

# **SUICIDES IN THE PRINT MEDIA: ANALYZING THE NEWSPAPERS' REPORTING PRACTICES OF SUICIDES IN PAKISTAN**

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## **Abstract**

*Evidence suggests that suicide is a highly prevalent health concern and one of the leading causes of mortality. Every year thousands of people die of suicides, which is briskly increasing, especially in South Asia. Previous studies directly attribute suicide behavior to news media portrayals of the relevant incidents. Nonetheless, people having psychological problems are comparatively more vulnerable to imitating self-harming behavior. In this regard, Pakistan and other countries have also developed ethical guidelines concerning news media reporting to counteract an increased suicide contagion. The current study also aims to examine the newspapers' reporting of suicide incidents under the Social Responsibility Theory of Press. The researcher conducted a direct content analysis of n= 3 newspapers (national dailies) and carefully analyzed their reporting patterns. Results indicated clear violations of all the designated reporting guidelines. Moreover, mentioning the single reason behind self-harming behavior was the most frequently repeated violation. The researchers concluded that these violations can cause a rapid imitation of self-destructive behavior especially among the mentally vulnerable individuals. Thus, newspapers should obligate the designated ethical guideline to keep people safe from imitating the self-harming behavior.*

**Keywords:** *Suicide contagion; Media Ethics; Werther effect; Copycat behaviour; Print Media*

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## **Introduction**

As a social institution, the media can transform our social, economic, cultural, and political viewpoints. Directly or indirectly, media alter ideologies and convictions. Bringing social change and consciousness through media can bring productive outcomes (Paul, Sing & John, 2013). However, suicide prevention programs and news media practices are not harmonious. Healthcare professional is highly concerned about unethical media reporting and increasing suicide contagion among the public (Tully & Elsaka, 2004). Today news media reporting of suicide incidents is a crucial phenomenon. Notions about a strong association between media reporting and suicide contagion can be traced to 19<sup>th</sup>-century medical literature. Media reporting can become a potential risk by leading individuals towards self-destructive thoughts and behavior (Sisask & Värnik, 2012). Unethical media reporting patterns present compelling models regarding suicides ideas and behavior as media exposure to suicide is comparatively more influential than face to face self-destructive propagation (Ranson, 2001). Several studies also witnessed an explicit correlation between unethical media reporting and suicide contagion among the individuals, i.e., mentioning the location, reason, method, and others (Machlin et al., 2004). For instance, Fu et al., (2011) analyzed suicide reporting in Guangzhou, Taiwan, and Hong Kong and used WHO guidelines to compare the relevant media content. Results revealed that most news reports violated ethical guidelines given by the World Health Organization in all three selected regions. The researcher concluded that these unethical practices could mislead the policymakers, local authorities, and support program organizers about the severity of the phenomenon. Another study to affirm was conducted by Tully & Elsaka, (2004) as they examined the media coverage of suicide attempts and their possible correlation with ethical guidelines. Results indicated that news media in platforms were violating the ethical guidelines in the name of "freedom of expression". Therefore, the researchers emphasized on a strict implementation of news reporting laws to secure further lives from self-destruction.

Similarly, a person has a pre-existing urge to adopt a particular behaviour. Those behaviours under "avoidance gradient" are why approach-avoidance conflict naturally exists and the portrayals of suicides in news media reinforce people towards adopting homicide-suicide behaviours (Ranson, 2001). For instance, newspapers and articles primarily aim to attract the audience's attention by utilizing over-simplification of the incident and speculations about the reasons (Flynn et al., 2015). Currently, the reasons behind growing suicide contagion can be determined by media reporting patterns. Unethical portrayals and reporting portrayals leave negative impacts on public perceptions as suicide contagion is a matter of behavioural contagion. The dramatization of suicides or the written vignettes

regarding them is among the primary dynamic factors to induce this behaviour among the audience (Ortiz & Khin Khin, 2018).

Several studies also witnessed the harmful consequences of unethical suicide reporting (Collings, 2011; PLoS Medicine, 2009; St et al., 2002; Sinyor et al., 2018; Beautrais et al., 2006). However, the potential role of media in Pakistan regarding suicide contagion is an underrepresented topic of research. Therefore, the current study examined the reporting patterns of Pakistani newspapers concerning suicide reporting practices. Our study hypothesis assumes that:

**H1:** Newspapers in Pakistan lack ethical practices for reporting suicide stories

**a) Werther Effect and Copycat Behaviour:**

According to Jang et al., (2016), media internalize suicide behaviours among the audience. Copycat Suicide or Werther Effect's internalisation is robust if the incident is related to some celebrity or given maximum media exposure. Suicide contagion behaviour from news reports represented on television, radio, or newspapers is known as the "Werther Effect." This concept can be traced back to 1774 when a novel named *Die Leiden des Jungen* (The Sorrows of Young Werther) by Johann Wolfgang Goethe publicized suicide, which promoted suicide in Germany. Likewise, Copycat suicide can also be traced back to 1960, when a famous Japanese novelist Seicho Matsumoto published his popular novel "Kuroi Jukai." Also known as "The Black Sea of Trees," the novel is based on two lovers who commit suicide in Aokigahara Forest (famous as a suicide area in Japan). One of the theories behind suicides in Aokigahara Forest is the novel by Seicho Matsumoto. In Aokigahara, people mostly hang themselves or swallow sleeping pills. People also claimed that the novel dramatically portrayed people committing suicide in Aokigahara; however, preferring this forest is still a mystery (Amanda Remling, 2012).

Scientific evidence of media reporting and suicide contagion predicts an even more increased number of future incidents. The causal relationship between these two is firmly validated by consistency, coherence, temporality, and specificity. More self-destructive attempts are recorded right-after repetition of the suicide media reporting (Sinyor et al., 2018). Unveiling suicide leads to the adoption of self-destructive behaviour in general, but today, suicide contagion is also common among individuals who access news through social media (Habes, Salloum, et al., 2020). Even if traditional media start following ethical guidelines, this contagion will still be prevailing due to social media access (Poland et al., 2019; Alghizzawi et al., 2019).

Additionally, individuals with severe psychological disorders are more vulnerable to adoptive suicide contagions due to unethical media portrayals.

The strong correlation between suicide in media and suicide contagion is addressed by several studies worldwide. All line of evidence affirms that media portrayals of suicide, whether fictional or non-fictional perpetuate suicidal behaviour among susceptible individuals (Beautrais et al., 2006).

**b) Ethical Guidelines:**

Several organizations are operating worldwide to offer clinical guidance and support to a briskly growing number of suicide cases. Besides, these organizations have also highlighted guidelines about media coverage of suicide incidents. World Health Organization (WHO), Samaritans, Centre of Journalism Ethics (School of Journalism and Mass Communication), Canadian Psychiatric Association (CPA), and American Association of Sociology are some pre-eminent organizations that provided ethical guidelines to journalists all over the world to thwart suicide predilections among masses. According to Machlin et al., (2004), these guidelines do not impose any censorship. The purpose is to avoid any risk of public imitation; however, if the news report aims to inform the public about the severity of the issue, reports can be published accordingly. A summary of the proposed guidelines is in **Table 1** given below:

**Table 1:** Guidelines for Reporting Suicides in Media:

S/R	Guidelines
1.	Avoid using big headlines
2.	The news report should be placed on non-prominent pages
3.	Avoid mentioning the name, place, or reason for the suicide attempt
4.	Carefully select the language
5.	Avoid publishing/broadcasting photographs or videos of the related incident
6.	Avoid referring suicide to a “growing problem.”
7.	Avoid mentioning the method used for suicide
8.	Avoid reporting the cause by mentioning it as a single event, i.e., poverty, loss of job
9.	Avoid sharing the notes left
10.	Share a hopeful message that suicide is preventable

Suicide prevention policies and programs tend to support vulnerable individuals (Sana Ali, 2020). For this reason, the guidelines mentioned above play a crucial role in refraining people from Copycat behaviour as media organizations and professionals tend to disclose suicide containing events for decades explicitly (Barbour et al., 2009). Referring to many psychological experts and medical professionals, such disclosure leads to copy a suicidal

behaviour. In this context, ideal ethical guidelines should be followed to circumvent suicide behaviour among the masses, and welfare should be the media core concern (Margaret & Azida, 2012).

## **Conceptual Framework**

This study is supported by the Social Responsibility Theory, which holds the press accountable for its news reporting, writing, and content selection. Formally, the Social Responsibility theory was developed by Siebert, Peter, and Schramm in 1956. Social Responsibility theory tends to assume the media's role as a social institution of delivering the appropriate information to the audience (Middleton, 2009). Society expects news media to provide information for the wellbeing and awareness of the masses. Here, the media platforms work as "a watchdog", which helps the audience empower their social awareness and evaluation process (Ravi, 2012). According to Hedblom et al., (2019), Social Responsibility theory is initially inspired by Hutchins's ideology. He assumed that newspapers work as a source of social awareness and work for the solution. In a nutshell, the central proposition is about free media from government and political control, working for the public interest. In this regard, reporting suicides is a more significant concern today. Several media monitoring programs and policies focus on addressing the news media reporting of self-destructive behaviours. These policies keep media practices under the prescribed guidelines (Machlin et al., 2004). Cautious media reporting will reduce the number of suicide attempts. Sometimes suicides are worth sharing due to the newsworthiness and public awareness; however, still following ethical guidelines and ensuring accuracy is highly suggested (WHO, 2008). In this regard, Norris et al., (2006) argued that journalists help the public understand the world they live in. They are the eyes and ears for those who cannot witness several ongoing phenomena in the outer world. For this reason, media persons have to make critical judgments on what to publish and what not to by keeping the public interests under consideration.

## **Methodology**

This study is exploratory, and the researchers used a direct content analysis technique for the data gathering process (Habes, Alghizzawi, et al., 2020; Ali & Qamar, 2020). According to Parveen & Showkat, (2017), content analysis directly enables data gathering from the message, especially from the mass media content. It provides a systemic classification of variables and also helps to examine the patterns or themes. Therefore, it is a "subjective interpretation of data content." The researchers selected three prominent newspapers (national dailies) of Pakistan: The Daily Jang, Daily Express-News, and Daily Duniya News were selected and studied for six months.

## Population & Sampling

All the newspapers being published in Pakistan where the population of this study. However, the researchers used the Simple Random Sampling technique to select suitable newspapers. This method grants every case in the population an equal chance of selection and reduce the researcher's selection bias (Taherdoost, 2018). Further, the researchers used the Purposive Sampling technique to select the relevant news content from January 1, 2019, to July 31, 2019.

## Categories

Frames in terms of journalistic guidelines were measured for the following categories.

1. Headlines
2. Placement
3. Identity
4. Speculative Reason
5. Photographs
6. Language
7. Method
8. Hopeful Message

## Data Analysis & Results

**Table 2: One-Sample Chi-Square Analysis**

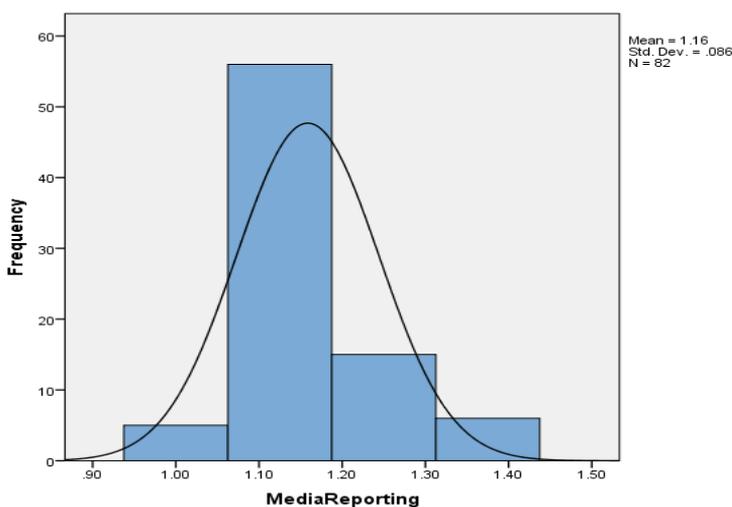
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	32.654	6	.015
Likelihood Ratio	21.730	6	.009
Linear-by-Linear Association	.045	1	.013

	Value	Asymp. Std. Error	Approx . T <sup>b</sup>	Approx . Sig.
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	.176		.075
	Cramer's V	.124		.065
	Contingency Coefficient	.173		.065
Interval by Interval	Pearson's R	.024	.107	.043 <sup>c</sup>
Ordinal by Ordinal	Spearman Correlation	.033	.110	.068 <sup>c</sup>

To test the study hypothesis. We used the  $\chi^2$  test of independence with  $\alpha=.05$  as a criterion for significance. Table 2 above contains the results of the One-Sample Chi-Square Analysis. Franke et al., (2012) noted that the Chi-square test is computationally comprehensive yet straightforward and reliable. It helps to scrutinize independence across two categorical variables. Thus the designated formula for the computation of statistics was as follows:

$$\chi^2 = \sum_{i=1}^n \frac{(O_i - E_i)^2}{E_i},$$

The Chi-square analysis indicated that print media in Pakistan lack ethical practices for suicide reporting,  $\chi^2(6, n = 82) = 32.654, p = .015$ . Figure 1 below contains the descriptive statistics to display normal chi-square distribution. Similarly, the Cross-tabulation of suicide news reports in the selected newspapers indicated that Daily Jang led the coverage by publishing  $n=35$  or 42.7% of news reports. Daily Express News published  $n= 33$  or 40.2%, and Daily Duniya published  $n= 15$  or 18.2 news stories covering suicide incidents. Therefore, news stories' accumulative frequency covering suicide incidents was  $n= 82$  (from January 2019 to July 2019).



**Fig. 1:** Descriptive statistics to display normal chi-square distribution

Similarly, the researcher also conducted cross-tabulation of the gathered data. Table 3 below contains the total means and standard deviations of data. According to Yankees, (2011), cross-tabulation is one of the most preferred analytical tools used in academic research. Researchers also refer to cross-tabulation as contingency analysis as it provides detailed information about the frequencies of occurrence, percentages, and relationship between the study variables. Thus, in the current study, cross-tabulation indicated that:

**a. Headline**

News headlines aim to attract the audience's attention as they summarize the whole story in just a few words. The use of the word "suicide" should be avoided, as it provides a clear idea of the entire incident that may entice vulnerable readers (WHO, 2008). However, the current study results revealed that  $n=78$  or 95.1% contained big headlines that were well proficient at catching the reader's prompt attention. According to Olmo López & García Fernández, (2015), journalists are asked to avoid highlighting the reports with big headlines and sensationalist style. Sometimes celebrities' suicides are also placed with catchy headlines. It can trigger Copycat behaviour among vulnerable individuals.

**b. Placement**

According to Norris et al., (2006), news media should minimize suicide news reports' visibility. They should make every possible effort to keep the stories on the other less prominent pages as the front pages are not the ideal location of the suicide news publication. Therefore, we found that  $n=75$  or 92.7% of reports were published on the first two pages of newspapers that a reader could easily access. In this regard, Samaritans (2013) also suggested avoiding publishing/broadcasting reports on prominent places as these incidents demand strict media scrutiny regarding their placement. In many cases, news reports are, e.g., positioned on the front pages of the newspapers, which can unduly attract susceptible people (Samaritans, 2013).

**Table 3: Means & Standard Deviation of the Data**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Means</b>	<b>SD</b>
Headlines	1.05	.217
Placement	1.07	.262
Identity	1.02	.155
Single/Speculative Reason	1.13	.343
Photographs	1.93	.262
Language	1.00	.000
Method	1.02	.155
Hopeful Message	1.04	.189

**c. Identity**

Over-identification of both the victims and places is prohibited. Susceptible people whose experiences resonate with the one who died can also lead them to prefer the same place and the method for suicide attempts (Samaritans, 2013). However, in the current study,  $n=80$  or 97.6% of news reports explicitly unveiled the name, gender, and places of suicide attempts. According to Norris et al., (2006), news reports should avoid overstatement, especially when mentioning the places. Tall buildings,

bridges, railways, mountains, and others are traditionally associated with suicide. Mentioning the details can be harmful as vulnerable individuals can prefer these places to commit suicide.

#### **d. Revealing Single/Speculative Reason**

Suicide can have different reasons generally comprised of early age trauma, disbelief or a notion about a better life. Explaining suicide in a simplistic or unexplainable manner should be avoided (Norris et al., 2006). Therefore, the researchers found that  $n= 71$  or 86.6% of news reports mentioned one-single speculated reasons behind self-harm behaviours. According to Samaritans, (2013), oversimplification of the causes and the motives behind self-harming behaviour can be misleading. Moreover, they can also fail to address the complexity of the incident appropriately.

#### **e. Inappropriate Language/Words**

The media should avoid inappropriately and sensationalized language to report a suicide. Media language can convey the subtle messages in an inappropriate language or out of context words, i.e., "successful, unsuccessful and failed attempt" contain different problematic interpretations (WHO, 2008). Our study's findings showed that all the selected news reports ( $n=82$  or 100%) explicitly used terms and maxims that are unethical in media reporting practice. According to Norris et al., (2006). The selection of appropriate language is of greater importance. Resorting to sensationalism, dramatization, and trivialization of the incident can entice many people and reinforce Copycat's behaviour.

#### **f. Photos**

According to WHO, (2008), photos and videos of suicide should not be published/broadcasted. Publishing graphical details can infringe on one's privacy and disgust the person who died by suicide. If publishing the photos is aimed at public awareness, explicit permission should be given by the person's family. This study found that a small number ( $n=6$  or 7.3%) of news reports contained photos of suicide incidents. Norris et al., (2006) noted that publishing photographs of the deceased person could bring intense disgust for their families. This identity disclosure can also reveal some extreme details, i.e., methods, places, any resonating experiences, and others, that can attract the vulnerable people

#### **g. Identifying the Method**

Details of suicide methods have shown immediate imitating behaviour among individuals. For example, mentioning the use of pills can perpetuate an instant adoption of the self-destructive idea (Samaritans, 2013). In the present study, the researchers recorded  $n= 80$  (97.6%) news stories revealing

the methods of a suicide attempt. News reports should refrain from mentioning methods used for suicide. Several studies also witnessed how susceptible people adapt to specific suicide methods mentioned in the news reports. The frequency of imitating the technique is comparatively much higher than the suicides in general (Norris et al., 2006).

#### **h. Hopeful Message**

According to Norris et al., (2006), the primary reason behind reporting suicides should be informing the public about the fatal consequences of self-harm. Mentioning the survivor's opinion and hopeful messages might be helpful for susceptible individuals. In the current analysis, ( $n= 70$  or 96.3%) were found lacking any hopeful message. Mentioning the name and contact details of the support organization is essential. It can help people who seek help and feel that they are not alone (Samaritans, 2013).

### **Discussion**

Suicide is a growing public health concern demanding our attention, but its prevention is a difficult task. State of the art research indicated that suicide prevention involves several activities, i.e., treatment of psychological disorders, provisions of suitable conditions for bringing up the children, and ethical media reporting of suicides (WHO, 2008). However, compelling evidence from previous studies' outcomes exhibited that media practitioners have strenuous responsibility when reporting suicides (Norris et al., 2006). A substantial body of research emphasized that news media reporting of suicides can attract the vulnerable masses and result in many self-harm attempts. Emerging research also witnesses that people overcoming suicide ideation can help other individuals seek help and guidance (Sinyor et al., 2018).

This study's key finding is that all the selected newspapers reported several news reports during the period chosen. However, most news reports contained big, prominent headlines and could draw the readers' attention. 95.1% of reports had enticing headlines, 92.7% of news stories appeared on newspapers' front pages. As Yip, (2004) argued, sometimes news reports contain newsworthiness; still, journalists should be careful to share sensitive details. The report should be published only if the reporting substance is essential and cautious about not triggering suicide contagion among the vulnerable people.

Perhaps, most importantly, a clear majority (86.6%) ignored the recommended guideline regarding oversimplification of the reason behind suicide incident as the articles described suicide as the cause of a single factor, i.e., drug abuse, loss of a job, family conflict, etc. According to Jesmin Ara et al. (2016), suicide behaviours may be accompanied by several risk factors, including disappointment, lack of self-confidence, body

shaming, financial loss, deprivation, bullying, and psychological disorders as the reasons behind self-harming behaviour. Also, 97.6% of news reports revealed the name, age, gender, and deceased person's place. This recommendation to avoid revealing his identity is mutually recommended by Samaritans, (2013) and WHO, (2008). Similarly, the same amount of (97.6%) of stories also revealed the methods utilized by deceased people for suicide. Indeed, this recommendation can play an essential part in suicide prevention. Several studies witnessed a strong association between celebrities' suicides and subsequent imitation of the community's same suicide methods (Carmichael & Whitley, 2019). The World Health Organization (WHO) provided evidence of imitation as they analyzed fifty research studies exploring any existing relationship between news media reporting and suicide contagion. They also examined the varying levels of imitations during specific situations. Findings indicated that the contagion lasted longer; however, it was at the peak during the first two or three days after exposure. Besides, the impacts also depend on the prominence and amount of coverage. Also, the over disclosure of suicide methods may lead to employing the same method (WHO, 2008).

Our other primary result was that only 7.3% of news reports contained visualization of suicides, i.e., photos of the deceased person, place, and the tool used for self-harm. According to Yip, (2004), publishing the images can give a false impression on vulnerable people and society. For instance, When Hong Kong's new media represented charcoal-burning's first suicide case, the local authorities later recorded nine more charcoal burning cases during the same month. In 2003, more than 25% of overall suicide cases were reported about charcoal burning as people from neighbouring places, i.e., Taiwan and Macau imitated the charcoal burning method. Similarly, we also found that all 100% of news reports contained inappropriate words directly sensationalizing and misleading about the incident. The language attributing suicides, to, e.g., "growing endemic, political suicide, unsuccessful suicide, etc.," tends to dehumanize the deceased person and desensitizes society about the magnitude of the problem (WHO, 2008). Lastly, 96.3% of news reports also lacked any hope for the vulnerable, suicidal people. In this regard, Machlin et al., (2004) emphasized that opportunities should be given by mentioning messages for helping help-seeking individuals. Also, helpline details regarding mental and social support services can help individuals as messages, and relevant information should be mentioned at the end of the news story. It can involve any motivational quote and contact information of psychologists, social activists, social welfare hotline numbers, and others (WHO, 2008).

Therefore, media change our perspective and influence our social recognition process (Alhumaid et al., 2020). Given the importance of media in our lives, they also bear the responsibility to work for the public interest.

Society depends on the media for information, awareness, and uncovering the prevailing human life issues (Corbi, 2014). However, journalists can harm the audience by representing the relevant reports in an appropriate manner, normalizing stereotypes, dehumanizing the individuals, and misrepresenting the major public health concerns (Comm, 2017). Unfortunately, news media guidelines proposed by several internal and local level organizations benefit from empirical validation, yet news media violates them (Gould et al., 2003). However, news reporting characteristics concerning suicide may lead to imitation, and the other elements may help educate the people (Norris et al., 2006). Here, social responsibility demands the press to look at ethical and legal issues associated with representations of suicide news stories as imitation can be vital when unethical practices dominate the news media (Comm, 2017; Carmichael & Whitley, 2019).

## **Conclusion**

Overall, the results suggest news media practices are unethical and capable of triggering Copycat behaviour. An ample example of suicide contagion is also witnessed by the cited literature suggesting that the media reporting suicides can reinforce relevant behavioural adoption among the public (Organizations, 2019). Through limited analysis of newspaper reports for six months, it is prominent that the press is concerned about the growing number of suicide cases in Pakistan; however, unethical reporting practices exhibited that they can be more detrimental for the readers and vulnerable masses. While reporting the suicide incidents, news stories containing catchy headlines, excessive details, speculative reasons, and visual content receive disproportionate audience attention. These can also cause a rapid imitation of self-destructive behaviour, and impacts can also be extended from immediate individuals to the general population. Some people can be comparatively highly susceptible to imitating the same suicide methods, especially those who possess suicidal ideation.

Similarly, media always focus on celebrity suicides where identity disclosure, photos, and others overstated details are prominently mentioned, capable of provoking suicidal behaviours. Public health professionals encourage media platforms and journalists to ascertain ethical reporting to reduce potential risk factors (Sisask & Värnik, 2012). Journalists should be trained enough to follow moral obligations that will minimize suicide contagion and help people adopt optimism towards a better life (Asraf et al., 2017).

## **Limitations & Recommendations**

The current study focused on how newspapers in Pakistan tend to follow ethical guidelines for reporting suicide incidents. Although there are several

other guidelines, the researchers chose only eight most prominent ones that narrow down this study's scope. Moreover, the researchers gathered limited data with a finite time duration that is another apparent study limitation. Therefore, the researchers recommend more investigations on the news media reporting practices on suicides and their impacts in Pakistan to obtain strongly generalizable results.

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