

Suicide Notes on Unconventional Surface: A Trending Challenge

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ABSTRACT

Suicide notes are often found at crime scenes and they are a very vital aspect in any criminal investigation. However, the experts often face difficulties in the examination of such notes and authenticating the original author if such suicide notes are written on any unconventional surfaces i.e. surface other than usually used for writing. This difficulty is manifold increased when the writing on unusual surface is done by unconventional writing instruments. Forensic documents examiners (FDE's) may come across such questioned handwriting which may have variations that are beyond the scope of natural variations and pose a challenge to the forensic document examiner. This paper presents a review on forensic analysis of handwriting on unconventional surfaces by unconventional writing instruments.

Keywords: Suicide Note, Unconventional Surfaces, Unconventional Writing Instruments

INTRODUCTION

Handwriting can be explained as a neuro-muscular activity of a human brain, which develops over a time being and is majorly governed by the subconscious or unconscious part of a human brain. Handwriting as an evidence is considered as very important aspect of information for forensic document investigators. The attempt of forensic document investigators increases manifold during examination of handwritings on unusual writing surfaces such as wall, mirror, photographs etc. written by unusual writing instruments such as lipstick, liquid vermilion etc. Available pieces of handwriting are scrutinized to

recognize and authenticate the genuine writer of the questioned document. Handwriting on unconventional surfaces often causes hindrance during examination and authentication. An attempted disguise of the questioned handwriting may further cause difficulties in comparison and evaluation process.

Kelly (1978) presented a case study which was successfully prosecuted in court, to illustrate handwriting and evidence analysis problems presented by unusual writing surfaces, certain writing instruments, factors which can distort writing, and variations in teenaged writing. The case study concerns the murder of a teenage girl after a birthday party. The major piece of evidence was a broken yellow balloon found in the suspect's car.

Totty (1981) examined a case where writing on the stomach of a dead victim was compared with the handwriting of a suspect and a helpful link was found between the questioned and specimen handwritings.

Hilton (1983) reported the consequence of writing instruments on handwriting and recommended that an examiner must be familiar with the kind of variables that can be introduced by a different type of writing instrument in order to prevent wrong opinions.

Hanzlick and Ross (1987) reported a case where an individual committed suicide and left a suicide note written in blue ink. Smearred and unsmearred blue ball point pen ink marks on the palms of both of the victim's hands were found.

Taylor and Hnilica (1991) examined handwriting on the dead body of a suicide victim. They observed that the

position of some of the writing on the body caused a new awkward formation of letters. They were, however, successful in identifying that the writing on the body had been written by the deceased.

DeAngelis (1997) conducted a study for examining the effects of writing surfaces on handwriting, the results of which showed abnormal substrates affected the overall appearance and line quality of an author's writing including abrupt interruptions, unevenness, and evidence of skips by the writing instrument.

Moran (1999) reported the loss of identifying details with a change in the type of writing instrument, but was of the view that there are still many recurring features that are of help in establishing the authorship.

Kopenhagen (2007) mentioned that graffiti often involves media other than paper, such as walls, locker doors, or mirrors. The graffiti may be spray-painted, scratched out with a sharp instrument, or written with lipstick or chalk. She suggested that, whenever possible, the document examiner should arrange to study the original.

Demirci et al. (2009) presented 2 suicide death cases in which suicide notes were written on the bodies of the victims. The first case was of a 32-year-old man, who committed suicide in his house by hanging. When they examined the body externally, they had seen that there were some words written on the body with a pen; specifically "DONKEY" was written on the forehead; coursing up-and-down along the chest, "HODJA" was on the right, "DO NOT" was on the sternal region, and "WASH" was on the left; and undecipherable handwritings were on both zygomatic regions. The second case was of a 39-year old woman a housewife who was being physically abused by her husband and committed suicide by ingesting an insecticide. They found a suicide note written on the left leg written with a pen saying that she could not stand being beaten by her husband on account of the inheritance dispute between him & her elder brother.

Rai et al. (2011) discussed a unique case of family suicide pact involving six adults and two children of the same family. The handwriting and signatures in the suicide notes did not reflect the disturbed mental condition in their strokes, they were found to be almost the normal writings of the individuals in spite of the fact that these writings/signatures were written on walls by three different male individuals involved in the family suicide pact. They had also discuss the characteristics of wall writings visa-versa the normal writings and the

importance of recording significant observations from the spot by the document examiner himself regarding nature of surface, writing instrument/s used and also proper photography of such writings.

Austin and Byard (2013) prospective study was undertaken for cases of suicide with skin messaging over a 12-year period from 1/1/2000 to 31/12/2011. A total of 498 cases of suicide were examined with only 2 cases (0.4%) having suicide notes written on their skin. Both cases involved young males (aged 18 and 30 years respectively) with the deaths occurring by hanging. Both decedents had written messages on their hands/arms expressing mixtures of sorrow and hopelessness. Messages on skin may be somewhat different to messages written on other surfaces, due to limited space, pens and markers may not write as effectively. An additional vulnerability with skin messages is to erasure, making clear documentation of these findings at the scene important.

Behera et al. (2013) presented three cases in which they found a handwritten note on the palm of the deceased at the time of autopsy. The sufferers had written a concise note in their own handwriting, citing the reasons for committing suicide. The suicide note in one case also mentioned details regarding the custody of the victim's children to be given to her mother.

Ballur et al. (2014) evaluate such suicide notes with respect to mode of writing, to whom it is addressed and victim's last wish. Study of such suicide notes show the psyche of the patient and play important role in understanding reasons for suicide. Due importance should be given at the site of crime for recovery of suicide note.

Jasuja et al. (2014) undertook a study which was based on the examination of writing samples written with spray paint cans on vertical surfaces. A preliminary study was conducted consisting of examining the handwriting of 30 individuals, executed on vertical writing surfaces with spray paint cans, and handwriting written under normal writing conditions. Various writing features were observed to find out the variations between the two sets of writings.

Sharma and Handa (2015) took an enterprise to bring up aspects of possible examination problems and limitations of examination confronted with unusual circumstances in context to the case examples viz. writing on shirt, suicide note on deceased palm, on shoe and seat cover of scooter.

Arya (2015) made an attempt to evoke an intense relationship and significance of crime scene observations

with relation to the crime scene case examples such as blood written suicide note on the wall, fabricated suicide note on wall in a murder case etc.

Sharma et al. (2015) discusses the approaches that can be used to identify documents which are hand written under unusual circumstances i.e. on a table, wall, in a moving vehicle like bus and train, on the roof of a moving vehicle, on one's hand or thigh. Four unusual situations (in which one may have to write under special circumstances) were selected for the study: in a moving bus, on table, on one's thigh and wall. They firstly observed natural variations regarding the special and unusual hand written samples. Some specific peculiarities were also observed like pen pressure was found to be more in case of samples written on thigh without any support below, changes in base line were apparent due to acceleration in case of samples taken in a moving bus. Tremors were common in most samples due to speed of the moving bus. The samples taken on the wall mostly showed an ascending baseline with hiatuses due to discontinuous flow of ink.

Sharma and Azeen (2015) examined the handwriting and signature samples written under unusual circumstances such as while walking, travelling in a vehicle, using rough surfaces like palm, back, wall etc., position of the writer and spatial constraints. The effects and extent of the circumstances were studied with the normal handwriting samples and comparison has been made. An attempt has been made by them to study the 'tremors' caused due to such conditions and differentiated them from the tremors of age and illness. They also made a pictographic representation of the comparison of such handwriting and signature specimens have been made.

Singh et al. (2015) reviewed the limitations posed by several unusual circumstances and endeavored to present a balanced view of the problems and their solutions, in the light of views expressed.

Pandya et al. (2015) studied seven suicide notes in Gujarati language already proved to be written by genuine writers are considered. Sufficient quantity of natural writing of the respective individuals were also collected to study the extent of variation in suicide notes to that observed in natural writings. Significant variations were observed by them in rhythm, speed, line quality and alignment of writing. In some cases, divergences in amount and quality beyond the range of variation were observed but those were attributed to the writer's conditions, when examined minutely. Statistical analysis by score based likelihood ratio was performed to know probability

distributions. Psycho-Stylistic analysis of suicide notes was also carried out as an additional study to find relation between writing characters, words selected and psychological frame of mind while writing suicide notes.

Sharma et al. (2015) presented a case study in which handwriting on the palm of the victim was found and the same was compared with the admitted handwriting of the suspect in the laboratory. In spite of the obstruction caused by the unusual nature of surface, a positive link was established between disputed and admitted handwritings.

CONCLUSION

During the commission of suicide the possibility of finding a piece of writing on unusual surface with unusual writing instrument can never be over looked. Hence the possible means and methods must be practiced on a regular basis by the forensic experts as well practitioners and new possibilities must always be explored for identifying and authenticating the actual author of the questioned document. For the purpose, class as well as individual handwriting characteristics should be carefully evaluated and taken into consideration while comparing the unconventional writing.

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