Suicide Reporting: An Analysis of Selected Nigerian Online News Sites (September 2018-August 2020)

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ABSTRACT

In 2019, the World Health Organisation released a report which revealed that Nigeria had the highest suicide rate in Africa. Employing a mixed-method approach, the researcher examined suicide reportage in Nigeria, between 2018-2020, comparing it to the standards set by the World Health Organisation's suicide reporting guidelines. A total of 227 articles and 3 editors were examined and interviewed. The findings revealed that although the editors stated that they were aware of and followed such guidelines, suicide incidents were reported irresponsibly. The research's result indicates that journalists need to be re-oriented on suicide and reporting best practices.

Keywords: Irresponsible reportage, Nigeria, Online news, Responsible reportage, Suicide, World Health Organization.

1. INTRODUCTION

Suicide is regarded as the deliberate termination of one's life, and suicidal behaviour ranges from suicidal ideation, plans, and attempts to death by suicide (Meissner, 2013). Earlier reports premised that suicide, and suicidal behaviours are rare occurrences in developing countries, specifically those in Africa (Chikezie & Ebuenyi, 2014; Eniola, 2018). In these parts of the world, suicide and suicide attempts are considered to be taboos. Beliefs such as *"Depression is a white man's disease"*, and *"Black people commit suicide"* are regurgitated and circulated in African communities, enabling a bondage-like spiral of silence (Meissner, 2013). As such, suicide-related cases are vastly under-reported. Even when they are, they are often sensationalised and reported irresponsibly (Vijayakumar, Nagaraj, Pirkis, & Whiteford, 2005).

Suicide is a global public health problem, and Nigeria as a nation is not exempted (Niederkrotenthaler, Arno, Benedikt, Markus, Elmar, Brigitte, Gernot, 2010; Mike, 2020). In September 2019, a World Health Organisation report indicated that Nigeria had the highest suicide rate among African countries (W.H.O, 2019). Okon (2019) reports that there have been forty-two cases of suicide in Nigeria which made the news between January and June 2019. Fifteen of these people killed themselves by drinking the dangerous insecticide, Sniper.

These distressing figures raise questions as to what media professionals are doing to mediate, control and prevent a further increase in suicide rates. Numerous studies, coupled with scientific evidence, have already established that the way suicide deaths are reported in the media can influence suicidal behaviour in the community (Niederkrotenthaler, et al., 2010; Quarshie, Andoh-Arthur, Asante, & Asare-Doku, 2020; Stack, 2009; Pirkis, Burgess, Francis, Blood, & Jolley, 2006). Irresponsible suicide reporting has been shown to trigger copycat behaviour, especially in cases where the suicide stories are described in sensational detail (Niederkrotenthaler, et al., 2010; Wang & Xiangdong, 2012). Nevertheless, responsible reporting can help curb and reduce suicide rates.

Responsible reporting on the part of our media professionals could play a role in decreasing the climbing suicide rate in the country. It is essential that clear, accepted principles are adopted by the media when reporting suicide. The World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Association for Suicide Prevention (IASP) released a resource titled *Preventing Suicide: A Resource for Media Professionals in* 2008. It is essentially a guide for proper reporting of suicide news. Studies have established that following this guide has a tremendous positive impact on reducing suicide rates (Chu, Zhang, Cheng, Schwebel, & Hu, 2018; Wang & Xiangdong, 2012).

There are very few studies that explore the suicide phenomenon in Nigeria, not to talk of the media's role in the aggravation of the social problem. This study examines whether Nigerian online news sites report suicide stories responsibly, adding to the small pool of literature we have on the subject. Going a step further, this study also examined whether suicide news coverage altered after the 2019 WHO report, which declared Nigeria had Africa's highest suicide rate, was published

The analysis yielded 227 suicide reports and these reports were examined against the WHO guidelines. The researcher also conducted interviews with the *Punch*, *Vanguard*, and *Sun* online editors to find out if they were aware of and employed the WHO guidelines. The findings of this study show that online media reporting of suicidal behaviour in Nigeria deviates significantly from WHO-recommended recommendations. These reports use sensationalistic language, unnecessary details of suicide methods, constantly use the image of victims as the featured images and may have an inherent propensity to inspire copycat suicide in vulnerable people. The results also indicate that media reporting could have influenced suicide clusters and contagion in the time period of May-September 2019.

2. SUICIDE AND THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

In 1774, Johann Wolfgang Goethe wrote a novel titled *"The Sorrows of Young Werther"*, which told the story of a young man who was conflicted with the demands of the everyday world. He tried to restore his well-being by travelling to the country but found that he was depressed and hopeless no matter where he went; this causes him to die by suicide. This novel triggered an increase in suicides, causing it to be banned in many European states. This phenomenon developed the model known as the "Werther effect", which explains a situation where one suicide case becomes a coercive model for another suicide (Chandran, 2019).

Research on the Werther effect was further worked on by sociologist, David P. Phillips, who found a strong link between suicide reports in newspapers or on television and a correlating increase in suicide rates. This phenomenon is described as "suicide contagion or copycat suicide", which suggests that specific ways in which the media describes suicide contribute to its imitation in society (Gould, 2001; Tully & Elsaka, 2004).

Studies as far back as the seventies have documented that due to newspaper reports about suicide, there has been a correlating increase in suicide reports (Motto, 1970; Phillips, 1974). There have also been several publicised suicide cases that have proven the influence of the media on the suicide phenomenon. A study by Fekete & Macsai (1990) showcased that there was a dramatic increase in suicide cases with the use of a drug called *lidocaine*. This spike came after a widely published suicide of the first Hungarian beauty queen who had died by ingesting this drug. The study also determined that the media reported the story irresponsibly, and as such established the consequent imitative suicides as a result of the Werther effect. An opposite instance of this case was the suicide of American singer, Kurt Cobain. The Seattle Crisis Clinic took up the responsibility of advising journalists on how to report the stories, and this had an active role in impeding the Werther effect (Jobes et al., 1996).

Most investigations into imitative suicides have concluded that media reporting of suicide can lead to imitative suicidal behaviours (World Health Organization, 2008; Chandran, Mathur, & Rao, 2019; Gould, 2001). These studies have also discovered that imitation is more likely in some settings than in others. In addition, time is considered a factor that influences imitation. Suicide imitation is said to be more likely in the first three days of the news report. Prominence, amount of coverage, overt description of suicide and the characteristics of the subgroup exposed to this content are also factors that contribute to imitative suicide (World Health Organization, 2008).

As a result of these findings, countries developed codes of practice, guidelines and legislation to impose the responsible reporting of suicide and mental illness. Media professionals were charged with restrictions on how they reported the news. However, some studies posit that this can be considered problematic because it poses a hiccup to the freedom of the press and their ability to self-regulate (Tully & Elsaka, 2004).

Recognising the critical role of the media in suicide prevention, the World Health Organisation provided detailed guidelines to ensure responsible reporting of suicide cases in the news media. The WHO Guideline (2008) covers a wide range of aspects of suicide reportage: setting standards in regards to grammar; choice of language; images and videos; and the recommended frequency a suicide story should be reported. The importance of the guideline is to curb the negative effects media reports may have on its audience, especially the vulnerable ones, as it concerns suicide reportage. Policies like this, coupled with intensive intervention programs, have been found to reduce suicide rates in several parts of the world (Clarke, 2011).

People that are more susceptible to committing suicide usually have some form of precursory mental disorder such as depression. However, not all patients suffering from depression would eventually lead to suicide. Early detection and treatment of depression would provide a good chance of suicide prevention (Takahashi, 2001). In a study by (Pöldinger, 1981), the stages leading up to suicide were classified into three; a) thinking, b) ambivalence, and c) decision making. The first phase of "thinking" is the point

where the individual considers the act, and suicide is seen as a solution for perceived problems. If this thought process continues, he or she settles on to the next stage- "ambivalence". This stage is where the individual has mixed feelings about the act, and his or her conscience might try to reign them in. Finally, the last phase is "decision making", which leads to the accomplishment of the suicidal act.

Individuals prone to suicide and suicidal behaviour can cope by developing connectedness with family and friends. This network of support can help remind the individual that they are loved and they should stay alive. Getting proper psychiatric help is also crucial; signing up for therapy as well (Jobes et al., 1996). Therefore, the mass media is a vital tool for spreading such information and awareness. Information about people with mental illnesses or who had died by suicide must also be portrayed in an objective and balanced light. In a study by Edney 2004, it is shown that there is a link between negative media portrayals of mental illness and a resulting negative public attitude toward people with mental health issues. This hostile atmosphere surrounding mental illnesses affects individuals who suffer from them. This negative portrayal of mental illnesses affects the government's response to the problem (Edney, 2004).

Conclusively, the media plays a multifaceted role when it comes to the issue of suicide. It could make matters worse or help alleviate the issue. The media, in the form of communicative devices, also helps health care providers reach out to patients and keep in constant contact. Most importantly, the way the media frames mental health issues and suicide could bring about the stigma associated with the illness or reduce the stigma and prevent imitative suicides. The media should endeavour to be more socially responsible, and educate the public so that those suffering can confidently go to seek help without feeling shame.

3. SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

The social learning theory is a widely cited model of media effects. Bandura's (1989) social learning or observational theory expounds that we cannot learn all or even much of what we need to guide our development and behaviour from direct personal observation and experience alone, but we can learn from indirect sources like the mass media. He explains that there are four basic processes of social learning which are attention, retention, production and motivation. It explains that our attention is directed towards media content that is relevant to us. Then we may choose to retain whatever information we might have got. The third stage says we might then decide to apply what we have learnt, which would lead to a reward that is either bad or good. The reward that is pleasant may motivate us to do it more. Though the social cognitive theory is usually used to explain the behaviour of children and young people, the theory posits both children and adults are observing other humans, whether directly or through the media.

The Social cognitive theory is a viable theoretical framework that could explain the contagion effect of suicide. In other words, the suicidal behaviour by one person may facilitate the occurrence of subsequent, similar behaviours in other people. Studies have shown that extensive newspaper and television coverage of suicide is associated with a significant increase in the rate of suicide. This is known as the Werther effect (Jamieson, Jamieson, & Romer, 2003; Lawal, 2018). Researchers posit that this contagion effect is mediated by social learning, where vulnerable individuals identify with people represented in the media and are prone to copy their behaviour (Amitai & Apter, 2012; Niederkrotenthaler, et al., 2010).

People may decide to emulate media portrayals of suicide through vicarious modelling. This is where media figures serve as models, much like parents, educators, or peers (Bandura, 2002; Brown, Halpern, & L'Engle, 2005). Applying this theory, one can say those already vulnerable individuals that consume a large amount of media that's saturated with suicide content are likely to imitate the actions or model their behaviour based on what they see or read. Social learning dictates that if the media are not reporting responsibly, their reports can have a contagious effect. In conclusion, irresponsible Nigerian media reports may influence copycat suicides.

4. METHOD

The researcher made use of a mixed-method research design; content analysis and an interview method. The population of the study consists of all online news sites in Nigeria, which includes over 95 online-only news publications in Nigeria and 51 Nigerian newspapers with both online and offline presence. However, *The Punch*, *Sun*, and *Vanguard* online newspapers were selected for the study. The *Punch*, *Sun*, and *Vanguard* news sites were selected because they are considered news sites that focus on human-interest stories and they have a wide readership and a loyal base of consumers. *Punch* is one of the top news sites in Nigeria and the top online newspaper, with over 800,000 readers per day. Vanguard follows Punch closely behind, with over 500,000 views on a daily basis. The Sun newspaper's slogan is the 'Voice of the Nation,' and the online news platform boasts about 150,000 readers on a daily basis as of the time of this study (Alexa, 2020). Three online editors were interviewed. They were selected from the three online news platforms, respectively.

The researcher focuses the research on only online news sites even though there is a present physical distribution of the newspapers because they are readily available to the public and can be easily shared. It is easy to share links to articles amongst friends and followers on social media, ensuring it has a broader reach. It is also easily accessible as it is a free platform that requires no readership fee.

From the online news sites selected for this study, news stories were selected and gathered by using the search tool on the selected news platforms. The search term "Suicide", synonyms and hyponyms, within the date range of September 2018 to August 2020, were used on all three of the online national newspaper sources. The sample studied within this time frame was to reflect one year before the publication of the WHO 2019 report and one year after. All suicide articles from these online news platforms within this time frame make up the research's sample size.

The search results were checked to ensure that only reports in which someone completed a suicide incident were collected. Stories that discuss statistics on suicide, suicide bombers, and suicide attempts, amongst others, were disregarded. Purposive sampling was adopted in selecting the three online news sites (*The Punch, The Sun, and Vanguard*) used for this research. It was also used in choosing the editors that would be interviewed.

The instrument that was used to collect the data was a coding sheet, an audio recorder, and an interview guide. A semi-structured interview guide was employed in the interview process. Here, the interviewer asked all the interviewees vital questions in the same way, while exercising the liberty to alter the sequence of the questions and to probe for more information.

Box 1: Content categories employed to analyse the reporting of suicide assessed in the study. Adapted from the WHO 2017 suicide reporting guideline.

1. Education: This refers to whether or not the news site's article educates its readers on suicide or mental illness in the report.
2. Language: This refers to whether or not the story uses such language that sensationalises suicide. Hyperbolic terms like *"suicide epidemic"* or inaccurate terms like *"unsuccessful suicide"* are evidence of irresponsible reporting.
3. Description of suicide: This refers to whether there is a detailed discussion of the method used in completed suicide, which is frowned upon in the guidelines.
4. Site: This refers to whether the story provides detailed information about the location where the suicide took place. This is frowned upon in the guidelines.
5. Headline: This category checks if the word suicide is used in the headline. This is frowned upon in the guidelines.
6. Pictures: This refers to the kind of images accompanying the story on suicide (i.e. rope, medicine bottles, knife, blade, cutlass etc.)
7. Call to action: This refers to whether the suicide story includes information for the public on the options for seeking help. This might include contacts of general physicians, other health professionals, community resources, as well as telephone helpline services.

5. RESULTS

A total of 227 suicide stories were harvested from the three selected online news sites: *the Punch*, *Sun*, *the Vanguard*. *Punch* news site published 111 stories, *Sun* news site, 65 stories and *The Vanguard* presented 51 suicide stories. This shows that *Punch* published more stories on suicide, and *Vanguard* published the least within the period under investigation. Most of the suicide stories were published in August 2019, a total number of 28 stories (12.3%), just a month before the WHO suicide report guidelines were made public.
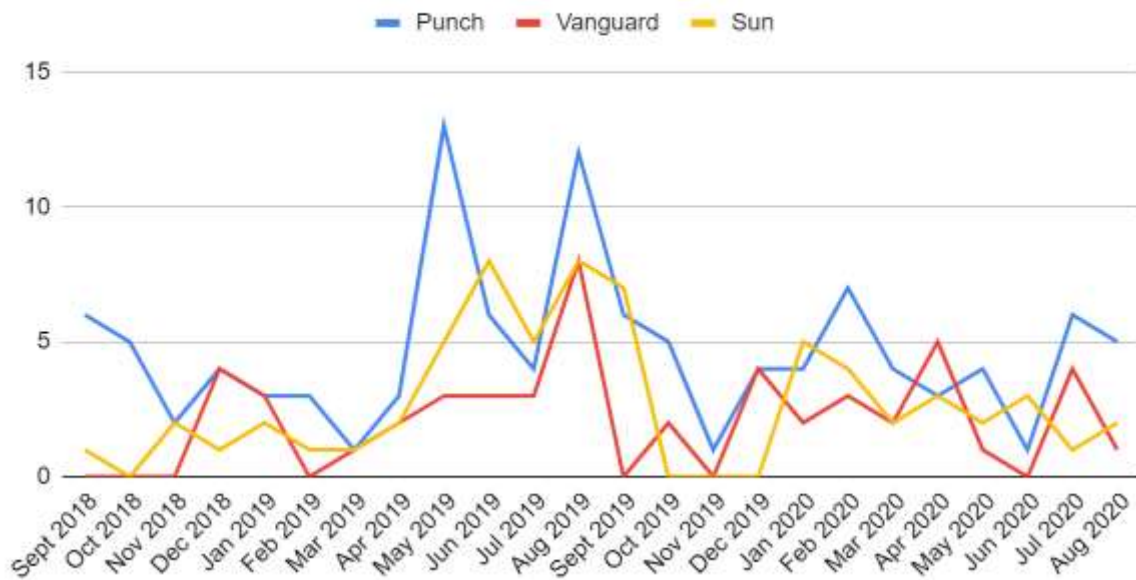
Figure 1: Frequency Distribution of Suicide Stories Analysed (September 2018-August 2020)

In each of the three newspapers studied, there were noticeable surges in suicide reporting in particular months, as shown in Figure1 Between May – September 2019, there was a considerable increase in suicide reports. Around this time, there were a number of high-profile suicide cases documented. For example, the death of Chukwuemeka Akachi, a first-class final year student at the University of Nigeria, Samuel Elias and Christabel Omoremime Buoro (Kalu & Sam, 2019; Adesina, 2019; Omobude, 2019). These reports of deaths shortly preceded the publication of the WHO 2019 suicide rate report.

Table 1: Compliance with the responsible reporting guidelines

Educational Content	Punch (%)	Vanguard (%)	Sun (%)	Total (%)
Present	4.5	5.9	6.3	5.3
Absent	95.5	94.1	93.8	94.7
Language	Punch (%)	Vanguard (%)	Sun (%)	Total (%)
Present	84.8	90.2	95.3	89.0
Absent	15.2	9.8	4.7	11.0
Irresponsible description	Punch (%)	Vanguard (%)	Sun (%)	Total (%)
Present	60.7	58.8	64.1	61.2
Absent	39.3	41.2	35.9	38.8
Location	Punch (%)	Vanguard (%)	Sun (%)	Total (%)
Present	33.0	31.4	32.8	32.6
Absent	67.0	68.6	67.2	67.4
Irresponsible Headlines	Punch (%)	Vanguard (%)	Sun (%)	Total (%)
Present	90.2	92.2	95.3	92.1
Absent	9.8	7.8	4.7	7.9
Call to Action	Punch (%)	Vanguard (%)	Sun (%)	Total (%)
Present	0.9	0	7.8	2.6
Absent	99.1	100.0	92.2	97.4

There was no educational content in 215 of the articles analysed (94.7%) and most of the articles did not contain any call to action; pieces of information where people who feel suicidal can seek help. The vast majority of the analysed stories used

sensationalist language or terminology, in violation of WHO guidelines. However, the majority of the reports (67%) did not publish much information on the locations of suicides or suicide attempts which is in alignment with the guidelines.

Table 2: Distribution of Types of Featured Images Attached to Suicide Reports

Images	*Punch (%)*	*Vanguard (%)*	*Sun (%)*	*Total (%)*
Inanimate Object	50.0	37.3	45.3	45.8
Suicide Note	1.8	0	0	.9
Suicide victim	33.0	11.8	21.9	25.1
Location	5.4	0	1.6	3.1
Authorities	4.5	3.9	1.6	3.5
Others	5.4	19.6	25.0	14.1
None	0	27.5	4.7	7.5

Images of the suicide victims are the second most common type of images used; for example, *Punch* and the *Sun* used the images of Chukwuemeka Akachi as the featured image for the reports on his death. *Punch* news site was guilty of particularly running afoul of this WHO provision. The platform had more stories with pictures of the suicide victims. Similarly, *Sun* had high percentages for publishing stories with images of the victims.
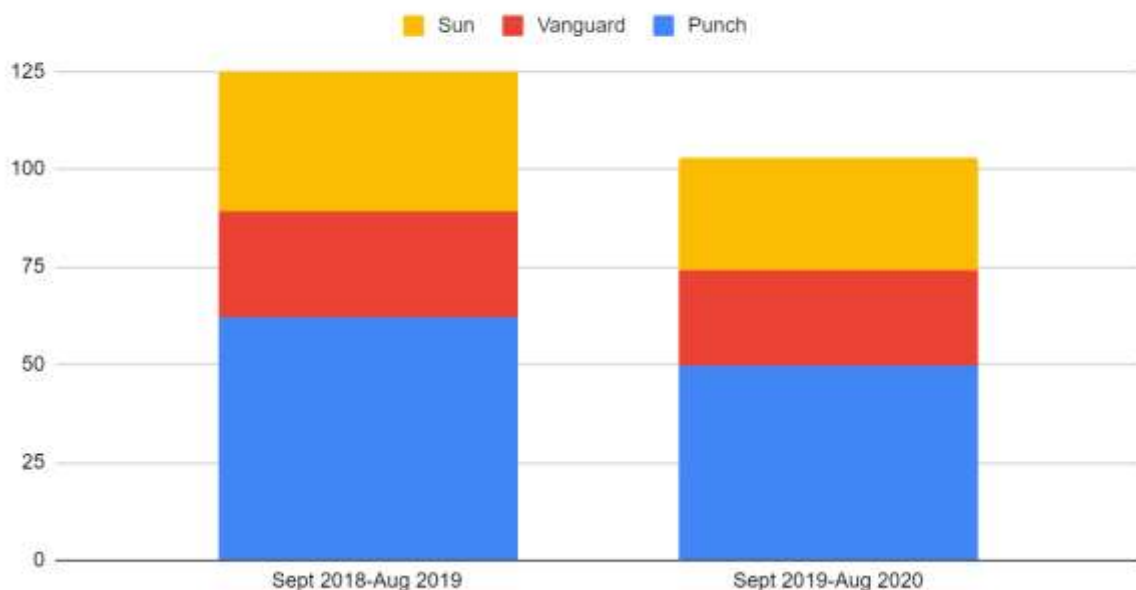
Figure 2: Frequency Distribution of Suicide Stories Analysed (September 2018-August 2020)

Table 3: Distribution of Suicide Reports across the Selected Years

	Education		Language		Description		Site		Headline		Call to Action	
	P (%)	A (%)	P (%)	A (%)	P (%)	A (%)	P (%)	A (%)	P (%)	A (%)	P (%)	A (%)
Sept 2018- Aug 2019	4.9	95.1	89.4	10.6	64.2	35.8	36.6	63.4	95.1	4.9	4.1	95.9
Sept 2019- Aug 2020	5.3	94.7	89	11	61.2	38.8	32.6	67.4	92.1	7.9	2.6	97.4

Present- P, Absent- A

As made evident in Table 3, many of the provisions by the World Health Organisation were still not followed even after the damning WHO 2019 report. The only provision that was seemingly aligned with, across both years, was the guideline that stated that the site of a suicide incident should not be indicated in the suicide story. The two years had enormously high percentages of irresponsible reporting. The major difference, however, is that there were more suicide stories in the first year than in the second year which could have been a result of a series of other external factors.

Discussion

Some studies have shown that the way suicide deaths are reported by the media has an impact on community suicide rates (Niederkrotenthaler, et al., 2010; Quarshie, Andoh-Arthur, Asante, & Asare-Doku, 2020; Stack, 2009; Pirkis, Burgess, Francis, Blood, & Jolley, 2006). Irresponsible suicide reporting, particularly when the suicide stories are publicized in graphic detail appears to trigger copycat behaviours (Niederkrotenthaler, et al., 2010; Wang & Xiangdong, 2012).

As shown in Figure 1, there were significant surges in suicide reports across the three news sources. Between May and September 2019, there was a considerable increase in suicide reports. During this time, a number of high-profile suicide occurrences were also documented.

The initial suicide story that saturated mainstream media during this period was the suicide case of a lecturer in the Department of Mathematics, University of Ibadan, on April 6, 2019. According to sources, the deceased died by suicide after failing to complete his PhD. Miss Rebecca Michael, a Kogi State University 100-level student, died by suicide the next week, on April 19, 2019, after her lover allegedly deserted her. She was said to have taken *Sniper*, a very dangerous and life-terminating pesticide. Similarly, on May 13, 2019, Chukwuemeka Akachi, a student in the Department of English and Literary Studies at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, died after taking two bottles of the poisonous *Sniper*. After finding that he had failed the 2019 JAMB examination on the 15th of May 2019, a 17-year-old in Jos allegedly drank Sniper to end his life. A third-year Physics/Astronomy undergraduate at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, was discovered dead in an unfinished building on campus the next day, on May 16th. Christabel Omoremime Buoro, a 21-year-old 300-level student at the University of Benin's Department of Medical Laboratory Science, took her life when her lover left her. Christabel was also believed to have drunk *Sniper*.

The aforementioned cases were high-profile cases that gained a lot of media attention (Obinna & Olawale, 2019; Mac-Leva, Ibrahim, Akor, & Mutum, 2020). Suicide stories appeared every other day to the point that news headlines began to read *"Another final year student of UNN commits suicide"*, *"Another UNN student commits suicide"*, indicating that the suicide incidents were repeatedly occurring. The details and similarities of the suicide stories indicated signs of suicide contagion and clusters, particularly because most of them took their lives using the poison, *Sniper*.

The Public Health England (2019) highlighted the ways to identify a suicide cluster.

> *"The term "suicide cluster" describes a situation in which more suicides than expected occur in terms of time, place or both. It is difficult to precisely define a cluster. A suicide cluster usually includes three or more deaths; however, two suicides occurring in a specific community or setting (for example, a school) in a short time period should also be taken very seriously in terms of possible links and impacts (even if the deaths are apparently unconnected), particularly in the case of young people."*

When looking at the sampled suicide stories, it's easy to notice the commonalities, such as several suicides in the same school, several suicides using the same method, and several suicides in the same geographic location which indicated evidence of suicide clusters and contagion.

Many other external factors may also have contributed to the increase in suicide cases. However, an overwhelming majority of the articles during the examined period did not meet WHO guidelines for the responsible reporting of suicide and so could not have helped mitigate against copycat suicide incidents, if not even going further to possibly aggravate such incidents.

In the interview sessions, the online editors of *Punch* and *Vanguard* attested that they are aware of the guideline. But the *Sun* editor said that he was not aware of this guideline. However, all three editors spoke of in-house policies and guidelines concerning suicide reporting. The *Sun* online editor said, *"Sometimes, we follow a certain guideline. When reporting a suicide incident, we do not use specific details like location, name because it's not proper."*

In a similar vein, the *Punch* online editor said that when reporting suicide stories, they *"ensure that non-graphic and gruesome photographs are published."* The *Vanguard* online editor also established that they have an editorial policy on suicide reporting. He effused that the publication *"puts names into consideration. If it is an exclusive story, especially when minors are involved, we try to protect the person's image. If there's a brand involved, for instance, if the person used an insecticide, we also want to protect the name of the brand. We also protect the public by not giving them an option of trying to use such when they get into a suicide corner."*

Some of these policies mentioned by these online editors confirm with the World Health Guideline. It is frowned upon to use a photograph of the suicide victim's body as the primary image in any suicide tale. Yet, victim images were the second most prominent type of image accompanying suicide stories. It is also crucial to leave out details about the suicide technique, such as the name of the poison consumed by the victim (World Health Organization, 2008). Readers and suicidal persons might copy the specifics and employ the poison indicated in a suicide incident. However, as is evident in Table 1, most of the stories, including *Vanguard* stories particularly mentioned the name of the suicide method- particularly *Sniper.*

In addition, the editors all attested to the importance of a guideline in suicide reporting. The *Punch* online editor went as far as pointing out the incidence of suicide contagion, which occurs when someone is exposed to suicide or suicidal behaviour in their family, social groups, or through media accounts of suicide. He expressed the need for journalists to desist from creating sensational suicide stories that promote imitation. *"In our reportage, you should write a story in a way that people would not try it out. Not in a way that it is a positive thing that people would want to try it out. People would copy it. If we are not careful, we don't want copycattism. We don't want a repetition of actions. We don't want people to follow suit."* The *Sun* online editor concurred with the above, emphasizing that disclosing too much information in a suicide report is inappropriate.

This statement can be backed up by the social learning theory of Bandura (1989), which states that both children and adults are observing other humans, whether directly or through the media. He states that after assimilating what we learn from the media, we go on to apply it to our lives. Impressionable individuals who are already suffering from suicidal ideation may go on to replicate what they observe in suicide stories from the media.

However, despite these explanations of basic concepts, guidelines and the importance of responsible suicide reportage, it was apparent to the researcher, through studied data, that the publications were not practising what they preach. In the responses from the interviewees, the editors admitted to not having any specific way of enforcing the minimal suicide reporting guidelines they practice which could be a reason why guidelines are not evident in reportage.

Furthermore, it is clear that these editors do not have sufficient knowledge of suicide, as some of them made statements that were filled with suicide myths. For instance, the *Vanguard* online editor proclaimed that suicide is not a Nigerian phenomenon, stating that *"Suicide has not been our thing from time, but unfortunately, it looks like the run-to option whenever there is frustration."* This is another myth (Lawal, 2018). It paints suicide as an easy escape and does not shed light on the phenomenon as something that could result from mental illness or depression.

In fact, the *Vanguard* editor did not appear to understand the need of limiting the kind of material that might be published in a suicide article. In fact, he seems to imply that it is critical to provide detailed descriptions of suicide news articles, stating that *"writing a story is about taking your readers on a journey. You would want to visualise as much as they can picture. It is not to encourage them to want to do something. It is making them understand the underlining process this person went through. In some cases, when you shed all the details, it could help someone prevent suicide."*

Studies have shown that this is false and that, actually, the opposite is the case. Research insists that details encourage imitation and that for suicide prevention, journalists should report stories with messages of hope (Stack, 2009; Chandran, Mathur, & Rao, 2019; Olstead, 2002).

According to a World Health Organization guideline, media professionals are also encouraged to be cautious of terms with nuanced meaning while reporting on suicide situations. In media coverage, terms such as "committing suicide," which suggests crime, and "failed suicide attempts," which indicates that suicide is a desirable outcome, are to be avoided. Other phrases, such as "took his/her life," are encouraged by media experts. In breach of WHO guidelines, the great majority of the reports examined contained sensational language or terminology as shown in Table 1. The phrase "committed suicide" were prominently displayed in most headlines, for example, *Vanguard*'s headlines- *"Shettima's steward commits suicide"*, *"Teacher commits suicide in Kano".*

However, this is understandable due to the country's archaic laws evident in Nigeria's Penal Code, Chapter 27, Section 327, which clearly states that;

> *Any person who attempts to murder himself is guilty of a misdemeanour and is punishable to imprisonment for one year*

Suicide is classified as a crime, and suicide victims are labelled criminals. Hence it is understandable that the word "commits suicide" is actively used since the Nigerian law recognises suicide as a crime.

Interestingly, all three editors claimed that they observed increases in suicide incidents in recent years. The *Sun* Online editor stated that because of the pandemic there has not been a high rate of suicide reports but that *"as far back as 2016, 2017 and 2018, I would say there has been an increase in suicide rates."* Despite the observation, there were no major changes in the ways suicides were reported in the time-frame studied, as shown in Figure 2 and Table 3.

All three editors claimed that their publications followed policies on suicide reporting. The *Punch* and *Vanguard* online editors went as far as declaring that they follow WHO guidelines particularly. These were not apparent in the studied articles as most of the suicide reports were sensational and did not provide useful suicide information and resources for the public. The editors have basic knowledge of suicide contagion and the importance of the guidelines, yet, they did not fully apply these in their daily practices. The mention of suicide myths in the interview also showed the need for the re-orientation of media professionals.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine online media reporting of suicide incidences in Nigeria to determine if they adhered to the World Health Organisation guidelines on responsible reporting. The findings of this study show that online media reporting of suicidal behaviour in Nigeria deviates significantly from WHO-recommended guidelines. These reports use sensationalistic language, unnecessary details of suicide methods, constantly use the image of victims as the featured images and may have an inherent propensity to inspire copycat suicide in vulnerable people.

The results also indicate that media reporting could have influenced suicide clusters and contagion in the time period May-September 2019. There was no major difference in suicide reportage before and after the WHO 2019 report became public; which had stated that Nigeria had the highest suicide rate in Africa. While most of the editors interviewed recognized the phenomenon of suicide contagion, the publications did not apply any extra care in suicide reporting. Most of the editors of the publications attest to being aware of the WHO guideline and declared that their publication complies with its stipulations. However, the research showed that the suicide reports deviated widely from the WHO guidelines.

Importantly, the findings showcase the need for a robust campaign that is geared towards educating media professionals on suicide, suicide myths and the appropriate guidelines for suicide reportage.

The findings of the study provide a solid platform for advocating for a national suicide reporting guideline. Specifically, the findings of this study will assist relevant authorities in establishing a compelling legislative reason for decriminalizing suicide in Nigeria, as well as the necessity to establish a national suicide registry that would provide complete data on suicidal behaviour in the country.

Limitations

The sampled articles were found by typing certain phrases into the search bar on various news sites. Some reports that did not contain the search word but were nevertheless relevant may have been missed by the search results.

Future Research

The result of the study's findings paves the way for additional investigation in a number of different areas. An investigation of the interactions among commentators should be conducted as part of a wider study that focuses on the consequences of these stories on readers. It is also crucial to look at myths and themes inherent in the comments as well as how it related to the beliefs concerning suicide.

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