

# Examining the Quality of Suicide News Reporting in Pakistan in Compliance with WHO Media Guidelines: A Content Analysis Study of Daily Dawn Newspaper

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## ABSTRACT

Despite the rate of suicide issue going high day by day in Pakistan, research on how Pakistani Press depicts the suicide cases has been missing. Thus, this study is aimed at assessing the quality of Pakistani English Press on reporting suicide issues in adherence to the media guidelines set by WHO against suicide reporting. The content analysis study of news related to suicide reported by Daily Dawn newspaper of Pakistan was undertaken. The content of suicide news reported in the newspaper was explored on its web filter and a total of 30 news related to suicide were generated from the newspaper over 12 months and then were systematically examined to meet the objective of the study. Almost exactly, all the news reported were related to completed suicide. Around 90% of the news reported the names of the people who committed suicide. 77% of the news reported the ages of victims and 97% of the news reported the gender of those who committed suicide. The vast majority of the news did not mention the occupation of the victims. Moreover, 40% of the news reported hanging as the most common method of suicide. And 23% of the news declared poverty as the most general suicide cause. At many points, the newspaper does not comply with the WHO media guidelines. There is a sheer need to develop the media guidelines and mechanism in Pakistan to ensure the answerable reporting that has a significant effect in the suicide prevention.

**Keywords:** Suicide, newspaper, media

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## INTRODUCTION

Suicide is a serious public and health issue all across the globe. The global incident of suicide is now at the alarming rate. It was estimated in 2018 by WHO that around 800,000 people die annually by suicide. These might not be the actual figures of the incident, but there might be the more numbers which could/are not reported. The contributing factors to suicide and its prevention are not fully explicated, but one of the best tools to make this issue explicable to public is media.

But the problem with media to report suicide was; whether or not it should cover the said issue completely? This problem made the issue more complex. For example, the main objective of the media is to inform wholly to the public of the incidents, and if it covers the all sides of suicidal incidents with purpose to impart whole information, then it is witnessed that there are many vulnerable people who may be influenced to engage themselves in emulating the suicidal behaviors. Like, Niederkrotenthaler et al. (2009) argued that the suicide news reports, either in online or printed newspaper, can crank up the behavior of suicide amongst the readers' attitude. Twenge et al (2018) found that it expands the desire among people to die from suicide. Sisask & Varnik (2012) said that the Werther effect, the phenomenon where suicide figure goes up ensuing the portrayal of single suicide in the media, had been met with in various states.

Making this explicable, in 2000, the WHO propelled a media guideline against the prevention of suicide wherein the multiple agendas were upraised. It inspires media professionals to get rid of language that puts suicide on a normal footing or recognizes it as a panacea for evils, to

give wider berth to excessive repetition and prominent placement of suicide stories, to elude unambiguous description of the suicide method, to avoid offering full data about the suicide site, to be cautious in sharing photographs or running the footage of video, to pick the headlines out purposely, to have the intention to educate the bibliophiles towards suicide, also to convey the data against health seeking (WHO, 2008).

It was estimated that 75% of all global suicides occur in low and middle-income countries and thus Mahar A (2014) Pakistan is a low and middle income country with an estimated population of 200 million, being the world's 6th most populous country.

Khan MM (2006) argued that in Pakistan, suicidal behavior exists as an under-studied cum under-researched subject. Shahid M (2009) found that due to both legal as well as financial reasons, religious and socio-cultural stigma surrounding suicidal behavior, the fundamental psychosocial issues stay largely unaddressed in Pakistan. The social consequences of suicidal behavior in the country can fairly be significant, with families stigmatized and ostracized as usual. Because stigmatization of suicidal behavior in Pakistani society may also be contributing to lack of research on it.

**Suicide in Pakistan:** Every year, around a million people die by suicide globally. The research based information on the said problem (suicide) mostly derives via larger-income countries. Some states outdoor the Western world proffer the WHO (World Health Organization) with suicide information on the regular manner. Noteworthy among those which do not offer are most of the 57 countries having the majority of Muslim population, totaling those

having populations exceeding 100 million people, like Bangladesh, Indonesia and Pakistan.

In Pakistan, suicide is an under-studied subject cum under-researched. Rudimentary epidemiological information, for example, on nationwide counting is unidentified. The different religious, legal and social foundations develop reporting based on the accuracy and make data gathering hard.

In Pakistan, incidents of suicide issues in many kinds like hanging, using medication for suicide, eating poisoning things, self-immolation, taking poisoning tablets, and sinking have been declared, showed and read via inclusive media at most. Almost every corner of the country such as both urban to rural and province it persists but varies in each arena and surrounding in the state. Whereas the official figures of suicide are getting down, it has been probable, however, to evaluate the suicide rates of in at least six different locations of the country. The rough figures differ from a low of 0.43/100,000 yearly (average for 1991-2000) in Peshawar to a high of 2.86/100,000 for Rawalpindi (in 2006), with other cities falling in between: Karachi, 2.1/100,000 (1995-2001); Lahore, 1.08/100,000 (1993-95); Faisalabad, 1.12/100,000 (1998-2001) and Larkana, 2.6/100,000 (2003- 2004).

Based on gender, suicide attempts to commit also diverges within them. Gender- specific frequencies display that for men, uppermost figures are 5.2/100,000 across Rawalpindi, whereas against women the peak figures are 1.7/100,000 across Larkana. The uppermost gender-specific and age related figures against men and their counterpart women are in the 20-40 years of age brackets: 7.03/100,000 and 3.81/100,000 in Larkana and Rawalpindi in the respective manner.

A decade ago, a NGO reported 5,800 suicide cases in nine months (January to September) of 2006. As far as the suicide prevention was concerned, this demands a multi-sectoral method. Around 34% of the population of the country grieves over depression and common mental disorders are concerned over 90% of suicides.

The object of the study was to know how the Pakistani media converses with public of Pakistan on the suicide topic has, however, gone to a great extent shorn of adequate analysis. However, the central objective of the current study, therefore, was to look into the eminence of newspaper reporting of news related to suicide in Pakistan in adherence to media guidelines set by World Health Organization for the responsible suicide reporting.

**Problem Statement:** In Pakistan, doubtlessly, it is yet one of the persisting and common serious challenges which are not being seriously tackled with. Almost exactly after every 16 minutes, one person dies intentionally from suicide [sic]. Newspapers are a widespread source of information in Pakistan. These impart information among the masses of what is happening all across the country and people desire to get informed of their country's issues and challenges. Therefore, the research on how Pakistani Press carries suicide cases has been in dearth, thus, this study has been executed to assess the quality of Pakistani English newspaper with regard the compliance with WHO media guidelines for suicide reporting.

**Why Dawn Newspaper?** Press in Pakistan runs in multiple languages but, in English language, Daily dawn is

considered to be one of the few widely circulated and the biggest newspapers of the country. This newspaper was found by Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, father of the nation – Pakistan, in 1942. It is placed atop in the list of English newspapers of the country in that it is widely read across the country but the interesting thing for this newspaper is; it is read mostly by the elite class people like businessmen, academicians, doctors, politicians, and students as well. To this end, all and sundry wants to get well informed of what's happening around the globe especially inside the country. Thus, this newspaper is selected to assess its quality after being widely circulated, read, and liked at most.

Numerous studies carried out in US, Australia and Japan have showed that the statistics of suicide incidents considerably rise after publicity of publication of stories of the suicide in press (Hagihara, Tarumi & Abe 2007; Hassan, 1995; Romer, Jamieson & Jamieson 2006). An organized assessment which examined the results through various researches done on this topic found the significant rise in the suicide figures causing via suicide related media accounts that dramatize or romanticize the portrayal of deaths done by suicidal (Sudak & Sudak, 2005).

Pirkis, Blood, Beautrais, Burgess, and Skehan (2006) ran across nine guidelines which were put forward from variety of countries to back the responsible reporting of suicide upon the subsequent factors – imitation effect, implementation process, development, plus the content of guidelines. The study resulted that the guidelines were having then early parallel content (e.g. avoiding sensationalization as well as emphasizing the significance of conveying the info against the help services were accentuated). Conversely, they varied in the way they were applied prior to their development. The authors felt that guidelines led by journalists and their appropriate conveyance were more likely to have necessary impact.

The implementation of media guidelines having the positive impacts for suicide reporting were reported in relation of a decline in the rates of suicide (Niederkröthaler & Sonneck, 2007), use of very much fatal suicide methods (Barker, Kolves, & De Leo, 2016), and enhancement in the ability of bibliophiles to use managing assets to surmount the suicide-led ideation or suicidal behaviour (Niederkröthaler et al., 2010). Nevertheless, Bohanna and Wang reported that media guidelines could only be effective when 'went along with media endorsement, ongoing training cum monitoring and active dissemination strategies' (Bohanna & Wang, 2012). Investigation of the efficacy of particular guidelines had met with neither positive nor negative influence of exposure to suicide reports of media, and it was vague as to which separate guidelines could be accredited to effectiveness (Anestis, May, Hagan, Michaels, & Klonsky, 2015; Williams & Witte, 2018).

Research shows; one example of substantial or intense media coverage to a new technique could up turn the incidences of suicide by the same technique (Chang, Gunnell, Wheeler, Yip, & Sterne, 2010), with this rise lasting after the coverage of media reduces (Lee et al., 2014).

An assessment of Guangzhou, Taiwan, and Hong Kong newspapers indicated that reports usually were met on the front pages of the publications; still, the great deal of suicide related media reports illustrated a photo, in excess of 80 per cent of headings mentioning the suicide technique and greater than 40 per cent identifying a problem found by the person who killed himself by suicide, while 85 percent or further avoided to putting forward the preventative suggestions such as helpline information (Fu, Chan, & Yip, 2011).

The related literature from across the Asia to this work is restricted to a report appeared from China that studied suicide related newspaper articles from across Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and Taiwan (967, 226, and 1,086 newspaper reports, in the respective manner). The findings met with adequate compliance with one characteristic only (just 2% of the related articles were prominently put). The study also came to know that newspapers accentuated further on suicides done by youth (Fu, Chan, & Yip, 2011). An in-depth literature pursuit discovered that there had been no organized research on this topic from any of the South Asian countries, excluding a research met from India that evaluated the impact of a workshop organized for the professionals of media against the quality of reporting. This study, though, could not offer any fine points of compliance with the guidelines for reporting (Ramadas & Kuttichira, 2011).

There are the apprehensions that media reporting could be the foundation of misleading info, like by providing naïve, mono-causal descriptions that suggest suicide is a panacea for instant triggers rather than getting connected with a complicated array of distal and proximal risk factors (e.g., religious/cultural attitudes towards suicide, fragile mental health, and the child sex abuse) (Beautrais et al., 2008; Hawton and van Heeringen, 2009). Reports of mass media could also stigmatise the suicide scum diminish assistance pursuit (Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2014), and could have inadequate contemplation for people in mourn by deaths led by suicide.

## METHOD

Suicide news contents were generated from daily Dawn newspaper. 12 months' editions, started from September 1, 2019 to August 31, 2020, were taken as the sample of this study. Only the Metropolitan pages of Karachi were chosen for the study. The matters of every news related to suicide the authors ran across one by one to determine if the required data was being run. The items looked for include the name of victim, gender, age, picture or illustration displayed, cause of death by suicide and method of suicide. Cases were excluded in the study if (a) the suicide incidents occurred before the selected time period (b) if the incidents were not from Pakistan, and (c) if the reports were inexplicable to observe whether the cases were of suicide or of murder. And, suicide cases related to terrorism or bombing were left out from analysis.

**Units of analysis:** The WHO has imposed the multiple restrictions on newspaper reporting of suicides. Out of which, following three restrictions have been selected in the current study to examine the quality of daily Dawn newspaper;

- Don't publish photographs or suicide notes.
- Don't report specific details of the method used.
- Don't give simplistic reasons

Source: Preventing suicide: A Resource for Media Professionals: Department of Mental Health, Social Change and Mental Health, WHO; 2000.

## RESULTS

The total of 30(100%) news on suicide case was found from the newspaper's 12 months editions started from September 1, 2019 to August 31, 2020. All of the news (100%) were related to complete suicide. In terms of identity of the victims, 27 out of the 30 news (90%) also brought the names of the people who committed suicide. 23 out of the 30 news (77%) reported the ages of those who done suicide and 29 news (97%) reported gender of the people who committed suicide. In terms of occupation, majority of the news did not provide the occupation of the victims who ended their lives by suicide. Moreover, almost all news (100%) pointed out the method of suicide explicitly, where having hanging in 12 news was declared as the most common method of suicide. Some 7 news (23%) mentioned the causes behind suicides, where having poverty was declared as the most general suicide cause.

### Assessing the compliance of Dawn's data with WHO guidelines

#### What not to do

- Don't publish photographs or suicide notes.
- Don't report specific details of the method used.
- Don't give simplistic reasons.

**Don't publish photographs or suicide notes:** There was no photograph found in the news related to suicide. In this regard, Dawn has complied with one of the restrictions the WHO guideline has imposed.

**Don't report specific details of the method used:** The Dawn newspaper has given all its news related to suicide details of methods. Thus, this restriction put forwarded by WHO has not been complied with by the said newspaper.

**Don't give simplistic reasons:** The newspaper has given 24 out of 30 news related to suicide details of reasons of suicides. To this end, this restriction put forwarded by WHO has been ignored by the said newspaper.

## DISCUSSIONS

In Pakistan, the dearth of systematic research is observed into the excellence of media reporting and its compliance with WHO media guidelines. This research offers an organized inspection in accordance with the media guidelines put forwarded by WHO and is distinctive for the reason that styles were analysed over a stated time span of 12 months. The outcomes provide an understanding towards the effects of the guidelines as well as the challenges that exist.

In the current study, it was found out that the Dawn, being a biggest and widely read, liked, and circulated newspaper, gives too insufficient coverage to the major problems of the country. Throughout the yearly span of coverage, it has reported only 30 suicide issues from across Pakistan. As per 365 total days of a year, the

average rate of reporting stands only one news item to be reported after every twelfth day that is an unjust coverage ratio. The newspaper does not give the details of suicide incidents in the titles of news. There are a majority of the incidents reported in too short length but there are also the counterpart a few suicide happenings given more space in terms of length.

All the news de facto newspaper has reported openly the methods of suicide. But in the only case of poisoning as method of suicide, newspaper mentioned clearly the poison's identity in the content of news. And, the vast majority (80%) of the news have brought the suicide causes, having the poverty as the major cause behind suicide issues. As far as the reason is concerned, newspapers as usual abstract or deduce the information from interviews taken from the victims' family, suicide note or from witnesses. In addition, the scrutinized reports discussed nothing to educate the readers about the suicide, preventive strategies, risk factors, suicidal behavior, suicidality, and necessary additional helpline information. This is an unused opportunity for the media (in general) to impart the education regarding suicide among the masses specified that this has been assured to have constructive effects on the people who are at stake (Niederkröthaler et al., 2014).

When the contrasts were set amid the cases of professionally well-known people like celebrity, doctor, engineer, and police official (even news of suicide committed by these kinds of professionally known people reported too insufficient) and those who are less known like labourer, jobless, poor and so on, reports include well-recognised people were farther likely to comprise of a higher length of description.

The suicide trend, as per the reports, has been rising among youth from 15 to 28 years of age. As for the gender, in the majority of news, males are shown more to have committed suicide. Few reports were found suspicious whether the incident itself was of suicide or murder. For instance, Dawn.com (Faisalabad, 2019) on October 27, 2019, reported as;

*A man allegedly gunned down his wife and then 'committed suicide' in Raza Garden on Canal Road on Saturday.*

*Rescue 1122 said Afzal Mehmood (54) killed his wife Madiha Afzal (49) over some domestic dispute and committed suicide by shooting himself in the head. Bodies have been shifted to the Allied hospital. A police official said it was yet to be established whether it was a suicide or killing by anyone.*

In the first sentence, newspaper declares clearly a man committed suicide but in the end, police official is quoted to have expressed the incident to be dubious and to be established yet whether or not it was a case of suicide. This could mislead the researches in the future. Besides, the majority of the suicide related news in the Dawn newspaper take a propensity to overstate the suicide news. The majority of the news do not comply with WHO media guidelines for suicide prevention. It is however no exaggeration to add here that in China it was brought into being that, the WHO media guidelines for suicide reporting were inconsistently and poorly applied in the newspapers as well as internet based media sources (Chu et al., 2018).

Another study in India found that suicide reporting in Indian newspapers displayed a strong trend towards sensationalism and strives to add some educative material was not met in any report (Jain and Kumer, 2016).

However, this study brings multiple boundaries. The contents of the suicide related news to were only scrutinized from the newspaper in the period of 12 months, started from September 1, 2019 to August 31, 2020. The news displayed was surfed deliberately using few keywords. The continuation-impact of the reported suicide news could not meet. To this end, further studies are required to deem examining the impact of reporting on Pakistani societies and to investigate the impacts of the current reporting style in society as well. With this reference, Bohanna and Wang (2012) argued that guidelines can mold the style of reporting and thwart the copied suicide proffered the methods centered on media ownership, consultation, training and collaboration.

## CONCLUSION

It is found that the majority of news do not adhere to the media guidelines, set by WHO, in the suicide reporting. Almost exactly, majority of the news brought the in depth data about the people who killed themselves by suicide by stating their names, gender, ages, occupations, methods and the suicide causes. What the WHO media guidelines advices is, to foster the positive contribution that can shrink the rate of suicides and present it less attractive but this can only be devised through cooperative approaches.

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