

# **Quality of Newspaper Reporting of Suicidal Behaviour in Kuwait as Assessed Against the WHO Guidelines**

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## **1. Abstract**

**Background:** Suicide is a growing global problem. Through its reporting of this issue, the media plays a significant role in influencing suicidal behaviour among the general public. However, the quality of suicide news coverage in Kuwait has not been evaluated.

**Objectives:** We aimed to assess the quality of newspaper reporting of suicidal behaviours in Kuwait against the World Health Organization's (WHO) reporting guidelines.

**Methods:** We searched the available content in four Arabic newspapers and assessed their adherence to the WHO media guidelines. We collected the reports between January 18, 2015, and September 3, 2021.

**Results:** A total of 254 news reports were analysed. The suicide method was mentioned in 98% of the reports. The term 'suicide' was mentioned in 99.2% of the headlines, and the method of suicide was mentioned in about 70.1% of the headlines. Only 7.9% of the reports referred to mental illness, and one stated evidence of substance abuse. Only 6.3% gave the statistics on suicide, one mentioned educative information, and none of the reports mentioned expert opinions, prevention programmes, research findings, or contact information to reach out for help.

**Conclusion:** The study revealed that the news reporting of suicide in Kuwait adhered poorly to the WHO media reporting guidelines. Therefore, further research should be undertaken to investigate the relevant factors and culture-specific prevention strategies.

**Keywords:** Suicide, Kuwait, media reporting, content analysis, WHO guidelines.

## جودة التقارير الإعلامية وعلاقتها بالسلوك الانتحاري في الكويت وفقاً لتوجيهات ومبادئ منظمة الصحة العالمية

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### ملخص البحث باللغة العربية :

**الخلفية:** الانتحار مشكلة نفسية عالمية متزايدة. وتؤدي وسائل الإعلام من خلال تقاريرها عن هذه المسألة، دوراً هاماً في التأثير على السلوك الانتحاري بين عامة الجمهور. غير أنه لم يتم تقييم دور التقارير الإخبارية للانتحار في الكويت ودورها في السلوك الانتحاري.

**الأهداف:** تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى تقييم جودة التقارير الصحفية حول السلوك الانتحاري في الكويت مقارنة مع مبادئ وتوجيهات منظمة الصحة العالمية.

**الأساليب:** أسلوب تحليل المحتوى حيث قام الباحث بتحليل محتوى أربع صحف عربية محلية في الكويت، ومدى التزامها بمبادئ وتوجيهات منظمة الصحة العالمية. جمعنا التقارير من ١٨ يناير / كانون الثاني ٢٠١٥ وحتى ٣ سبتمبر / أيلول ٢٠٢١.

**النتائج:** تمت مراجعة وتحليل ٢٥٤ تقريراً إخبارياً. وقد ذكرت معظم التقارير طريقة الانتحار في ٩٨% من التقارير. وذكر مصطلح "الانتحار" في ٩٩.٢% في العناوين الرئيسية، وذكر الأسلوب المستخدم في الانتحار في نحو ٧٠.١% في العناوين الرئيسية. وأشارت ٧.٩% فقط من تقارير الانتحار إلى وجود أسباب نفسية أدت للانتحار، وذكرت إحدى التقارير أدلة على إساءة استعمال المخدرات. ولم يقدم سوى ٦.٣% من التقارير أرقام وإحصاءات عامة عن الانتحار، وذكرت دراسة واحدة فقط معلومات تثقيفية للحد من سلوك الانتحار، ولم يذكر أي من التقارير آراء الخبراء، أو برامج الوقاية أو نتائج البحوث السابقة أو معلومات الاتصال للوصول إلى المساعدة المنشودة في مثل هذه المواقف.

**الخاتمة:** وكشفت الدراسة الحالية أن التقارير الإخبارية عن الانتحار في الكويت لم تلتزم بمبادئ وتوجيهات منظمة الصحة العالمية فيما يتعلق بالقواعد الخاصة بنشر مثل هذه الأخبار. ولذلك، ينبغي إجراء مزيد من البحوث للتحقق في العوامل ذات الصلة واستراتيجيات الوقاية والحد من السلوك الانتحاري.

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**2. Introduction**

The media has significantly accelerated the rate of suicide. In the past decade, new technological advancements have given rise to the prevalence of social media. These sites encourage social interaction via platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, and their widespread use influences suicide behaviour, especially among youth (Luxton et al., 2012). Typically, people display their lifestyles and personal information on social media platforms, including their intention to commit suicide.

Suicide or suicidal behaviour is any deliberate action that can result in the loss of one's life. It can occur through drug overdose, jumping, shooting and cut injury (Antemir et al., 2017). The common motivators of such behaviour include bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, post-traumatic stress disorder, a history of abuse, and stressful life situations. Suicidal behaviour can also be triggered by events such as losing a loved one, trauma, and experiencing a financial crisis (Antemir et al., 2017). Adverse experiences during childhood might contribute to mental disorders and suicidal behaviours during adulthood.

Media reports of suicide involving a famous person or celebrity can have a significant effect on people's lives. In cases where media consumers associate themselves with specific figures, these high-profile suicides may give the impression that it is a solution for life's problems. For example, research was conducted following the death of Robin Williams, a famous U.S. comedian who died from suicide in 2014, and the effect it had on people (Carmichael & Whitley, 2019). According to research conducted before and after his death, a 10% increase in the suicide rate was found (Carmichael & Whitley, 2019). The researchers concluded

that the media's over-glamorization of the event triggered similar suicides among the population.

The loss of a loved one through suicide causes severe emotional, economic, and physical pain. The loss of a family member or friend may result in guilt, anger, anxiety, and in some instances, depression (Spillane et al., 2018). Losing a loved one can be traumatising to the immediate family, relatives, and friends. These individuals may feel ashamed for failing to take action and prevent the death, and they might also experience feelings of anger, confusion, and resentment. In addition, people who lose siblings through suicide may suffer from depression and develop suicidal thoughts (Spillane et al., 2018). These reactions can have a negative impact on other people and on the community.

The elements that contribute to suicide and its prevention are complicated and not fully understood, but there is mounting evidence that the media can either strengthen or weaken suicide prevention efforts. For instance, imitative (copycat) suicide may be reduced or increased as a result of the media's reporting about suicide. The media can either provide helpful instructional material about suicide or perpetuate myths about it (WHO, 2017). Chen et al. (2011) demonstrated that an increase in the intensity of suicide news reporting increased the actual number of suicides.

The WHO guidelines require the media to educate the public about suicide and prohibit language that normalises the act (McTernan et al., 2018). However, the guidelines discourage giving details regarding the method used to commit suicide. For example, Huh et al. (2009) found that the reporting of unusual accidental deaths and specific suicide methods (e.g., charcoal burning) may lead young people to commit imitative suicidal acts. Moreover, Reisch and Michel (2005) analysed the data from Switzerland and concluded that it suggested an increased popularity of the suicide method of jumping during a period of high media attention.

A recent study conducted in Kuwait aimed to investigate the relationship between demographic factors, such as age, sex, and

residential area, and suicide. The majority of the sample ( $N = 297$ ) were aged between 19 and 35 years (60.6%). Moreover, the study revealed that the majority of the sample was Asian (60.2%), while the Kuwaiti were a minority (7.4%). Moreover, hanging was the preferred method of suicide (90.6%) (Al-Waheeb et al., 2020).

Hanging is also the most preferred way to end one's life in Kuwait. Local Kuwaiti nationals comprised a small proportion of the cases—7 out of 118 cases (5.9%), while the others were foreigners working in Kuwait, with an Indian precedence of 54 persons out of 118 (54.8%), followed by other nationalities representing 39.3% of the cases (Hassan et al., 2013).

Although the media is only one aspect of the social environment in which suicidal behaviour can be learned, and its impact is likely to be smaller than that of other psychosocial risk factors for suicide, it is nevertheless a significant agent contributing to one's social construction of reality, particularly that of vulnerable people (Sisask & Värnik, 2012).

To reduce inappropriate reporting, international organisations, such as the WHO and the International Association for Suicide Prevention (IASP), have issued guidelines to media professionals all over the world (WHO, 2017). However, the majority of countries, including the Muslim-majority countries of Bangladesh, Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Iraq, have reported poor adherence to the media reporting guidelines on suicide (Arafat et al., 2020; Arafat et al., 2021; Kamboh & Ittefaq, 2019; Nisa et al., 2020; Shoib & Arafat, 2021).

It is unclear whether these guidelines are used in suicide reporting in Kuwait. The purpose of the current study is therefore to investigate the quality of newspaper reporting of suicidal behaviour in Kuwait in comparison to the WHO suicide reporting guidelines.

### 3.Methods

#### 3.1 Data Collection

Seven local Kuwaiti newspapers were contacted among the top most circulated daily newspapers in the country: Al-Watan, Al-Qabas, Al-Ra'i, Al-Seyassah, Al-Anbaa, Al-Nahar, and Al-Jarida, between May 11, 2021 and August 15, 2021. Three newspapers were excluded for the following reasons: The Al-Watan newspaper is currently suspended due to issues within the company; the Al-Qabas and Al-Ra'i newspapers were contacted directly, but the researcher was unable to access the newspapers' archives due to lack of cooperation or unavailability of the archive official because of the Covid-19 crisis. The remaining four newspapers (Al-Seyassah, Al-Anbaa, Al-Nahar, and Al-Jarida) were included. Therefore, the current study undertook a content analysis study of articles reporting on suicide deaths in four Arabic language newspapers. We included news reports from January 18, 2015 to September 3, 2021 in the study.

Hard copies were obtained from the archives of the four newspapers. Our review yielded 254 articles reporting on suicide deaths after the removal of duplications and considering the inclusion criteria.

The first researcher extracted the descriptive information from each article, made the quality ratings, and entered the data into an Excel database designed for this purpose. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data that were extracted from the reports.

#### 3.2 Inclusion and Exclusion of Reports

Articles reporting on specific instances of suicide deaths and suicide attempts were included in the study. Those covering these events perpetrated by foreigners who lived in Kuwait and Kuwaiti citizens were included as well. Articles focused on criminal suspicions were excluded, as these were considered to be different types of events, and the WHO/IASP guidelines do not provide detailed recommendations about these. Reports on suicide bombings and/or mass suicidal events were not found during the

search but were intended to be excluded. Suicide bombing is a rare phenomenon in Kuwait to date.

### **3.3 Variables**

The name of the newspaper, number of attempted/completed suicides, number of suicides per article (i.e., there could be more than one suicide reported), related homicides, suicide pacts, public figures/glorification, victims' names, victims' occupations, names and details of suicide methods, name of suicide location, reporting live event of the case, monocausal explanations, suicide notes, citations from notes, headline analysis in respect of the term 'suicide', method and triggering life events (on the headline of the news), effects on and interviews with bereaved persons, photos displayed (any photo, photo of victim or scene), warning signs, reported mental illness, substance abuse, expert opinions, research findings, reporting of data, mention of preventative strategies, educative information, and help contact information were considered as variables for the analysis based on the WHO guidelines. Each variable was coded as being either present or absent.

### **3.4 Instrument**

We used the instrument previously used in Arafat et al. ((2019)) , based on the WHO media guidelines (WHO, 2017). We identified the variables related to suicide behaviour, such as the method of suicide, the number of suicides per article, any association with homicides, and suicidal pacts. We checked the potentially harmful reporting characteristics according to the WHO guidelines, including mentioning the name of the deceased, the person's occupation, the suicide method, details about the suicide method, a quotation from a suicide note; mentioning the term 'suicide', the method, and the precipitating life event in the headlines; citing interviews with bereaved persons; and posting photographs of the deceased. The potentially helpful reporting characteristics included mentioning the warning signs of suicide and the role of mental illness and substance abuse; providing education regarding suicide

and suicide prevention, as well as expert opinions; discussing epidemiological research findings; explaining suicide statistics; mentioning available prevention programmes; and providing help contact information for suicide prevention.

### **3.5 Statistical Analysis**

All analyses were carried out using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS version 28) and Microsoft Excel 2021. The data were coded, cleaned, tabulated, and presented in a descriptive form.

### **3.6 Ethical Statement**

We analysed the publicly available news reports and no institutional ethical clearance was sought. However, the research followed the Declaration of Helsinki (Rickham, 1964).

## **4. Results**

The number of reports on suicidal behaviour varied significantly across the newspapers (Table 1). Out of the total 254 articles, 45.7% were found in just one of the four newspapers, Al-Anbaa, while 21.3% were published in Al-Seyassa, followed by 19.3% and 13.8 in Al-Jareda and Al-Nahaar, respectively. Al-Anbaa published the highest number of reports, while Al.Nahaar published the lowest number.

**Table 1**

### ***Distribution of news about suicides in four newspapers (N = 254)***

Name of the newspaper	Frequency	Percent (%)
AL-ANBAA	116	45.7
AL-JAREDA	49	19.3
AL-NAHAAR	35	13.8
AL-SEYASSA	54	21.3
<b>Total</b>	254	100.0



Table 2 shows that among these 254 articles, most of them (95.7%) were connected to completed suicides, and the others (4.3%) were connected with attempts. Single completed suicides comprised the majority of the reports (87%), whereas two persons were involved in about 13%; however, suicide pacts were not found among the reports. Also, suicide-associated homicide and public figures were not found.

**Table 2**

*Frequency and patterns of suicide behaviours in news reports (N = 254)*

Variable	Frequency	Percent (%)
Suicide Behaviour		
Suicide	243	95.7
Attempt	11	4.3
Number of suicides per article		
1	220	86.6
2	32	12.6
3	2	.8
Murders related to suicide	0	0
Suicide pacts	0	0
Public figures	0	0
Methods		
Hanging	192	75.6

Throwing	32	12.6
Shooting	9	3.5
Cut injury	8	3.1
Poisoning	4	1.6
Fire setting	3	1.2
Drowning	1	.4

Table 3 shows that very few reports mentioned the name (3.5%) and occupation (9.4%) of the victim. The method of suicide was mentioned in 98%, and details about the method were found in 45.7%. About 95.3% (242) articles mentioned public sites of suicide, and precipitating life events were mentioned in .04% (one) of the reports. Monocausality was found in about 10.6% of the reports on a confirmed basis, and 89.4% mentioned monocausality on an implied basis. A quotation from a suicide note was mentioned in 1.2% of the articles. Analysis of the headlines revealed that the term "suicide" was mentioned in 99.2% of the article headlines, the method of suicide in 70.1%, and life events in 1.2%. About 11.4% (29) of the reports mentioned interviews with bereaved persons, and none of articles discussed the effects of suicide on bereaved persons. Only 1.2% ( $n=3$ ) of the reports provided different images such as scene, material, and symbolic photos in the reports, and the rest of the reports .08% ( $n=2$ ) posted images of suicide victims. Only about 7.9% ( $n=20$ ) of the reports mentioned mental illness and the warning signs of suicide, and only one named evidence of substance abuse. About 6.3% ( $n=16$ ) of the reports displayed statistics. Only one report included educative information, and none of the articles referred to expert opinions, research findings, prevention programmes, and help contact information.

**Table 3***Quality assessment of reporting against WHO suicide reporting guidelines (N = 254)*

Variable	Frequency	Percent (%)
<b>Identity of the person</b>		
Name stated	9	3.5
Occupation mentioned	24	9.4
<b>Method</b>		
Name stated	249	98
Details of method	116	45.7
<b>Public site mentioned</b>	242	95.3
<b>Life event mentioned</b>	1	.04
<b>Monocausality</b>		
Certain	27	10.6
Implied	227	89.4
<b>Suicide note</b>		
Present	0	0
Citation from note	3	1.2
<b>Headline</b>		
Suicide in headline	252	99.2
Method in headline	178	70.1
Life event in headline	3	1.2
<b>Bereaved</b>		
Effects	0	0
Interview of bereaved	29	11.4
<b>Photo</b>		
Any photo	3	1.2
Photo of victim	2	.08
Photo of scene	8	3.1
<b>Any warning sign</b>		
Any mental illness	20	7.9
Any drug abuse	1	.04
<b>Education and information</b>		
Expert opinions	0	0
Research findings	0	0
Any statistics	16	6.3
Prevention programme	0	0
Any educative information	1	.04
Any contact identity	0	0

## 5. Discussion

This study examined the suicide reporting in four daily newspapers in Kuwait in the period between 2015 and 2021. The findings reveal that the media reports in Kuwait were generally found to be poor in quality when assessed against the WHO guidelines.

According to studies, insensitive media coverage of suicide is linked to an increase in suicide rates (e.g., Sisask & Värnik, 2012). Our study confirms the findings of previous studies on suicide media reporting in many ways, including mentioning the method of suicide in the headlines and in the reports, providing details of the method, and mentioning the term ‘suicide’ in the headlines. It is also similar to other studies regarding the lack of expert opinions, research findings, educative information, and suicide prevention contact information (e.g., Arafat et al., (2019); Arafat et al., 2021; Oyetunji et al., 2021).

Our study, however, differs from previous studies (e.g., Arafat et al., 2021) in that the victims’ names and occupations were rarely mentioned, and only a few citations from suicidal notes were quoted. Also, the triggering life events were rarely included in the headlines or in the reports, and photos of the victims in our study were very limited, unlike in the previous studies (e.g., Arafat et al., 2022). On the other hand, the results on interviewing bereaved persons in our study is similar to that in Arafat et al. (2021).

The reporting of suicide methods in Kuwaiti newspapers, both in the headlines and in the body of the articles, are common practice. This is similar to the media reporting in India, South East Asia, and Iraq (Arafat et al., 2022; Arafat et al., 2021). In addition, the current study found that hanging was the most popular method used to commit suicide in Kuwait. This finding was also reported by Al-Waheeb et al. (2020) and Hassan et al. (2013).

According to Shoib and Arafat (2021), suicide awareness can be raised by looking at the factors that lead to an increase in suicide from a multi-pronged perspective, namely social stigma,

mental illness, and media reporting, all of which play a pivotal role in increasing the instances of suicide. In addition, the lack of censorship of provocative material in newspapers may be a contributing factor to the increase in suicides. In a press release dated September 13, 2019, the Press Council of India adopted guidelines for reporting on suicides based on the WHO guidelines. It stated that when reporting on suicide cases, newspapers and news organisations should not glamorise, sensationalise, or normalise suicide, and they should refrain from providing unnecessary details, such as the suicide note, suicide method, photographs, and location of the suicide (Vijayakumar, 2019). Such policies should be adopted in the Middle East, specifically in Kuwait.

### 5.1 Strengths and Limitations

The generalisability of these results is subject to certain limitations. For instance, the news reports were searched purposively, and they were analysed cross-sectionally for a single period of time, including the Covid-19 period, during which suicides increased dramatically. Moreover, only four Kuwaiti newspapers were included in the study.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to undertake a newspaper reporting quality analysis in Kuwait, and thus it can serve as a base for future studies in Kuwait. In addition, future studies could analyse the content in social media relating to suicide, as well as suicide attempts that are visualised and widely disseminated, which pose a risk to people that have the same leanings in the absence of suicide prevention programmes.

## 6. Conclusions

The current study found that the newspaper reporting of suicidal behaviour to be of poor quality when assessed against the WHO suicide reporting guidelines in Kuwait. Harmful information, such as naming the suicide methods, giving the details of the methods, and naming the public sites of suicide were mentioned frequently.

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