illustrate how the evaluative language in ES communications may elicit a behavioural response, the present thesis has demonstrated that appraisal analysis is not specific enough as a tool for use as the primary framework for linguistic analysis of ES. While it may offer a view of how generalised 'encouragement' may manifest, specifically through the use of evaluative language, it does not help in identifying the nuances of encouragement, coercion and persuasion as actions. Furthermore, if multiple coders produce inconsistent conclusions of which appraisal categories are present, this leaves the appraisal framework an unconvincing and unreliable means of analysis in this context due to the result of the above reliability test which produced a Fleiss' Kappa score of 0.29. This minimal agreement could be due to a number of factors, such as "different understandings of how the codes have been defined or how they have been interpreted, [...] simple human attention error or differing levels of coding experience" (Cole 2023: 1956-57).

Further, the discrepancies in the inter-rater test may be attributed to the subjective nature of appraisal analysis, one of its recurring critiques as an analytical method (Thompson 2008; Bloom 2011, Fuoli 2018), therefore highlighting the need for a less subjective analytical tool. Appraisal

analysis can suggest the ways in which suicide is evaluated and therefore may help to identify simple instances of behavioural and conceptual promotion through the Judgement and Appreciation subsystems. However, its categories do not specifically relate to the notions of assistance, encouragement or coercion as present in the ES legislation. On this basis, I propose that a more bespoke tool designed around the ES speech acts is needed.

As suggested by Tiersma and Solan in the context of forensic authorship analysis, "the only responsible solution is for the linguistic and legal communities to work together toward developing techniques from which reliable inferences [...] can be drawn" (2002: 230). While the development and testing of the IA framework does not claim to be the catch-all solution to this problem in terms of ES language analysis, it is the first of its kind to address the issue of how to offer a replicable means of analysis with clear delineations between these speech acts. If applying the framework practically, questions of its suitability for use in a forensic context would undoubtedly benefit from the input of legal communities. For example, any foreseen issues in the method's acceptability for trial evidence or how best to present the findings to a Court or jury.

5.4 Development and testing of the IA framework

This section discusses the decisions made and the challenges faced in designing the IA framework for analysing ES data. It then explores the trends in the illocutionary acts emergent from the analysis, how they are realised, and their potential impact.

5.4.1 The ES Speech Acts

In developing a new system for coding ES communication, a pragmatics-based approach was adopted. This is because in considering ES as a language crime (rather than in the context of physically assisting someone, for example) what constitutes an offence can be considered a set of illocutionary acts. Illocutionary acts can represent how one views the world, with the concern of the legislation being the worldviews that are being represented and the influence they may have on behaviour (the perlocutionary force). Herring (2004: 18) describes these facets as "[w]hat the speaker intends" and "what is accomplished through language", respectively. As such, the point of focus is the pragmatic force of the utterance, rather than the literal content of the messages or posts themselves (Woodhams and Grant 2006).

As detailed in Chapter 2.10, the illocutionary acts that constitute an ES offence are vague and overlapping in their definitions. An offence is committed under the Suicide Act 1961 (s.2A) when an action is "capable of encouraging or assisting the suicide or attempted suicide of another person". Under the blanket term of 'encouraging', the Suicide Act 1961 (s.2A(3)) includes "threatening another person or otherwise putting pressure on another person to commit or attempt suicide", implying coercion but not naming it as such. The Online Safety Act 2023 calls for the moderation of Primary Priority Content considered harmful to children, including that which is capable of encouraging, promoting or assisting self-harm or suicide (s.62). Additionally, coercive and controlling behaviour online is a Priority Offence under the OSA (s.62; Ofcom 2025a).

Table 8 from Chapter 4.1.3 is repeated below; this summarises the primary purposes of each illocutionary act. These conclusions are based on the dictionary definitions of each verb, with care taken to delineate synonyms appearing in multiple. For example, "support" has been segmented into the support of an action (assist), of a behaviour (encourage) and of a concept (promote). All may be considered directives by Searle's (1976) classification as "attempts [...] by the speaker to get

the hearer to do something" (p.11), with the exception of promotion as an expression of a state of affairs (Searle 1976).

Table 8) The deduced purposes of ES speech acts

ES Speech Act	Key Purpose
Assist	To help, support (an action), advise
Coerce	To compel, force, assert asymmetrical power
Encourage	To express belief, support (a behaviour), inspire confidence
Persuade	To convince (mental state A to mental state B)
Promote	To positively evaluate (a concept), support (a concept)

To code for occurrences of these speech acts, a coding scheme was created using UAM CorpusTool, thereby forming the IA framework (repeated in Figure 9 below). This provides definitions for each illocutionary act from the ES legislation (plus persuasion and seeking assistance), the option of NA (for none of the speech acts occurring within a unit of text), and the context of the illocution (i.e. whether in favour of life or death). The decision to include coding for occurrences of pro-life discourse was made for comparative purposes. For example, if life is encouraged significantly more frequently than death on a platform, then this is presumably of a lesser threat to safety and a community more centred around recovery. Similarly, if in a one-to-one exchange, the most frequent act is one party seeking assistance, this could be indicative of a different kind of asymmetrical relationship and an alternative (non-ES) issue. Furthermore, compassionately helping an individual who is seeking assistance with a "settled" decision to die by suicide may have an effect on the decision to prosecute and the length of a given sentence (CPS 2014).

Figure 9) The Illocutionary Acts framework for analysing computer-mediated ES
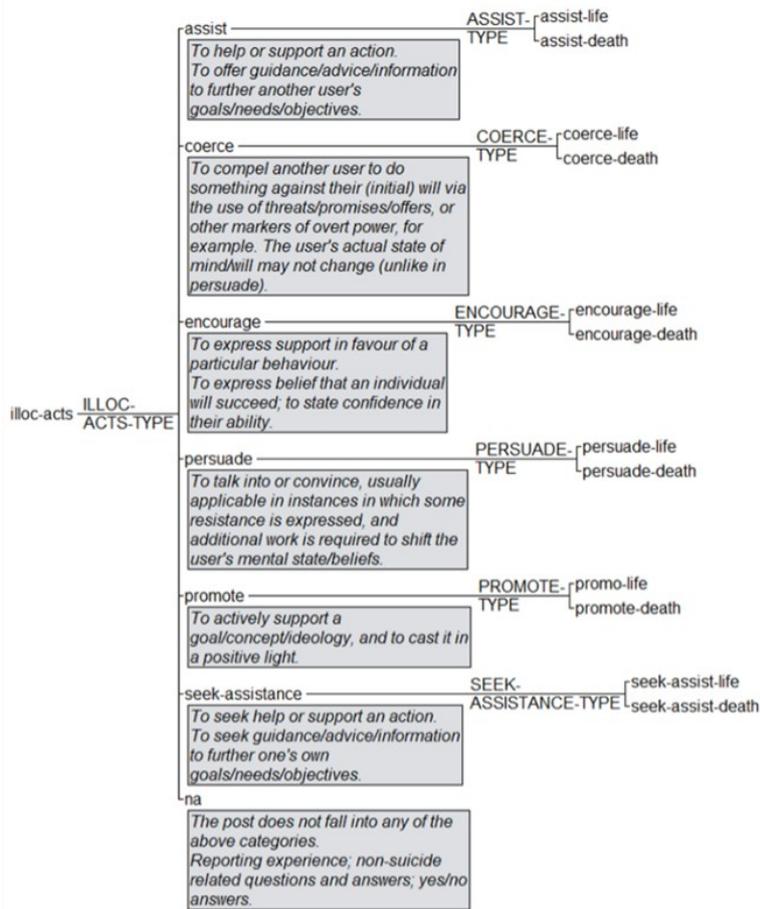
The dictionary definitions of these terms represent a foundational understanding of them conceptually, but for a technical purpose, there must exist clearer boundaries between them. This is due to the necessity in a forensic context for the trier of fact to be able to confidently state, for example, "*This constitutes encouragement **because**",* and to provide criteria for their reasoning. The rationale of this decision was also based on the assumption that a greater specificity in definition of each speech act would lead to a greater degree of inter-rater agreement. One shortfall of the appraisal coding scheme from the questionnaire is the cross-terminology between categories leading to possible confusion; for example, the mention of "process" and "processes" in the glosses for Affect and Appreciation. It is for this reason that care has been taken in the IA framework to clearly state the differing objects of "support" in the glosses of assist, encourage and promote.

Persuasion and coercion are currently implied under the umbrella of encouragement. Regarding persuasion and coercion, both involve an attempt to get the addressee to act where some initial resistance is met. The difference lies in persuasion as an act with the aim of influencing someone's opinion, and coercion as one where the opinion may not change, but the addressee feels compelled to act regardless. Coercion may therefore be seen as an inherently nefarious act, as reflected by the inclusion of "threats/promises/offers, or other markers of overt power" in the gloss. Encouragement carries the connotation of the addresser expressing belief in the addressee's ability to carry out the task, and the addressee may already be committed to the prospect of suicide while in receipt of

encouragement, for example, being wished luck. In dissecting these concepts, it becomes apparent that they may be treated judicially with varying degrees of severity (as suggested in *R v Howe*).

While the analysis gleaned that persuasion is not common to ES in these datasets, it may prove useful in applying the framework to other types of computer-mediated data with the potential to influence. As suggested by Martin and White (2005) with their appraisal framework, the IA framework may also be adapted for use with a variety of genres. This could include the omission or addition of further illocutionary acts as relevant to the research context. Considering the addition of illocutionary acts, care should be taken not to overcomplicate the system's structure and to keep it as simple as possible so as not to become "cognitively intensive" (Woodhams and Grant 2006: 257).

Seeking assistance has also been included in the IA framework, as identification of this can be useful in suggesting a victim's mental state (and a perpetrator's awareness of it), as in the case of Tyler Webb (see 2.8.5). On the other hand, it may also be seen as evidence of a "a voluntary, clear, settled and informed decision to commit suicide" (CPS 2014) as a mitigating factor tending against prosecution. Additionally, if a dataset features a high proportion of individuals seeking assistance in favour of life, this is an indication that the discourse may be more focused on recovery than actively pro-suicide. Furthermore, high proportions of seeking assistance with suicide may be indicative of the wider issue of a lack of available mental health resources and greater societal struggle. Further research could address whether instances of seeking assistance with suicide correlate with events of significant political or economic stress, or times of increased academic stress in young people (for example, exam season) (Bould et el. 2019).

Overall, the aim of the framework is to add to the breadth of "social scientific ways of organising discourse and language into categories in a systematic way" (Holbrook 2015: 58), and to seek to dissect pragmatically dense concepts in a way that is easily illustratable in a judicial setting.

5.4.2 Testing the IA Framework

Following its design based on the definitions provided in Stage 1, the IA framework was tested for inter-rater reliability using the one-to-one data. Initially, the coding scheme included a layer to code for whether the speech act is realised implicit or explicitly. After the initial rounds of coding, it became clear that this factor was detrimental to the system's replicability and likely superfluous to the need of the court for evidentiary purposes (as its hypothetical applied usage). Following the removal of the implicit/explicit layer, the agreement rose from 54.5% to 70%, with a Cohen's Kappa of 0.68. Subsequently, testing the framework on the forum data returned inter-rater reliability of 71.5% (Cohen's Kappa=0.69). The Kappa scores in both instances may therefore be considered representative of substantial agreement between coders (Landis and Koch 1977; Cole 2023). As qualitative pragmatic analysis is inherently subjective, the testing and editing of the framework sought to minimise this degree of subjectivity for the purpose of replicability, an outcome which was successfully achieved.

Due to the element of subjectivity and the fact that the Kappa scores are within the mid-range of the substantial agreement bracket (0.61 to 0.8 (Landis and Koch 1977; Cole 2023)), the IA framework should be reliability tested again when being applied to new contexts and genres. This is especially true if new illocutionary acts are added by the researcher.

Through exploring the presence and realisation of the ES speech acts within the data, some patterns are apparent. This subsection will discuss some of the trends in illocutionary acts emergent from the data in the context of the law and the literature.

5.4.3a Promotion

The frequent promotion of suicide in both datasets appears primarily related to the positive evaluation of a suicide method for factors of painlessness, peacefulness, speed, and efficacy. In asserting confidence in a method's effectiveness, it is logical to assume this could lead to people enacting such method by a word-of-mouth effect. In the Carter/Roy data, this comes in the form of MC researching methods on CR's behalf, while WMD bases his evaluation of hanging on personal experience as a nurse. In the forum data, users claim knowledge of a method's effectiveness through experience in practicing with the method, medical expertise (either their own or via someone they know), or from articles or written accounts of other users.

In the forum data, promotion is also frequently linked to the belief that suicide is the best option for that individual at that time. For example, in Chapter 4.3.2a, extracts 7a-7e are all expressions of desire to die by suicide, rather than pushing the concept on another user. As such, the aim of these posts doesn't seem to be to influence the thoughts or actions of others. They are declaratives functioning almost like a diary entry or a statement of fact, not necessarily inviting conversation or input. These acts of promotion could indeed be considered low risk and may therefore not require action if the particular online space did not also feature instances of encouraging, assisting or coercing suicide (while Sanctioned Suicide does).

Conversely, MC's romanticisation of death serves to hold the act of suicide in a positive light. In portraying herself and CR in a fashion akin to Romeo and Juliet (in which both lovers die), or Cory Monteith and Lea Michele (Monteith died in 2013 of an accidental drug overdose), she draws links between romantic love and death through imagery of longing and angelic protection (e.g. "wrap your arms around me and let me know you're watching over me, and I'll always smile back"). This serves to portray an idealist view of suicide, while neglecting the factors of pain and tragedy for both the suicidal individual and their loved ones. Whether purposefully or through ignorance, this romanticised depiction serves to minimise the gravity of an individual ending their lives in suffering. This also exemplifies how promotion as an illocutionary act may influence suicidal behaviour as a perlocutionary effect. In glamourising suicide in this way, it could be argued that this promotion is also an act of encouragement by celebrating the result of a specific behaviour and therefore implicitly encouraging the behaviour itself.

The concept of life is also promoted on occasion. On the forum, this can come in the form of naming reasons to live; for example, friends, pets, nature, and the belief that some struggles may be temporary. Identifying instances of promoting life could prove useful in determining a victim's state of mind during an interaction. Much as the CPS used Tyler Webb's knowledge of his victim's vulnerability as evidence in his case, evidence to suggest a victim's hesitance to die by suicide could prove useful in forming a case against an offender (CPS 2014). On one occasion, CR states that he wishes he were a baby so that he could "start over", thereby indicating that he holds some hope that life could be worth living under different circumstances. Instead of promoting death as the solution to his current situation, he implicitly promotes the concept of life and implies his will to live.

The illocutionary act of assisting suicide was also common in both datasets. While conceptual promotion may be difficult to moderate, assisting a suicide is a more explicit act and one that is inherently more dangerous. In exploring the forum data, certain topics of assistance became apparent. These concern the *type of method*, *type of equipment*, *source/acquisition of equipment*, *time/location*, *method enactment*, and *other*. The frequency of these topics has been repeated in Table 19 below. Assisting with a method can involve providing instructions and advice regarding the topics in Table 19 and therefore involves the user claiming knowledge and expertise on the subject, as when promoting a method. As a result, the degree of confidence instilled by the addresser may be met with the addressee's confidence in the advice.

Table 19) Frequency of assistance topics

Assist-Death	M	N	Rank
method-enactment	6.97%	289	1
equipment-type	2.72%	113	2
method-type	2.63%	109	3
equipment-source/acquisition	1.98%	82	4
time/location	0.46%	19	5
other	0.14%	6	6

The high frequency of assistance regarding method enactment is concerning due to the suggestion that description of a suicide method may lead to an increase in suicides using that method (Ashton and Donnan 1979; Phillips and Carstensen 1986, 1988; Cheng et al. 2007). This comes in support of the Werther effect in which an increase in suicides using a method recently featured in the media occurs (Phillips 1974; Pirkis and Nordentoft 2011). In providing guidance on how to carry out a suicide, the topics of *equipment type* and *equipment source/location* may also feature, with the aim of increasing the likelihood of the desired outcome for the addressee (and, as often stated, to reduce the risk of ending with lifechanging injuries instead). What's more, these acts of assistance mean a step-by-step guide on how to die by suicide is available on the clear web for all to access, including children. When assistance (in method enactment) is paired with promotion (due to painlessness and efficacy), suicide can be portrayed as an easy, achievable act, with no attention drawn to the emotional outcome for others involved. On the other hand, forum members may argue that ending one's life in a chosen manner is a decision to be made by the individual, free from outside influence. The matter-of-fact approach to assistance typically means this category does not seek to influence the will of the addressee (unlike in instances of persuasion or coercion). As highlighted by the definition in the IA framework, assistance is the provision of guidance/advice/information to further the goals/needs/objectives of another. As such, posts that assist suicide can be seen in response to those seeking assistance.

Assisting suicide is explicitly named as an offence under the Suicide Act 1961. Within this, there are mitigating factors regarding whether a prosecution is sought and the severity of the resulting criminal sentence, for example, whether or not the suspect was "wholly motivated by compassion" (CPS 2014). If providing assistance in response to a user's "voluntary, clear, settled and informed

decision to commit suicide" (ibid.), this may receive some consideration. A conflicting stance provided by the CPS (2014) is that "[a] prosecution is more likely to be required if":

> the suspect was unknown to the victim and encouraged or assisted the victim to commit or attempt to commit suicide by providing specific information via, for example, a website or publication[.]

It is unclear which takes precedence, whether the aggravating factor of the suspect and victim being personally unknown to each other and the provision of online guidance, or the mitigating factor of acting out of compassion. It is also noted that

> In the context of websites which promote suicide, the suspect may commit the offence of encouraging or assisting suicide if he or she intends that one or more of his or her readers will commit or attempt to commit suicide" (CPS 2014).

Therefore, in instances of users providing instructions and resources, it is reasonable to assume that their intent is for them to be used to facilitate a suicide. This is especially true when assistance is being sought by another user expressing suicidal ideation.

5.4.3c Seeking Assistance

Coding for instances of seeking assistance can provide insight into an individual's state of mind, for example, if they are regularly seeking assistance in relation to life, they may be actively aiming towards recovery. Meanwhile, if they are regularly seeking assistance with suicide, other users or interlocutors will be aware of their vulnerable state. For example, MD and NK pose questions regarding suicide methods to WMD, and MC and CR establish a dynamic in which they query and assist each other.

Seeking assistance with a suicide can imply a degree of commitment on the part of the seeker at one end of the scale, or a passing curiosity at the other. This speech act typically takes the form of a question, be it regarding the topics of assistance in Table 19, links to external sources (8d-g), or practicalities after death (e.g. 5b). This can also take the form of implicit requests, for example, "I'm ready, but I don't know where to jump from". While the target of the request is obvious in the one-to-one data, there is often an unspecified target when assistance is sought on the forum, as indicated by indefinite pronouns like "anybody", "anyone" or "someone". Likewise, the specificity of the request can vary from minutiae regarding equipment such as the correct thickness of rope to more vague and general requests like "Can someone give me advice or precautions before doing It please?". The prevalence of seeking help with method enactment is unsurprising considering Rodway et al.'s (2023) finding that the most common type of suicide-related online experience is researching suicide methods.

The desired pragmatic force of seeking assistance is to elicit a reply. The illocutionary act of seeking assistance with suicide appears to achieve a degree of success, with some requests for assistance being met with multiple replies (assist-death: n=289 vs seek-assist-death: n=174). Several requests are also not met with replies, for example, extracts 8d-g. This is not to say that the perlocutionary force of the addressee answering is not fulfilled, as this may have taken place in the form of a private message of the requested link. The reason for not posting the resource link publicly is likely due to

the clear web nature of the forum and not wanting to attract observing law enforcement officers to this source of suicide materials.

In the context of the OSA, it is possible that seeking assistance with a suicide could be viewed as its conceptual promotion by way of legitimation. In seeing suicidal ideation and planning for suicides in close concentration on a forum, this could result in it being seen as normalised and accepted conduct (for example, if accessed by children). Again, this could stand to debate in an instance wherein encouragement, assistance and coercion were not also present. However, in the case of Sanctioned Suicide, criminal acts are occurring regardless (based on UK legislation if concerning UK-based users), meaning intervention is already valid.

5.4.3d Encouragement

As a directive speech act (Searle 1976), the intended perlocutionary force of encouragement is to get someone to do something. In this instance, to behave in a certain way by positively evaluating said behaviour and highlighting belief in the individual's ability to enact it successfully. For example, MC draws attention to her belief in CR's strength in 4a, stating "I don't think you're weak at all [...] I think you're so strong". This comes in combination with her suggesting that dying by suicide doesn't make CR "selfish or a coward or weak or anything", thereby supporting his suicidal behaviour by implicitly suggesting it is an act of bravery. As suggested by Wong (2015), encouragement is a process through which support for others is expressed. MC and WMD both exemplify this by stating belief in the ability of their interlocutors, for example, "there's no way you can fail" and "I think youll do fine". In doing this, the aim is to minimise doubt and hesitation on the part of the addressee, aligning with Macdonald and Lorenzo-Dus' (2020) observation that "encouragement is intentional; and, it is performative" (p.476).

Suicide is also portrayed as an act of bravery in the forum data, for example, in the statement "that's already a great deal to have the courage to try" in response to another user's report of a suicide attempt. This may be seen to inspire the user to try again, much like another saying, "Don't give up!". This pertains to the idea of death as the goal or desirable outcome, further supported by users wishing each other luck in their suicidal acts (9d-g) and encouraging practicing suicide methods to gauge their likelihood of working for the individual. Despite this, forum users can be seen rejecting the possibility that the forum is a platform on which suicide is encouraged (9m), while others appear cautious of producing an act of encouragement without knowing the circumstances of the addressee (9l). This does indicate some awareness that encouraging suicide is a moral issue at least and a legal issue at most, as both examples demonstrate acknowledgement of encouraging suicide as a negative concept. Nevertheless, the forum is host to explicit examples of encouraging suicide which fulfil the criteria of an offence under the Suicide Act 1961.

Regarding the encouragement of life, while suicide is presented as a viable option for some, it is not an action unanimously supported for all. For example, for posts in which users appear pressured to die quickly, belief in their ability to recover or for an issue to pass can be seen as encouraging life. This can be seen in 9n, where "u can overcome it" demonstrates faith in the addressee's strength to continue. There are instances of MC discouraging CR from suicide, as demonstrated by "[o]kay then, don't do it!", and "[i]f you don't wanna do this, don't do it!". These statements do however take place in a manipulative context, due to being followed by negative judgements of CR's veracity ("I thought you wanted to do it I mean you bought all the stuff") and capacity ("I just know you'll always

be thinking about it and you're just gonna get worse if you don't get help") in appraisal terms, and therefore have the potential to crossover into an act of coercion.

5.4.3e Coercion

Coercion arises when an addressee performs a perlocutionary act they did not initially want to do, typically involving a degree of force and an asymmetrical power dynamic. Coerced suicide is not explicitly mentioned as an offence under the Suicide Act 1961, while it is implied as a type of encouragement by way of "threatening another person or otherwise putting pressure on another person to commit or attempt suicide" (s.2A(3)). Additionally, the judge in the UK ES case of *R v Howe* stated that "evidence of threats, pressure or persuasion applied to the victim will have a bearing on culpability", suggesting that these facets (qualities of coercion) could receive stricter sentencing. The lack of explicitly naming coercion as an offence under the Suicide Act (and one with bearing on the suspect's culpability) may prove to be an oversight. Due to the harmful nature of coercion through which someone can feel forced to act in a way they may not feel is right for them through the application of external pressure, coercing suicide may therefore be considered with greater severity than encouraging suicide (for example). Owing to this, this thesis suggests that the coercion of suicide should form an explicit criterion of an ES offence in future adaptations of the Suicide Act 1961 for the purpose of transparency within the criminal justice system.

Coercive language appears more frequently in the one-to-one data, specifically from MC. The irrealis modal in 3c ("You keep pushing it off and you say you'll do it but u never do. Its always gonna be that way if u don't take action") follows the structure of *If you don't do X, then Y will happen.* This has the effect described in Tolhurst's (1983) explanation of how coerced suicide can be achieved, by giving the options of prolonged torture versus a quicker, self-inflicted death. In this example, even if CR doesn't want to die, he doesn't want to live in suffering either; therefore, the quicker solution appears to be the more logical one, despite being against his stated will.

Coercion is an inherently manipulative force, which this thesis argues to be the most nefarious of the ES speech acts due to an individual feeling obliged to act, typically through force and subsequent intimidation or fear. MC achieves this by belittling CR, questioning his veracity, and persistently applying pressure. In the latter, she repeatedly questions whether/when CR is going to follow through with his suicide, with the expectation that he should and soon. In doing so, this "[puts] pressure on another person to commit or attempt suicide" (Suicide Act 1961, s.2A(3)). With respect to questioning CR's character, MC implies that he is a liar in 3a and that he has previously let her down. In 3b the bravery that she once praised is now replaced with accusations of cowardice ("Saying you'll vomit is kinda like a safe way out") and a lack of commitment ("I can tell you don't want this bad"). This exemplifies how appraisal analysis can complement pragmatic analysis by highlighting evaluations of personal characteristics and behaviours. While the pragmatic force can be explored by the IA framework, appraisal can be helpful in breaking down the elements that may elicit a behavioural response (Calloway 2023) and *what* makes something coercive, while this detail is missed by coding for appraisal alone.

Coercive speech occurs more frequently in the one-to-one data compared to the forum. This could relate to the targeted nature of a private conversation when compared to the group dynamic offered by the forum. Moreover, users visiting the forum typically hold the same beliefs regarding suicide, that is, they consider it an option available to them and for the individual's right to choose. Because of this, there is less opportunity for pressure to be applied for someone to act against their will due to their will being the norm of the community. It could be said that the possibility exists for

a vulnerable person to enter the community unsure of whether they wish to die yet, for other users to then coerce them in favour of suicide before they feel ready. In actuality, the inverse seems to be true, and those expressing doubt regarding their death are instructed to wait until they have gained further clarity or ruled out the possibility of recovery. This aligns with the forum's self-professed "pro-choice" stance, meaning users should be free to make their own informed and unimpeded decision regarding life and death, providing they are rational and have considered all options available to them. The only examples of coercion that do occur in the forum data (11a-b) mirror Tolhurst's (1983) reasoning, as explained above.

The perlocutionary force of coercion is the addressee acting according to the will of the addresser. This therefore implies that the addresser has something to gain from this action. It is unclear what a user would stand to gain from coercing another into suicide, and this would be a high-risk interaction due to the group nature of the conversation and the community guideline not to encroach on another's decision making. In the one-to-one context, this may be more apparent. WMD sought to influence others to die by suicide via live stream to fulfil his voyeuristic fantasy. As he groomed MD and NK from suicide fora, it could be the case that this is more commonplace than visible by the forum data in this study. In MC's instance, her potential gain could similarly have been to fulfil a fantasy; this time, the romanticised one she expresses in her promotion of suicide (see 5.4.3a). Alternatively, she could have sought to ensure the possibly distressing contact from CR ceased in a way that was quick and permanent. The emotional weight of communicating with someone expressing suicidal ideation could have become overwhelming for her, and this may have been an ill-informed way of ending the conversation rather than seeking to help. Another possibility may be a form of 'mercy killing', in which she could see CR's pain and struggle and genuinely believed this to be the best option for him.

5.4.3f Persuasion

Persuasion is the least frequently occurring speech act in the dataset from the IA framework. While the analysis in Chapter 4 did not demonstrate many noteworthy findings in relation to instances of persuasion in the ES data, the addition of this speech act may prove useful in application of the framework to other illicit genres in which participants seek to influence others for nefarious purposes (e.g. Deamer et al. 2025). Additionally, there are instances in which it may be necessary to distinguish between an individual's mind or will being unchanged yet feeling obliged to act through force or intimidation (coercion), and one in which their belief or will has been changed (persuasion). While coercion appears to be the more harmful act at face value, it may be noted that persuasive devices may too be exploited for either "the greatest possible good" or "the greatest possible harm" (Aristotle 1991: 69).

The idea that "[i]t isn't really persuasion if the respondent is already committed to the proposition" (Walton 2012: 56) is especially relevant to the forum data in this study. Many posts are indicative of a level of commitment to choosing suicide and therefore do not provide an opportunity for the poster's mind to be changed. As noted regarding coercion above, sometimes users do enter the forum unsure of their commitment to suicide. In communicating this, they leave themselves open to potentially manipulative users seeking to influence them in favour of suicide; however, there are no instances of persuading suicide in the forum data used in this study. This could be in part owing to the "pro-choice" tendencies of the group, meaning if someone is found trying to influence another's decision, they may be called out for this behaviour and ostracised by the community.

Persuasion takes place in the MC/CR data at points where "resistance is expressed" by CR, in alignment with the IA definition of persuasion. CR expresses concern regarding how his family will react to his death and questions whether he can knowingly subject them to that degree of pain. At this point, MC persists to try and change his mind, claiming that his family will "be okay" and "get over it". In attempting to remove his reservation, the desired effect is for him to act (in this case, to proceed with suicide). Further, extract 6bis an example of MC's use of the Aristotelian proof of *logos* in trying to nullify another of CR's concerns. In providing a logical and structured argument, the aim is to make it difficult for the interlocutor to counter-argue. This example (6b) demonstrates a clear argument in favour of CR trying the suicide method they are discussing.

Coding for acts of persuasion revealed the only instance in either dataset in which a speech act occurs in support of life over death (*n*=9 vs *n*=0)*.* While the forum's "pro-choice" stance indicates that users should not try to change anyone's mind in favour of either life or death, the exception appears to be when someone's reason(s) for suicide are irrational, illogical, forced, or temporary. Examples 10a-c demonstrate this, as well as the interplay between persuasion and encouragement. This element of the forum is not one generally presented to the public in the media; one in which support and morality are present. Where the facets that encourage, coerce and assist suicide are dangerous and problematic, those that promote informed and rational decision-making, logical reasoning, and recovery can be positive.

5.5 Implications for policy

This section uses the findings of this thesis to suggest where the ES data lies in respect to the current ES law. It also considers necessary and overlooked factors regarding the moderation and removal of pro-suicide online spaces.

Article 10 of the Human Rights Act 1998 "protects your right to hold your own opinions and to express them freely without government interference", including via the internet and social media (Equality and Human Rights Commission 2021). However, this right can be restricted by authorities in the interest of "prevention of disorder or crime" or "the protection of health or morals" (Human rights Act 1998, Article 10). From this, it is understandable how language crimes are difficult to police, particularly ones that involve the expression of opinion. While the encouragement or coercion of racial hatred (for example) is a simpler issue because it infringes on the rights and safety of others, the concept of promoting suicide proves more difficult. In examples 7a-e from Chapter 4.3.2a, suicide is promoted conceptually as the preferred option for these individuals. It could be surmised that these are a threat to "health or morals" (Human Rights Act 1998, Article 10) by standing in favour of suicide, which may be deemed an immoral act. This promotion could also be restricted in the interest of "prevention of disorder or crime" (ibid.) in instances wherein the encouragement or assistance of suicide occurs alongside it. Regarding restrictions, EHRC states that

> the relevant public authority must show that the restriction is 'proportionate', in other words that it is appropriate and no more than necessary to address the issue concerned (2021).

No additional information relating to the proportionality or necessity of a restriction is provided.

In cases of pro-suicide content, it may be argued that promoting the concept of suicide as a personal option is a lesser issue in what may become a graded scale of promotion. For example, promoting a

suicide method, the romanticisation of suicide, or portraying suicide as the solution to a problem would rank higher in their potential to do harm through the possibility of encroaching on the beliefs or influencing the opinion of another.

One step that has been taken since the introduction of the OSA is the first conviction of encouraging serious self-harm (Online Safety Act s.184; CPS 2025). The offender (Tyler Webb) was determined by the CPS to have

> committed an act that encouraged serious self-harm, or encouraged suicide, and was intended to do so; or that he believed his acts were capable of encouraging suicide or self-harm (CPS 2025).

Webb received a sentence of eight years and two months for encouraging suicide, and one year and two months for encouraging self-harm, with part of this to be served in a hospital facility for his mental health issues. While an offence was committed under the Suicide Act regardless, the additional sentence for encouraging self-harm is the first of its kind. Webb approached the victim on a forum where matters of mental health were discussed. They then proceeded to message privately, through which he would instruct her to harm herself and to send him photos of her injuries. Reminiscent of William Melchert-Dinkel, he made attempts to get the victim to hang herself on video stream while he watched. Owing to the vulnerability of the victim due to her existing mental health difficulties, her risk of dying by suicide on Webb's instruction may be increased (Dorol-Beauroy-Eustache and Mishara 2021; Cheng et al. 2007; Phillips and Carstensen 1986; 1988). This case illustrates the need to intercept targeted ES; Webb's arrest means he is unable to target any further victims, for whom the outcome could have been death.

Also borne of the OSA, at the time of writing, Ofcom has launched its first investigation into an online suicide forum, claiming it has "failed to comply with its duties" (Ofcom 2025a). The investigation concerns whether the provider has failed to "assess the risk of UK users encountering illegal material on their sites and apps", "[implement] appropriate safety measures to reduce the risk of it appearing in the first place", and "remove illegal content quickly when they become aware of it, including illegal forms of suicide and self-harm content" (Ofcom 2025b). If the provider is found to be noncompliant with its legal obligations under the OSA, fines of up to "£18m or 10% of qualifying worldwide revenue, whichever is greater" may be imposed (ibid.). Additionally, Ofcom can

> seek a court order for 'business disruption measures', such as requiring payment providers or advertisers to withdraw their services from a platform, or requiring Internet Service Providers to block access to a site in the UK (2025b).

As it seems unlikely that a suicide forum would have a revenue stream or advertisers, the most probable conclusion appears to be a block on the site in the UK. While attempts have been made to remove suicide fora in the past, they continue to reappear under different domains. While Ofcom have chosen not to name the provider, Sanctioned Suicide has since become inaccessible in the UK without a VPN or anonymous (onion) browser. In order to mitigate the action being taken by Ofcom, Sanctioned Suicide would need to host discussions of suicide which are not illegal under the Suicide Act. As Sanctioned Suicide is a US-hosted site, they argue that the OSA as a UK law should not be imposed on them.

It may be noted that moderation of pro-suicide fora does not solve the wider societal issue of failing mental health resources. In the data, users of the suicide forum express belief that it is a place of support, free from judgement and the fear of being institutionalised. This is supported by Baker and Fortune's (2008) findings of self-harm and suicide forum users suggesting they are places of empathetic understanding, community, and ways of coping. Likewise, the suicide forum has the advantage of ease of accessibility compared to professional psychological or psychiatric help, with Dilkes' (2022) study suggesting that once users become established members of the forum community, they may begin to assist others in their own recovery.

Ging and Garvey (2017) argue that the existence of pro-ana fora illustrates the widespread issue of eating disorders, and in the same vein, visibility of the prevalent issue of suicidal ideation can be viewed as positive. They suggest that online communities such as pro-ana are successful in "rendering visible (as opposed to creating) a problem" (Ging and Garvey 2017: 1184). This highlights that the issues raised by these communities are not sparked by the existence of the internet, but their prevalence is increasingly apparent because of it. The findings regarding the pro-suicide community in this thesis support those concerning the pro-ana community in that some users interact with the forum "solely to gain support, understanding and a feeling of belonging" (Ging and Garvey 2017: 1197; Ascari 2013; Boero and Pascoe 2012). Meanwhile, it can also be argued that content that explicitly assists in how to enact a suicide or provides resources for this may be "a possible cause of acts of self-destruction" (Niezen 2013: 307); however, the existence of the forum as the root cause is highly questionable.

Much as pro-ana sensibilities are argued to exist prior to the internet (Ging and Garvey 2017), the issue of suicidality and those seeking help with suicide attempts will not disappear with blocking content related to it. Complete removal of these fora could therefore result in thousands of suicidal people with no online support community, and no appropriate mental health resources to replace it. If pro-suicide sites and fora are going to be blocked or removed in the UK, there needs to be an adequate care plan in place. A correlational surge in mental health funding and availability of services may begin to remedy this issue, albeit limited by factors such as individuals' willingness to contact and engage with such services due to the lack of trust in an already failing system. Suicide prevention charities like Samaritans play a valuable role, however, these rely on the asymmetrical dynamic of the suicidal individual asking for help, as opposed to the opportunity for give-and-take sharing of experiences on a forum. The "pro-life" stance of the forum also allows users to be honest with the degree of their suicidality at that moment, while admitting suicidal intent on a recovery-specific forum may be automatically blocked; however, with the possibility of intervention from trained moderators. If posts concerning suicidal intent are removed, this could lead other users to feeling isolated in their own struggle if no other users are seen to be relapsing in their recovery. Perhaps with the blocking of pro-suicide fora in the UK could come a breadth of recovery fora and modes of online help for the benefit of those who prefer to communicate about this sensitive issue facelessly and without phone calls. One reason for this could be due to it being easier to communicate views online that may otherwise be considered unacceptable (Baker and Fortune 2008). To achieve this, new research could be undertaken to assess what makes a successful and engaging recovery forum, particularly for users with a history of participating in pro-suicide fora.

In a wider context, clarifying the pragmatic distinctions between near synonyms in law may prove increasingly important in the evolving discussion of assisted dying. For example, considering the

Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill (HL Bill 112), if this kind of physician-assisted yet self-administered type of suicide is to become legal, there is an important absence of encouragement required in order for this system to operate ethically. If active encouragement is present, this has the possibility to urge someone to die before they feel ready; to imply that others want them to die; and to facilitate death for others' personal gain rather than borne out of compassion. This illustrates the difference between assistance and encouragement in the context of suicide and therefore furthers the argument that "to assist or encourage" should not be treated as one semantic unit, but as two separate concepts with varying aims and felicity conditions. The Terminally Ill Adults Bill also raises the question of whether assisted dying is conceptually the same as assisted suicide. Both have the outcome of self-inflicted death; however, the connotation of dying is a more natural process whereas suicide carries a certain stigma despite is decriminalised status in the UK. Perhaps owing to the necessary "terminal" aspect of a patient's illness in order to qualify for assisted dying, the fact that death is already prognosed makes the premature death more societally acceptable compared to, for example, the provision of a suicide kit to a 30-year-old suffering from depression.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Future Research

The IA framework has been designed to analyse ES evidence for presence of the illocutionary acts featured in ES legislation. This was made possible by attempting to reduce the degree of ambiguity between the criteria of an ES crime, specifically, a linguistically realised one. In applying this framework to identify the presence of ES speech acts in the data, substantial inter-rater agreement was achieved (Cohen's kappa=0.68 in the one-to-one data and 0.69 in the forum data) (Landis and Koch 1977; Cole 2023). The next logical step in applying this tool is to consider other laws surrounding pro-harm content, for example, the new Communications Offences brought by the Online Safety Act 2023. In this, "Primary Priority Content" is defined as that which "[c]hildren must be protected from accessing" (Gov.uk 2024). This is inclusive of content that encourages or assists in self-harm, suicide, or eating disorders (Online Safety Act 2023, s.61). As the IA framework has been reliability tested for the identification of language that encourages or assists suicide, it could similarly be tested for application on pro-self-harm and pro-ED content. Rather than assuming the principles are the same for these new contexts (pro-self-harm and pro-ED), the framework should be subject to further inter-rater reliability testing for new applications owing to the subjective nature of pragmatic analysis. In focusing on the specific Communications Offences introduced by the OSA, this could help to combat some of the vagueness and lack of definition it has been criticised for (Article 19). Additionally, in seeking to establish standardised means of evidentiary analysis for language-based crimes, this furthers the scientific merit of linguistic evidence. A standardised, replicable and reliable framework would also contribute to each case being assessed by the same criteria, thereby working in favour of the delivery of justice.

Much as Martin and White (2005) suggest with the appraisal framework, the IA framework may be expanded and adapted for application with different genres of potentially influential language. For example, the concept being encouraged (etc.) may be extremist behaviour, and the illocutionary act of glorifying violence may be substituted (as per the UK definition of extremism (Gov.uk 2024)). In this example, a clear and unambiguous definition of glorifying would need to be included, and this adaptation would need testing for inter-rater reliability. This aligns with the rationale of developing the IA framework in providing a means of mapping actual language use to a pre-defined criterion of speech acts. In doing this, nuances of whether language falls into the category of an offence may be revealed.

Future research directions could also consider means of automating data coding using the IA framework. For example, an LLM could be designed specific to the coding of ES, similar to one built by consultancy company herEthical.AI to detect victim blaming language in courtroom transcripts (herEthical.AI 2025). Before embarking upon this longitudinal and costly process, a smaller-scale proof-of-concept stage could first be explored. The IA framework and an uncoded dataset may be uploaded to ChatGPT (for instance), with the instruction to code the data based on the criteria and glosses provided in the framework. ChatGPT can be additionally instructed to include reasoning for its choices of classification, thereby adding a level of transparency to its decision-making. From this, it may be gleaned to what extent the framework in its current state is suitable for automated tagging, and what changes may be made in order to facilitate this successfully. The benefits of automating the data coding process include saving time (and therefore money) in manually coding large data sets, for example, entire chatlogs for court cases. This could also limit the amount of time

the linguist is submerged in potentially harmful or disturbing data, although samples of the LLM coding would need to be regularly checked by a human coder for errors or misunderstandings.

6.2 Contributions of this Thesis

This thesis has taken a tripartite approach to the language of computer-mediated ES. The first stage involved critiquing the ambiguous criteria of the Suicide Act 1961 and the Online Safety Act 2023 regarding the types of language that may constitute an offence, contribute to greater or lesser sentencing, or require moderation. Using the literature surrounding these pragmatically dense concepts, new definitions for these criteria were proposed based on their role as illocutionary acts (through the lens of speech act theory).

Secondly, the reliability of analysing ES data using appraisal theory was tested based on the analysis in Calloway (2023), in which appraisal is used to suggest how evaluative language may influence behaviour in an ES context. This test returned an unsatisfactory inter-rater reliability score Fleiss' Kappa=0.29), illustrating that in this instance, the way linguists categorise appraisals in ES data does not equate to substantially greater than chance agreement. Furthermore, it demonstrated that a more bespoke tool to identify the presence of ES is needed. While unsuitable as the primary analytical framework, facets of appraisal analysis have proven useful in illustrating how illocutionary acts may achieve their corresponding perlocutionary effects.

Next, a new framework was designed (using the definitions from Stage 1) and reliability tested on one-to-one ES data (Cohen's Kappa=0.68). This framework was designed to be simple and unambiguous in such a case that linguistic analysis is required to determine what constitutes an offence under the Suicide Act 1961; to determine the severity of an alleged offence; or to present language evidence to tiers of fact.

Finally, this new IA framework was reliability tested on data scraped from a pro-suicide forum (Cohen's Kappa=0.69), and an exploratory analysis of which ES speech acts were present in this data was undertaken. Conclusions were drawn that many examples of language taken from the forum would constitute an offence under the Suicide Act 1961 in England and Wales, primarily relating to the encouragement and assistance of suicide, while the promotion of suicide was the most frequently occurring ES speech act (relating to the Online Safety Act 2023 for purposes of moderation). Fewer examples of coercive language occurred within the forum data compared to the one-to-one data, perhaps indicative of the varying aims, audiences and mindsets of the users in each genre. Despite the satisfactory inter-rater reliability scores of the IA framework, there still exists some degree of crossover between the speech acts. For example, whether seeking assistance with a suicide should also be regarded as the promotion of suicide due to legitimation and normalising pro-suicide discourse.

In demonstrating the differences in pragmatic force between the speech acts of assistance, coercion, encouragement, persuasion, and promotion, I hope to illustrate that these acts should not all be considered under the narrow brackets of assistance and encouragement (as they currently are in the Suicide Act 1961). For example, the inherently nefarious nature of coercion as the application of force, pressure, or threats borne of an asymmetrical power dynamic should be viewed with greater severity in prosecuting and sentencing in an ES case. I argue that coerced suicide should form its

own distinct criterion of the Suicide Act, rather than being considered a form of encouragement. In doing so, greater transparency in what determines an offence may be achieved, as well as acknowledgement of the intricacies of language crimes.

Furthermore, this thesis takes the stance that in analysing individual types of online harm, patterns in their realisations and impacts may become apparent. This comes in contrast to treating all forms of online harm as the same genre, much as Dorol-Beauroy-Eustache and Mishara 2021 suggest exploring the multi facets of cyberbullying. This has the aim of being able to provide help with feature analysis for moderating online spaces, rather than a catch-all approach which disregards the nuances of a variety of speech acts. Furthermore, in developing a tool capable of identifying and analysing occurrences of ES, I have sought to provide a replicable methodology for the linguist to use as an expert witness, should their expertise be required in disputed ES cases. The IA framework represents a reliable, replicable system as an initial solution to this problem, while not a definitive one. With further testing and application on additional ES data, and with input from legal experts, the framework may evolve in its robustness and its suitability for a judicial setting.

Finally, I echo the argument that while the suicide forum can be a harmful resource (particularly with its current ease of access for children), its existence is the indication of a wider societal problem, and not the problem itself. The status of "those who fall victim" to suicide should be reconsidered (Tolhurst 1983: 115), as they are indeed victims. If Ofcom is going to fulfil its goal of blocking suicide fora in the UK under the OSA, attention must first be given to the availability of mental health support for those whose recovery support system will be removed.

REFERENCES

Acklin, M. W. and Fuger, K. (2016). Assessing field reliability of forensic decision making in criminal court. *Journal of Forensic Psychology Practice,* 16 (2): 74-93.

Adler, A. (1956). *The individual psychology of Alfred Adler: A systematic presentation in selections from his writings* (H. L. Ansbacher & R. R. Ansbacher, Eds.). New York: Harper Torchbooks.

Allan, K. (1997). 'Felicity Conditions'. In P. V. Lamarque (Ed.) *Concise Encyclopaedia of Philosophy of Language,* (pp.397-400). Pergamon/Elsevier.

Aristotle (1991). *The Art of Rhetoric.* Translated by H.C. Lawson-Tancred. London: Penguin Books.

Article 19 (2022). 'UK: Online Safety Bill is a serious threat to human rights online'. *Article 19*, 25 April. Available at: https://www.article19.org/resources/uk-online-safety-bill-serious-threat-to-human-rights-online/ [Accessed 12 February 2024].

Ascari, M. (2013). *A discourse analysis of interactions from an online pro-anorexia forum*. Master's Thesis, Dublin City University, Dublin.

Ashton, J. R. & Donnan, S. (1981). Suicide by burning as an epidemic phenomenon: An analysis of 82 deaths and inquests in England and Wales in 1978–79. *Psychological Medicine.* 11: 735–739.

Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Baker, D. and Fortune, S. (2008). Understanding self-ham and suicide websites: A qualitative interview study of young adult website users. *Crisis: The journal of crisis intervention and suicide prevention.* 23 (3):118-122.

Baker, P., Vessey, R. and McEnery, T. (2021). *The Language of Violent Jihad.* Cambridge University Press.

Barlow, C., Johnson, K., Walklate, S. and Humphreys, L. (2020). Putting coercive control into practice: Problems and possibilities. *British journal of criminology*. 60: 160-179.

Beauchamp, T. (1975). 'Suicide'. In T. Regan (ed), *Matters of life and death*.

Bednarek, M. (2008). *Emotion Talk Across Corpora*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bhatia, V. K. (1994). 'Cognitive structuring in legislative provisions'. In J. Gibbons (Ed.), *Language and the law* (pp. 136–55). London: Longman.

Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S. and Finegan, E. (1999). *Longman grammar of spoken and written English*. Pearson Education Limited.

Bill S.2382 Commonwealth of Massachusetts 191st (2019-2020).

Black, S. (1993) Comparing genuine and simulated suicide notes: A new perspective. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology,* 61 (4): 699-702.

Black, P., Wollis, M., Woodworth, M., Hancock, J. (2015). A linguistic analysis of grooming strategies of online child sex offenders: implications for our understanding of predatory sexual behaviour in an increasing computer-mediated world. *Child Abuse Neglect*. 44: 140-149.

Bloom, K. (2011). Sentiment analysis based on appraisal theory and functional local grammars. PhD thesis, Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago.

Boero, N. and Pascoe, C. J. (2012). Pro-anorexia communities and online interaction: bringing the pro-ana body online. *Body & Society* 18(2): 27–57.

Bogetic, K., Heritage, F. Koller, V. and McGlashan, M. (2023). Landwhales, femoids and sub-humans: Dehumanising metaphors in incel discourse. *Metaphor and the Social World.*

Bould, H. Mars, B., Moran, P., Biddle, L. and Gunnell, D. (2019). Rising suicide rates among adolescents in England and Wales. *Lancet.* 13: 116-117.

Brooks, B. (2018). 'Cyberbullying and cyberbullicide: The role of linguistic features in suicide by text', MA thesis, Hofstra University, Long Island, New York.

Brunstein-Klomek, A., Sourander, A., & Gould, M. (2010). The association of suicide and bullying in childhood to young adulthood: A review of cross-sectional and longitudinal research findings. C*anadian journal of psychiatry.* 55(5): 282-288.

Cacioppo, J. T., Cacioppo, S. and Petty, R. E. (2018). The neuroscience of persuasion: A review with an emphasis on issues and opportunities. *Social Neuroscience*. 13 (2): 129-172.

Calloway, L.R. (2021). 'On developing an analytical framework for cases of alleged encouraged suicide using the texts of Michelle Carter', MA thesis, Aston University, Birmingham, U.K.

Calloway, L. R. (2023). Using appraisal theory and the texts of Michelle Carter to assist in developing a means of analysing evidence in encouraged suicide cases. *The International Journal of Speech, Language and the Law,* 30(2): 161-182.

Calloway, L. R., Berškytė, J., Harrington, L., Zahid, I. and Popa-Wayatt, M. [forthcoming]. "An ugly subhuman like me": A computer-assisted move analysis of online incel forum posts containing 'subhuman' as a self-referent. *Discourse and Society.*

Cambridge University Press. (n.d.). Assist, v. In *Cambridge Dictionary*. Retrieved January 28, 2026, from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/assist.

Cambridge University Press. (n.d.). Coerce, v. In *Cambridge Dictionary*. Retrieved January 28, 2026, from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/coerce

Cambridge University Press. (n.d.). Encourage, v. In *Cambridge Dictionary*. Retrieved January 28, 2026, from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/encourage.

Cambridge University Press. (n.d.). Persuade, v. In *Cambridge Dictionary*. Retrieved January 28, 2026, from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/persuade.

Cambridge University Press. (n.d.). Promote, v. In *Cambridge Dictionary*. Retrieved January 28, 2026, from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/promote.

Carns, M. R., & Carns, A. W. (2006). 'A review of the professional literature concerning the consistency of the definition and application of Adlerian encouragement'. In S. Slavik & J. Carlson (Eds.), *Readings in the theory of individual psychology* (pp. 277-293). New York, NY: Taylor & Francis.

Carr C. T., Schrock D. B., Dauterman P. (2012). Speech acts within Facebook status messages. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 31(2), 176–196.

Cartwright, N. (2009). 48 years on: Is the Suicide Act fit for purpose? *Medical Law Review.* 17(3): 467-476.

Charteris-Black, J. (2018). *Analysing Political Speeches,* 2nd Ed. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

Cheng, A. T. A., Hawton, K., Chen, T. H. H., Yen, A. M. F., Chang, J. C., Chong, M. Y., Liu, C. Y., Lee, Y., Teng, P. R., & Chen, L. C. (2007). The influence of media reporting of a celebrity suicide on suicidal behaviour in patients with a history of depressive disorder. *Journal of Affective Disorders.* 103: 69–75.

Cinelli, M., De Fransisci Morales, G., Galeazzi, A., Quattrociocci, W. and Starnini, M. (2021). The echo chamber effect on social media. *PNAS.* 118 (9): 1-8.

Clarke, J. (2025). 'How could assisted dying laws change?', *BBC News*, 20 June. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c5y5d2g3wgxo [Accessed 27 July 2025].

Cohen, R. L. (2021). Prosecution for sticks, stones, and words that killed Conrad Roy: A look at the free speech fundamentalism behind Michelle Carter's conviction. *Indiana Journal of Law and Social Equality,* 9(2): 150-166.

Cole, R. (2023). Inter-rater reliability methods in qualitative case study research. *Sociological methods & research*, 53(4): 1944-1975.

Coleman, C. (2022). *Social media: Potential harm to children.* Available at: https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/social-media-potential-harm-to-children/ [Accessed 15 July 2023].

Collavin, E. (2011). 'Speech Acts', In Bublitz & Norrick (Eds.), *Foundations of Pragmatics* (pp. 373–396). Berlin/New York: De Gruyter Mouton.

Commonwealth v. Carter, 52 N.E.3d 1054 (Mass. 2016).

Commonwealth v. Inyoug You, 1984CR000617 (Mass. 2019).

Companies Act 2006, Available at: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/46/contents [Accessed 28 July 2025].

'Conrad's Law': An act relative to preventing suicide (Bill. H1548).

Crawford, A. and Smith, T. (2024). 'Poison seller tied to suicide forum tracked down by BBC', *BBC News*, 1 March. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-68347415 [Accessed 28 July 2025].

Criminal Practice Directions (2023). *CrimPRC(23)90(b)*. Available at: https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Criminal-Practice-Directions-2023-1.pdf [Accessed 6 September 2025].

Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) (2022). Suicide: Policy for prosecutors in respect of cases of encouraging or assisting suicide. Available at: https://www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/suicide-policy-prosecutors-respect-cases-encouraging-or-assisting-suicide#:~:text=The%20offence%20of%20encouraging%20or,of%20itself%2C%20a%20criminal%20offence. [Accessed 4 December 2023].

Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) (2021). *Inchoate offences*. Available at: https://www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/inchoate-offences [Accessed 23 November 2023].

Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) (2024). *Expert Evidence.* Available at: https://www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/expert-evidence [Accessed 12 July 2025].

Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) (2025). *Prison term for 'legal first' prosecution of man who encouraged a vulnerable woman to commit serious self-harm online*. Available at:

https://www.cps.gov.uk/cps/news/prison-term-legal-first-prosecution-man-who-encouraged-vulnerable-woman-commit-serious [Accessed 12 July 2025].

Dale, A., Davies, A., & Wei, L. (1997). Developing a typology of rapists' speech. *Journal of pragmatics,* 27: 653-669.

Davies, B. and Harré, R. (1990). 'Positioning: The discursive production of selves'. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*. 20: 43– 46.

Day, K. (2010). Pro-anorexia and 'binge-drinking': conformity to damaging ideals or 'new', resistant femininities? *Feminism and Psychology.* 20(2): 242–248.

Dayter, D. (2016). *Discursive self in microblogging*. John Benjamins Publishing.

Dayter, D. (2021). Dealing with interactionally risky speech acts in simultaneous interpreting: The case of self-praise, *Journal of pragmatics*. 174: 28-42.

Dilkes, J. (2022). Quantifying changes in language to evaluate the social and psychological effect of participation in a 'pro-choice' suicide forum. *International Workshop on Cyber Social Threats (CySoc 2022)*. 16th International AAAI conference on web and social media.

Dillard, J.P. and Seo, K. (2012). 'Affect and Persuasion'. In J.P. Dillard and L. Shen (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Persuasion: Developments in Theory and Practice* (2nd Ed.). London: SAGE Publications, pp.150-166.

Dimopoulos, N. (2021). Cause of death? Speech: The problems with criminalizing the "encouragement" of suicide. *Quinnipiac health LJ*. 24: 211-235.

Dinkmeyer, D., & Losoncy, L. (1996). *The skills of encouragement: Bringing out the best in yourself and others*. Delray Beach, FL: St. Lucie Press.

Donath, J. S. (1999). Identity and deception in the virtual community. In M. A. Smith & P. Kollock (Eds.),Communities in Cyberspace. 29-59. London: Routledge.

Donorovich-Odonnell v. Harris, 241 Cal. App. 4th 1118, 1127-28 (2015).

Dorol-Beauroy-Eustache, O. and Mishara, B.L. (2021). Systematic review of risk and protective factors for suicidal and self-harm behaviors among children and adolescents involved with cyberbullying, *Preventive medicine,* 152 (1):1-12.

Dreikurs, R. (1971). *Social equality: The challenge of today*. Chicago, IL: Regnery.

Du Bois, J. W. (2007). The stance triangle. In R. Englebretson (Ed.), *Stancetaking in discourse: Subjectivity, evaluation, interaction* (pp. 139–182). John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Dumas, B. K. (1992). An analysis of the adequacy of cigarette package warnings: An analysis of the adequacy of federally mandated cigarette package warnings. *Tennessee law review*. 59: 261-304.

Dumas, B. K. (2010). 'Consumer product warnings: Composition, identification, and assessment of adequacy'. In M. Coulthard and A. Johnson (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Forensic Linguistics.* London and New York: Routledge, pp.365-377.

Equality Act, 2006. Available at: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/3/part/1 [Accessed 28 July 2025].

Equality and Human Rights Commission (2021). *Article 10: Freedom of expression.* Available at: https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/human-rights/human-rights-act/article-10-freedom-expression [accessed 26 July 2025].

Falomir L. P. (2015). Leyre Ruiz de Zarobe and Yolanda Ruiz de Zarobe: Speech acts and politeness across languages and cultures. *Intercultural Pragmatics*, 12(2): 283–288.

Farnsworth, W. (2011). *Classical English Rhetoric*. Boston: David R. Godine.

Fenner, M. (1996). The Daubert Handbook: The Case, Its Essential Dilemma, and Its Progeny. *CREIGHTON L. REV,* 29: 939-954.

Flannery, S. (2023). 'What to do if an abuser threatens suicide'. *Domestic Shelters,* 17 April. Available at: https://www.domesticshelters.org/articles/identifying-abuse/what-to-do-if-an-abuser-threatens-suicide [Accessed 4 December 2023].

Forensic Science Regulator Act, 2021. Available at: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2021/14 [Accessed 17 July 2025].

Fortenbaugh, W. W. (2007). 'Aristotle's Art of Rhetoric'. In Worthington, I. *A Companion to Greek Rhetoric.* pp. 107-123. Oxford: Backwell.

Fraser, B. (1975). Warning and threatening. *Centrum*, 3: 169–80.

Fraser, B. (1998). Threatening revisited. *Forensic Linguistics: International Journal of Speech, Language and Law*, 5(2): 159–73.

Fredal, J. (2018). Is the enthymeme a syllogism? *Philosophy and Rhetoric.* 51(1):24-49.

Friestad, M. and Wright, P. (1994). The persuasion knowledge model: How people cope with persuasion attempts. *Journal of Consumer Research.* 21 (1): 1-31.

Fuoli, M. (2018). A step-wise method for annotating APPRAISAL. *Functions of Language.* 25(2): 229-258.

Gales, T. (2011). Identifying interpersonal stance in threatening discourse: An appraisal analysis. *Discourse Studies* 13(1): 27–46.

Gales, T. (2020). "Prison has been a proper punishment": Investigating stance in forensic and legal contexts. In M. Coulthard, A. May, & R. Sousa-Silva (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of forensic linguistics* (2nd ed., pp. 675–693). Routledge.

Gales, T. and Solan, L. (2017). Witness cross-examinations in non-stranger assault crimes: An appraisal analysis. *Language and Law / Linguagem e Direito*, 4(2), 108–139.

Genova, A. C. (1971). Assertion and evaluation in Searle's theory of speech acts. *The southwestern journal of philosophy.* 2 (1/2): 65-72.

Gentry, C. E. (2022). Misogynistic terrorism: it has always been here. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 15(1), 209–224.

George, M. (2019). The Importance of Social Media Content for Teens' Risks for Self-harm, *The Journal of adolescent health: official publication of the Society for Adolescent Medicine.* 65(1): 9-10.

Ging, D. and Garvey, S. (2017). 'Written in these scars are the stories I can't explain': A content analysis of pro-ana and thinspiration image sharing on Instagram. *New Media & Society.* 20(3):1181-1200.

Glasgow Law Practice (2018). *Woman imprisoned for encouraging suicide.* Available at: https://www.theglasgowlawpractice.co.uk/Latest-News/Criminal-defence/woman-imprisoned-encouraging-suicide.html [Accessed 11 February 2024].

Gnach A. (2018). 'Social media and community building: Creating social realities through linguistic interaction'. In Cotter C., Perrin D. (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of language and media* (pp. 190–205). Routledge.

Golf-Papez, M. and Veer, E. (2017). Don't feed the trolling: Rethinking how online trolling is being defined and combated. *Journal of marketing management*. 33 (15-16): 1336-1354.

Golf-Papez, M. and Veer, E. (2022). Feeding the trolling: Understanding and mitigating online trolling behaviour as an unintended consequence. *Journal of interactive marketing.* 57(1): 90-114.

Google (2022). *Update to Dangerous and Derogatory policy.* Available at: https://support.google.com/adspolicy/answer/11933633?hl=en [Accessed 29 July 2025].

Gov.uk (2022). *A guide to the online safety bill.* Available at: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/a-guide-to-the-online-safety-bill [Accessed 15 July 2023].

Gov.uk (2023). UK children and adults to be safer online as world-leading bill becomes law. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-children-and-adults-to-be-safer-online-as-world-leading-bill-becomes-law [Accessed 11 February 2024].

Gov.uk (2024). *Guidance: Online Safety Act: Explainer.* Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/online-safety-act-explainer/online-safety-act-explainer [Accessed 9 January 2025].

Gov.uk (2024). *New definition of extremism (2024).* Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/new-definition-of-extremism-2024/new-definition-of-extremism-2024 [accessed 12 September 2025].

Graff, R. (2001). Reading and the "written style"; in Aristotle's rhetoric. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly.* 31(4):19-44.

Gray, P. R. A. (2010). 'The future for forensic linguistics in the courtroom: Cross-cultural communication'. In M. Coulthard and A. Johnson (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Forensic Linguistics.* London and New York: Routledge, pp.591-601.

Giboney v. Empire Storage & Ice Co., 336 U.S. 490, 495, 498 (1949)

Gries, L. E. (2015). *Still life with rhetoric: A new materialist approach for visual rhetorics.* Utah State University Press.

Grundlingh, L. (2018). Exploring the possibility of using appraisal theory to determine the legitimacy of suicide notes. *Lingua*. 214: 1-10.

Gumperz, J. (1982). Discourse Strategies. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hall, R. (2025). 'Blackmailing girls and encouraging suicide: the young British men in online gangs'. *BBC News* [online]. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/mar/25/young-british-men-convicted-for-crimes-as-online-gang-members-two-case-studies [Accessed 28 August 2025].

Halliday, M. (1976) 'The form of a functional grammar'. In Kress, G. (ed.). *System and Function in Language* (pp.*7-25*.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hardaker, C. (2010). Trolling in asynchronous computer-mediated communication: From user discussions to academic definitions. *Journal of politeness research.* 6: 215-242.

Harris, B. A. and Woodlock, D. (2019). Digital coercive control: Insights from two landmark domestic violence studies. *British journal of criminology*. 59: 530-550.

Harwood, N. (2005). 'Nowhere has anyone attempted … In this article I aim to do just that': A corpus-based study of self-promotional I and we in academic writing across four disciplines, *Journal of pragmatics*. 37(8): 1207-1231.

HerEthical.AI (2025). *Victim blaming in courts*. Available at: https://www.herethical.ai/projects/project-vb [Accessed 31 July 2025].

Herrick, J. A. (2020). *The history and theory of rhetoric: An introduction*. Routledge.

Herring, S. (2004). 'Computer-mediated discourse analysis: An approach to researching online behavior'. In S. A. Barab, R. Kling, & J. H. Gray (Eds.), *Designing for virtual communities in the service of learning* (pp. 338–376). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Hester, M. (2010), 'Gender and Sexuality', in C. Itzin, A. Taket and S. Barter-Godfrey, eds., *Domestic and sexual violence and abuse: Tackling the health and mental health effects*. 99–131. Routledge.

Hinduja, S. and Patchin, J.W. (2010). 'Bullying, cyberbullying, and suicide'. *Archives of Suicide Research.* 14(3):206-221.

Holbrook, D. (2015) Designing and applying an 'Extremist Media Index'. P*erspectives on Terrorism.* 9 (5): 56-67.

Huddleston, J. (2023). Would New Legislation Actually Make Kids Safer Online?: Analyzing the Consequences of Recent Youth Online Safety Proposals. *Cato briefing paper.* 150: 1-5.

Human Rights Act, 1998. Available at: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/42/schedule/1 [Accessed 26 July 2025].

Hunston, S. (1993). "Evaluation and ideology in scientific discourse." *Register analysis: theory and practice*. Ed. Mohsen Ghadessy. London: Pinter. Pp. 57-73.

Hunt, D. (2025). 'Man who encouraged woman to kill herself sentenced', *BBC News,* 4 July. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cpwqy40wxw1o [Accessed 27 July 2025].

Hunter, M. (2022). *Violent Ideologies: An investigation of the relationship between linguistic evaluative patterns and psychopathology in three types of violent offender.* PhD Thesis. Aston University. Available at: https://publications.aston.ac.uk/id/eprint/45929/1/Hunter_Madison_-_2022.pdf

Hunter, M. and Grant, T. (2022). Killer stance: An investigation of the relationship between attitudinal resources and psychological traits in the writings of four serial murderers. *Language and Law / Linguagem e Direito*. 9(1): 48-72.

Hurt, M. and Grant, T. (2018). Pledging to harm: A linguistic appraisal analysis of judgement comparing realized and non-realized violent fantasies. *Discourse and Society.* 30(2): 154-171.

Iedema, R., Feez, S. and White, P. (1994) *Media Literacy (Write it Right Literacy in Industry Project: Stage Two).* Sydney: Metropolitan East Region's disadvantaged schools program.

Jisc Online Surveys (2025) Available at: https://www.jisc.ac.uk/online-surveys [Accessed 18 November 2025].

Karmakar, S. and Das, S. (2021). 'Understanding the Rise of Twitter-Based Cyberbullying Due to COVID-19 through Comprehensive Statistical Evaluation', In Proceedings of the 54th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences. 2021, Maui, Hawaii (Virtual).

Kellar, L. (2022). 'Defendant in coerced Russian roulette suicide sentenced to two years in prison'. Knox News, 15 July. Available at: https://eu.knoxnews.com/story/news/crime/2022/07/15/hayden-berkebile-sentenced-2-years-prison-coercing-russian-roulette-suicide/10073123002/ [Accessed 11 February 2024].

Kidd, R. (2022). 'They argued up to wedding': Family speak out after case of wife guilty of inciting suicide'. *Ontago Daily Times*, 21 May. Available at: https://www.newstalkzb.co.nz/news/crime/they-argued-up-to-wedding-family-speak-out-after-case-of-wife-guilty-of-inciting-suicide/ [Accessed 11 February 2024].

Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors We Live By.* Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Landis J. R. and Koch, G. G. (1977). The measurement of observer agreement for categorical data. *Biometrics,* 33(1): 159-74.

Langlotz, A. (2010). 'Social Cognition'. In M.A. Locher and S.L. Graham (Eds.), Interpersonal Pragmatics. Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter.

LaPalme, N. (2018). 'Michelle Carter and the Curious Case of Causation: How to Respond to a Newly Emerging Class of Suicide-Related Proceedings'. Boston University Law Review. 98 (5): 1443-1474.

Laver, A. (2024). 'Man found not guilty of encouraging teen's suicide'. BBC News [online]. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cpvzp2zvx12o [Accessed 28 August 2025].

Law Commission. (2021). Modernising Communications Offences: A final report. London: Law Commission. Available at: https:// s3-eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/lawcom-prod-storage-11jsxou24uy7q/uploads/ 2021/07/Modernising-Communications-Offences-2021-Law-Com-No-399.pdf [Accessed 9 October 2023].

Leech, G. N. (1983). *Principles of Pragmatics*. London: Longman.

LexisNexis (2024). *Glossary: Mens Rea Definition.* Available at: https://www.lexisnexis.co.uk/legal/glossary/mens-rea [Accessed 6 December 2024].

Lipscombe, S. Dawson, J. and Rough, E. (2024). The law on assisted suicide, *House of Commons Library.* Available at:

https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN04857/SN04857.pdf [Accessed 27 July 2025].

Liu, H. and Shu, K. (2019). *Detecting fake news on social media*. Morgan and Claypool.

Loenhoff, J. (2019). 'Social constructivism and the problem of language' in M. Pfadenhauer and H. Knoblauch (Eds.) Social Constructivism as paradigm?: The legacy of the social construction of reality. Routledge.

Love, S. (2020). People are dying after joining a 'pro-choice' suicide forum. How much is the site to blame? *Vice*. Available at: https://www.vice.com/en/article/z3vn9a/people-are-dying-afterjoining-a-pro-choice-suicide-forum-how-much-is-the-site-to-blame [Accessed 4 March 2024].

Lu, J., Ning Chua, S., Kavanaugh, J. R., Prashar, J., Ndip-Agbor, E., Santoso, M., Jackson, D. A., Chakraborty, P., Raffoul, A., Austin, S. B. (2024). Impact of digital advertising policy on harmful product promotion: Natural Language Processing analysis of skin-lightening ads, *American Journal of Preventive Medicine.* 67(6): 811-819.

Lundström R (2018) Spaces for support: Discursive negotiations of supporter positions in online forum discussions about suicide. *Discourse Context & Media,* 25: 98–105.

Macdonald, S. and Lorenzo-Dus, N. (2020). Intentional and performative persuasion: The linguistic basis for criminalizing the (direct and indirect) encouragement of terrorism. *Criminal law forum,* 31: 473:512.

MacLeod, N. (2023). Intentionally encouraging or assisting others to commit an offence: The anatomy of a language crime. *International journal of semiotic law,* 37: 677-694.

MacLeod, N. and Grant, T. (2020). 'Assuming identities online: How linguistics is helping the policing of online grooming and the distribution of abusive images'. In T. Owen & J. Marshall (eds), *Rethinking Cybercrime.* Palgrave Macmillan: 87-104.

Mars, B., Heron, J., Biddle, L., Donovan, J. L., Holley, R., Piper, M. and Gunnell, D. (2015). Exposure to, and searching for, information about suicide and self-harm on the internet: Prevalence and predictors in a population-based cohort of young adults. *Journal of Affective Disorders.* 185: 239-245.

Marsh, I., Winter, R. and Marzano, L. (2021) 'Representing suicide: Giving voice to a desire to die?', *Health* : 1-17.

Martin, J. R. (2000). "Beyond exchange: APPRAISAL systems in English." E*valuation in text: authorial stance and the construction of discourse*. Eds. S. Hunston and G. Thompson. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp 142-75.

Martin, J.R. (2016). Meaning matters: A short history of systemic functional linguistics. *Word.* 62(1): 35-58.

Martin, J.R. and Rose, D. (2003). *Working with discourse: Meaning beyond the clause* (2nd Ed.). London and New York: Continuum.

Martin, J.R. and White, P. R. (2005). *The Language of Evaluation: Appraisal in English*. Palgrave Macmillan: Hampshire.

Martin, P. and León Pérez, I. K. (2014). Convincing peers of the value of one's research: A genre analysis of rhetorical promotion in academic texts, *English for specific purposes*. 34: 1-13.

Mason, C. (2025). 'A colossal social change that is now likely to become law', *BBC News*, 20 June. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c70r46r3kx6o [Accessed 27 July 2025].

Matley D. (2018). "Let's see how many of you mother fuckers unfollow me for this": The pragmatic function of the hashtag #sorrynotsorry in non-apologetic Instagram posts. *Journal of Pragmatics.* 133, 66–78.

Mayoob, M., Algaraady, J. and Alrahaili, M. (2021). Linguistic-based detection of fake news in social media. *International journal of English linguistics.* 11(1): 99-109.

McArthur, J. Blais, J. and Terns, M. (2024). Digital Dating Abuse: An Application of the Theory of Planned Behavior. *Journal of interpersonal violence.* 39(5-6): 1308-1326.

McGraw, K. and Wong, S. P. (1996). Forming inferences about some intraclass correlation coefficients. *Psychological methods.* 1(1): 30-46.

McLaughlin, K. (2022). 'Coerced suicide trial: Berkebile gets maximum sentence'. *Court TV,* 15 July. Available at: https://www.courttv.com/news/coerced-suicide-trial-sentencing-to-take-place-friday/ [Accesed 11 February 2024].

Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Assist, v. In *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. Retrieved January 28, 2026, from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/assist.

Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Coerce, v. In *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. Retrieved January 28, 2026, from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/coerce.

Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Encourage, v. In *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. Retrieved January 28, 2026, from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/encourage.

Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Persuade, v. In *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. Retrieved January 28, 2026, from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/persuade.

Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Promote, v. In *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. Retrieved January 28, 2026, from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/promote.

Midson, B. (2016). Coercive control and criminal responsibility: Victims who kill their abusers. *Criminal law forum*. 27: 417–42.

Milmo, D. (30 September 2022). '"The bleakest of worlds": how Molly Russell fell into a vortex of despair on social media'. *The Guardian* [online]. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/sep/30/how-molly-russell-fell-into-a-vortex-of-despair-on-social-media [Accessed 9 June 2023].

Minkkinen, J., Oksanen, A., Kaakinen, M., Keipi, T., and Räsänen, P. (2016). Victimization and exposure to pro-self-harm and pro-suicide websites: A cross-national study. *Suicide and life-threatening behaviour.* 47 (1):14-26.

Minn. Stat. § 609.215

Mitchell, N. (2025). "'Suicide website users encouraged our teen son to drink poison'". *BBC News* [online]. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c1jg55nk9ggo [Accessed 28 August 2025].

Mitchell, K., Wells, M., Priebe, G., Ybarra, M. (2014). Exposure to websites that encourage self-harm and suicide: Prevalence rates and association with actual thoughts of self-harm and thoughts of suicide in the United States. *Journal of adolescence.* 37(8): 1335-1344.

Model Penal Code §2.02 (1962).

Niezen R (2013) Internet suicide: Communities of affirmation and the lethality of communication. *Transcultural Psychiatry*. 50(2): 303–322.

Nikelly, A., & Dinkmeyer, D. (1971). *Techniques for behavior change: Applications of Adlerian theory*. Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas.

O'Connor, R. (2021). *When it is darkest: Why people die by suicide and what we can do to help*. Ebry Publishing.

O'Connor, R. C. and Nock, M.K. (2014). The psychology of suicidal behaviour. *The Lancet Psychiatry.* 1(1): 73–85.

O'Donnell, M. (2019). UAM Corpus Tool (Version 3.3v). http://www.corpustool.com/:WagSoft Systems.

Ofcom (2021). *Children and parents: media use and attitudes report 2020/21*. Available at: https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/childrens/children-and-parents-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2021 [Accessed 15 July 2023].

Ofcom (2025a). *Ofcom investigates online suicide forum.* Available at: https://www.ofcom.org.uk/online-safety/illegal-and-harmful-content/ofcom-investigates-online-suicide-forum [Accessed 25 July 2025].

Ofcom (2025b). *Protecting people from online suicide and self-harm material.* Available at: https://www.ofcom.org.uk/online-safety/illegal-and-harmful-content/protecting-people-from-online-suicide-and-self-harm-material [Accessed 25 July 2025].

Office for National Statistics (2020). *Suicides in England and Wales: 2019 registrations*. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/suicidesintheunitedkingdom/2019registrations [Accessed 11 February 2024].

Online Safety Act, 2023. (HL 151, 2022-2023). [Online] [Accessed 15 July 2023] Available at: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2023/50

Ontago Daily Times (2022). 'Dunedin woman convicted after inciting man's suicide with 'callous' texts'. *NZ Herald*, 4 May. Available at: https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/dunedin-woman-convicted-after-inciting-mans-suicide-with-callous-texts/ADXTSXZESCUNRZPE4GUKHPA4UI/ [Accessed 11 February 2024].

Oxford University Press. (n.d.). Abet, v. In *Oxford English dictionary*. Retrieved March 28, 2025, from https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7513928413.

Oxford University Press. (n.d.). Assist, v. In Oxford English dictionary. Retrieved March 28, 2025, from https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4860361265.

Oxford University Press. (n.d.). Coerce, v. In Oxford English dictionary. Retrieved March 28, 2025, from https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6577858937.

Oxford University Press. (n.d.). Encourage, v. In Oxford English dictionary. Retrieved March 28, 2025, from https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2666118563.

Oxford University Press. (n.d.). Persuade, v. In Oxford English dictionary. Retrieved March 28, 2025, from https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2732907595.

Oxford University Press. (n.d.). Promote, v. In Oxford English dictionary. Retrieved March 28, 2025, from https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1103083913.

Page, R. E. (2003). 'An analysis of APPRAISAL in childbirth narratives with special consideration of gender and storytelling style'. *Text*. 23(2): 211-237.

Paltridge, B. (2015). 'Language, Identity and Communities of Practice' (pp.15-25) In: D. Noverini Djenar, A. Mahboob, and K. Cruickshank (Eds). *Language and Identity Across Modes of Communication.* De Gruyter Inc.

Papadopoulou, N. and Wicks, L. (2025). Taking 'the right to life' seriously: Addressing the role of 'the right to life' in the context of assisted dying, *Medical* law international. 25(2): 88–109.

Patchin, J.W. and Hinduja, S. (2021). 'Tween cyberbullying in 2020', *Cyberbullying Research Center in partnership with Cartoon Network.* Available at: https://i.cartoonnetwork.com/stop-bullying/pdfs/CN_Stop_Bullying_Cyber_Bullying_Report_9.30.20.pdf [Accessed 27 November 2021].

Peckham, S. (2023). 'What are algorithms? How to prevent echo chambers and keep children safe online'. *Internet Matters.* Available at: https://www.internetmatters.org/hub/news-blogs/what-are-algorithms-how-to-prevent-echo-chambers/ [Accessed 4 March 2024].

Phillips, D. P. (1974). The influence of suggestion on suicide: Substantive and theoretical implications of the Werther effect. *American Sociological Review*. 39: 340–354.

Phillips, D. P. & Carstensen, L. L. (1986). Clustering of teenage suicides after television news stories about suicide. *New England Journal of Medicine*. 315: 685–689.

Phillips, D. P. & Carstensen, L. L. (1988). The effect of suicide stories on various demographic groups, 1968–1985. *Suicide and Life Threatening Behavior.* 18: 100–114.

Phillips, W. (2015). *This is why we can't have nice things: Mapping the relationship between online trolling and mainstream culture.* Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press.

Picardo J., McKenzie SK., Collings S., Jenkin G. (2020). Suicide and self-harm content on Instagram: A systematic scoping review. *PLoS ONE.* 15(9).

Pierre, J. (2015). Culturally sanctioned suicide: Euthanasia, seppuku, and terrorist martyrdom. *World journal of psychiatry* 5: 4-14.

Ponton, D. M. (2020). *Understanding political persuasion*. Vernon Press.

Preece, J. (2000). *Online communities: Designing usability, supporting sociability*. Chichester: John Wiley.

Pretty v the United Kingdom (2002) 35 EHRR.

Rodway C., Tham S.G., Richards N., Ibrahim S., Turnbull P., Kapur N., Appleby, L. (2023). Online harms? Suicide related online experience: A UK-wide case series study of young people who die by suicide. *Psychological Medicine*. 53, 4434–4445.

R v Natasha Gordon (2018) Leicester Crown Court, case 10.

R v Howe [2014] EWCA Crim 114.

R (Purdy) v DPP (2009) EWCA Civ., case 92.

Ruggeri, C. E. (2021). "You just need to do it!": When texts encouraging suicide do not warrant free speech protection. *Boston College Law Review* 62(3): 1017-1046.

Samaritans (2022). *Latest suicide data.* Available at: https://www.samaritans.org/about-samaritans/research-policy/suicide-facts-and-figures/latest-suicide-data/ [Accessed 15 July 2023].

Sanctioned Suicide (2018). 'The night night method mega thread'. Available at: https://sanctioned-suicide.org/threads/the-night-night-method-mega-thread.6834/ [Accessed 16 October 2022].

Sanctioned Suicide (2025). 'Homepage'. Available at https://sanctioned-suicide.org [Accessed 28 August 2025].

Sanchez, R. and Lance, N. (17 June 2017). 'Judge finds Michelle Carter guilty of manslaughter in texting suicide case'. *CNN* [online]. Available at: https://edition.cnn.com/2017/06/16/us/michelle-carter- texting-case/index.html [Accessed 16 May 2021].

Sandler, P. M. (2010). Classical rhetoric and the modern trial lawyer. *Litigation.* 36(2):16-22.

Science and Technology Committee (2019). *Impact of social media and screen-use on young people's health.* (HC 822, 2017-19). [Online] [Accessed 15 July 2023]. Available at: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmsctech/822/822.pdf

Searle, J. R. (1969). *Speech acts: An essay in the philosophy of language.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Searle, J. R. (1976). A classification of illocutionary acts. *Language in Society*, 5(1):1–23.

Sedgwick, R. Epstein, S., Dutta, R. and Ougrin, D. (2019). Social media, internet use and suicide attempts in adolescents. *Current opinion in psychiatry.* 32(6):534-541.

Sentencing Council (2023). *Controlling or coercive behaviour in an intimate or family relationship.* Available at: https://www.sentencingcouncil.org.uk/offences/magistrates-court/item/controlling-or-coercive-behaviour-in-an-intimate-or-family-relationship/ [Accessed 4 December 2023].

Sentencing Council (2023). *Threats to kill.* Available at: https://www.sentencingcouncil.org.uk/offences/magistrates-court/item/threats-to-kill/ [Accessed 4 December 2023].

Serious Crime Act, 2007. Available at: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2007/27/contents [Accessed 29 July 2025].

Serious Crime Act, 2015. Available at: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/9/section/76/2015-12-29 [Accessed 4 December 2023].

Sexual Offences Act, 2003. Available at: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/42/contents [Accessed 29 July 2025].

Shuy, R. W. (2010). 'Terrorism and forensic linguistics' In M. Coulthard and A. Johnson (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Forensic Linguistics.* London and New York: Routledge, pp.558-575.

Simons, H. W., Morreale, J., Gronbeck, B. (2001). *Persuasion in society*. California: Sage.

Singer, J.L. (2014). *Daydreaming and Fantasy* (Psychology Revivals series). Abingdon: Routledge.

SlickText (2024). *30+ Average Screen Time Statistics for 2024*. [Online] SlickText. Available at: https://www.slicktext.com/blog/2023/01/30-key-screen-time-statistics-for-2022-2023/ [Accessed 25 April 2024].

Solokow, A. (17 June 2021). 'Legislators refile 'Conrad's Law' to prevent suicide coercion'. *Boston Herald* [online]. Available at: https://www.bostonherald.com/2021/06/17/legislators-re-file-conrads-law-to-prevent-suicide-coercion [Accessed 27 November 2021].

Spears, R. and Lea, M. (1992). Social influence and the influence of the 'social' in computer-mediated communication. In M. Lea (ed.), *Contexts of computer mediated communication*, 30-65. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Stack, S. (1990a). Audience receptiveness, the media, and aged suicide, 1968–1980. *Journal of Aging Studies.* 4: 195–209.

Stark, E. (2007). *Coercive control: How men entrap women in personal life.* Oxford University Press.

State v. Hayden Jennings Berkebile, E2022-01700-CCA-R3-CD (Knox Ct. App. Feb. 27, 2024).

State v. Melchert-Dinkel, A15-0073 (Minn. Ct. App. Dec. 28, 2015).

Steuter, E. Wills, D. (2009). *At war with metaphor: Media, propaganda, and racism in the war on terror*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Stygall, G. (2010). 'Legal writing: Complexity'. In M. Coulthard and A. Johnson (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Forensic Linguistics.* London and New York: Routledge, pp.51-64.

Suicide Act, 1961*.* Available at: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Eliz2/9-10/60 [Accessed 16 May 2021].

Supreme Court of Minnesota (2014). State v. Melchert-Dinkel. Available at: https://caselaw.findlaw.com/court/mn-supreme-court/1660689.html [Accessed 19 July 2023].

Swales, J. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge University Press.

Sweeney, T. J. (2009). *Adlerian counseling and psychotherapy: A practitioner's approach.* New York, NY: Taylor & Francis.

UK Parliament (2015). Research publications, '*The right to die and assisted suicide'*. Available at: https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/research/key-issues-parliament-2015/social-change/debating-assisted-suicide/ [Accessed 01 February 2024].

Tepper, M. (1997). Usenet communities and the cultural politics of information. In D. Porter (ed.), *Internet culture,* 39-54. New York: Routledge.

Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill (2025). Parliament: House of Commons. Bill no. 112. Available at: https://bills.parliament.uk/publications/61635/documents/6734 [Accessed 27 July 2025].

Thompson, G. (2004). *Introducing Functional Grammar.* London: Arnold.

Thompson, G. (2008). Appraising glances: Evaluating Martin's model of APPRAISAL. *Word.* 59(1-2): 169-187.

Thompson, C. (24 August 2009). 'Clive Thompson on the New Literacy'. *Wired* [online]. Available at: www.wired.com/techbiz/people/magazine/17-09/st_thompson [Accessed 11 December 2023].

Tiersma, P. M. (1999). *Legal Language*. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press.

Tiersma, P.M. and Solan, L. (2002). The linguist on the witness stand: forensic linguistics in American courts. *Language*, 78(2): 221-239.

Tintori, A., Ciancimino, G., Bombelli, I., De Rocchi, D. and Cerbara, L. (2023). Children's online safety: Predictive factors of cyberbullying and online grooming involvement. *Societies.* 13(2).

Tolhurst, W. E. (1983). Suicide, self-sacrifice and coercion. *The southern journal of philosophy.* 21(1): 109-121.

United States v. Bethlehem Steel 1938. 315 U.S. 289, 300, 301.

Verlegh, P., Fransen, M. L., and Kirmani, A. (2015). Persuasion in advertising: When does it work, and when does it not? *International Journal of Advertising.* 34 (1): 3-5.

Walton, D. (2012). *Media argumentation.* Cambridge University Press.

Wang, W. and Yang, C. (2015). Claiming Centrality as promotion in applied linguistics research articles, *Journal of English for academic purposes.* 20: 162-175.

Wernick, A. (1991). *Promotional culture: Advertising, ideology and symbolic expression.* Sage Publications.

Wertheimer, A. (1987). *Coercion (Studies in Moral, Political, and Legal Philosophy).* Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Westerlund, M. (2011). The production of pro-suicide content on the internet: A counter-discourse activity. *New media & society*. 14(5): 764-780.

Weston, D. (2022). When does speech perform regulable action? A Critique of Speech Act Theory's Application to Free Speech Regulation. *International Journal of Language and Law,* 11*:* 78- 97.

Wiggins S, McQuade R and Rasmussen S (2016). Stepping back from crisis points: The provision and acknowledgment of support in an online suicide discussion forum. *Qualitative Health Research.* 26(9): 1240–1251.

Wildmoon, K.C. (2021). 'Tennessee teen shoots herself for Indiana man's FaceTime 'viewing pleasure': Police'. *CrimeOnline,* 14 August. Available at: https://www.crimeonline.com/2021/08/14/tennessee-teen-shoots-herself-for-indiana-mans-facetime-viewing-pleasure-police/ [Accessed 11 February 2024].

Wilson, R. (2011). Appraisal theory as a linguistic tool for the analysis of market research interview data. PhD thesis, University of Leeds, UK.

Wise, I. (2013). 'APPRAISAL framework: Evaluations in language' Available at: https://blogonlinguistics.wordpress.com/2013/11/10/appraisal-framework-evaluations-in-language/ [Accessed 27 July 2023].

Witt, T. (2020). 'If i cannot have it, i will do everything i can to destroy it.' the canonization of Elliot Rodger: 'Incel' masculinities, secular sainthood, and justifications of ideological violence. *Social Identities*, 26 (5), 675–689.

Women's Aid, Hester, M., Walker, S-J., and Williamson, E. (2021). *Gendered experiences of justice and domestic abuse. Evidence for policy and practice.* Bristol: Women's Aid.

Wong, Y. J. (2015). The psychology of encouragement: Theory, research and applications. *The counseling psychologist.* 43(2): 178-216.

Woodhams, J. & Grant, T. D. (2006). Developing a categorisation system for rapists' speech. *Psychology, Crime, & Law,* 12(3), 245-260.

Yoder, M., Perry, C. Brown, D., Carley, K. and Pruden, M. (2023). Identity Construction in a Misogynist Incels Forum. In *The 7th Workshop on Online Abuse and Harms (WOAH)*, pages 1–13, Toronto, Canada. Association for Computational Linguistics.

Yousif, N. (2025). 'Parents of teenager who took his own life sue OpenAI'. *BBC News* [online]. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cgerwp7rdlvo [Accessed 28 August 2025].