

Patterns of portrayal of suicide in print media in an urban setting in western India : a pilot study

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ABSTRACT

Suicide is a major psychosocial issue in all countries. Among many factors affecting the suicide rates, few studies have identified media portrayal to play a significant role in suicidal behavior. The aim of the research was to study the pattern of portrayal of suicide in print media in an urban setting. All news items reporting a suicide or a para-suicide from 26th December 2014-25th February 2015 in 5 newspapers with highest circulation figures in Mumbai were included in the study. Guidelines issued by Indian Psychiatric Society on media portrayal of suicide were used to assess the news items on reporting variables. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, Chi-square test and Pearson's correlation. The study sample included 150 news items with 80% reporting suicide. 12% of the news items were placed on the front page of the newspaper, and in a box. 22% of the news items were accompanied by a visual aid. 60% used the word suicide in the headline and 78% described the method of suicide in a step by step manner. Only 1 news item mentioned suicide helpline and not a single item reported the fact that suicidal behavior can be identified and prevented. Education and awareness programmes for newspaper editors and reporters regarding this sensitive issue are necessary.

Key words: *suicide, media, suicide prevention.*

INTRODUCTION

Suicide is a major health issue as well as social issue in all countries [1]. A complex and dynamic interaction of genetic, biological, psychosocial and environmental factors culminate in a suicide or a para-suicide [2]. Sadly, India has achieved the unwanted distinction, being the country with the highest number of suicides (1/3rd of all suicides in the world) in the world [3].

Apart from the factors mentioned above, few factors have been identified as precipitate and influence the suicide rates. Media is one such influence. The impact of print media on suicide rates has been recognized from as early as 1774, when a spike of copycat suicide ensued after Goethe published "The Sorrows of Young Werther", which even today is known as "The Werther Effect [4]" Werther effect is an increase in suicide rates following media reports of suicide, aka "copycat suicides".

A corollary to this has also been proposed. As the media portrayal can precipitate the suicides, it must also have the potential for playing a protective or preventive role. This is proposed as "The Papageno Effect [5]" from the Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute*, where a suicidal Papageno overcomes his suicidal thoughts by learning new coping strategies.

A lot of research from mental healthcare professionals as well as journalism research groups has supported the effect of media portrayal of suicide on suicide rates. This has resulted in proposition of guidelines by the World Health Organization as well as various governing bodies, media monitoring groups and national governments for media personnel on portrayal of suicide. Recently, Indian Psychiatric Society [2] also published its position statement and guidelines for the media on the topic at hand.

Except New Zealand, where compliance to these guidelines is mandatory by law, and any deviation from is punishable, other countries' guidelines are to be accepted by the media voluntarily. There is no monitoring agency for the same, and studies have reported poor compliance to the guidelines in both print as well as the television media.

We couldn't find an Indian study in literature and felt the need to gauge the level of compliance of our print media houses to the IPS suicide coverage guidelines [2]. The aim of the current research was to study the pattern of portrayal of suicide in print media in an urban setting.

METHODOLOGY

Inclusion Criteria

1. All news items covering a suicide/para-suicide from 26thDecember 2014 to 25th February 2015.
2. All news items/reports covering the issue of suicide from 26thDecember 2014 to 25th February 2015.

Exclusion Criteria

1. All news items covering suicide-bomber attacks.
2. All news items using the word "suicide" as a metaphor.

This is a retrospective article review and does not involve human volunteers. We selected 5 newspapers in the Mumbai circle with the highest circulation figures. We used the data from the Registrar of Newspapers in India (RNI) of The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting [1] for selecting the newspapers. This data contains detail on every newspaper registered in India.

We selected the newspapers which were 1) Printed in English or hindi or Marathi and 2) having a Mumbai edition. The newspapers thus selected (with figures of circulation) were 1) The Times of India – Mumbai edition (10,26,153), 2) Daily News and Analysis (DNA) – Mumbai edition (5,76,507), 3) Hindustan Times – Mumbai edition (3,91,568), 4) Maharashtra Times – Mumbai edition (3,02,330) and 5) Loksatta – Mumbai edition

(2,27,108). Newspapers from 26th December 2014 till 26th February 2015 were included in the study.

Each of the newspaper thus selected was then screened and searched entirely by the investigators (DH and PJ). The newspapers were accessed as hard copies or online epaper editions. News items in every newspaper were selected, which covered a suicide or parasuicide, which included expert comments or editorials or featured columns on suicide for analysis.

The news items were analyzed for the data regarding socio-demographic details of the victim/survivor. Then, the news items were analyzed for quality indicators. We used the recommendations by Indian Psychiatric Society [2], the World Health Organization [6], The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists [7], Canadian Mental Health Association [8], The Irish Association of Suicidology [9], The Hong Kong Jockey Club Centre for Suicide Research [10] and the recommendations by a joint venture dealing with mental health and suicide in the United States [11].

The recommendations by each of the above mentioned projects were analyzed. We selected guidelines which 1) were common in all recommendations, 2) were objective (had no room for subjective opinion or bias). Few of the guidelines in the recommendations are subjective and can lead to rater bias or even selection bias. For example; most of the guidelines including those by the Indian Psychiatric Society recommend that suicide news item should be matter-of-fact, should not use language which will portray the event as sensational, emotional or glorify/romanticize the event. We used those guidelines, which are objective and have a measurable outcome.

The guidelines thus selected are,

- 1) Page number
- 2) Presence of a box around the news,
- 3) Word count,
- 4) Photographs of the deceased/location/scene/grieving relatives,
- 5) Mention of suicide note,
- 6) Quotes from suicide note,
- 7) Mentions the word "Suicide" or "Committed suicide" or "Successful/Unsuccessful" terms in headline,
- 8) Method of suicide mentioned in headline,
- 9) Method of suicide described in details/step by step manner,
- 10) Mention of the grief/shock of survivors,
- 11) Attempt to create public awareness,
- 12) Mention of suicide helplines/services/treatment options,
- 13) Stories of those overcoming depression/suicidal thoughts,
- 14) Mention of mental illness,
- 15) Warning signs/symptoms mentioned,
- 16) Treatment options for depression/stress,
- 17) Possibility of vulnerabilities/triggers,
- 18) Interview of the police/first responders,
- 19) Interview/quotes from family,
- 20) Repetitions/mention of old/other suicides,
- 21) Cause of suicide blamed on someone

The news items were analyzed and each variable was scored as a dichotomous variable with yes/no response. Quantitative variables such as page number and word count were measured and values were entered.

Statistical Analysis

Data was pooled in Microsoft Excel and analyzed in statistical software. Demographic data was analyzed with descriptive statistics. Compliance with media guidelines was assessed with cross-tabs and Chi Square test. Correlations were studied with Pearson's correlation. Statistical significance was at $p < 0.05$

RESULTS

Socio-demographic profile of victims

A total of 150 news items were selected for the study and analyzed. The distribution of victims was found to be 55% males (81/150) and 45% females (69/150). Mean age of all the victims was 27.02 ± 13.53 years, and there was no significant difference between male and female victims in terms of age (28.08 ± 15.26 [Males] versus 25.72 ± 9.44 [Females] years, $t = 1.645$, $P = 0.105$). When occupation [Table 1] of the victims of studied, 26% of the victims were students and 18% were housewives. The occupation was not mentioned in 21% cases. 12% of the victims were unemployed.

Data on suicide attempt

Majority of the news stories (120/150 – 80%) covered a suicide, whereas rest covered a para-suicide (30/150 – 20%). 78% of the news stories reported attempts involving a single victim, and in 20% cases, attempt by a couple or a family was reported. Suicide pact was mentioned in 1 suicide attempt. 4% of suicide attempts were associated with murder or attempt to murder a colleague/spouse or a family.

Coming to the method of suicide, there was no significant impact of gender on the method [Table -2] of suicide ($X^2 = 11.286$, $p = 0.186$). Hanging was the most frequently used method for committing suicide. There was no significant difference in age ($F = 0.575$, $p = 0.795$) on the method of suicide in the study sample.

Table 1 – Occupation of the cases

	Male	Female	Total	Significance
Students	23	16	39	$\chi^2 = 31.862$ $p < 0.001$
Housewives	0	27	27	
Unemployed	8	1	9	
Laborer	10	4	14	
Police/Army	3	4	7	
Farmers	6	0	6	
Clerical	2	4	6	
Lawyer	1	0	1	
Doctors	0	1	1	

Data on placement and presentation of the news item

We found that 58% of the news articles were placed [Figure 1] in the 1st 5 pages of the newspaper, 12% of which were on the front page. Placement of the news

items did not differ across gender ($\chi^2 = 13.161, p = 0.357$) and occupation ($\chi^2 = 116.679, p = 0.569$). 12% of the news items were placed inside a box. News items with and without the box did not differ significantly in terms of gender ($\chi^2 = 0.881, p = 0.282$) and occupation ($\chi^2 = 3.602, p = 0.963$).

Mean word count of news items was 151.92 ± 97.27 words. Word count did not differ significantly across gender of the victim ($t = 0.643, p = 0.547$), number of victims ($F = 0.087, p = 0.917$), across method of suicide ($F = 1.033, p = 0.421$) or page number ($F = 1.313, p = 0.234$). 22% of the news items were accompanied with a visual aid. 11% were accompanied by a graphic depicting suicide/location of the attempt, 8% were accompanied with the photograph of the location of suicide and only 5 news items (3%) was accompanied with the photograph of the victim. No impact of gender, or occupation or page number was found on use of the visual aids of victim and location. However, the graphic accompanying the news was significantly more frequent with the news covering para-suicide compared to suicide (14 vs. 7.5%, $\chi^2 = 9.266, p = 0.026$).

Table 2 – Method of suicide used

Method of suicide	Frequency
Consuming poison/overdose medications	23
Hanging	36
Drowning	25
Jump	26
Burning self	8
Stabbing self	2
Getting run over by train	2
Self-strangulation	2
Not mentioned	4

News Items (n=150)

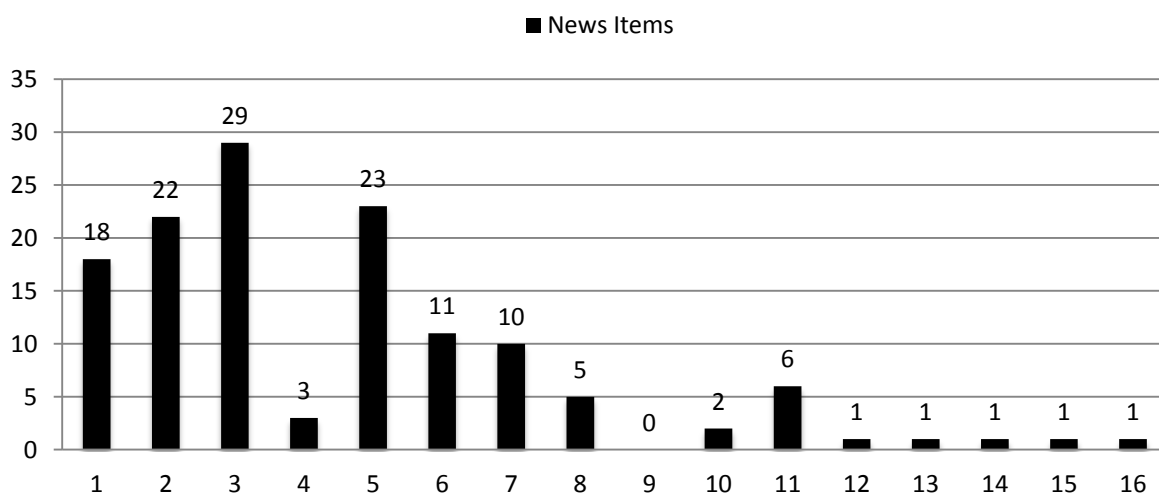


Figure 1 – Placement of news items in the newspaper

Data on details provided in the news items

Headlines

60% of all news items had the word "suicide" or "suicide" in the headline. 36% of the news items mentioned the method of suicide in the headline. 16% news items mentioned the method of suicide/para-suicide as well as the word "Suicide" or "suicide" in the headline.

The frequency of the word suicide mentioned in the headline was highest with consumption of poison/overdose of medications (90%), and was lower for hanging (50%), drowning (59%), jumping from height (55%), self-emulation (66%). It was observed that the method of suicide was more frequently mentioned in case of suicide as compared to para-suicide (50 vs. 19%, $X^2 = 8.698$, $p = 0.034$). Interestingly, the method of suicide was mentioned in headline most frequently ($X^2 = 40.085$, $p < 0.001$) in cases of stabbing self to death and being run over by train (100%), drowning (84%) and jumping from height (90%), followed by hanging (29%), consuming poison/overdose of medications (5%). Method was also mentioned most frequently ($X^2 = 19.933$, $p = 0.030$) in suicides by labourers (75%), followed by farmers (50%), housewives (46%), students (26%) and unemployed (22%).

Content

65% of the news items indicated/placed blame on someone the victim knew, or the conditions/environment around the victim. The mention of blame was more frequently in cases of para-suicide compared to suicide (86 vs. 63%, $X^2 = 10.785$, $p = 0.013$). 7% of the news items mentioned the suicide note in the content, and 3% quoted matter from the suicide note. Also, in no news item, the entire suicide note was printed. 78% of the news items gave a step-by-step account and details of the method employed by the victim in his/her suicide attempt. They also described the suicide location, the time of the day in detail. 20% of the news items contained a reference to a prior suicide at the same location or by similar method, whereas 6% news items mentioned the prior attempts by victims. This was significantly more frequent in cases where the suicide attempt was by drowning (59%).

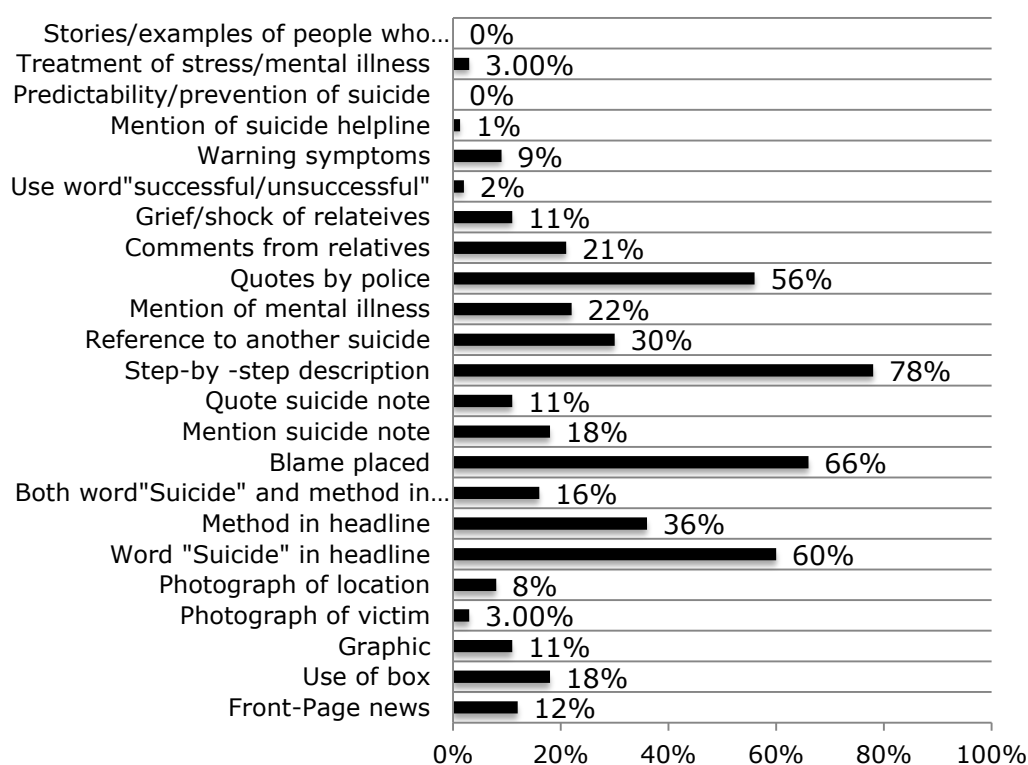
30% of the news items mentioned that the victim was suffering/probably suffering from mental illness as quoted by police/family/neighbours. Most common mental illnesses reported were depression (16%), followed by stress (8%) and substance use disorders (5%). 56% of the news items quoted investigating police officers or the first responders to the victim. However, this was only for news printed on the pages other than the front page. 21% of the news items interviewed and quoted reactions and comments from the bereavers, however only 8% mentioned the grief and shock experienced by the relatives. 5% of the news items used the word successful/unsuccessful or foiled to describe the outcome of the suicide attempt.

De-stigmatization and public awareness

8% of the news stories mentioned and occasionally described certain warning signs and symptoms in victims prior to current suicide attempt. The symptoms described included "being upset", "depressed", "crying spells", and "suicide attempts" in the past few days. 8% of the news items quoted the bereavers and expressed their shock and grief to the news. Only 1 news item mentioned the (1.3%) mentioned suicide

helpline numbers in its content. Not a single news item reported that suicidal behavior can be identified and suicide can be prevented. As mentioned in above section, although 22% victims were reported to be suffering from mental illness, only 4 news items (2.6%) reported the victim being taking treatment for his mental illness. Interestingly, not a single news item mentioned the association between suicide and psychiatric illness and the fact that psychiatric illnesses can be treated. Although as much as 20% of the news items mentioned or referred to a prior suicide attempt at the same location or by similar method, none mentioned the stories or examples of people who overcame suicidal thoughts/psychiatric illness.

Figure 2 - Various reporting indicators of suicide



DISCUSSION

After the guidelines were framed, many studies have been done in western countries to check compliance and adherence of media to the respective guidelines [10-17]. However, since the Indian guidelines were formulated, we could not find an Indian study on this topic.

The first issue to be addressed is the "Werther Effect" itself. The impact and influence of media coverage on suicide rates and copycat suicide has been both supported as well as criticized. Studies have demonstrated an increase in suicide rate after the media coverage of celebrity suicide significantly [12]. A study has also demonstrated that media portrayal of suicide can play a role in preventing suicides as well [13]. This impact of media on an increase in the suicide rates can be explained by the social learning theory [19-20]. The magnitude of copycat suicide behavior will increase, when the vulnerable groups will identify with the victim who committed suicide or the psychosocial fabric around the victim.

The first aspect of a news article we focused on was, the details regarding the suicide/para-suicide itself. More than 2/3rd of all news items in our study had covered a completed suicide with the rest reporting a para-suicide [13]. However, it was seen in the McKenna study that apart from reporting completed suicide and attempted suicide, newspapers in New Zealand also report articles covering suicidal ideations without the suicide attempt. Our study did not find any news article portraying suicidal ideations in the absence of an attempt! This factoid is vital since publishing articles covering suicidal ideations only in the absence of an actual attempt has been linked with reduction in suicide rates [11]. This is hypothesized to be due to i) identification with the victim, ii) stress being placed on the fact that despite the suicidal ideations, the person is going to live.

Both male and female genders were mentioned in equal preference in news articles (52% males, 48% females). It was also found that, 66% of the news articles covered the suicide attempts by people in the age group of 20-40 years, which was followed by suicide attempts by adolescents (19%). In our study, 8% of the news was on the front page and almost half the news articles were in first 5 pages of the newspaper. Prior studies have also found placement of news on the front page to be 6% [14] and 4% [15]. It has been argued that placement of a news covering suicide on the front page gives it an undue prominence. Phillips [16] demonstrated that, placement of news covering suicide on the front-page leads to an increase in the number of suicides within 3 to 30 days of publication. Wasserman and Stack [17-18] also reported an increase in suicide rate over a longer time period. Thus, the guidelines mention that the news covering suicide should be on inside pages, and lower section of the page [3].

Not just the placement of the story, but also the details provided in the headline as well as the news itself can help-both sensationalize the incident, glorify the incident, attribute martyrdom to the victim and sometime romanticize the act of suicide. These details include the suicide note, quotes from the note and mention of the word "suicide" or "commit suicide" in the headline. In our study, nearly 2/3rd of the news stories carried the word "Suicide" in the headline, and 43% mentioned the method of suicide in the headline. These details provide an emotional tone to the news story and help the audience connecting with the victim at an affective level.

If sensationalizing suicide is a problem, normalizing suicide is an even bigger problem. Media is said to normalize the suicide, when they report suicide excessively and report suicide as the coping mechanism or the obvious way out of the problem [13]. For example, "*Mr Y commits suicide after break-up*". A headline like this portrays that suicide is the obvious step after the break-up. Nearly 60% of the news stories in our study had placed a blame/attributed someone/environment for the suicide whereas none mentioned the stress-vulnerability model of mental illness and suicide.

Apart from sensationalism and normalization, certain details make it easier for the vulnerable groups to identify with the victim. These include photographs of the victim, location, a graphic demonstrating the attempt and step-by- step description of the method and/or chain of events. In our study, 82% of the news stories provided a detailed description of the method, 20% supplemented the news with a visual aid. Scientific research has shown imitation behavior with method in fictional and non-fictional literature [21-23].

Just as mentioning some details are associated with a rise in suicide rates, reporting certain factors has been shown to reduce suicide rates and can have a role in preventive models of suicide [24] for example as discussed above, printing news articles covering only suicidal ideations without the attempt. These details include availability of resources; help seeking behavior, suicide helplines, mention of stress and depression

associated with suicide and a stress-vulnerability model of suicide. A recent study has demonstrated a reduction in suicide rates after a positive coverage of suicide in television media [25]. Compared to the study in New Zealand (6%) [13] and the United States (6%) [14], only 1 (0.6%) news stories in our study mentioned the suicide helplines and numbers, when nearly 30% had mentioned that the victim had some mental health related issue for example stress, depression and mental instability. Mention of suicide helplines, depression and help seeking behavior leads to public awareness regarding contributing factors in suicide and the feeling that, help is available and a solution can be found no matter how hard the problem is.

Not just victim, but the reactions from the society and the survivors also play a role in the media impact on suicide. In almost 60% stories, quotes from police and survivors were mentioned regarding the investigation, however only 2 stories reported the grief and shock experienced by the survivors after the impact. Portraying shock and grief of survivors is theoretically said to create awareness and a feeling of hope that, despite one's suicidal thoughts, there are loving friends and family members who care for the person and will be tormented after his/her loss.

To conclude, print media comply with suicide coverage guidelines in India as they do in other countries such as the United States and New Zealand. News stories were prominently placed and contained material and details-which sensationalized the news or normalized the event. The factors known to cause a rise in suicide rates were comparable in Indian media as compared to the countries mentioned above. However the more troubling issue is, the preventive aspects of suicide, medical and stress-vulnerability models of suicide, help sources available for suicide and the shock-grief experienced by suicide were hardly mentioned. Further research is henceforth required to find Werther Effect and Papageno effect in Indian scenario.

The limitations of our study included a small sample size and selective selection of newspapers from an urban setting. The future directions include a study with a longer time span and a study of suicide portrayal patterns before and after a celebrity suicide.

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