

NEWSPAPER REPORTAGE OF SUICIDE (A STUDY OF *THE NATION* AND *THE PUNCH* NEWSPAPERS)

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Abstract

The study content analysed newspaper reportage of suicide. Framing and Agenda Setting theories were used to explain the study. Findings showed that *The Punch* newspaper had more (58.0%) reportage of suicide issues followed by *The Nation* newspaper with 42.0%. Also, 38.1% of suicide reportage in *The Nation* newspaper was in double columns while 24.1% of the reportage of suicide in *The Punch* newspaper was in multiple columns. Findings indicated that 71.4% and 58.6% of reports of suicide by *The Nation* and *The Punch* newspapers were published on inside pages respectively. Also, 19.0% and 17.2% coverage of suicide in *The Punch* and *The Nation* newspapers were on the back page (18.0%). The study concluded that suicide stories were given less prominence and were not deeply investigated and reported. The study, therefore, recommended that the media should continue to reduce the level of prominence given to suicide stories to mitigate suicidal behaviour among the general populace.

Keywords: Framing, Media, Newspaper. Reportage, Suicide

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1. INTRODUCTION

Suicide is a severe problem that affects not just the victims but also the bereaved, the community and society at large. Despite being preventable, about a million people die by suicide each year, with low- and middle-income countries accounting for around 80% of suicides globally, according to Jacob (2017). According to the World Health Organisation (2017), 800,000 individuals worldwide die by suicide each year, making it the second leading cause of death for persons between the ages of 15 and 29. In undeveloped countries, research on suicide is rare due to underreporting and the stigma attached to it (Gill, Muoz & Leykin, 2018).

Gureje and Alem (2004) noted that suicide is significantly under-reported and under-documented in Nigeria, as it is in many other developing countries, due to the lack of a vital statistics system and the sensitive nature of the subject. According to Bachynski, Canham-

Chervak, Black, Dada, Millikan and Jones (2017), suicide accounted for 44,193 fatalities, or about one every 12 minutes, making it the tenth largest cause of death in the United States in 2017. It has constantly been among the top 12 leading causes of death since 1975. With an estimated suicide rate of 17.3 per 100,000 people, Nigeria, a country with a population of over 200 million, is one of the world's suicide hotspots. This rate is greater than the estimates for both the world (10.5 per 100,000 people) and Africa (12.0 per 100,000 people) (World Health Organisation, 2019).

The "Werther effect" and "Papageno effect" are well-known examples of how media has a bidirectional impact on public suicidal behaviour (Niederkrötenhaler, Voracek, Herberth, Till, Strauss, Etszendorfer, Eisenwort and Sonneck, 2010). Every aspect of humanity depends on the media, and because the world is so interconnected. Any human action that is not adequately covered by the media poses a major threat to not only the individuals engaged but also to

humanity as a whole. Asemah (2009) asserts that the media is a force for social change that may influence readers' attitudes in a good way and create agendas for people to follow in any culture. According to Lull (2000) argument, the spread of a dominant ideology affects consciousness "to the extent that society's powerful institutions may permeate thought and influence human conduct. In his well-known book *Public Opinion* (1922-1938), Walter Lippmann made the argument that the media's function affects how individuals view and interact with other social groups and that it has historically served to promote societal norms and values. Many academics are interested in the news media's capacity for persuasion, especially when it comes to framing and how it influences how society views various issues.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

A study on suicidal behaviour in Nigeria found that using chemicals, self-harming practices like self-cutting and burning with kerosene, and hanging and using firearms are among the suicide methods (Onotai & Ibekwe, 2010). Media reportage of suicide has repeatedly been shown to trigger suicidal behaviour. Few studies have investigated the associations between specific media content and suicide rates. Even less is known about the possible preventive effects of suicide-related media content (Niederkröthenthaler, Voracek, Herberth, Till, Strauss, Eترزdorfer, Eisenwort & Sonneck, 2010).

It has long been believed that widespread media reporting of suicide can lead to copycat suicides among the general populace. Many European countries outlawed Goethe's 1774 work *The Sorrows of Young Man Werther*, in which the protagonist ends his life after having a failed love affair. It was thought to be the cause of imitation suicides in cities like Italy, Leipzig, and Copenhagen. With the work of David Phillips in the 1970s, systematic scientific studies on copycat suicide were first conducted. The well-known movie star Marilyn Monroe had the most potential copycat effect. She committed suicide in August 1962, and there were 303 more suicides that month, a 12% rise. However, in general, highly publicised incidents only marginally raise the country's suicide rate during the month of media coverage (2.51%). The effect of suicide stories in the media on actual suicide has been the subject of more than 40 scholarly articles. However, there have been some discrepancies among the research's findings. While other studies find no effect, some find significant increases in suicide after a widely reported suicide story (Stack, 2003).

According to international statistics, the number of suicides in the country has increased since 2012. Additionally, Nigeria is currently reporting the largest number of depression cases in Africa (WHO, 2018). Suicide is persistently underreported and underdocumented in Nigeria, as it is in many other developing countries, due to the lack of a vital statistics system and the sensitive nature of the subject (Gureje and Alem, 2004). Additionally, Panyayong, Tantirangsee and Bogoian (2018) revealed that because of the stigma and cultural and religious beliefs surrounding suicide, there is a shortage of data in Nigeria. Since suicide is considered a forbidden act, sinful and the result of demonic forces, people often prefer to conceal the cause of death by classifying them as homicides or accidents. The family is hence commonly stigmatised and excluded from social possibilities (Ohayi, 2019).

Furthermore, according to Niederkröthenthaler et al. (2014), people are dissuaded from thinking of suicide as an issue with their mental health since the news media frequently underreports suicide in relation to mental disease. Instead, homicide and suicide are commonly recorded together, which may support the idea that those who are contemplating suicide are hazardous to others. According to Arendt, Sebastian and Daniel's (2019) examination of the impact of suicide referents in the news media for German speakers, the news media's use of problematic terms, such as *Freitod*, which translates to "Free death," raised readers' use of these words. Studies indicate that the media's coverage of suicide may affect its rate. Arendt, et al. (2019) assessed possible Werther effects associated with 21 suicide news items between 1819 and 1944 and found that there was a covariation between suicide rates and the volume of reporting. In view of this, the study centres on media reportage of suicide in Nigeria in *The Nation* and *The Punch* newspapers.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Objectives of the study are to:

1. determine the frequency of reportage of suicide by *The Nation* and *The Punch* newspapers.
2. identify the various frames used by *The Nation* and *The Punch* newspapers' coverage of suicide stories.
3. determine the depth of reportage given to suicide stories by *The Nation* and *The Punch* newspapers.

4. ascertain the prominence given to suicide stories by *The Nation* and *The Punch* newspapers.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Social issues are covered in the news media in a way that both reflects the public's present attitudes and shapes how people view and react to those concerns. It is vital to look at the role performed by the news media to better understand stigma and public views regarding suicide in Nigeria as well as how stigma may be minimised. According to Soules (2015), framing refers to "cognitive structures that shape how people perceive, think, and behave. The narrative, or the way the tale is delivered, is what determines what is genuine. Understanding frames will help us understand how the human mind is influenced when receiving information.

Responsible reporting on suicide may contribute to the public's understanding of suicide and its prevention, may urge individuals who are in danger of suicide to adopt other measures and may generally stimulate a more honest and upbeat conversation. Stories that show people asking for help (positive coping) in difficult situations may improve protective factors or barriers to suicide and help prevent it. Information about where to get help, particularly from established suicide prevention agencies that are always open, should always be included in media reporting about suicide (WHO & I A S P, 2017).

The "Papageno effect," so named after the character Papageno in Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute*, who becomes suicidal when he thinks he has lost his love but is suddenly reminded of alternatives to suicide and decides to take another course of action, describes the protective effects of responsible media coverage of suicide. Media recommendations for suicide prevention should be tailored for both traditional and digital media and should target as many people as possible. Information can spread swiftly through digital media, making it more difficult to monitor and control. Despite the differences between digital and more traditional media, studies on how conventional media affect suicidal behaviour can help programmes for preventing suicide in digital media (WHO & I A S P, 2017).

On the other hand, knowledge gained on the possible impact of digital media on the rise or deterrence of suicidal behaviour can support traditional media's efforts to prevent suicide. In recognition of the fact that there are occasions when suicide will need to be

reported based on its newsworthiness (WHO & I A S P, 2017).

Suicide rates were positively correlated with reporting of suicide myths and the same suicide again. Suicide rates were negatively correlated with coverage of individual suicidal thoughts that were not followed by suicidal behaviour. While the expert opinion class and the epidemiological data class were positively related to suicide, the mastery of crisis class which featured stories about people who used coping mechanisms other than suicidal behaviour was adversely connected with suicide (Niederkrötenhaler, Voracek, Herberth, Till, Strauss, Etzersdorfer, Eisenwort & Sonneck, 2010).

The way an issue is framed is a crucial exercise in power because it affects the attention it receives, the justifications or considerations that are accepted or rejected, and the opinions or viewpoints that are conveyed in a communication setting (Nisbet & Huges, 2007). Because many media consumers or other encounters (whether purposefully or unintentionally) are already adept at framing their thoughts and viewpoints, there is no such thing as frameless content in the media (Nisbet & Newman, 2015). It is true that some communicators purposely twist facts and data. According to Nisbet (2009b), framing can be used to condense the material and give some thoughts and elements more weight than others to stay faithful to what is usually regarded as a sensitive corruption issue. Frames act as the structuring principle of a message in a communication setting, helping to organise the receivers' view (Tankard, 2001). According to Reese (2001), frames are organising principles that are symbolically effective at meaningfully structuring the social reality and are socially shared, and durable through time.

A political topic that is the subject of widespread public debate is defined and constructed by communication sources, such as news organisations, through the framing process. According to Oputa (2017), framing is a talent that may be used to produce effects or comprehend a certain situation. An event takes on a certain significance when it is put in a particular frame. Therefore, framing refers to the ability of the media to select and emphasise some aspects of reality or an event until they become crucial. This can occasionally go so far as to influence people's opinions. As a result, news framing proposes that how news is delivered affects how it will be perceived, and as a result, how

people will act and choose. It refers to the way media gatekeepers organise and present events and issues they cover and the way audiences interpret what they are provided with.

According to Entman (2015), framing involves salience and choice. That is, framing is the process of choosing some elements of a seen reality and emphasising them in a communication text to support a specific issue description, causal interpretation, moral judgement, and/or treatment for the thing being described.

Four analytical categories were used to categorise the direction of news in newspapers, and these categories were then used in the empirical analysis. According to Olsson, Nord and Falkheimer (2015), there are two categories for how the news is presented in newspapers: a positive direction and a negative direction. A general differentiation between an inside-the-media perspective and an outside-the-media perspective that separates routine from nonroutine events can be made from a journalistic point of view (Olsson, 2010). The perspective from outside the media clings to news events that are regular for the journalists covering the story but are viewed as crisis occurrences by the actors being covered. The inside-the-media perspective, on the other hand, focuses on situations that journalists and news organisations see as crises, that is, situations that are marked by a high degree of surprise and uncertainty (Berkowitz, 1992). These events become problematic for journalists to cover because they challenge everyday routines and thereby make it difficult for news organisations to change their time priorities and work procedures in accordance (Olsson, 2010).

The core of news reporting is the depiction of dominant social discourses and the construction of social reality. This is especially important for the print media because there is a greater opportunity for reporters to capture social events on film and to convey ideas and opinions with more objectivity and distance. Media research, according to Alkazemi (2012), has amassed critical and evaluative studies over the years on how the media impacts reality and how people perceive their surroundings. According to Okpara (2010), the Nigerian media have yet to successfully use their reporting to carry out their monitoring duties. Igoe (2010) added that as audiences and "news holes" for traditional media decline and more people rely on new media for news and information, this issue is becoming more important.

Theoretical Framework

In 1981, Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman developed the framing theory (Baran and Davis, 2009). According to Shuck and de Vreese (2006), the attitudes and information that exist before media exposure play a significant part in determining the framing effects. Additionally, Adair (2007) has demonstrated that the public is generally more influenced by negative frames than by positive ones. Entman, Matthes, and Pellicano (2009) assert that "culture is a store of schemas widely found in the minds of a society's individual and these common schemas are the ones that form the basis for most persons' reaction to framing communications." The media audience members are then more likely to be swayed by narratives that speak to their cultural orientation.

The second level of attribute agenda-setting and the framing theory are similar in that both are interested in the emphasis given by the media to specific aspects of an issue. There are some distinctions between them, though. When framing is "defined in terms of how an object is portrayed in the media or by the public, but when the definition of framing takes a broad or abstract direction, then the two concepts of attribute agenda-setting and framing cease to be similar," it is possible to make a valid comparison between attribute agenda-setting and framing. With this assertion, McCombs and Valenzuela (2007) explain. According to this theory, a message's effectiveness depends on how it is conveyed to the audience (framed) (Baran and Davis, 2009). They explain further that theory investigates how individuals interpret and comprehend actual expectations. The media's attention on the audience's interpretation of events forms the basis of the thesis. According to the premise that how news is framed by the media affects how the public, or the media audience, would accept and perceive important or social concerns, the media framing theory is pertinent to this subject. It acknowledges that the framing used by the Nigerian media in their reporting of suicide would influence the tone of the nation's public debate. The way suicide is portrayed in the Nigerian media and how the general public in that country comes to comprehend and interpret the stigmatisation of suicide are likely to interact. Moreover, the framing theory is in agreement that news framing by the media (journalists) is involved in the manner in which news items (issues) are portrayed to the public by the journalists.

Agenda Setting Theory

Walter Lippman provided the foundation for the agenda-setting theory when he suggested that because

the world is too huge for us to understand, we rely on the media for information and that this influences how people perceive the world by informing them (Sheafer & Weimann, 2005). McCombs and Shaw's realisation of the importance of media to society led to the advancement of the agenda-setting hypothesis. According to McCombs and Shaw, the agenda for every political campaign is "created by the mass media, which determines the salience of opinions toward political issues" (1972).

The 1968 presidential election was the focus of the first agenda-setting study, which contrasted the topics that voters thought were essential to the campaign's mass media coverage to examine the agenda-setting function (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). The study's conclusions showed that agenda-setting activity occurred during the campaign (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). The agenda-setting hypothesis of the researchers aimed to examine and explain how topics covered by the media might become significant to the general public as well as how the mass media and public opinion interact (Meriläinen and Vos, 2011). The introduction of the agenda-setting theory to the field of mass communication studies changed how the topic was approached by media academics. Assumptions have moved from the media teaching individuals what to think to the media informing people what topics or issues they should think about (Cohen, 1963). According to Defleur and Ball-Rokeach (1989), the media does not convince individuals to change their ideas, but there is a considerable association between the amount of attention a topic receives in the news media and the audience's assessment of its relevance. Therefore, what the media broadcasts may be what the general public considers to be more important (Meriläinen and Vos, 2011). Readers learn not only about a certain subject, but also the priority to place on that issue from the amount of material in a news story and its position (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). The study offers a basis based on the agenda-setting theory, the writers, and sources to examine how suicide is covered in the media in Nigeria. Newspapers inspire, encourage, interpret, create, preserve, thrill, satisfy and occasionally let down readers. They preserve the past, document the present and periscope the potential for a better tomorrow. Asemah (2009) asserts that the media is a force for social change that may influence readers' attitudes in a good way and create agendas for people to follow in any culture. The formation of public opinion and the results of events ultimately depend on the mass media.

While the extent to which the media affects culture is

still up for debate, many scholars have proposed theories describing the connection between media representations, social norms and individual behaviour. Lull (2000) argued that the circulation of a dominant ideology impacts consciousness "to the extent that society's powerful institutions can infiltrate thinking and affect human action."

The news media routinely underreports suicide in relation to mental disease, which discourages people from considering suicide to be a problem related to mental health, according to Niederkrotenthaler, et al. (2014). Instead, the topic of suicide is typically brought up in the context of violence, which may contribute to the idea that people who are contemplating suicide are dangerous to others. Arendt et al. (2018) examined how suicide referents were used in the news media for German speakers and found that readers were more likely to employ problematic terms like *Freitod*, which translates to "Free death," than they had previously thought.

5. METHODOLOGY

The content analysis method was used to carry out the study. The population of the study were *The Nation* and *The Punch* editions from April 1, 2021, to December 30, 2021. Two National newspapers were simply randomly selected because the two newspapers National newspapers in Nigeria. Systematic random sampling was used to select every 10th day from April 1, 2020-December 30, 2021. A total of twenty-seven (27) editions from each of the newspapers (*The Punch* and *The Nation*) were sampled for the study which is equal to 54 editions.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Frequency to which *The Punch* and *The Guardian* Newspapers Report suicide in Nigeria (April to December 2021) (n=50)

Newspaper	Frequency	Percentage %
<i>The Punch</i>	29	58
<i>The Guardian</i>	21	42
Total	50	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2022

The result in Table 1 shows the frequency to which *The Nation* and *The Punch* newspapers report suicide in Nigeria. Findings reveal that cumulatively, *The Punch* had more (58.0%) coverage of suicide than *The Nation* newspaper with 42.0% of suicide coverage. This is an

indication that suicide was not frequently covered by the newspaper as happens in the real life and this might be added to abominations attached to the act. Though, the coverage of the two newspapers varies. In addition to this is Okpara's (2010) observation that Nigerian newspapers are yet to effectively play the surveillance function of the newspapers in their reportage of suicide.

Table 2: Various Frames used by *The Nation* and *The Punch* Newspapers' coverage of suicide (April to December 2022) (n=50)

Frames	<i>The Nation</i> (21)	<i>The Punch</i> (29)
Antileadership	2(9.5)	1(3.4)
Conspiracy	2(9.5)	3(10.3)
Hopelessness	9(42.8)	15(51.7)
Picture	2(9.5)	3(10.3)
Economic	5(23.8)	2(6.9)
Cartoon	1(4.7)	5(17.2)
Total	21(100.0)	29(100.0)

Source: Field Survey, 2022 (Values in Parenthesis are percentages)

The result in Table 2 revealed that the dominant frame used by *The Nation* was Hopelessness (42.5%), followed by economic (23.8%) and the least frames used were cartoons (4.7%). Also, the dominant frame used by *The Punch* newspaper is hopelessness (51.7%), followed by cartoon (17.2%) and the least frame used was anti-leadership (3.4%). This implies that the dominant frame used by the two newspapers is hopelessness and this might be the reason why some suicide were not reported talk less covered in the print media.

Table 3: Depth of Reportage Given to Suicide by *The Nation* and *The Punch* Newspapers (April to December 2021) (n=50)

Depth	<i>The Nation</i> (21)	<i>The Punch</i> (29)	Total (50)
Single Column	10(47.6)	18(62.1)	28(56.0)
Double Columns	8(38.1)	3(10.3)	11(22.0)
Multiple Columns	3(14.3)	7(27.6)	10(20.0)
Total	21(100.0)	29(100.0)	50(100.0)

Source: Field Survey, 2022 (Values in parenthesis are percentages)

Results in Table 3 showed that *The Punch* newspaper (62.1%) published suicide stories more in a single column than *The Nation* newspaper (47.6%). Also, 24.1% of the coverage of suicide in *The Punch* newspaper has multiple columns while 38.1% of suicide coverage in *The Nation* newspaper has double columns. This implies that *The Punch* and *The Nation* used a single column in the coverage of suicide stories. This means that suicide issues were not deeply covered and

reported by the selected media.

Table 4: Prominence given to suicide issues by *The Nation* and *The Punch* Newspapers (April to December 2021)

Prominence of coverage	<i>The Nation</i> (21)	<i>The Punch</i> (29)	Total (50)
Front Page	1(4.7)	3(10.3)	4(8.0)
Back Page	4(19.0)	5(17.2)	9(18.0)
Editorial Page	1(4.7)	4(13.8)	5(10.0)
Inside Page	15(71.4)	17(58.6)	32(64.0)
Total	21(100.0)	29(100.0)	50(100.0)

Source: Field Survey, 2022

Results in Table 4 revealed that 71.4% and 58.6% coverage of suicide issues by *The Nation* and *The Punch* newspapers were on inside pages respectively. Also, 19.0% and 17.2% of coverage of suicide issues in *The punch* and *The Nation* newspapers were on the back pages with a total of 18.0% while 10.0% of the total suicide coverage was on the editorial page. This implies that the majority of the coverage of suicide by the two newspapers (*The Punch* and *The Nation*) was on the inside page. Prominence is determined by the placement of each item on news. Frontpage appearance signifies that the news stories are the most important for that day. The stories that appear on the Back page are regarded as semi-important. The stories in the Inside pages are counted as the least important stories; they usually appear from page 2 to the last page, before the back page and this is an indication that the selected newspapers did not give prominence to suicide issues in Nigeria.

7. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The Punch had the highest (58.0%) coverage followed by *The Nation* with 42.0% of suicide coverage in Nigeria. Gureje and Alem (2004) reported that in many developing countries, suicide in Nigeria is grossly under-reported and under-documented due to the non-existence of a vital statistics system and the sensitive nature of the subject. Vinay and Sathya (2020) confirm the possible influence of newspapers in enhancing the awareness and knowledge levels of regular readers. According to Asemah (2009), media is an agent of social change that can bring about positive attitudinal change in the audience (readers); they set agenda for the people to follow in any society. Media plays a bidirectional role in the suicidal behaviour of the general population, which is well known by the "Werther effect" and "Papageno effect (Niederkrotenthaler, Voracek, Herberth, Till, Strauss, Etzersdorfer, Eisenwort and Sonneck 2010). The dominant frame used by the two newspapers is hopelessness and this might be the

reason why some suicide were not reported talk less covered in the newspaper. Panyayong *et al.*, (2018) reported that the dearth of data is also shrouded in stigma and cultural and religious sentiments associated with suicide in Nigeria. Deaths by suicide are perceived as sinful, taboo and caused by evil forces, so the family are often stigmatised and denied social opportunities and this makes people prefer to hide the mode of death, declaring suicides as accidental deaths or as homicides (Ohayi, 2019). Reese (2001) opined that frames are organising principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world.

Findings showed that *The Nation* newspaper (47.6%) and *The Punch* (62.1%) have more single-column publications of suicide stories. Also, 24.1% of the coverage of suicide in *The Punch* has multiple columns while 38.1% of suicide coverage in *The Nation* newspaper has a double column. This implies that most columns used by *The Punch* and *The Nation* in the coverage of suicide in Nigeria is a single column and this might be due to less priority given to such news. The majority of the coverage of suicide by the two newspapers (*The Punch* and *Nation*) was on the inside page. Prominence is determined by the placement of each item on news. Frontpage appearance signifies that the news stories are the most important for that day. The stories that appear on the Back page are regarded as semi-important. The stories on the Inside pages are counted as the least important stories; they usually appear from page 2 to the last page, before the back page and this is an indication that newspapers do not give prominence to suicide in Nigeria and this might be adduced to the taboo attached to it.

8. CONCLUSION

The study concluded that suicide stories were given less prominence in the reportage of *The Punch* and *The Nation* newspapers as most of the suicide stories appeared on inside pages of the selected newspapers. It was also discovered that suicide issues were not deeply investigated and reported as selected newspapers published more suicide stories in a single column. The dominant frame used by the selected newspaper is hopelessness.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the conclusion, the study, therefore, recommended the following:

1. The media should not relent in giving less prominence to suicide stories to minimise the

copycat effect.

2. Media should carry out more deep investigations on suicide issues in order to uncover stories behind the story.

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