Adolescent suicide is a major problem in most Western countries. One of the strategies that has received increasing support to combat youth suicide are media campaigns, particularly in the form of TV public service announcements (PSAs). However, studies evaluating the impact of PSAs are scarce. The aims of this project are to assess positive and negative effects (in terms of suicidal ideation, attitudes towards suicide, emotional well-being, and likelihood of help-seeking).

The project will be conducted in Vienna, Austria, over three phases. In Phase 1, we will run a school project for high school students to develop suicide prevention PSAs. In Phase 2, we will conduct focus groups with the participating students to analyze their experiences with the development of the PSAs. In Phase 3, we will conduct an experiment of the best PSA, as assessed by an international jury. 288 16-19 year olds will be recruited from schools and randomly allocated to view either (a) the suicide prevention PSA or (b) a control PSA on an unrelated health issue with similar stylistic features. Before the start of the experiment, participants will complete a socio-demographic questionnaire and a series of measures to assess various aspects of psychological and emotional well-being (e.g., suicidal ideation), including a scale to assess current suicide risk in order to identify individuals at risk for suicidal behavior, who will be offered help. Immediately post-viewing, participants will complete questionnaires about the PSA itself, and about identification with the protagonists. They will also complete the questionnaires from before the viewing in order to investigate immediate effects of the PSA. Four weeks later, the participants will complete the outcome measures again, in order to analyze the sustainability of effects. We will also investigate if the effects vary with regard to identification or vulnerability of the participants.

The project is important and innovative in that it uses PSAs that are produced by young people and therefore more likely to resonate with young people. Without this research, it is quite possible that ineffective – or harmful – PSAs could be rolled out. The project will yield material for prevention campaigns targeting adolescents in Austria and elsewhere, and will allow health organizations to better balance the risks and benefits involved in these campaigns. Thereby, the results from this project can contribute to combatting suicide and help save young lives.