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Quality of News Reporting of Celebrity Suicide in Bangladesh against World Health Organization Guidelines

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Abstract

Background: The quality of media reporting of celebrity suicide affects suicidal behaviour among community populations. However, it has not been assessed in Bangladesh.

Objectives: We aimed to assess the quality of news reporting of celebrity suicide in Bangladesh against the World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines.

Methods: Online news portals were searched in both Bangla and English languages for news articles that reported the suicide of a Bangladeshi celebrity singer. The quality of the reporting was assessed and compared with the WHO media guidelines.

Results: 163 reports with an average of 30 sentences were analysed. 72.4% of reports were published in Bangla, and about 95% of the reports were published within the week of the death. Almost all the reports mentioned the name and occupation of the celebrity, and about 90% of the reports displayed photos of the person. More than 70% of the reports mentioned the method of the suicide attempt. 7.4% mentioned warning signs while 57.7% of the reports mentioned the possibility of depression. 10 (6.1%) reports mentioned expert opinion, and none of the reports mentioned contact information for suicide prevention.

Conclusions: The quality of news reporting of celebrity suicide is poor when compared to the WHO guidelines, with a high presence of potentially harmful characteristics, and negligible presence of potentially helpful characteristics.

Keywords

Celebrity suicide, Bangladesh, Media reporting, Content analysis, WHO guidelines

INTRODUCTION

Globally, suicide is a major public health concern. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that more than 720,000 people died due to suicide yearly (World Health Organization, 2024). Media plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions towards suicide (Niederkröthaler et al., 2020; Zalsman et al., 2016; Chu et al., 2021). Hence, there has been growing concern regarding the quality of media reporting on suicide, particularly on the suicide reports of celebrities (Menon et al., 2022). This issue is important because ways of media reporting on celebrity suicides have a relation to triggering suicide incidents among the general population (Nie-

derkröthaler et al., 2020; Zalsman et al., 2016). Therefore, the media's role in reporting on suicides is receiving considerable attention as a key strategy for suicide prevention (Zalsman et al., 2016; World Health Organization, 2017; Fink et al., 2018; Fu et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2013). The WHO has issued guidelines to assist media professionals in reporting on suicide responsibly to minimize potential negative impacts on vulnerable populations (World Health Organization, 2017, 2023).

Suicide and its prevention get little attention as a public health problem in Bangladesh. The absence of a national suicide prevention plan, insufficient high-quality suicide surveillance data, and under-re-

porting of suicide cases indicate that suicide and suicide prevention are under-prioritised (Arafat, 2024; Kabir et al., 2023; Sharmin Salam et al., 2017). The quality of media (online and printed newspapers, movies, and drama) reporting of suicidal behaviour has been assessed against the WHO media guidelines in previous studies that reflect the high presence of potentially harmful characteristics, and extreme absence of potentially helpful characteristics of media reporting (Arafat et al., 2019; Arafat, Khan, et al., 2020; Arafat et al., 2022). However, the studies covered the media reporting of suicidal behaviour among general populations. No previous study attempted to assess the quality of newspaper reporting on celebrity suicide in the country. Therefore, we aimed to assess the quality of media reporting of celebrity suicide in Bangladesh against the WHO guidelines. This study would help to compare the status of celebrity suicide and suicidal behaviour among the general population. This may also help to formulate the national media guidelines for suicide reporting in Bangladesh.

METHODS

Data Collection

This paper is based on content analysis of news reports published in online news portals. To do so, we took the suicide of Sadi Mohammad, a renowned singer in Bangladesh, as a case to assess the quality of media reporting on celebrity suicide in Bangladesh. Data were searched in online news portals including online news reports of television channels in both Bangla and English language for news articles that reported the death of Sadi Mohammed by suicide on 13 March 2024. We searched in three cycles so that we could include the maximum number of reports. The latest search date was April 18, 2024.

The criteria for selecting those news contents were information related to the death of the celebrity singer with a specific date of publication. Reports published in media outlets of other countries like India and China were excluded.

Instrument

We used the WHO media reporting guidelines for the current study as it has been used internationally.

The instrument was adapted from a previous study (Arafat, Khan, et al., 2019) which was prepared according to the WHO media guidelines for suicide prevention (World Health Organization, 2017). We considered the news reports against potentially helpful and harmful characteristics. The helpful characteristics include any warning signs, any mental illness, expert opinion, research findings, any statistics related to suicide, a suicide prevention program, any educative information/ myth dispelling, and contact information for seeking help. The latter characteristics include the mentioning of the following in a news report and/or the headline: the deceased's name, their occupation, the method of suicide, events in their life, and the use of the word 'suicide'. In addition, other harmful characteristics included the effect on the bereaved, interviews with them and photos of the deceased. We also extracted the publication date of the report, the name of the news outlet, and the total number of sentences and paragraphs in each report.

Data analysis

The data was prepared in Microsoft Excel Software for Windows version 10 and expressed the variables in frequency and percentage.

Ethical Approval

The data was extracted from already available news reports. Therefore, formal ethical approval for this study was not sought.

RESULTS

Distribution of the reports published in online portals on celebrity suicide

The search included 163 reports published between March 13, 2024, and March 31, 2024, in 96 news outlets. Of these, 118 (72.4%) reports were published in Bangla and 45 (27.6%) in English. The mean number of sentences was 30.6, ranging from 6 to 168, with the average number of paragraphs being 8.7.

A third (33.1%) of the 163 reports were published on the day of the suicide, while about 75% were published in the first 2 days, and about 95% during the week of the suicide (Figure 1).

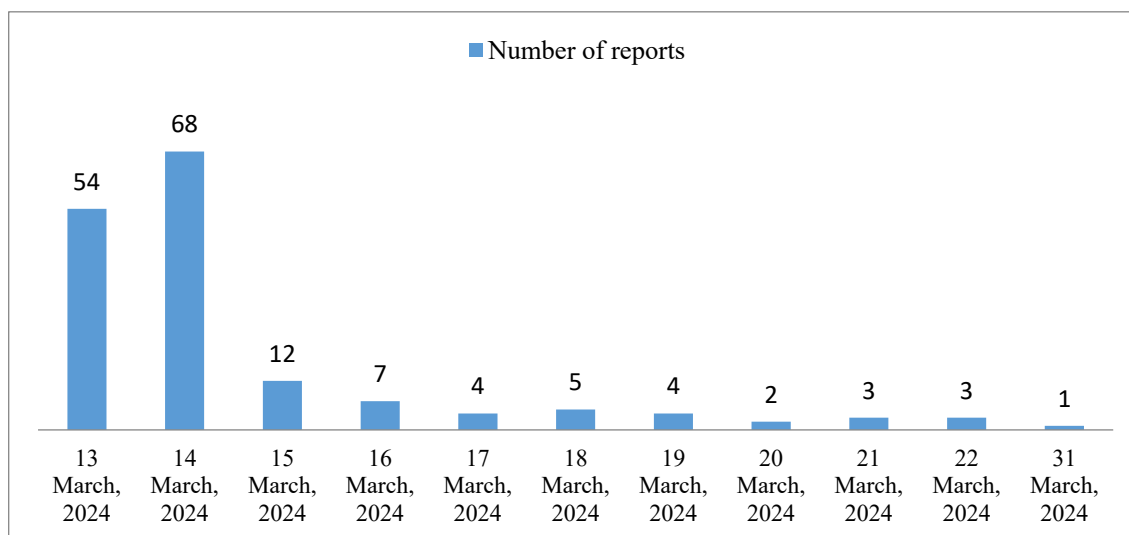


Figure 1. Date-wise publication of reports (n=163)

Assessing the quality of reporting against WHO guidelines

Almost all the reports mentioned the name and occupation of the celebrity and about 90% of the reports displayed a photo of the person,

while more than 70% reported the method of the suicide attempt (Table 1). The proportions of mentioning the term “suicide”, method of attempt, and life events in the headline were 17.8%, 6.7%, and 4.3% respectively.

Table 1. Frequencies of potentially harmful characteristics

Variable	Number of Reports	%
Name mentioned	162	99.4
Occupation mentioned	162	99.4
Method mentioned	116	71.2
Life events mentioned	86	52.8
Suicide in headline	29	17.8
Method in headline	11	6.7
Life events in headline	7	4.3
Interview of bereaved	18	11.0
Photo of deceased	146	89.6
Total	163	100

Among the news reports, 7.4% mentioned warning signs and 57.7% reported the possibility of depression, while 10 reports (6.1%) provided an expert

opinion (Table 2). None of the reports mentioned contact information for suicide prevention.

Table 2. Frequencies of potentially helpful characteristics

Variable	number	%
Any warning sign	12	7.4
Any mental illness	94	57.7
Expert opinion	10	6.1
Research finding	4	2.5
Any statistics	9	5.5
Prevention program	2	1.2
Any educative information	2	1.2
Any contact information	0	0
Total	163	100

DISCUSSION

Major findings of the study

The major findings of the study indicate that celebrity suicide received adequate media attention as the reports were published in 96 news outlets with an average of more than 30 sentences. It indicates the span of media attention noting that the first two days could be a target for prevention as two-thirds of the news reports were published during this time. Thirdly, news reports mentioned a high proportion of potentially harmful characteristics and a low proportion of potentially helpful characteristics. Our study further claims that the news coverage following the suicide of the celebrity singer had a noticeable absence of information to raise awareness among the public about suicide prevention.

Prior research has indicated that the quality of media reporting on suicides is very poor in Bangladesh where harmful characteristics of suicide reporting are mentioned regularly (Arafat et al., 2019). Following the case of a celebrity suicide, our current study reinforces these findings and reclaims that these reports are poorly adherent to the WHO reporting guidelines. This pattern of poor adherence is also observable in other neighbouring countries, in particular countries of South East Asia, which collectively account for 40% of global suicide deaths (Arafat, Kar, et al., 2020; Armstrong et al., 2018; Nisa et al., 2020; Marthoenis et al., 2020; Brandt Sørensen et al., 2021).

The current study may help to compare the reporting status of celebrity suicide with the reporting of

suicidal behaviour among general populations. Arafat et al. (2019) conducted a study on the quality of news reports about suicides among the general population in Bangladesh, finding that 'suicide' was prominently featured in the headlines, along with the method used, while our current study found that fewer reports mentioned the term 'suicide' in headlines on celebrity suicides. In this study, there was a lower emphasis on mentioning life events (4.2%) in headlines compared to the general population suicides (32%). Moreover, the celebrity suicide reports showed slightly better adherence to potentially helpful reporting practices. A small percentage of reports mentioned warning signs, while a majority mentioned the possibility of depression, indicating some awareness of mental health issues. Additionally, a few reports included expert opinions. However, similar to the general population suicide reports, none of the reports provided contact information for suicide prevention.

This study observed similarities with celebrity suicides in other countries, particularly in the prevalence of harmful reporting characteristics. Studies conducted in India (Menon et al., 2022; Ganesh et al., 2020) highlighted poor adherence of media reporting to the WHO recommendations, such as reporting of suicide methods, description of personal information, use of 'suicide' in the headlines of the reports, and few cases of educating people etc. However, there is optimism in India as recent studies have indicated improvements in such media reporting (Ganesh et al., 2020). Compared to our study, Ganesh et al. also noted that 13% of media reports

included help-seeking information, a feature completely absent in the reports of celebrity suicides in Bangladesh. However, studies in South Korea, such as Lee et al. (2014) found 37.1% violations of WHO suicide reporting guidelines, which is comparatively better than India and Bangladesh.

Implications of the study results

The findings of the current study have several implications. Firstly, the poor quality of media reporting of suicide warrants attention as this has been evident in multiple studies in the country (Arafat et al., 2019, 2020, 2022) across the media outlets. Secondly, the study indicates that the first two days of celebrity suicide reporting are the prime time for concern of media reporting as two-thirds of reports were published during this time. Additionally, it may help to formulate the national media reporting guidelines for suicide reporting in Bangladesh.

STRENGTH AND LIMITATIONS

To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is the first study to assess the quality of news reporting on a celebrity suicide in Bangladesh. Thus, this research is a useful contribution offering important insights to address the shortcomings in Bangladeshi media portraying celebrity suicides. Furthermore, it may provide support for further research in exploring the implications of such extensive media reporting of celebrity suicide, such as, an increase in suicides or the immediate risk of suicidal tendency as other studies claim (Cheng et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2014).

However, several limitations should be considered while generalising the study results. Firstly, the sample size is relatively small. Secondly, we assessed only news reports published in online news portals, the circulation and readership of which were not considered. Further, excluding the printed version, we limited our assessment to only online versions of news reporting.

CONCLUSION

The quality of news reporting of celebrity suicide is poor when compared to the WHO guidelines with a high presence of potentially harmful characteristics and negligible presence of potentially helpful characteristics. The first two days of celebrity suicide could

be a potential time to be cautious as the majority of the reports are published during this time. Additional longitudinal studies assessing the impact of celebrity suicide on suicidal behaviour among community people are warranted in Bangladesh.

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Authors' contribution

Conception & Design: S.M.Y. Arafat

Data curation: Y. Sultana, H. Akter

Data analysis: S.M.Y. Arafat

Drafting and critical revision of the manuscript: All authors

Final Approval of the manuscript: All authors

Conflict of interest

None.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

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5708

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