

## Perception of media in reporting suicide cases in Malaysia

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### ABSTRACT

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Suicide is a public issue in Malaysia. Local data provides information about the rates, methods, risks and preventive measures of suicide, but little is known of how media influences suicide in this country. This study aimed to investigate the perception of media in particular online newspapers on suicide. Data were gathered from the online archives of 8 local newspapers. Thematic and content analysis were carried out. A total of 81 articles and 45 photos that met the selection criteria were retrieved and analysed. There were five main themes emerged from the searched articles; i) sensationalistic headlines and photos of real suicide ii) background of person attempted or committed suicide; iii) presentation of method of suicide; iv) reasons for or factors associated with the act of attempting or committing suicide and v) strategies or intervention related to prevention of suicide. Suicide stories in Malaysia have been presented in more harmful than productive manners. Journalists should be wise to choose professional and ethical ways of presenting suicide stories so that online newspaper can be used as a useful medium for prevention.

#### Keywords:

Media, online newspapers, suicide,  
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## 1. Introduction

Suicide is an important public issue. In 2014, a report from the World Health Organization entitled Preventing Suicide, A Global Imperative [1], estimated that around 800,000 people worldwide committed suicide annually. This is equivalent to one death due to suicide every 40 seconds. Suicide gives impact to significant others with every one successful suicide act instigates other twenty suicide attempts. Globally, suicide is one of the top 10 causes of death and the second most common cause of death for those at the age of 15-29 years old. Around 75% of global suicide occurs in low and middle-income countries [1]. Apart from that, the report also estimated that a

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higher rate of suicide is found in men, with a rate of 15.0 per 100,000 people as opposed to a rate of 8.0 per 100,000 people in women [1]. Malaysia has also been equally affected by the global increase in suicide. The National Suicide Registry Malaysia (NSRM) 2008-2010 published by Ministry of Health [2], documented that the suicide rate in this country was about 1.18 per 100,000. A recent systematic review of suicide in Malaysia indicated higher prevalence of suicide of 6 to 8 per 100,000 populations [3]. A lower estimated rate documented by NSRM probably because only those of medically-certified suicides cases were registered and that encompassed approximately only half of all deaths due to suicide in Malaysia [2].

Review studies suggest that suicidal acts are a consequence of complex factors which are interrelated with each other [3-5]. Among the risk factors for suicide include significant life events such as financial difficulties, difficulties with intimate partner and employment problems. Other risk factors include presence of psychiatric illness, previous suicide attempts, family history of suicide or other psychiatric illness, poor social support, substance abuse as well as chronic illnesses such as cancer [3-5]. Among the methods commonly used for suicide include hanging, jumping off from high places, exposure to pesticides, drug overdose, firearm shooting and carbon monoxide poisoning [3-5]. In terms of gender propensity towards certain suicide methods, it was found that both male and female victims had opted for hanging, strangulation and suffocation as their most favoured method for suicide, followed by exposure to pesticides and jumping from high places [3-5].

Like cases of suicide elsewhere, Malaysians present with almost similar pattern of socio-demography, risks and presentation of suicide. Males in Malaysia have a higher preponderance for suicide compared to females with an approximate ratio of 3:1 [2, 3]. Parasuicide is higher in females than males. The highest rate of suicide was in the 35-44 age group, followed by the 75+ age group. The youngest case was 14 years of age and the oldest was 94 years old [2]. Ethnically, Malaysian Indians were found to have the highest rate of suicide followed by Malaysian Chinese, and Malays [2, 3, 6]. About 1 in 10 suicides was committed by non-citizens; predominantly immigrants from Indonesia and Nepal [2]. The highest rate of suicide was found in divorced or separated individual, and those embraced to Hinduism [2, 3, 6].

In terms of stressors or factors contribute to suicide, according to NSRM, financial difficulties and job problems played as major roles for suicide [2]. However, systematic review of 31 articles of suicide and deliberate self-harm in Malaysia indicated other reasons including interpersonal problems such as marital discords or other family conflict as the main stressors for suicide [3]. Other local researchers also reported similar findings [7]. Other stressors for suicide in this country include recent life-event changes, alcohol use disorder, having psychological disturbances such as depression, anxiety, stress, substance abuse, and being the victim of bullies [6, 7]. In an epidemiological study of 19309 individuals aged 16 and above which investigated relationship between psychological disturbances and suicidal behaviour by face-to-face interviews using WHO SUPRE-MISS questionnaire, having depression, anxiety and alcoholic abuse were found to have increased the tendency for a person to commit suicide [6]. The study also indicated that, those who have past history of depression have 25 times risk of committing suicide compared to others without such psychological disturbances [6]. Further, having chronic medical conditions (such as epilepsy) has also been documented to increase risk of suicide in this country [7, 8]. On the other hand, protective factors for suicide documented by local researchers include changes of personal habits and religious salience in particular among Muslims [7, 9].

The horror, fear and grief of suicide attract attention of public; hence this act is often highlighted in media such as television, radio, newspaper as well as contemporary online media. In a recent systematic review of the use of social media on discussion regarding deliberate self-harm among predominantly young people between 19 to 21 years old, the review suggested that social media

provide benefit in terms of giving advice for early treatment seeking, suggesting ways for stopping self-harming behaviour, and providing encouragement [4]. On the other hand, social media may also provide negative effects such as copycat act or contagion effect [4, 5]. Evidence that suggest the contagion effect of media reporting on suicide act has been demonstrated by many studies before [4, 5, 10]. For example, in 1962 after a month of widely reported death of Marilyn Monroe by suicide, an additional 303 suicides or increment of about 12% of suicide cases occurred as a result of highly publicised media coverage on suicide. Furthermore, media through inappropriate ways of presentation or illustration could encourage suicide by normalising or accepting self-harming behaviour, discussion of motivation or triggers, concealment, suicidal ideation or plans; and live depictions of self-harm acts [4, 5]. Hence, In order to ensure suicide is presented in positive manners, coverage of suicide in media should be informed by best practices.

In Malaysia, there are substantial articles in media in particular newspapers which highlight stories and matters related to the act of attempting or committing suicide. However, no scholarly discussion has been published to evaluate of how presentation of articles in media in this country give impact to suicide. Hence, this study aimed to investigate the perception of media through analysis of published articles on suicide in online newspapers in this country. The investigation would include of how media presented and illustrated suicide stories, content of the suicide stories as well as the possible highlighted impact of suicide act.

## **2. Materials and Method**

Data were gathered from the online archives of the Star or Star Online (SO), Utusan Malaysia or Utusan Online (UM), New Straits Times (NST), Berita Harian (BH), Harian Metro or myMetro (HM), Kosmo (Kos), Sinar Harian (SH), and Bernama. All of these online newspapers publish new articles in their respective online websites every day. Online newspaper archives were chosen because they were readily available and accessible for reviews compared to printed newspapers. In order to retrieve data from the online archives, terms used is ‘suicide’ and for Bahasa Malaysia newspapers, the term used was “bunuh diri”. Newspapers published in two different languages were chosen to reduce bias. The selection criteria included any articles, such as highlights, commentary, opinion, letter or report that described the phenomenon of suicide in Malaysia. It was not restricted to written articles only; photos that were published together with the articles were also retrieved. Article published from March, 2014 to November, 2016 were included.

Data retrieval and analysis were carried out by medical students in psychiatry postings, a medical officer in psychiatry and a consultant psychiatrist. Findings derived through inductive process; thematic analysis was carried out which involved repetitive reading and careful line-by-line analysis on the content and themes of each article. Themes portrayed by the photos were also assessed carefully. The emergent themes with a similar message were grouped together to be the main themes. The articles were re-read for further evidence of other emergent themes. The process continued until the articles yielded no more themes. Discussions were done between team members over any disagreement of the themes or content. Thematic analysis was used because the method has been extensively used across the social, behavioural and other applied sciences. It is beneficial to identify patterns of meaning across a dataset through a thorough process of data familiarisation, data coding, and theme development and revision.

In order to ensure reliability of the findings, the articles were rigorously reviewed by different research members and final read of articles was done during group discussion to ensure that the main theme had represented the overall content and discourse of the articles. Appropriate sentences that represented the themes were chosen to be included in the result. In order to maximise

anonymity, any names of the person and place that related to the act of attempting or committing suicide published by the newspapers were changed and bracketed.

### 3. Results

A total of 81 articles and 45 photos that met the selection criteria were retrieved and analysed. There were five main themes emerged from the searched articles; i) sensationalistic headlines and photos of real suicide ii) background of person attempted or committed suicide; iii) presentation of method of suicide; iv) reasons for or factors associated with the act of committing suicide and v) strategies or intervention related to management of suicide.

#### 3.1 Sensationalistic Headlines and Photos of Real Suicide

Majority of the articles had sensationalistic headline by highlighting the real stories of suicide and focused on the method of suicide such as “Cerai talak tiga, lelaki ditemui mati tergantung [Third (irrevocable) divorce, man was found hanging]” BH, 17 Oct. 2016, “Lelaki bunuh diri dalam kereta [Man committed suicide in a car]” BH, 2 Oct. 2016, “Lelaki cuba bunuh diri panjat menara pencawang [Man attempted suicide by climbing the transmission tower]” BH, 7 Nov. 2016, “Lelaki maut selepas bakar diri [Man died after burning himself]” BH, 22 Oct. 2015 and “Suspek kelar diri sendiri – Polis [Suspect slits himself- Police]” BH, 5 June 2016. Together with the methods, many articles also highlighted in their headlines the stress experienced by the person who attempted or committed suicide such as “Lelaki hadapi masalah kewangan terjun (JPP)[Man experiencing financial problems jumped from (JPP)]”BH, 14 Nov. 2016, “Pemuda alami tekanan perasan terjun perigi 5 meter[Man experiencing stress jumped into 5 meter well]” BH, 9 Oct. 2016 and “Kelar leher sendiri gara-gara tidak dapat gaji [Slit own throat because did not receive payment]”BH, 10 Feb. 2016. A few articles informed the public the seriousness of suicide by highlighting in the headlines the number of suicide cases such as “60 bunuh diri sebulan [60 cases of suicide every month]” and “Satu hingga dua kejadian bunuh diri di Malaysia setiap hari [One to two suicide cases in Malaysia everyday]”BH, 1 Oct. 2015. Only very few highlighted acceptable headline such as “Orang ramai digalakkan jalani saringan tahap tekanan [Public is encouraged to screen for stress level]” BH, 26 Sept. 2016, (Psychological First Aid) PFA boleh atasi masalah kesihatan mental [PFA may prevent mental health problem]” BH, 10 Oct. 2016. None of the articles had provided helpline as the headline of the article.

Of the total 45 photos illustrated, 17(37%) photos showed the person was in action trying to attempt or commit suicide or had fallen into the ground after jumping from top of the high rise building and a few others showed the person died of other methods. Twenty five (55 %) disclosed the photos of the real person who attempted or committed suicide by blurring their faces, and 3 articles clearly published the real names as well as real photos of the person attempted or committed suicide. A few articles had illustrated graphics related to the act such as buildings, gun, car and bridge. Only three articles illustrated photos which are not related to the event such as hospital’s sign board, photo of the minister and a police officer.

#### 3.2 Background of Person Committed Suicide

Content analysis showed that most of the person attempted or committed suicide aged between 20 to 40 years. A few of persons who attempted or committed suicide were in their late 40’s but none of them were in elderly age group. The youngest involved a suicide attempt by a 15-year-old school girl. No information regarding ethnicity and religion of the committed person published. Of

the total articles, 42 articles provided information regarding the employment status of the persons who committed suicide. Of 42 cases, 27 cases (64%) of the person committed suicide were employed while others not. These include unemployed person, student or housewife. There were 18 articles which described that the person who committed suicide were married while most of other articles their marital status were not published or undetermined.

### 3.3 Presentation of Method of Suicide

Of the total articles, 39 (48%) articles described the person attempted or committed suicide by jumping off a high rise structure such as building or bridge. Other methods include hanging, smoke inhalation, cutting own throat, poison ingestion, burning, and shooting. The acts of suicide were committed in private places such as condominium, flats, home (43; 53%) or public places such as bridge, shopping complex (38; 47%).

Apart from illustration through photos, methods of suicide mostly described clearly in sentences such as: i) Jumping from high rise building; "A heated argument with her estranged husband led to a woman jumping from the fifth floor of a condominium in [SJ]" SO, 10 Oct. 2016; ii) Smoke inhalation; "Our investigation showed that the victim had locked himself in the vehicle and then burned paper in a tin can inside," he said. He added that the man had suffocated from the smoke" SO, 3 Oct. 2016; iii) Hanging; "The decomposed body of a man was found hanging from a tree in [TTMK], here." SO, 26 Sept. 2016 and iv) Poison ingestion; "... a bottle of insecticide was found on the table near the man's lifeless body" SO, 10 Sept. 2016.

A total of ten articles described that the person who attempted or committed suicide had written messages through telephones or paper notes indicating or giving hints of their intention to die.

Most of the articles described the act was classified as "died due to unknown reason" (58; 72%), "died due to sudden death" (15; 19%) and a few "died due to suicide" (6; 8%)

### 3.4 Reasons for or Factors Associated with the Act of Attempting or Committing Suicide

Among the reasons of factors described that may contribute to the act of attempted or committed suicide include i) intimate partner or family problem; Tekanan perasaan kerana perceraian talak tiga dipercayai menjadi punca seorang lelaki ditemui tergantung di ruang tamu rumahnya [Emotional stress because of third (irrevocable) divorce is believed to be the cause of a man was found hanging in his living room]" BH, 17 October, 2016; ii) mental illness; "Seorang lelaki yang dipercayai mengalami masalah mental bertindak mengelar leher anak perempuannya berusia tiga tahun sehingga cedera sebelum menikam diri sendiri.....suspek yang mempunyai rekod sakit mental dikatakan mengalami kemurungan sejak seminggu lalu [A man believed to have mental disturbance slit the throat of three-year-old daughter until (she was) injured before stabbing oneself ..... the suspect who has a record of mental illness is said to be suffering from depression since last week." Kos, 22 Mei 2016; iii) financial crisis; "...polis turut menemukan sebuah buku yang terdapat nota dalam bahasa Cina tertera ayat 'saya ada masalah judi, ada banyak hutang' [Police also found a book with a note written in Chinese verse, 'I have a gambling problem, I have a lot of debt']" UM, 3 October, 2016; iv) fear of punishment; Bimbang dihukum penjara dipercayai mendorong seorang peniaga terjun dari (JSAHM). [Worried being jailed encouraged a businessman jumped from (JSAHM)] BH, 26 October, 2016; v) chronic physical illness; "The discovery of a cancer relapse is believed to be the reason why a 51-year old recluse committed suicide in [KBH] here this morning." NST, 11 November, 2016 and v) poor support;

“Dalam keadaan tertentu, masyarakat kita juga tidak memberikan sokongan sewajarnya. Misalnya, apabila ada ahli keluarga ditimpa musibah teruk seperti konflik rumah tangga atau masalah kewangan, individu itu akan terus dilabelkan sebagai punca masalah. Ini menjadikan pesakit tadi tidak mempunyai jalan keluar untuk berkongsi masalah. Ada juga yang sejak awal menunjukkan simptom kemurungan namun orang sekeliling lebih senang melabelnya ‘orang gila’ dan menjauhkan diri tanpa membantu mendapatkan rawatan kerana masyarakat menganggap isu kesihatan psikologi tidak mampu dirawat [In certain circumstances, our society also does not provide appropriate support. For example, when a family member experienced domestic conflict or financial problems, the individual will continue to be labelled as the cause of the problem. This makes the patient does not have an outlet to share his problems. There are also people who show symptoms of depression, but people around them prefer to label them as 'crazy' and stay away without helping to get treatment because society considers psychological disturbance as something cannot be treated]”  
HM, 18 Sept. 2016.

### *3.5 Strategies or Intervention Related to Management of Suicide*

Of all the newspapers analysed, only The Star Online published at the end of their articles helpline such as:

“Those in need of a sympathetic ear can call Befrienders Kuala Lumpur at 03-7956 8144 / 03-7956 8145; Penang (04-281 5161 / 04-2811108), Ipoh (05-547 7933 / 05-547 7955) or e-mail: sam@befrienders.org.my”  
SO, 31 August, 2016

About 44 % (34) articles described of acute intervention that was provided by fire department. The person attempting suicide was most often persuaded by firemen and later brought to the nearest hospital.

There were only 12 (15%) articles discussed in length regarding the strategies or interventions that should be done to manage suicide. These include having a specific programme for suicide awareness such as World Suicide Prevention Day; seminars for suicide prevention and mental health counselling; encouraging social support for people at risk such as those with emotional disturbances and in crisis; and early treatment for mental illness.

One article highlighted the importance of Psychological First Aids (PFA) to help person in crisis;

“Bantuan Awal Psikologi (PFA) mampu membantu individu yang mengalami krisis kehidupan bagi menangani masalah kesihatan mental, kata Menteri Kesihatan, Beliau berkata, melalui kaedah PFA, individu berkenaan akan diberi kaunseling untuk mengawal reaksi dan emosi, menstabilkan perasaan individu itu serta memberikan sokongan kepada individu terbabit menghargai setiap peluang yang mereka miliki [Psychological First Aid (PFA) can help individuals suffering from a crisis of life to deal with their mental health problems, Health Minister, said, through the PFA, the individual will be counseled to control reactions and emotions, stabilize the feelings of the individual as well as provide support to individuals involved appreciate every opportunity that they have]” .  
BH, 10 Oct. 2016

A few articles reminded readers the importance of support systems and the need for surrounding people to be vigilant of hints or symptoms of mental illness. Family plays an important role preventing

suicide according to a few articles such as, "Pihak keluarga dinasihatkan jika terdapat perubahan atas tingkah laku seperti diam diri dan gelisah untuk segera mendapatkan khidmat kaunseling dan psikoterapi yang bertauliah di hospital atau pun di sekolah [Family is advised if there is a change of behaviour such as silence and anxiety to get immediate counselling and psychotherapy in hospital or at school]" SH, 22 December, 2015. Community also plays a part in prevention of suicide as described by one of the articles:

"Everyone within the community, from cultural institutions, educational systems to family members, should be aware of the warning signs so that we can intervene and prevent a suicide...In an academic setting, if a lecturer notices that a student is skipping class or there is a sudden dip in their academic performance, he or she must intervene as this is one of the many warning signs."  
SO, 11 Oct. 2016

Very sparse article discussed on the use of deterrence in prevention of suicide. Only one article; a letter to editor from The Star Online argued regarding legal provision related to suicide in Malaysia;

"In Malaysia, Section 309 of the Penal Code criminalises a suicide attempt with a sentence of up to one year in jail or a fine. This portion of the Penal Code is an antiquated legacy from our British colonial past. Suicide has since been decriminalised in the UK, US, Australia and many other countries in the West following advancements in psychology and psychiatry that provide a deeper understanding of this complex and taboo topic...When suicide is considered a criminal act, suicide attempts are often hidden and suicide deaths are unreported, thus giving the false impression that suicidal behaviours are less prevalent. This in turn hinders efforts from government and charitable organisations to reach out and support individuals and communities at high risk of suicide".  
SO, 10 Sept. 2016

#### 4. Discussion

The online newspaper articles in Malaysia have presented suicide in more negative than positive manners. This can be seen through substantial articles published in local newspapers that sensationalising the headlines on real suicide, disclosing the real details of the person attempting of committing suicide and illustrating or describing clearly methods of suicide. On the other hand, there were lack of articles that promote help seeking methods and preventive measures of suicide.

Sensationalising the act of real suicide in the headlines of online newspapers may attract attention of public to read the articles which benefit to the newspapers' producer. However, the harmful consequences include contagion effects to the public such as copycat suicide [10]. Based on social learning theory [11], by highlighting the stress and ways of solving stress by suicide, it may provide example for those in similar situation to imitate and model the behaviour. A meta-analysis study of copycat suicide also suggested that apart from the amount of suicide coverage and involvement of public figure in suicide, a few other factors contribute in increasing risk for copycat suicide. Highlighting a real suicide stories has four times likely to induce copycat effects than fictional suicides [10]. There is higher tendency of copycat suicide to occur if the story about suicide is published in newspaper than television because the stories can be repeatedly revisited [10]. This is also true for online newspaper articles. Hence, by providing sensationalized stories of suicide online may indirectly increase risk for future suicide.

It is not in keeping with the best practice of journalism to disclose details of person attempting of committing suicide by any means including publishing the photos of the deceased or disclosing the

background details of the person. As part of code of ethics of the biggest journalists' unions in the world; National Union of Journalist [12] which states, "Does nothing to intrude into anybody's private life, grief or distress unless justified by overriding consideration of the public interest" and code of ethics of the National Union of Journalists Malaysia [13] which says "to maintain high ethical standards in journalism", such publications breach the code of ethics and require further review. In other countries such as New Zealand, even disclosure of the method or suspected method of the death or any detail such as the place of death that might suggest the method or suspected method of the death and a description of the death as a suicide to the public are not allowed and must have permission from chief coroner's office. A legal provision is set out in Section 71 of the Coroners Act 2006 (Amendment 2016) that clarify the restrictions [14]. Instead of including photos of the location or method of death, grieving family, friends, memorials, or funerals, Recommendations for Reporting on Suicide [15] which comprises of experts on suicide from various renowned agencies, universities and institutions in collaboration with WHO Media Task Force suggested that journalists should highlights hotline logos or local crisis phone numbers.

Newspaper can be powerful source or medium to educate public. However, the lack of awareness of journalists in Malaysia to provide more articles to educate public on help seeking behaviours and preventive measures of suicide is prominent. It can be seen when only one online newspaper that provides helpline and only fifteen percent articles described the preventive measures of suicide. The Star Online could be an example of how newspaper can be used to disseminate knowledge of how to get help when one experiencing stress or crisis. It is suggested that newspaper should also include "Warning Sign" or "What to do" sidebar in every suicide articles because most (but not all) of people who attempted or committed suicide exhibit warning signs [15].

Despite the negative ways of presenting suicide, online newspapers in Malaysia have managed to describe almost similar pattern of socio-demography, method of suicide and factors that related to suicide as described by National Suicide Registry, Malaysia [2]. A few articles had provided suggestions for management to prevent suicide including increasing awareness through campaigns and seminars, early detection of symptoms of stress and mental illness by every level of community and early treatment and counselling for stress and mental illness which contribute to suicide. Interestingly, as brought forward by one of the article, discussion among legal and mental health experts should be done to review the use of legal provision that is the Section 309 of the Penal Code that penalizing the person who attempted suicide.

## 5. Conclusion

Media have a significant role to educate public on suicide. This study is the first of its kind in this country to evaluate media role in presenting important issue such as suicide. Through limited analysis of recent online newspaper articles, it is found that suicide stories in Malaysia have been presented in more harmful than productive manners. However, the findings have to be read with limitations that the analyses were not carried out to include all newspapers in Malaysia and no investigation on hardcopies of the newspapers. Journalists should be wise to choose professional and ethical ways of presenting suicide stories so that online newspapers can be used effectively as a medium to prevent suicide.

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