

# Nigerian newspapers coverage of suicide: Assessment of adherence to WHO suicide reporting guidelines

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## ABSTRACT

**Context:** Despite an increase in research evidence on media compliance with suicide reporting guidelines globally, evidence from Nigeria seems to be relatively limited.

**Aim:** This study assessed the prevalence of World Health Organization (WHO) helpful/harmful suicide reporting cues in suicide stories reported by Nigerian newspapers in 2021.

**Setting and Design:** The setting is the entire Nigeria and the design is descriptive.

**Method:** Quantitative content analysis method was adopted and 205 online suicide-related stories from news portals of 10 purposefully selected newspapers were analyzed. The newspapers selected were among the top 20 in Nigeria and had higher circulation/coverage and considerable online presence. Evaluation framework was designed following moderated WHO guidelines.

**Statistical Analysis Used:** Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were used for the analysis.


**Results:** The study suggested high prevalence of harmful reporting and near absence of helpful suicide reporting cues among Nigerian newspapers. Majority of the stories, 95.6% mentioned suicide in the headline; 79.5% provided details on the suicide methods employed; 66.3% offered mono-causal explanation to suicide; and 59% featured images of suicide victims and/or suicide-related graphics. Helpful reporting cues were almost nonexistence as only less than 4% of the stories traced warning signs, reported mental health experts/professionals' opinions, featured research findings/population level statistics, and provided details on the identity/contact of suicide prevention programs/support services.

**Conclusion:** Prevalence of harmful suicide-reporting practice among Nigerian Newspaper presented a gloomy future for suicide prevention in the country. There be training and motivation programs for health/crime reporters/editors on responsive media coverage of suicide following (a domesticated) WHO guidelines.

**Key words:** Harmful reporting, helpful reporting, Nigerian newspaper, poisoning, quantitative content analysis, suicide coverage, WHO suicide reporting guidelines

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## INTRODUCTION

Mass media remain one of the major sources of information on suicide.<sup>[1]</sup> Its coverage has been described as 'a significant agent in the social construction of reality in today's world, which may affect people's exposure to suicide behaviours, especially for vulnerable groups'.<sup>[2]</sup> Studies on the quality of media coverage of suicide have been on the increase following the seminal research conducted by Philips in the United States in 1974. Philips reported an increase in suicide rates after a publication of a story on suicide on the title page of the *New York Times*.<sup>[3]</sup> Recent studies on media reportage of suicide continue to affirm the relevance of responsive suicide reporting because the content of the media report could influence suicide copycat behaviour.<sup>[4]</sup> For instance, it has been reported that media report on suicide involving celebrities would likely have more consequence on copycat behaviour among vulnerable groups than reports on suicide incidence involving unpopular personalities.<sup>[5,6]</sup> Copycat behaviour among vulnerable groups has also been linked with repeating suicide reports, identifying and explicitly explaining dramatic lethal suicide method, placing suicide stories prominently in the media, making suicide look inevitable, glamorizing/sensationalizing suicide story, and the extent to which the reader can identify with the reported suicide victim.<sup>[2,5,7]</sup>

The above underpinned World Health Organization's (WHO) drive toward promoting responsible global media coverage of suicide by advancing effective guidelines for the media.<sup>[8]</sup> Although WHO and International Association for Suicide Prevention (IASP) suicide reporting guidelines serve as the standard for suicide reporting globally,<sup>[8]</sup> many high-income countries have developed their own guidelines that were unique to their environment.<sup>[6,9,10]</sup> The guidelines remained the main reference material guiding media coverage of suicide in many low-income and middle-income countries.<sup>[11]</sup> The WHO and IASP guidelines basically emphasized potentially helpful features that may help in preventing suicide, and potentially harmful features that may provoke suicide, thereby serving as educational resource material on best suicide reporting among media.<sup>[11]</sup> Helpful or responsive suicide reporting as per WHO and IASP guidelines requires the mass media to provide accurate information about where people with suicidal thought could seek help and educate the masses about the facts of suicide and suicide prevention without necessarily spreading myths. Others include the need for mass media to emphasize how people facing difficult times in life could cope with life stressors and the need for the media to apply particular caution especially when reporting celebrity suicide or when interviewing bereaved family/friends. The mass media were therefore advised against harmful suicide reporting that include placing suicide stories prominently, unduly repeating suicide story, and sensationalizing/normalizing suicide. The guidelines also

emphasized the need for the mass media not to present suicide as a constructive solution to problems and not to explicitly describe the method used. Others required the media not to provide details about the site/location and avoid the use of sensational headlines, photographs, video footage, or digital media links in reporting suicide.

Research efforts to evaluate media compliance to guidelines in the coverage of suicide have been on the increase in other places like the United Kingdom,<sup>[10,12,13]</sup> Australia,<sup>[14]</sup> Canada,<sup>[15]</sup> India,<sup>[1,16,17]</sup> China,<sup>[18,19]</sup> Hong Kong,<sup>[20]</sup> Indonesia,<sup>[21]</sup> and Bangladesh.<sup>[22]</sup> Limited studies have been conducted in some countries in Africa like Ghana,<sup>[11]</sup> Egypt,<sup>[23]</sup> and Nigeria<sup>[24]</sup> with report of little or no compliance to suicide reporting guidelines despite the increasing suicide burden on the continent and Nigeria particularly. Available evidence suggests that Nigeria's suicide rate of 17.3 per 100,000 stands above the global 10.5 per 100,000 and that of Africa's 12.0 per 100,000 estimates.<sup>[25]</sup> This suicide figure may even be higher than the estimated if there were to be proper reporting, documentation, and statistics.<sup>[24]</sup> Suicide in Nigeria is often not well reported and documented because of fear of stigmatization, cultural and religious sentiments, and the criminalization of suicide by the Nigerian constitution.<sup>[24,26]</sup> This study therefore assessed the prevalence of WHO helpful/harmful suicide reporting cues in suicide stories reported by Nigerian newspapers from January 1 to December 31, 2021.

## METHODS

This study employed descriptive research design and undertook a quantitative content analysis to analyze the online editions of suicide-related news stories reported by 10 Nigerian national newspapers. The quantitative content analysis has also been applied in similar studies because it is a systematic objective and quantitative procedure devised to examine the manifest content of recorded information and afford the researcher the opportunity to make relational inferences with statistical methods.<sup>[27]</sup>

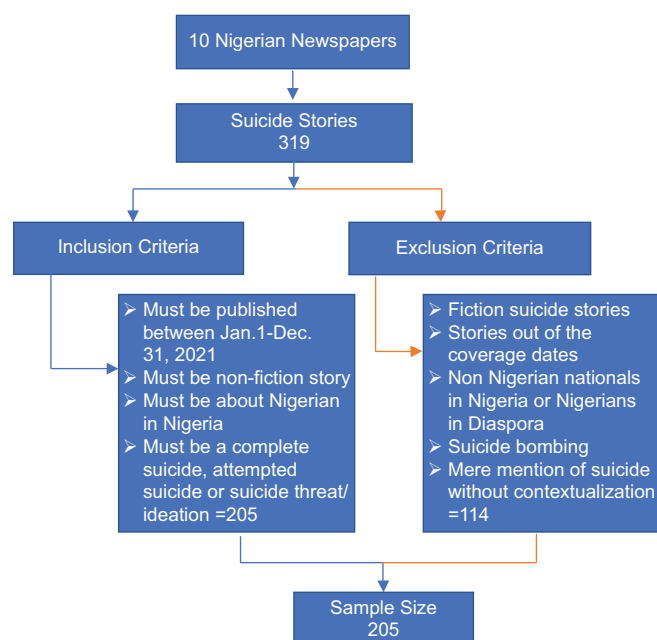
Ten newspapers selected purposefully were *The Punch*, *The Vanguard*, *The Daily Trust*, *The Guardian*, *The Sun*, *The Daily Independent*, *The premium Times*, *The Tribune*, *The Nation*, and *The Leadership* newspapers. The criteria for the selection of the newspapers were that they were among the top rated 20 newspapers in the country, regularly publish stories on their websites on wide range of contents, and published at least five suicide-related stories on their websites within the study period. All the 10 newspapers selected for the study publish only in English as the general language in Nigeria.

## Data collection

The data (news stories) were collected between 14 and 30 April, 2022. The data were collected by the lead author after two different meetings with the other authors on the

nature and characteristics of the data to be collected. The collection of the data was done by searching through the newspapers' official websites using the keyword 'suicide' and hyponyms of common suicide methods in Nigeria (that is 'drinking sniper', 'jumping off a building', 'poisoning', 'jumping into a river', 'jumping into well or reservoir', 'jumping off a bridge', 'drinking pesticides', 'hanging', 'setting self-ablaze', and 'throat slitting'). As such, only the stories in the webpages of the selected newspapers were used for this study. Then we opened and saved all the stories in PDF and copied the web links for all the stories into Microsoft Excel File. The stories collected covered the one-year period spanning from January 1 to December 31, 2021.

The initial data collection yielded 319 suicide-related stories published within the study period. The stories were then filtered using a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria as presented in Figure 1. The inclusion criteria included the fact that the event depicted in the story must be nonfictional including death by suicide, suicide attempt, and or ideation/threats. Other stories included were stories on suicide that have occurred in Nigeria and among the Nigerian population (meaning stories relating to suicide of foreigners in Nigeria and/or relating to Nigerian nationals in other countries were not included). Suicide events associated with suicide bombing were excluded. We equally excluded stories that only contained the word 'suicide' or its synonyms in the text but no further contextualization of suicide to the actual motif of the study. At the end of the exercise, we obtained 205 suicide-related news stories from the selected Nigerian newspapers as presented in Table 1.



**Figure 1: Suicide stories selection process**

### Data coding and categorization of the articles

The coding was carried out in line with earlier evaluation researches.<sup>[19,21,22,24]</sup> We developed a coding schema to categorize the selected stories into major and subcategories for analysis. At the first instance, we extracted descriptive data bothering on name of newspaper, time of publication, type of suicide events reported (whether the suicide event was a suicide, an attempted suicide, suicidal ideation/threats, or not), location (urban or rural), reported suicide method, and attributed factors.

At the second instance, we designed a mainstream media evaluation framework following the moderated WHO guidelines to assess the prevalence of helpful/harmful suicide reporting cues in online versions of Nigerian newspaper stories on suicide. In doing this, we divided the content of the media stories into two major categories: helpful and harmful information.<sup>[8]</sup> We then went further to create subcategories for the two major categories by modifying and adapting Armstrong *et al.*'s categories.<sup>[1]</sup> As per WHO, harmful information on suicide reporting could be established when there are bad use of language (if the story was written in sensational language or written to normalize suicide or presented suicide as a constructive solution to problem); description of method used (if the story explicitly described the method used in the suicide event); location (if the story revealed details about the site or location of where the suicide took place); presence of sensational headline (if the story used sensational headline); and whether the story use photographs, video footage, or social media links.

In the same vein, case of helpful information in suicide reportage was established if the story provided accurate information about where to seek help and educate the public about the facts of suicide and suicide thoughts; educate the public on how to cope with life stressors or suicide thoughts; applied particular caution when reporting celebrity suicides (caution was said to have been applied if the story was not speculative on the cause of death and it focused on the celebrity's life, how he or she contributed to society, and how their death negatively affects others rather

**Table 1: Newspaper Distribution according to Suicide Related Stories**

Newspaper	Total Collected	Total Excluded	Total Included
Daily Trust	10	4	6
Guardian	27	7	20
Independent	36	18	18
Leadership	9	2	7
Nation	52	15	37
Premium	20	8	12
Punch	60	17	43
Sun	30	8	22
Tribune	42	14	28
Vanguard	33	21	12
Total	319	114	205

than details of the suicidal act or providing simplistic reasons for why the suicide occurred); and applied caution when interviewing bereaved family or friends. For practicality and scientific applicability purposes, the WHO guideline was moderated after discussing with other experts as it was not possible to ascertain, from the latent contents of the stories, if the reporters applied 'caution when interviewing the bereaved family or friends' and recognized that 'media professionals themselves may be affected by stories about suicide' without interviewing the concerned reporters. Again, because the stories used were online versions of the stories, it was difficult to ascertain the placement of the story in the newspaper.

Three of the authors were used for the coding, using explicit coding framework. We carried out a reliability test based on 48 sampled data items with the following results: the inter-rater reliability of suicide reporting characteristics ranged from 0.77 to 0.97 with an average of 0.90 and that of the quality of suicide reporting which ranged from 0.79 to 0.98 with an average of 0.92. Going by prior research, both parts of the framework suggest strong inter-rater reliability. Throughout the coding period that lasted for three weeks, we had four different meetings in between coding among the coders to maintain high level of consensus throughout the coding process.

### Data analysis

The study employed descriptive statistics like percentage and frequency tables to analyze the collected data. The data were inputted into SPSS version 23 where the aforementioned statistical tests were conducted.

### Ethical consideration

This study qualifies for 'exempt' status under human subjects' regulation because it was a retrogressive review of existing newspaper reports of suicide incidences in the country from January 1 to December 31, 2021. In addition, the data collected did not give room for the identification of any subject in the study and again, there was no link to any of the subject identifiers.

## RESULTS

### Characteristics of suicide stories

The study analyzed 205 news stories from 10 selected newspapers as presented in Table 2. The average suicide stories per newspaper was 20.5 as a whole and 0.056 per newspaper per day. However, the number of suicide-related stories in each of the newspapers varied considerably. *The Punch* newspaper had the highest number of suicide stories (21%) with an average of 0.12 story per day, whereas *The Daily Trust* newspaper has the least (2.9%) with an average of 0.02 story per day. As presented in Table 2 below, for every 200 suicide-related stories, 144.3 were reports relating to suicide death while only 36 per 200 were

**Table 2: Descriptive Characteristics of Suicide Stories (n=205)**

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Newspaper		
The Punch	43	21.0
The Vanguard	12	5.9
The Daily Trust	6	2.9
The Guardian	20	9.8
The Sun	22	10.7
The Daily Independent	18	8.8
The Premium Times	12	5.9
The Tribune	28	13.7
The Nation	37	18.0
The Leadership	7	3.4
Total	205	100.0
Type of Story		
Suicide Death	148	72.2
Suicide Attempt	37	18.0
Suicide Idea/Threat	20	9.8
Number of Persons in a single report		
One	203	99.0
Two and above	2	1.0
Total	205	100

on suicide attempt and 19.5 per 200 were on threat or the thought of committing suicide. Among almost all the suicide-related news stories, 99.0% were centered on suicide incidents that involve a single individual. Multiple suicide victim stories appeared in only two of the 205 news stories analyzed.

### Potential harmful cues in the suicide stories

Analysis of the potential harmful reporting cues in the news corpus was done looking at the extent to which the newspapers revealed the identity of suicide victims, details of suicide method, causative factors in the reported stories, suicide note, headline, and volume of private information reported as seen in Table 3. The study found that 188.3 per 200 suicide stories reported by Nigerian newspapers mentioned the name of the suicide victim, 149.3 per 200 stated the occupation of the victim, and 132.7 per 200 stories reported the age of the victim. Again, 180 of every 200 suicide stories reported the method adopted by the victim, and 159 stories of every 200 stories provided details of the suicide method. Also, a single factor was reported to be responsible for the suicide incidence in majority of the news stories (66.3%). While suicide note was mentioned in 20 of every 200 suicide stories, extracts from the suicide notes were reported in only 3 of every 200 suicide stories.

An analysis of the headlines equally revealed harmful suicide coverage among the selected newspapers as suicide was mentioned in almost all the headlines (95.6%). The study also found that suicide-related images were found in more than half of the stories (59%) with image of suicide victim appearing in 65.4 per every 200 stories and other images/graphics depicting suicide or showing suicide



scene without the victim were published in 52 per every 200 stories.

### Potential helpful cues in the suicide stories

The study assessed the presence of helpful reporting cues in the selected stories by looking at the extent to which the newspapers reported warning signs before the suicide incidence, established link with mental illness and drug abuse, and provided educational information as presented in Table 4. The study reported that helpful reporting was almost nonexistence in the selected suicide news stories as less than 4% of the stories traced warning signs (7.8 per 200 suicide stories), linked it with drug or substance abuse (6.8 per 200), reported mental health experts or professionals' opinions (2.3 per 200), and reported research findings and

population level statistics on suicide (2 per 200 stories). Details on the identity and contact of suicide prevention programs and support services appeared in only 2.9 of every 200 suicide stories. Nevertheless, 22.9% of the suicide stories linked the suicide incidence with mental illness and 13.2% of the stories mentioned the possible effect of the suicide incidence on the bereaved. Information on prevention programs and messages aimed at educating the readers and dispelling myths on suicide were published in only 6.8% of the suicide stories.

## DISCUSSION

We analyzed the 205 suicide stories collected from the official websites of 10 Nigerian national newspapers covering January 1 to December 31, 2021. The result of the study indicated high prevalence of harmful reporting cues and low helpful suicide reporting cues contrary to the WHO-recommended suicide reporting guidelines. As seen in Table 3, almost all the stories mentioned the name of the suicide victim; majority stated the occupation of the victim, reported the age of the victim, mentioned and provided details on the methods employed, and offered mono-causal explanation to suicide. An analysis of the headlines equally revealed harmful suicide coverage among the selected newspapers as suicide was mentioned in almost all the headlines. More than half of the news stories featured images of suicide victims or suicide-related graphics. Majority of the news stories were not educative and as such might not be able to dispel myths surrounding suicide and prevent same in the country. Some of the stories also indicated the names of public sites or locations where the suicide incidence occurred, mentioned and cited suicide note, and reported interview with the bereaved.

The above findings corroborate earlier results from other African countries like Ghana<sup>[11]</sup> and earlier study in Nigeria<sup>[24]</sup> with a little positive variation in Egypt.<sup>[23]</sup> For instance, Quarshie *et al.*<sup>[11]</sup> reported a similar pattern of media coverage of suicide in Ghana as majority of the stories analyzed did not put into cognizance, the WHO guidelines on suicide coverage by the media. Similarly, in their study report from Nigeria, Oyetunji *et al.*<sup>[24]</sup> affirmed that media coverage of suicide in Nigeria from 2010 to 2019 did not follow the WHO guidelines as 'the majority of the reports mentioned the name, occupation [of] the person, name of the method, life events, and simplistic mono-causal explanation of suicide' among others. Findings of this study equally corroborate reports from some low-income and middle-income countries in South East Asia<sup>[20]</sup> and other countries like China,<sup>[18,19]</sup> Indonesia,<sup>[21]</sup> and India.<sup>[1,16,17]</sup> However, findings from Egypt as reported by Mesbah<sup>[23]</sup> differ slightly from the current reports and present a greater hope for the adoption of WHO guidelines in Africa. As per his report, significant volume of the stories analyzed adhered to a few of the WHO (2000) and the Center for

**Table 3: Distribution of Harmful Suicide Reporting (n=205)**

Variables	Present	Percentage
Identity of the Victim		
Name of the victim	193	94.1
Occupation	153	74.6
Age	136	66.3
Public site named as location	74	36.1
Method		
Name of method	185	90.2
Details of method	163	79.5
Cause of Suicide		
Single cause	136	66.3
Multiple cause	9	4.4
No clear cause stated	60	29.3
Suicide Note		
Present	20	9.8
Citation from suicide note	3	1.5
Headline		
Suicide in the Headline	196	95.6
Suicide Method in the Headline	16	7.8
Cause of Suicide in the Headline	75	36.6
Disclosure of Private Information		
Image of Suicide Victim	67	32.7
Other Image Depicting Suicide	54	26.3
Interview with the Bereaved	42	20.5
Total	205	100

**Table 4: Distribution of Helpful Suicide Reporting (n=205)**

Variables	Present	Percentage
Warning Sign	8	3.9
Link to mental illness	47	22.9
Link to drug Abuse	7	3.4
Education and Information		
Expert opinion	3	1.5
Research finding	2	1
Population level Statistics	2	1
Prevention program	14	6.8
Educative Information	14	6.8
Contact Identity	3	1.5
Effect on the Bereaved	27	13.2
Total	205	100

Suicide Research and Prevention guidelines for suicide reporting before and after the Arab spring in mainstream Egyptian dailies. These include the fact that 93% did not define suicide as 'success' or 'failure', 90% did not use images or videos, 94% did not mention the suicide note of a victim, and 72% did not add a quote about the victim (p. 64).

## CONCLUSION

The study showed that Nigerian newspapers online did not adhere to WHO's (2017) guidelines for the coverage of suicide in Nigeria. Almost all the stories mentioned the name of the suicide victim; majority stated their occupation, reported their age, mentioned and provided details on the methods employed, and offered mono-causal explanation to suicide. The study also reported that suicide was mentioned in majority of the headlines. More than half of the news stories featured images of suicide victims or graphics depicting suicide scene or background, while the news stories were hardly educative enough to dispel myths surrounding suicide and prevent same in the country.

The study concludes that harmful suicide reportage by the media portends grave implications and present a gloomy future for the prevention and control of suicide in the country. This is because irresponsible media coverage of suicide may increase copycat (*Werther*) effect rather than promoting *Papageno* effect among the vulnerable groups in the country.

This study therefore recommended more awareness creation among health/crime reporters/editors on WHO suicide-reporting guidelines. Key stakeholders like mental health experts, researchers, health policy makers, and the media practitioners should collectively work out domesticated Nigerian-specific guidelines for the coverage of suicide. Such guidelines should take into cognizance, the nation's peculiar legal and socio-cultural mix. The health reporters and editors should be trained and encouraged to apply the (modified) principles of responsible reporting in their coverage of suicide.

Suffice to say at this point that there are some limitations of this study which call for caution when generalizing the findings. One, the analysis included only 10 purposively selected newspapers and was limited to only their online reports on suicide. This means there might be some suicide-related news stories reported by the selected newspapers offline but not uploaded online within the study period besides the fact that there might also be suicide stories covered by other newspaper and media outlets that were not covered by this present study. However, there seems to be a greater level of circulation for the online contents of newspapers in this internet age. The approach adopted by this current paper gave room for greater level of thoroughness and in-depth analysis of specific details of

suicide stories that have the capability to go viral within the algorithm of the web 2.0.

Future studies can therefore explore the offline version of the newspapers and as well incorporate other media like the broadcast media and the social media to provide greater perspectives. In addition, further research may be necessary to evaluate the actual impact of the newspaper coverage of harmful reporting of suicide on vulnerable groups in Nigeria.

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## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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