



# Media Practitioners' Attitudes, Awareness, and Adherence to WHO Regulations on Suicide Prevention in Kenya

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## Abstract

Globally, media coverage of mental health issues, particularly suicides, has become a public concern. Studies show that how the media reports on sensitive health topics is likely to either raise awareness or lead to suicide incidences in any given society. This study examined the communication gaps in media reporting of suicides to recommend interventions to promote mental health awareness and wellness among the youth and the general public. This study used Media Representation, Cultivation, and Framing theories of mass communication to develop a theoretical framework. A relativist-constructivist paradigm was adopted. A qualitative research approach to get varied views from the participants of the study was used. Content analysis of suicide news from the two selected newspapers, namely *Daily Nation* and *The Standard* Newspapers, form the main sources of data. In-depth interviews were incorporated to complement the deeper understanding of the field of study. The study population was specific suicide cases from the two newspapers from 2018-2024. A sample size was of 25 key informants comprising youths, journalists and mental health experts whose responses supplemented data from key sources from the two newspapers. The participants were chosen through snowballing and purposive sampling techniques. The key findings of this study were that Newspaper reports on suicide do not adhere to the WHO guidelines on suicide prevention since most journalists in the Kenyan media have limited knowledge of the regulations and the media houses lack regulatory policies and guidelines on suicide reporting and prevention in Kenya. Therefore, the study proposed that the Media Council of Kenya and media houses, in general, should come up with robust guidelines on suicide reporting and prevention to minimise harm among the general public.

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## Introduction

Although there is no data indicating the accuracy of suicide rates in Kenya and beyond, a significantly higher incidence of suicides has been reported in the media, especially among youth. In Kenya, there is a shortage of qualified mental health specialists to assist those experiencing suicidal thoughts or mental health challenges (Ndetei, 2011; Ndetei et al., 2007). The country has fewer than 100 psychiatrists, most of whom are situated in universities, national referral hospitals, and a handful of county hospitals (Kwobah et al., 2017; Ndetei et al., 2007; Auditor General Report, 2017). Furthermore,



Marangu et al. (2021) found that primary health workers possess low mental health literacy, which limits their ability to identify and diagnose symptoms of mental health disorders among patients in Kenya. The Auditor General's report of Kenya (2017) also pointed out that awareness campaigns to educate the public about mental health disorders are insufficient, leading to the stigmatisation and criminalisation of suicides. It is important to note that youth, who constitute the majority of the most productive demographic, struggle to cope with mental challenges, which can result in mental health issues and, ultimately, suicides. Wanyoike (2015), Ongeru et al. (2018), and Ongeru et al. (2022) identified factors such as pressure to excel academically, financial constraints, and hopelessness. Additionally, high unemployment rates among youth contribute to mental health challenges.

The Kenya Mental Health Policy (2015-2030) and the Kenya Mental Health Action Plan (2021-2025) recognise the vital role of mass media in promoting mental health. The policy framework also acknowledges the shortage of mental health professionals, emphasising the importance of responsible media reporting to the public. Furthermore, the Suicide Prevention Strategy (2021-2026) aims to raise awareness about suicide and its prevention while addressing stigma in Kenya. The Ministry of Health hopes this plan will result in a 10 per cent reduction in suicide mortality by 2026. This strategy identifies a general lack of awareness on the topic and proposes advocacy and public awareness communication, highlighting the media's role in responsibly reporting on suicide prevention. This underscores the media's critical responsibility to report on suicides in a manner that contributes to prevention efforts among the general public.

The WHO guidelines from 2008, 2018, and 2023 guide media professionals on suicide prevention. For example, these guidelines emphasise that media practitioners should avoid the prominent placement and excessive repetition of stories about suicides, refrain from explicit descriptions of methods used in completed or attempted suicides, not disclose names or detailed information about the locations of completed or attempted suicides, and ensure that headlines are carefully crafted. They also promote positive reporting that educates and instils hope in the public. However, these guidelines are often overlooked and rarely followed, especially in the media landscape in Kenya and beyond.

## **Suicide and Media Reporting**

Suicide is a significant global public health issue. The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that approximately 800,000 suicides occur each year, directly affecting at least six individuals for every suicide (WHO, 2021). Media coverage of suicides can either exacerbate or alleviate the incidence of these cases due to their prevalence, repetition, and influence. There is an ongoing global debate about how traditional and new media should report suicide incidents to the public (Mutindi, 2019; Ogbodo, 2019; Zdanow & Wright, 2012; Spates, Kreiter & Coffey, 2019).

There is general agreement among scholars that how the media portrays suicide can lead to imitative acts or copycats, as presented across various media channels (Luce, 2016). This phenomenon can be explained by the 'Werther effect,' named after the title character in Goethe's novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, who dies by suicide after facing the loss of his love. Philips (1974) was the first to coin the term 'Werther effect,' which describes the connection between the portrayal of suicides in media and the subsequent imitation of these acts, where a viewer, listener, or reader mimics the behaviour they have seen transmitted via traditional mass media. In subsequent years, throughout Europe, many young boys committed suicide while dressed as *Werther*, seated at their writing desks with an open copy of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* in front of them. This led to banning of the novel in Italy, Germany, and Denmark (Philips, 1974; Coleman, 2004; O'Connor & Pirkis, 2016). With the rise of new media, there is little research on whether social media posts by suicidal users can impact other users, particularly in Kenya.



In another study by Philips in 1979, the scholar found an increase in automobile fatalities following publicised suicides. He discovered that automobile fatalities rose by 31 per cent in the three periods after a suicide was reported in the media (Philips, 1979; Coleman, 2004). Similar studies conducted in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Korea in 2012 and 2013 also explained the phenomenon of copycats resulting from media reports (Pirkis et al., 2016). Chen, Chen, Gunnel, and Yip (2013) examined the relationship between media reports on charcoal-burning suicides and found that each report led to an increase in the number of suicides by charcoal burning the following day using the same method.

The media can also help reduce or minimise the perceived impact of suicides. Niederkrotenthaler et al. (2010) analysed feature stories linked to a decrease in suicide rates. The researchers conducted the study through content analysis of nearly 500 Austrian newspaper articles and found that positive stories emphasising solutions or alternatives led to decreased suicides. Niederkrotenthaler et al. (2010) further highlighted the protective effects of responsible media reporting on suicide, known in scientific literature as the “*Papageno effect*.” This term is named after the character Papageno in Mozart’s opera *The Magic Flute*, who becomes suicidal when he fears losing his love but is reminded of alternatives to suicide at the last moment, subsequently choosing a different course of action. The *Papageno* effect protects against suicide in the same way that the *Werther* effect escalates suicide rates (Pirkis et al., 2016). Luce (2016) stated that responsible reporting on suicide might help educate the public about suicide and its prevention, encourage those at risk to explore alternative actions and motivate them to seek timely help.

Shola and Peace (2022) observed that the media in Nigeria tends to focus on suicide attempts or completed suicides rather than on prevention strategies. Similarly, in Kenya, the media often glamorises these reports to drive traffic and reach a larger audience (Kagunda, 2019; Mutindi, 2017; & Mwaura, 2018). The scholars also noted that the media provides detailed descriptions of completed or attempted suicides. This situation leads to an increase in suicide incidents. Furthermore, the media underreports positive stories that can offer hope to those struggling with mental health challenges and the general public. Kagunda and Nabushawo (2020) stated that media representation of mental health issues receives less attention compared to other prevalent non-communicable diseases due to the stigma associated with mental health. Kagunda (2019) pointed out that ‘although many people with various mental health challenges live positive and productive lives, the media fails to depict such stories. These narratives can create hope. Thus, the media has a crucial role in promoting positive stories to minimise suicides among members of society, particularly among the youth.

Most practising journalists have limited expertise in reporting on mental health issues, which hinders adequate coverage of this sensitive topic. Additionally, media professionals often lack the knowledge of appropriate language to use when discussing mental health matters. Kagunda (2019) noted that this can lead to sensationalism and stigmatisation of mental health issues, potentially increasing the incidence of suicide. In many cases, the media continues to use phrases such as ‘to commit suicide’ despite it being decriminalised by the World Health Organisation.

There are also legal gaps that exacerbate suicide cases. The Penal Code of Kenyan law (section 226) states that an individual who attempts suicide is guilty of a misdemeanour and can face two years in jail. This often discourages those with mental health challenges, particularly survivors of attempted suicides, from seeking treatment due to fear of reprisals. As noted by Ochuku et al. (2023), this law also complicates the tracking of suicides in society.

On January 9, 2025, the Kenyan High Court declared Penal Code 226 unconstitutional, marking a bold step in addressing discrimination and stigma. However, the number of suicide cases is rising; therefore (Wachu, 2025), Parliament must ensure the Code aligns with human rights standards and



that laws are enacted to support individuals facing mental health challenges. In 2024, the International Association of Suicide Prevention (IASP) reported that at least 20 countries (former British colonies), including Ghana, have decriminalised suicide laws. Countries such as Nigeria, South Sudan, Uganda, Tanzania, and Somalia are among those with regressive suicide laws.

Furthermore, Section 225 of the Penal Code stipulates that those who encourage, aid, or counsel others to attempt or complete suicides are guilty of a felony and face life imprisonment. By reporting on suicides, media practitioners, unfortunately, encourage members of the public to attempt or complete suicides. Therefore, all media practitioners should exercise caution when reporting on suicides to save lives.

This study utilised the Theory of Media Representation, along with Cultivation and Framing theories of mass communication. Hall (1997) argued that the choice of language and representation often shapes perceptions of a particular topic. Media is a powerful tool in society, as it shapes attitudes and reinforces dominant views, such as stigmatisation, through its representation of issues.

### **Research Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative research approach. This method was selected because, as Dawson (2009) notes, it 'explores attitudes, behaviours, and experiences through interviews, aiming to gather in-depth opinions from participants.' Furthermore, as Yin (2015) postulates, this approach enabled the researcher 'to integrate and present data from multiple sources, study the meaning of people's lives, and represent their views and perspectives.' Additionally, the constructivist research paradigm was chosen because the goal of this study was to rely heavily on the participants' perspectives regarding situations and experiences related to the field of study (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

The study examined peer-reviewed scholarly materials and news articles on suicides published in the *Daily Nation* and *Standard* newspapers from 2018 to 2024. Both online and print news items were analysed. The stories pertinent to this study were thematically analysed and presented through in-depth discussions.

This study utilised in-depth and semi-structured interviews because, as Brinkman (2013, p. 21) states, it allowed the researcher to take control over the discussion and have the leeway to ask follow-up questions during the interview, ensuring that the conversation focused on the crucial issues relevant to the study.

A diverse participant population included a target study group of 250 and a sample size of 25 participants: five youth, five senior journalists, and 10 reporters, alongside five mental health experts. The purposive and snowball sampling methods were used to select participants for this study. The researcher aimed to understand media reports on suicide from mental health experts. The snowball technique enabled participants to assist the researcher in identifying additional relevant participants (Yin 2015). These methods helped the researcher locate university students, mental health experts, and journalists who could address the research questions.

This study ensured validity and reliability. The researcher consulted supervisors and mental health experts to review the instruments, guaranteeing accuracy before undertaking the field study. Ethical considerations were established to protect the participants' right to privacy and confidentiality. Participants' names were kept confidential, and informed consent was obtained prior to conducting the interviews.



## Results and discussion

### *Taboo*

Most journalists are reluctant to report on the sensitive topic due to the associated taboo. Some of those interviewed admitted that the topic reminds them of their loved ones who lost their lives as a result of completed suicides.

*“The topic of suicide brings to mind the loss of my uncle to a suicidal act. I don’t feel comfortable discussing events related to suicide or talking about it, as it brings back memories of past tragic events.” (Print Journalist 8, March 12, 2023)*

In some cases, families of those who lost their loved ones due to a suicidal act don’t want to talk openly about it, leading to under-reporting, especially the educative aspects.

*“The experience of covering suicide is traumatic, causing us to shy away from discussing the topic because we imagine someone in our family losing their life in such a manner. Most families either don’t want to open up to journalists, and their kin died by suicide because it is still considered a taboo.” (Print Journalist 5, March 20, 2023)*

### *Low interests*

Most journalists at the two selected media houses, especially field reporters, cover all topics and news events. Some journalists mentioned during the interview that they received complaints from the friends and families of victims regarding their coverage of suicide cases.

Journalists consider the subject a complex issue and often avoid reporting on mental health matters to the public. Media practitioners tend to concentrate on political stories and other more straightforward topics. Moreover, some reporters approach these stories with disdain, believing they are ‘not rewarding but traumatising. ‘This attitude stems from the disconnect between mental health experts and media practitioners, which hampers the latter’s ability to report effectively on suicides.

One reporter suggested, *“We should provide as much context as possible in stories about suicide. Secondly, disable comments on social media posts that share news about suicide. Avoid merely presenting a standard news story on suicide; instead, include broader perspectives on mental health and discuss how these issues can be addressed,”* stated one science reporter. (Print Journalist 2, December 12, 2022)

### *Limited knowledge*

Generally, there is a significant knowledge gap regarding WHO guidelines on suicide prevention among media practitioners in Kenya. Most journalists are unaware of these guidelines that are intended to help them report effectively on suicides and other health issues. As a result, many have not received training on the guidelines, which hinders their ability to report responsibly on suicides.

When asked about their knowledge of the WHO guidelines on suicide prevention, one field reporter responded, *“No, I am not aware of these WHO guidelines on suicide prevention. Mostly, I rely on the code of ethics whenever I report on suicides.”* (Print Journalist 1, October 31, 2022)

Due to insufficient understanding of the WHO guidelines on suicide prevention, journalists glamorise or glorify suicide issues to the public, leading to an increased incidence of suicide in society.

*“The use of these terminologies is harmful to relatives who have lost their loved ones and to those facing mental health challenges. Terms like ‘commit’ make suicide seem like an evil act, whereas it is a mental illness. The media should focus more on educating the public about where to seek help and what circumstances can lead to such situations,”* a psychologist suggested. (Clinical Psychologist, January 2023)



### ***Non-specialisation***

Most media practitioners do not understand health matters; they lack the discretion to report on sensitive health issues. Consequently, this sadly impacts how they cover the subject and subsequently affects the families of those who have lost loved ones to suicide and those struggling with mental health problems. Some journalists interviewed observed that they received complaints from the friends and families of victims regarding how they reported suicides.

One of the field reporters responded when asked about complaints: *“Yes, the public, especially the families of victims, have complained, stating that it leads to more such incidents and makes them more traumatised about the loss of their loved ones.”* (Print Journalist 7, December 10, 2022)

In many cases, the voices of mental health experts are absent from the narratives. Mental health professionals should play a role in educating the public on the topic to minimise harm.

### ***Suicide ideation***

Glorification and glamorisation of suicide reports in the media may lead individuals with mental health challenges to develop suicidal thoughts and imitate acts reported in the media to attempt or complete suicide. Five youths interviewed stated that Kenyan media explicitly reports stories related to mental health. One youth further commented that these stories about suicides may trigger suicidal thoughts.

*Most news reports focus on negative stories that can trigger suicidal thoughts. Sometimes, an individual suffering from depression can be affected by a suicide story of someone to whom we've been attached. I feel traumatised when such stories are featured in the media. I believe the media should focus more on positive stories that educate the public about mental health issues, highlight those who have overcome these problems, and provide information on where to get help.* (Youth 1, December 05, 2022)

### ***Poor policy framework***

Policies can help dictate how the media landscape reports on various issues. Unfortunately, there is no clear policy framework, such as an editorial policy, to guide the media on how to report on this sensitive matter in Kenya responsibly. This situation contributes to an increase in suicide cases within society. One senior science editor responded,

*“At the moment, there are no regulations. I don't think there is any media house that has guidelines on suicide and mental health reporting. Most stories serve as catchy headlines for clickbait to attract readers. They describe the methods used, which can give an idea to a depressed reader that if they failed last time with one method, they might have an idea of how to complete a suicide based on those who have gone through with it.”* (Editor 1, January 10, 2023)

Mental health experts also suggested that regulations should be established to encourage media practitioners to report responsibly on suicide and to support those with mental health challenges in getting timely assistance. One mental health expert proposed that,

*“Regulations should be established regarding how media outlets describe the details of suicides. Stories about completed suicides should not appear in headlines or on the front page, and repetitive reporting on the same incident should be avoided.”* (Mental Health Specialist3, March 2023)

### ***Under-reporting***

Positive reports that can inspire hope for those battling mental health challenges are often underreported in the media, which discourages individuals from seeking timely medical assistance. Moreover, the Kenyan laws outlined in Penal Code Section 226 contribute to stigmatisation, underreporting of positive stories, and tracking of suicides in communities. Survivors of attempted



suicides hesitate to share their stories due to the stigma and legal consequences surrounding the act. The media should lead the campaign for the decriminalisation of suicide in Kenya and beyond.

One mental health expert argued that *“In addition to training journalists on responsible suicide reporting, they should increase awareness about risk factors. They must also share messages of hope and information on where to seek help.”* (Mental health expert<sup>2</sup>, March 2023)

A science reporter suggested that media practitioners should *“provide as much context as possible in stories about suicide. Secondly, disable comments on social media posts that share news regarding suicide. Avoid treating it as a standard news story; instead, include broader perspectives on mental health and discuss potential solutions,”* stated the reporter. (Science reporter/Editor<sup>2</sup>, December 12, 2022)

Additionally, another health reporter suggested improving the coverage of suicides: *“I believe we should write stories about how families are coping or recovering from such situations instead of focusing on how their loved ones died. Highlighting the circumstances of their deaths may cause them further pain, but if we report on the support and help they need, we will be assisting them.”* (Print Journalist<sup>3</sup>/Health reporter, November 2022)

### **Recognition**

Media awards can significantly motivate journalists to report effectively on this sensitive topic to the public. This should be integrated with other strategies.

One mental health expert suggested, *“Media awards can enhance responsible reporting of suicide, as they often promote positive behaviour. However, awards cannot be the sole solution; we need to adopt a multi-strategy approach that includes ongoing training for media personnel on responsible reporting and the development of related policies and guidelines,”*. (Mental Health Expert<sup>4</sup>, November 12, 2022)

### **Conclusion**

This study identifies gaps that contribute to the rise in suicide cases. It recommends that media organisations create in-house guidelines for suicide prevention reporting through editorial policies and manuals while adhering to WHO guidelines on suicide prevention. With guidance from mental health experts in the Ministry of Health, all media organisations should establish clear protocols for media professionals to minimise harm when reporting on suicides and mental health issues. Additionally, a mechanism should be implemented to ensure strict adherence to these guidelines. Furthermore, all practising journalists should receive regular training on how to reduce harm among youth and the general public when reporting on suicides and mental health topics. This will enhance their understanding of the potential impact of suicide reporting, enabling them to address these matters responsibly to the public.

Media houses should also raise awareness about mental health issues among the public. The media must concentrate on educating the public about coping strategies for mental health conditions and sources of help. Additionally, the media should consistently provide information on where mental health patients can find assistance, such as mental health facilities, and connect them with crisis teams or helplines nationwide and beyond. Furthermore, there is a need for awards to motivate journalists to report on suicide responsibly.

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