



# Media Reporting of Suicide: A Comparative Framing Analysis of Malaysian Newspapers

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## ABSTRACT

In the next ten years, suicide is expected to emerge as the second highest cause of death in Malaysia. The World Health Organization cautions that media coverage of suicide could either heighten the incidences of suicide or generate a protective effect through responsible media reporting. In light of the role of media, and how the reach of mainstream articles is amplified through new media, the need to study suicide reporting is imperative. This study employed a quantitative framing analysis on suicide-related articles that were published in *The Star*, *Kosmo*, *Sin Chiew Daily* and *Malaysia Nanban*, newspaper dailies with the largest circulation in their respective languages and representative of major ethnic groups in Malaysia. Suicide-related articles for a 5-year period from 2013 to 2018 were studied to ascertain the extent of coverage, frames and sources used in the articles. There was a marked difference in the number of articles published by these dailies with *The Star* and *Sin Chiew Daily* having the highest and *Kosmo*, the lowest. The number of articles in *Sin Chiew Daily* show a declining trend whereas there is an increase in *Nanban*. The most common frame of the reporting was the method of suicide which included details of the methods used by victims. The source of information was predominantly from the authorities, namely the police. Only a limited number of articles mentioned mental health professionals and sources of help—content that could be helpful to readers. In this regard, the focus on suicide methods indicates a lack of adherence to suicide reporting guidelines recommended by several international suicide prevention organisations. Thus, findings of this study could be used to raise awareness on media reporting practices and appeal for more sensitive and positive reporting.

Keywords: **framing, suicide coverage, content analysis, newspapers, comparative analysis**

## INTRODUCTION

While there are already some alarming statistics on suicide rates in Malaysia, there is also a tacit admission that many cases of suicide and attempted suicide go unreported. The National Suicide Registry was set up by MOH in 2007 to improve data collection and provide guidelines to various professionals including the media. Unfortunately, this was discontinued in 2009 after just two annual reports.

The ethnic, cultural and religious milieu of the country makes the understanding of the overall situation complex. The country consists primarily of Malays, Chinese and Indians and a host of other indigenous peoples. While the incidence of suicide in the various ethnic groups is significantly different, there remains a strong religious-spiritual superego across the board that makes the discussions, explorations and expositions of suicide a taboo. Nevertheless, media continues to provide coverage of these incidences. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2017) cautions how the media reporting of suicide can encourage suicide contagion regardless of location. In its wider efforts of suicide prevention, WHO advises that “appropriate dissemination of information and awareness-raising are essential elements in the success of suicide prevention”.

Jane Pirkis (2017), one of the authors of the WHO report, *Suicide Prevention: A Global Imperative*, in her plenary address at the 2017 International Association for Suicide Prevention, Kuching, Sarawak highlighted that while the impact of the media is often discussed, much of this discussion has centred around the potential of irresponsible reporting leading to copycat acts. Recently, however, the discourse has moved to how media can be used in a positive way, as a vehicle of suicide prevention. Hence, in line with such efforts, this paper examines how media in Malaysia frames suicide incidences in the country and its role as either contributing to the contagion (encouraging copycat behaviour) or raising the understanding and awareness of the public.

Although an Asian survey places Malaysia as having a comparatively “low to medium rate of suicide”, MOH has forecasted that in the next 10 to 15 years, suicide will emerge as the second highest cause of death in Malaysia, after cardiovascular disease (Wei & Chua, 2008). This is supported by another research by Armitage et al (2015, p. 3) which concluded that the prevalence of suicide in Malaysia is 6–8 per 100,000 person per year. This alarming situation has also been highlighted by a news report stating that the number of people who seek help due to suicidal thoughts has increased. Of the average 68 callers who call Befrienders Kuala Lumpur (the country’s only 24-hour suicide prevention helpline) on a daily basis, 20 were found to have suicidal thoughts (Pillay, 2017).

Literature shows that in some Asian countries, news on suicides are reported in more graphic, explicit and simplistic manner as compared to Europe and the United States (Beautrais et al., 2008). Such media portrayal of suicide has been associated with copycat suicidal acts (suicide contagion), particularly if the reported suicide is glorified, sensationalised, or the method is explicitly described. In investigating the perception of selected online newspapers on suicide, Mohamad Afiq et al. (2017) concluded that suicide stories in Malaysia have been presented in a harmful manner instead of productively. They also recommended that journalists should choose professional and ethical ways of presenting suicide stories that would contribute to its prevention. Media plays a significant role in society in shaping public opinion and centring focus on certain issues (Goffman, 1974). As such, it is important for media to report suicide news appropriately.

In Mohamad Afiq et al.’s work on media coverage of suicide in Malaysia (2017), Chinese and Tamil- language newspapers were not included. Their data were sourced 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*, from March 2014 to November 2016. In contrast, this present study is much more comprehensive as it looks at all the four major vernacular language newspapers (Malay, English, Chinese, and Tamil) including articles published both online and in the print versions; no research to date has done this. This would provide a better or holistic understanding of the different approaches or ideologies observed by different vernacular newspapers when addressing suicide incidences. Moreover, there is no theoretical framework in Mohamad Afiq et al.'s study (2017), let alone communication theories to guide the study. A theoretical framework (framing) is needed to provide a systemic analysis of newspaper coverage, thus revealing the sociocultural context within which the media operates and influences the coverage of different vernacular newspapers for different ethnic groups.

Additionally, literature shows that the media framing theory is usually applied in the field of political communication with little substantial evidence on its application in social issue coverage. In this regard, the present study sets out to apply the media framing theory in examining the media coverage of suicides. Further, the study carried out a systematic analysis and interpretation to present a deeper understanding of the framing of suicide cases by mainstream Malay-, English-, Chinese- and Tamil-language newspapers in Malaysia. Given the critical role played by media in shaping public perceptions on social issue and more specifically, given the influential impact of media in forming readers' perceptions or stereotypes, it is important to gain a deeper understanding of how suicide cases are covered. More specifically, the systematic analysis of media coverage and media discourse helps detect misrepresentations and biases that may negatively impact public opinion and perception of suicide.

The overall objective of the study is to examine the coverage of suicide by Malaysian mainstream Malay-, English-, Chinese- and Tamil-language newspapers. The specific objectives of the study are to determine the extent of coverage on suicide published by these newspapers and to identify news sources and news frames used by the newspapers in their coverage. The research questions emerging from these objectives are:

RQ1: What is the extent of coverage published by the newspapers?

RQ2: What are the news sources used by the newspapers?

RQ3: What are the news frames used by the newspapers?

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study drew upon framing as the theoretical framework. Scholars (Bosman & d'Haenens, 2008; McCombs, 2004) pointed out that the most frequently cited definition of framing comes from Entman (1993):

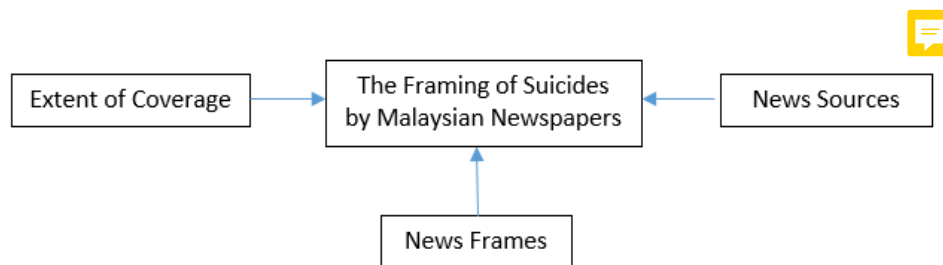
Framing is done to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (Entman, 1993, p. 52)

Griffin (2003) describes framing as the process of calling attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring others, which might lead to different reactions; and Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) refer to framing as the selection of a restricted number of thematically related attributes for inclusion in the media agenda when a particular object is discussed.

According to Spratt, Bullock and Baldasty (2007), while previous research have exposed that media frames support status quo positions on social and political issues, almost no attention has been paid to how newsgathering practices (such as choice of sources) and journalistic norms differ between types of news media, and how these differences affect framing. News is socially constructed and it reflects not just, what happens but also the context within which it was gathered and processed (Spratt et al., 2007). The type of events covered (or not) and how they are covered are influenced by many considerations, including law, economics, political forces, power relations, culture, race, structure of media organisations and work routine of journalists (Gan, Teo & Detenber, 2005; Tankard, 2008; Van Gorp, 2007).

Bruggemann (2014) contended that the framing approach is a powerful tool to analyse journalistic practices. The author also argued that coverage resulting from journalistic framing can be divided into three categories. Firstly, if a journalist mostly employs frames that are consonant with his or her own views, it will result in filtered accounts of a social problem. The journalist's interpretations will therefore dominate the coverage. Secondly, an interpretive account is the middle path where the journalist presents different ways of framing an issue, some of them in line and others in conflict with his or her own views. Then, the journalist uses the frames provided by external actors. Thirdly, if the journalist mostly practises frame sending and refrains from the different ways of reframing advocacy frames, this leads to conduit accounts. This approach to news-making presents different frames on a given issue and does not provide cues as to which interpretation is more adequate.

Tankard (2008) enumerated several news features that commonly convey frames. These features are headlines and kickers, subheads, photographs, photo captions, leads etc. Wong (2004) outlined four major dimensions of framing that could be studied: (1) presentation of news items (their size and placement); (2) news topic items (or the issues included in the frame); (3) cognitive attributes (or the specific details of issues included); and (4) affective attributes (tone of the picture). In addition, Manheim (1994) stated that news-framing analyses usually cover three aspects: visibility, valence and frame genres. Visibility refers to both the amount and extent of prominence an event/issue or a nation receives in news coverage. Prominence is usually demonstrated by some typical elements such as the article's placement in the newspaper or web sites, the headline, the visual tools associating with the text, mention(s) on the evening television news etc. Valence or slant is the tone of a news story or comment regarding certain frames. It is believed to have the potential to generate behavioural effects. By indicating discourse valuations or carrying positive and/or negative elements, valenced news frames present the extent to which the coverage reflects favourably or unfavourably on the event/issue. Entman (2007) also stressed that agenda setting, priming and framing fit together as tools of power, and he associated them to the explicit definitions of news slant and bias. Figure 1 presents the research framework for this study.



**Figure 1.** The research framework for this study

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Prevalence of Suicide*

Suicide is a complex phenomenon and has emerged as a serious public health problem that merits substantial attention, understanding and action. Close to 800,000 people kill themselves every year, which translates to one person every 40 seconds. Many more attempt suicide but do not succeed. Suicide can occur at any point of a person's lifespan and is reported as the second leading cause of death among 15- to 29-year-olds globally. It is a global phenomenon; in fact, 78% of global suicides in 2015 occurred in low- and middle-income countries. Suicide accounted for 1.4% of all deaths worldwide, making it the 17th leading cause of death in 2015 (WHO, 2017). More specifically, suicide has been linked to mental health issues. International Association for Suicide Prevention President, Professor Brian Mishara, highlighted the gravity of this worldwide phenomenon as he deciphered its statistics—more people kill themselves than die in wars, terrorist acts and interpersonal violence combined (“More people die”, 2009).

Suicides in Asian countries account for as much as 60% of all suicides in the world. A few Asian nations rank amongst the highest in the world, such as Sri Lanka (annual rate of 35 per 100,000 person), South Korea (25 per 100,000), Japan (20 per 100,000), Thailand (16 per 100,000) and China (10 per 100,000). The same 2015 WHO figures place Pakistan with the lowest rate, as low as 2.1 per 100,000 and the Philippines with an estimated prevalence of less than 3.4 per 100,000. Malaysia stands at 5.8 and Singapore, 9.9 (WHO, 2015).

There has been a marked increase in suicides and attempted suicides in the 16–25 age group (Khan, Syed Sulaiman & Hassali, 2012). Malaysia consists of Malays, Chinese and Indians substantially and a host of other indigenous peoples. In 2017, Malaysia had a population of 3 million with 28.7 million citizens and 3.3 million non-citizens. The ethnic breakdown was of 62% Malays, 21% Chinese, 6% Indians, 1% others and 10% non-citizens (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2017). In Malaysia, Maniam's work (1995) showed that compared to the suicide rates of 15 Chinese and 6 Malays for every 100,000 person, it was estimated that 30 to 35 Indians attempt or commit suicide. Aishvarya et al (2017), in reviewing suicide ideation in Malaysia, quote the National Suicide Registry 2007 figures for completed suicide showing that Chinese made up the majority (43%) followed by Indians (29%) and Malays (11%). There are however, no statistics for suicide rates in Sabah and Sarawak or among the Orang Asli (the indigenous people of Malaysia).

The ethnic, cultural and religious milieu of the country makes the understanding of the overall situation additionally complex. The most recent demographics on religions (Facts and Details, 2015) shows Malaysia consists 61% Muslims, 19% Buddhists, 9% Christians, 6.3% Hindus, 2.6% Confucianism, Taoism and traditional Chinese religions while 1.5% others and 0.8%

none. There remains a strong religious-spiritual superego amongst all ethnic groups that make the discussions, explorations and expositions of suicide a taboo. This delicate situation necessitates interventions to prevent and control suicides. Research shows that this is feasible, but involves a whole array of stakeholders and approaches starting from the proper raising of children and youth, effective and efficient mental health support to the control of risk factors. In their review of suicide in Asia, Wei and Chua (2008) enumerated a number of strategies including a strong focus on prevention programmes that address restricting access to pesticides, increasing crisis counselling activities, improving the accessibility and delivery of mental health services, and promoting responsible media reporting of suicide and related issues.

### *Suicide and Media Reporting*

Media plays a significant role in today's society by providing a very wide range of information in varied ways. They strongly influence the attitudes, beliefs and behaviour of communities as well as play a vital role in politics, economics and social practice. Given its potent influence, media can play either an active role in the prevention of suicide or contribute to its incidences.

WHO cautions how media reporting of suicide can encourage suicide contagion, the phenomenon of an increase in suicide incidences after a prominent news story on a suicide, regardless of where it takes place. A major concern of organisations involved in suicide prevention regarding the media is related to the "Werther effect", a term used to refer to imitation or copycat suicides. This phenomenon, referring to one of the earliest known associations between media and suicide, is derived from Goethe's 1774 novel *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* (*The Sorrows of Young Werther*) (Schmidtke, 1988). The story revolves around Werther, a jilted lover who decides to shoot himself. The book was banned soon after its publication when many young men started using the same method to commit suicide.

Literature on the correlation between media coverage or exposure and suicide continues to sustain the debate for both sides of the divide. Proponents confirm the effect of contagion induced by media while opponents point to the flaws in these findings by questioning the methodology or statistical approaches used. Nevertheless, WHO (2000, p.5), wary of the Werther effect, came to a grave conclusion in its guidelines for media professionals: "As in the printed media, highly publicized stories that appear in multiple programmes on multiple channels seem to carry the greatest impact—all the more so if they involve celebrities."

Although cases involving celebrities are the primary focus, any case appears to have a possible effect on potentially suicidal persons. WHO (2008, p. 6) reinforced this finding eight years later in their updated 2008 guideline, this time backed by several more surveys:

Over 50 investigations into imitative suicides have been conducted. Systematic reviews of these studies have consistently drawn the same conclusion: media reporting of suicide can lead to imitative suicidal behaviours... It is accentuated when the person described in the story and the reader or viewer are similar in some way, or when the person described in the story is a celebrity and is held in high regard by the reader or viewer. Particular subgroups in the population (e.g., young people, people suffering from depression) may be especially vulnerable to engaging in imitative suicidal behaviours. Finally, and probably most importantly, overt description of suicide by a particular method may lead to increases in suicidal behaviour employing that method... It is related to the amount and prominence of coverage, with repeated coverage and 'high-impact' stories being most strongly associated with imitative behaviours.

On the other hand, WHO (2017, p. 1) also recognizes the importance of proper reporting of suicide incidences:

The protective effects of responsible media reporting about suicide have been referred to in the scientific literature as the “Papageno effect”. It is named after the character Papageno in Mozart’s opera *The Magic Flute*, who becomes suicidal when he fears he has lost his love, but is reminded of options at the last moment and subsequently chooses an alternative route of action.

In a study on media and suicides in six US cities, Romer et al (2006, p. 267) confirmed the effect of media-induced suicide contagion and point to the importance of local television news as well as newspapers as the source of the phenomenon. The researchers claimed that their findings suggest the effect is replicable across geographical sites:

... all three large cities [display] effects in persons younger than 25 and four out of six cities [display] effects for persons older than 44. This effect is perhaps one of the most reliable influences of the media on violence and substantiates the powerful role that the media can play in promoting the imitation of destructive and violent behaviour.

Beautrais et al. (2008) contended that the reporting of suicide in some Asian countries is more graphic, explicit, and simplistic compared to Europe and the United States. Similar to other research, they concurred that the media portrayal of suicide is associated with copycat suicidal acts (suicide contagion), particularly if the reported suicide is glorified or sensationalised, or if the method is explicitly described. In addition, the reporting can be simplistic such that the cause is perceived as a single, most plausible factor whereas the suicide is actually the culmination of a myriad of events and factors. In this context, suicide should not be attributed to just problems with work, study or relationships but can be linked to mental illness and/or substance abuse as well. A Malaysian medical academic, Chan (2011) highlighted this point:

There is usually no single cause of suicide. On the contrary, a stress-diathesis model that depicts the interaction of multiple biological and psychosocial risk factors offers a better explanation of how and why a case of suicide has occurred. An understanding of the risk and protective factors of suicide are important in developing suicide prevention strategies.

This suggests that while media reporting cannot be construed as being the only cause, it can be a contributing factor to the rise in suicide numbers. Many findings, which paint a strong case for the effects of media coverage on the incidence of suicides, have led government agencies and private organisations to advocate for a more sensitive reporting to discourage imitation in vulnerable individuals. Internationally, the WHO and the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention are some examples. Romer et al. (2006, p. 268) summarised the various recommendations proposed by these organisations:

Their recommendations encourage reporters to reduce the potential for suicidal imitation by downplaying the romantic or sensational aspects of suicide deaths as well as the implication that suicide resolves problems for the victim. In addition, the recommendations encourage journalists to educate the public about potential lost opportunities to seek treatment that could have averted these deaths. By focusing on the efficacy of treatment, news reporting can educate the public about the role of mental disorders, such as major depression, in suicide and the potential for prevention of suicide.

Understanding the significant role of media in suicide prevention, in 2000, WHO introduced a resource kit on responsible reporting for media professionals. This was followed by their updated 2008 and 2017 editions. These resources seek to outline the impact of media reporting on suicide, indicate sources of reliable information, guide on reporting in both general and specific circumstances, and highlight pitfalls to be avoided in reporting. In 2004, MOH in collaboration with the Malaysian Psychiatric Association and the Befrienders (an international non-governmental organisation dedicated to suicide prevention) developed national guidelines along the same lines with input from senior editors of relevant newspapers.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Method*

Quantitative content analysis was employed as the research method for this study. The articles used for the study were drawn from 1 July 2013 to 30 June 2018, covering a period of five years to provide sufficient content to identify reporting trends. Preliminary search yielded only a few articles for a shorter period. The unit of analysis was article, which included straight news, editorials, columns, opinions and letters. The articles were identified and collected from the online archives of each newspaper using keywords such as “suicide”, “sudden death”, “fell to death”, “plunged to death”, “jumped to death”, “hung to death”, “hanged to death” found within headlines or body text.

### *The Selected Newspapers*

Newspapers with the highest circulation within their vernacular stream were chosen for this study. Therefore, the articles for analysis were selected from *Kosmo* (Malay), *The Star* (English), *Sin Chew Daily* (Chinese) and *Malaysia Nanban* (Tamil), all national vernacular dailies in Malaysia available in print and online. According to the Audit Bureau of Circulations Malaysia (2017), the average daily circulation of *Kosmo*, *The Star*, *Sin Chew Daily* and *Malaysia Nanban* in 2017 were 160,536, 217,082, 303,781 and 43,000 respectively. These newspapers are circulated nationwide but predominantly within Peninsular Malaysia.

### *Coding Procedures*

The framing of suicide by the selected Malaysian newspapers was examined using three different dimensions: 1) extent of coverage, 2) news sources, and 3) news frames. In addition, the extent of coverage was studied from two angles: 1) number of news items, and 2) type of news items. Conventionally, there are two possible approaches to analysing frames in the news: inductive and deductive (Matthes & Kohring, 2008; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). The inductive approach involves analysing a news story with an open mind to unravel the full array of possible frames, beginning with very loosely defined preconceptions of these themes. This approach can detect all the possible ways an issue can be framed, but it is labour-intensive, often based on small samples, and can be difficult to replicate. A deductive approach involves predefining certain frames as content analytic variables to verify the extent to which these frames occur in the news. This approach makes it necessary for the researcher to have a clear idea of the likely kinds of frames because frames that are not defined a priori may be overlooked. This approach can be replicated easily, can cope with large samples, and can easily detect differences in framing between media (e.g. television vs press) and within media (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000).



Similarly, Wimmer and Dominick (2014) recommended two ways in establishing coding categories for content analysis. The first is known as *a priori* coding, where the researcher establishes categories before data are collected, based on some theoretical or conceptual rationale. The second method is called *emergent coding*, where the researcher establishes categories after a preliminary examination of the data. This study employed the inductive or emergent coding approach for both news sources and news frames. Prior to the comprehensive coding exercise, the researchers coded together 30 articles that were chosen randomly from the study sample. Disagreements and ambiguities were resolved and some additional explanation was added to the coding instructions in the codebook. The list of sources and frames was derived from the preliminary examination of the articles and the subsequent operational definitions were mutually agreed upon.

**Table 1.** Operational definitions for coding – *News Sources*

Authorities	Police, government officials
Mental health professionals	Doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists
NGOs	Representatives, leaders, social workers, Befrienders, international organisations
Media organisations	Other newspapers, magazines, broadcast news, online news portals
Family members	Immediate family, relatives
General public	Friends, neighbours, bystanders, passers-by
Others	Random information or comments from those not classified under any of the above sources

**Table 2:** Operational definitions for coding – *News Frames*

Statistics/prevalence	Statistics, figures, number of incidences, demographics
Strategies	Strategies to prevent or improve mental health, or to address social issues, information for help
Causes/tendencies	Reasons given for the incident/ family members/ friends/ parents, jumping on the bandwagon without understanding the repercussions, bullying, serious illness, drugs/ substance abuse
Mental disorder	Mental illness, depression, previous mental health problems
Criminalisation	Highlighting suicide as a criminal offence, suicide attempt met with police action
Method of suicide	By jumping from a high-rise building, overdose, hanging, cutting, shooting, etc

## FINDINGS

Some 2,203 articles on suicide in Malaysia were collected from *Kosmo* (Malay), *The Star* (English), *Sin Chew Daily* (Chinese) and *Malaysia Namban* (Tamil) (Table 3) of which 2,048 were straight news.

**Table 3.** Number of articles retrieved from selected newspapers

	Jul-Dec 2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	Jan-June 2018	TOTAL
<i>The Star</i> (English)	94	115	156	166	176	133	<b>840</b>
<i>Kosmo</i> (Malay)	7	2	11	15	4	7	<b>46</b>
<i>Sin Chew Daily</i> (Chinese)	292	224	98	79	104	37	<b>834</b>
<i>Malaysia Namban</i> (Tamil)	58	49	61	105	52	158	<b>483</b>
	<b>451</b>	<b>390</b>	<b>326</b>	<b>365</b>	<b>336</b>	<b>335</b>	<b>2203</b>

There are no clear indications of an overall trend with regard to the number of suicide-related articles published by the various newspapers. The most obvious pattern is the marked increase of *Malaysia Namban's* coverage with 158 articles for just the first half of 2018. On the contrary, *Sin Chew Daily's* figures reveal a declining trend in the coverage of this issue.

**Table 4.** Types of articles covering suicide incidences (2013–2018)

Item	<i>The Star</i> (English)	<i>Kosmo</i> (Malay)	<i>Sin Chew Daily</i> (Chinese)	<i>Malaysia Namban</i> (Tamil)	TOTAL
Straight news	703	44	825	476	2,048
Editorial	0	2	1	1	4
Column	95	0	4	0	99
Opinion	5	0	4	4	13
Letters	37	0	0	2	39
	<b>840</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>834</b>	<b>483</b>	<b>2,203</b>

A majority of the coverage on suicide incidences was in the form of straight news (N=2,048 or 93%) while the least were opinions (N=13, 0.6%) and editorials (N=4, 0.2%). This suggests that editors and journalists seldom gave their personal views on the matter.

**Table 5:** *News sources* used in the coverage of suicide incidences (2013–2018)

Item	<i>The Star</i> (English)	<i>Kosmo</i> (Malay)	<i>Sin Chiew Daily</i> (Chinese)	<i>Malaysia Nanban</i> (Tamil)	TOTAL
Authorities	498	27	343	168	1,036
Mental health professionals	93	1	2	7	103
NGOs	65	0	9	0	74
Media organisations	114	10	24	248	396
Family members	73	6	279	41	399
General public	71	1	227	24	323
Others	90	8	36	1	135
					<b>2,466</b>

In the reporting of suicide incidences, some articles cited more than one source. Table 5 shows the total number of sources cited in the articles (N= 2,466). The data shows that authorities were the most frequently cited source in the coverage of suicides (N=1,036, 42%). Media organisations and family members (N=396, 16.1% and N=399, 16.2%, respectively) came in second, followed by the general public (N=323, 13%). The Chinese daily used primarily family members (N=279) and the general public (N=227) as sources, distinguishing it clearly from the other papers. Interestingly, mental health professionals and representatives from NGOs were the least used sources (N=103 and N=74, respectively).

**Table 6:** *News frames* used in the coverage of suicides (2013–2018)

Item	<i>The Star</i> (English)	<i>Kosmo</i> (Malay)	<i>Sin Chiew Daily</i> (Chinese)	<i>Malaysia Nanban</i> (Tamil)	TOTAL
Statistics/prevalence	108	2	3	13	126
Strategies	200	2	27	14	243
Causes/tendencies	516	35	315	33	899
Mental disorder	174	5	103	85	367
Criminalisation	31	4	13	36	84
Method of suicide	578	17	398	304	1,297
					<b>3,016</b>

The findings show that some articles carried more than one frame. Table 6 presents the total number of news frames found in the articles studied (N=3,016). The most salient frame found in is “method of suicide” (N=1,297, 43%). “Causes or tendencies of suicides” (N=899, 30%) is the next prominent frame, followed by “mental disorder” (N=367, 12%) and “strategies” to deal with suicides (N=243, 8%), and the least prominent is the “statistics/prevalence” frame (N=226, 7.5%).

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that there were very few articles in total on suicide (N=2,203) for the five-year period. The highest coverage was in *The Star* (N=840), although WHO (2016) reported 1,734 deaths by suicide in Malaysia in 2016 alone. This means 840 suicide-related articles were published during the period where there were about 8,500 actual deaths, not including attempted suicides. One possible explanation for this is that while the actions carried out by the victims can be deemed as committing suicide, the police may classify the incident as “sudden death” and therefore the incidents are not categorised under the “suicide” category per se. While it is not possible to expect the media to report on every suicide or attempt, more coverage would help raise the awareness of this mental health problem in the country.

However, the main contention here is not only the number of articles but also the quality of the content reported. With no clear overall trend for the number of suicide-related articles published by the selected newspapers, it is difficult to see any pattern as to whether such stories are deemed newsworthy by the media in light of the growing concern about mental health worldwide and in Malaysia. Nevertheless, there is a marked difference in the number of suicide-related articles in *Sin Chiew Daily* (N=834) and *The Star* (N=840) compared to that of *Kosmo* (N=46). *Malaysia Namban*, on the other hand, shows a marked increase (N=483) over the years with 158 for just the first half of 2018. On the contrary, *Sin Chiew Daily*'s figures reveal a declining trend in coverage.

Pirkis, Burgess, Blood, & Francis (2007) offer a clue to the phenomenon of decreasing coverage by suggesting that news organisations may believe that overt reporting on suicide may create the copycat effect and lead to more suicide cases thus the practice of selective reporting, though it cannot be ascertained if this is the influencing factor in *Sin Chiew Daily*'s case.

The main source that media turn to for reporting suicides is the authorities, namely the police as straight news articles (93%) require official statements. Sadly, only a minority of articles carried comments or opinions from mental health professionals. Suicide-related articles that carry more information and comments from mental health professionals can help readers understand better suicide and guide those at risk towards acquiring proper help. Sadly, such information is often only found in editorial columns, opinion pieces and features which are very few and irregular. An interesting finding that stands apart is that compared to the other papers, *Sin Chiew*'s reporters referred to family members and the public as their main source for their stories.

From the articles retrieved and studied, the most salient frame found in the coverage of suicide cases is the description of the suicide method. This finding confirms that suicide in some Asian countries is often reported in a more graphic, explicit and simplistic manner as compared to Europe and the United States (Beautrais et al, 2008). Such media portrayal of suicide has been associated with copycat suicidal acts (suicide contagion), particularly if the reported suicide is glorified or sensationalised, or the method is explicitly described. In this regard, the articles reviewed were found to have detailed descriptions of the victims and the method they used.

WHO's guidelines on suicide reporting specifically state that detailed descriptions of the method used and how the method was procured should be avoided. In this regard, there is an obvious lack of adherence to this guideline. The level of awareness, compliance, and perception of journalists for WHO's guidelines is generally low, resulting in explicit reporting that do not adhere to recommended guidelines (Bohanna & Wang, 2012; Pirkis et al., 2007). This finding is also in line with Mohamad Afiq et al. (2017) whose work on Malaysia's suicide reporting concluded that suicide stories in Malaysia are presented in a harmful manner rather than

productive. The same researchers recommended that journalists choose professional and ethical ways of presenting suicide stories that would contribute to its prevention.

The findings further show that very few articles used the frame of “strategies”, specifically with regard to strategies that can prevent suicide or improve mental health, and information on how or where to get help. This is particularly important, as there are likely to be readers with mental health issues who may be affected or triggered by reading about suicides. There were more articles written using the frame of “causes/tendencies”, i.e. stories which, included reasons for the suicide taking place. This raises the concern that the reason for someone to take their own life has been reduced to simplistic interpretations, when in fact the reasons and causes are complex and multifactorial.

## CONCLUSION

While the media framing theory is usually applied in the field of political communication, there is no substantial evidence of its application in the coverage of social issues. Thus, this paper adds a valuable contribution to the extant literature by applying the framing theory to examine media reporting on suicides over a 5-year period to yield quantitative description of the extent, sources and frames of suicide coverage. The findings reveal that the media coverage of suicides and attempted suicides is limited in number, which may reflect and in turn, affect its place in the national consciousness and awareness. More visibility of the issue could lead to increased public and government efforts towards reducing the incidences of suicide and dispelling the stigma surrounding suicide and mental health.

The reporting was also found to focus largely on the methods of suicide engaged by the victims. This is in direct contravention of explicit reporting guidelines from various suicide prevention organisations that say that such information may spur copycat acts or at the very least, adversely affect those who are already experiencing mental health problems. This empirical evidence of the shortcomings in media reporting of suicides can be presented to media organisations to engage their editors and writers to consider changing their approach to such coverage. There has been a growing realisation on how the media might be used in a positive way, for example the Papageno Effect, as a vehicle for suicide prevention. In examining the current approach used by leading newspapers in Malaysia for their suicide coverage, findings show a dearth, if not complete absence, of positive coverage.

Further analysis which takes into consideration photos accompanying the articles is warranted to examine if the stories were presented in a sensational manner. Visuals in terms of photos and videos (for online and broadcast stories), are likely to have different and much greater impact. The varied patterns shown by the different newspapers warrants further investigation on organisational practices to determine if guidelines for suicide reporting were followed as well as other publishing policies and practices that come into play in driving the choice and presentation of suicide stories.

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