Media Silence on Suicide in Nigeria's News Coverage

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Abstract. Suicide is a pressing public health concern in Nigeria, yet the extent to which it is reported in the media remains unclear. The mass media serves a critical role in shaping public awareness and framing social issues. This study explores how suicide cases are reported by Nigerian online newspapers and whether such coverage aligns with the media's social responsibility. Using a quantitative content analysis method, the study examined suicide-related articles published in The Punch and The Guardian online editions between April and December 2019. A total of 540 newspaper issues (270 from each outlet) were analyzed using purposive sampling. Data were categorized based on story frequency, genre, paragraph length, and number of deaths reported. Theoretical framing was guided by Agenda-Setting Theory, Cultivation Theory, and Social Responsibility Theory. A total of 75 suicide-related stories were identified. Most were brief (1–10 paragraphs) and appeared in the metro section, with little investigative or thematic depth. The Punch contributed more stories (57.3%) compared to The Guardian (42.7%). Despite the high number of suicides in Nigeria, the overall media coverage was found to be minimal and inconsistent. Findings suggest significant underreporting and a lack of meaningful engagement with suicide as a societal issue. The media has not fulfilled its role in setting the public agenda or cultivating awareness. Suicide is often framed episodically rather than thematically, limiting its visibility as a public health concern. This undermines the media's potential to educate, warn, and mobilize action against suicide. The study concludes that Nigerian newspapers have not adequately reported on suicide, failing to meet the standards of socially responsible journalism. Broader media monitoring and audience-focused research are needed to understand the full impact of media coverage on suicide perception and prevention.

Keywords: Suicide; Nigeria; Newspaper Coverage; Agenda-Setting Theory; Media Responsibility; Content Analysis

1. Introduction

Suicide, defined as the intentional act of ending one's own life, has become a growing public health concern globally, including in Nigeria (Nwafor, 2024; Ogoina et al., 2022;

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Oyetunji et al., 2021). The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that nearly 800,000 people die by suicide annually, with countless others attempting it (Chu et al., 2018; Marthoenis et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2022). Suicide remains the second leading cause of death among individuals aged 15–29 years globally. In Nigeria alone, over 17,000 cases of suicide were recorded in 2016, placing the country among those with the highest suicide rates in the African region (Nuhu et al., 2013; Onyemelukwe, 2020).

Literature reveals that suicide is often linked to complex and multifactorial causes such as mental illness (including depression, bipolar disorder, and anxiety), substance abuse, financial stress, family issues, and social isolation (Alberti et al., 2024; Alshaya, 2022). It is increasingly acknowledged that suicide is not only a medical or psychological issue but also a social phenomenon that requires multidimensional engagement. One of the most influential societal institutions in shaping public perception and awareness of suicide is the mass media.

The media, as the fourth estate, plays a powerful role in informing, educating, and shaping public attitudes on pressing social issues. According to Oo and Dai (2025), the media serves as a bridge between the government and the people, influencing not only what people think about but also how they think about it. The literature suggests that the manner in which suicide is covered in the media can have either a preventative or a harmful effect, depending on the tone, framing, and frequency of the reports (Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2010). Despite this, media reportage in Nigeria tends to present suicide stories briefly, often without context or public health framing.

While existing studies have addressed suicide as a health issue and examined general media functions, few have systematically investigated how suicide cases are covered by Nigerian newspapers, particularly online editions which are increasingly consumed by the public. There is a notable gap in literature concerning the frequency, format, and framing of suicide reportage in Nigerian print and digital media. Moreover, the influence of such coverage on public awareness or behavior remains underexplored.

Given this gap, this study aims to assess the coverage of suicide-related news in two prominent Nigerian online newspapers, The Punch and The Guardian, within the period of April to December 2019. Specifically, it investigates how frequently suicide is reported, in what journalistic formats it is presented, and whether media coverage correlates with changes in suicide perception or behavior.

The significance of this study lies in its potential contribution to both media practice and public health discourse. By examining how suicide is represented in mainstream online newspapers, this study not only informs journalistic ethics and responsibility but also contributes to the development of more effective media strategies for suicide prevention and mental health advocacy in Nigeria.

2.   Methods

This study employed quantitative content analysis as the primary research method (Pröll & Magin, 2022; Sjøvaag & Stavelin, 2012; Wadbring & Ödmark, 2016). Content analysis is a systematic and objective technique for analyzing the manifest content of recorded communication, including newspapers, radio, and television. The focus of this research was on online editions of The Punch and The Guardian newspapers in Nigeria. These two outlets were purposively selected based on their credibility, national reach, and consistency in reporting public health and social issues.

The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, targeting editions published between April 2019 and December 2019, a period of nine months. This time frame was

chosen to ensure sufficient representation of suicide reportage across different seasons and news cycles. Since both newspapers publish daily, the study included a total of 540 issues, 270 from each newspaper, covering all days of the week (Monday to Sunday), under the assumption that suicide incidents may occur and be reported at any time.

The units of analysis in this study were carefully selected to capture both the structure and substance of suicide-related news coverage. Each news item was assigned a serial number to account for the total number of stories collected during the study period. The headline or title of each story was analyzed to examine how attention was drawn to the issue through language and framing. The type of story was also classified according to its journalistic genre, such as news reports, editorials, features, metro news, crime reports, opinion pieces, or columns. To assess the depth of coverage, the number of paragraphs in each article was counted. Additionally, the study recorded the number of deaths reported in each story to understand how frequently fatal outcomes were emphasized in the reportage.

For the analysis, the study employed descriptive statistical methods, using simple frequency counts and percentages to summarize the data. The results were visually represented through tables and pie charts, which helped to identify patterns, trends, and the overall prominence of suicide cases in the selected newspapers.

3.   Result and Discussion

This study analyzed suicide-related news reports published by The Punch and The Guardian newspapers between April and December 2019. The analysis focused on four key aspects namely the number of headlines per month, the types of news stories, the length of articles in paragraphs, and the number of deaths reported. The following tables present the findings.

Table 1 Number of headlines of suicide cases reported by The Punch and The Guardian newspapers

Month	The Punch	The Guardian	Total Frequency	Percentage
April	2	5	7	9.33%
May	7	7	14	18.67%
June	7	5	12	16.00%
July	5	3	8	10.67%
August	6	6	12	16.00%
September	5	3	8	10.67%
October	2	0	2	2.67%
November	4	1	5	6.67%
December	5	2	7	9.33%
Total	43	32	75	100%

Table 1 presents the monthly distribution of suicide-related headlines published by The Punch and The Guardian from April to December 2019. A total of 75 suicide stories were identified, with the highest number recorded in May (14 reports or 18.67%), followed by August and June with 12 reports each (16%). This indicates that media attention to suicide was not evenly distributed but peaked during specific months, possibly due to clusters of incidents or heightened editorial interest during those periods. The data also show moderate coverage in April and December (7 reports each, or 9.33%),

as well as July and September (8 reports or 10.67%). November featured only 5 reports (6.67%), while October had the least, with only 2 reports (2.67%). These figures suggest inconsistencies in suicide reportage, which may be influenced by editorial priorities, public interest, or the newsworthiness of specific cases.

In terms of publication comparison, The Punch had a higher total number of stories (43) compared to The Guardian (32). This discrepancy may reflect differing editorial policies, newsroom practices, or target audiences. Overall, the data point to a sporadic yet persistent coverage of suicide issues in Nigerian newspapers, which raises questions about how sustained and strategic the media response to suicide prevention truly is.

Table 2 Types of news stories covered by The Punch and The Guardian newspapers

Story Type	The Punch	The Guardian	Total Frequency	Percentage
News	9	0	9	12.00%
Feature	5	0	5	6.67%
Metro/Metro Plus	15	21	36	48.00%
National	0	9	9	12.00%
City Round	2	0	2	2.67%
Beat	3	0	3	4.00%
Uncategorized	9	2	11	14.67%
Total	43	32	75	100%

Table 2 categorizes suicide-related stories based on their journalistic genre or news section. The majority of these stories fell under the Metro/Metro Plus section, which accounted for 36 reports (48%). This suggests that suicide cases were largely framed as routine or local news items, rather than as national crises or mental health issues requiring serious attention. The tendency to frame suicide within the metro beat may downplay the broader social or psychological dimensions of the problem.

Both News and National sections recorded 9 stories each (12%), indicating that only a small proportion of suicide reports were treated as front-page or high-profile news. The Feature category had just 5 stories (6.67%), pointing to the lack of in-depth or investigative coverage that could explore root causes, prevention strategies, or survivor perspectives. The prevalence of surface-level reporting raises concerns about whether the media are fulfilling their public education role on this issue.

Additionally, there were 11 stories categorized as Uncategorized (14.67%), which may indicate editorial inconsistencies or a lack of a clear framework for reporting suicide. Minor categories like Beat (3 reports, 4%) and City Round (2 reports, 2.67%) were scarcely used. In summary, the data reflect a pattern of reactive and compartmentalized reporting, with few efforts to promote awareness or public engagement around suicide prevention.

Table 3 Number of paragraph of suicide stories carried by The Punch and The Guardian newspapers

Paragraph Count	The Punch	The Guardian	Total Frequency	Percentage
1–10	24	18	42	56.00%
11–20	14	12	26	34.67%

21–30	5	2	7	9.33%
Total	43	32	75	100%

Table 3 analyzes the depth of suicide news stories by measuring their paragraph length. The majority of reports, 42 out of 75 (56%) were relatively short, ranging from 1 to 10 paragraphs. This brevity implies that most of the stories were quick updates, likely offering minimal context, analysis, or preventative messaging. Such a format may hinder the public's understanding of the complex social and psychological issues underlying suicide.

Meanwhile, 26 stories (34.67%) fell within the 11 to 20 paragraph range, offering slightly more detail. These stories may have included background information, quotes from experts, or accounts from family members. However, considering the sensitive and multifaceted nature of suicide, this level of detail is still limited in terms of providing a comprehensive narrative that educates and empowers readers.

Only 7 stories (9.33%) extended to 21–30 paragraphs, indicating a significant lack of long-form journalism on suicide in the sample. This scarcity of detailed reports underscores a missed opportunity for newspapers to explore the systemic causes of suicide or highlight support resources. Overall, the findings reveal a need for richer, more contextual storytelling to replace the predominantly skeletal coverage currently observed.

Table 4 Number of death reported in The Punch and The Guardian

Month	The Punch	The Guardian	Total Deaths	Percentage
April	2	10	12	8.16%
May	9	8	17	11.56%
June	35	34	69	46.94%
July	4	3	7	4.76%
August	12	6	18	12.24%
September	6	3	9	6.12%
October	2	0	2	1.36%
November	4	0	4	3.72%
December	6	3	9	6.12%
Total	80	67	147	100%

Table 4 focuses on the number of deaths reported in suicide stories across the sample period. June had the highest number of deaths recorded 69 in total (46.94%) a significant spike that may correspond with a surge in incidents or greater media sensitivity to reporting during that month. The next highest death toll was in August (18 deaths or 12.24%), followed by May (17 deaths or 11.56%). These figures suggest a clustering of suicide cases during the mid-year months.

Other months reported significantly fewer deaths: April (12 deaths or 8.16%), September and December (9 deaths each, or 6.12%), July (7 deaths or 4.76%), and November (4 deaths or 3.72%). October had the lowest number of reported deaths, with only 2 cases (1.36%). This uneven distribution may reflect the sporadic nature of reporting rather than actual suicide incidence, raising questions about underreporting or editorial oversight.

In terms of newspaper comparison, The Punch reported more deaths (80) than The Guardian (67), mirroring the trend observed in overall story frequency. This consistency

suggests a stronger editorial emphasis in The Punch on reporting the numerical impact of suicide. Nevertheless, while the data quantify the problem, they do not reveal whether such coverage was framed in a way that fosters awareness, empathy, or solutions. The high numbers underscore the urgency for more responsible, contextualized, and preventative reporting.

3.1. Why Nigerian Newspapers Don't Report Suicide Enough

The findings of this study reveal a substantial underreporting of suicide cases by The Punch and The Guardian, with only 75 stories covered across nine months. This is alarmingly low when placed side by side with the World Health Organization's (2019) data, which recorded over 17,710 suicide cases in Nigeria in a single year. Such a significant discrepancy suggests that the Nigerian press, especially these two major national dailies, are failing to treat suicide as a public health crisis that deserves regular and prominent attention. According to the Social Responsibility Theory, first introduced by McWilliams and Siegel (2001), the press is not merely a business entity but a social institution with an ethical obligation to act in the interest of public welfare. When the press minimizes or ignores pressing social issues like suicide, it effectively abandons its moral duty to inform, educate, and protect the public.

The Hutchins Commission Report (2021), a cornerstone of the social responsibility framework, asserts that the media must present a representative picture of the various constituent groups in society. Suicide cuts across all demographics, age, class, gender, geography yet the current coverage trends observed in this study show a strong bias toward reporting cases involving university students or individuals connected to government offices. Such focus implies a selective narrative that excludes rural populations, uneducated citizens, or individuals in less visible communities. This form of reporting reinforces the misconception that suicide is limited to elite or urban demographics, thereby excluding vulnerable groups that may be suffering in silence.

This selective attention not only reflects a distortion of reality but also undermines the educational potential of the media. As Rafiee et al. (2024) and Karlsson et al. (2023) emphasizes, journalism should function not just as a mirror that reflects events, but as a guidepost for society especially when human lives are at stake. The absence of comprehensive reporting on suicide removes an essential platform for public education and dialogue, and by extension, obstructs the early identification and prevention of suicidal behavior. A broader, more inclusive approach to coverage would better serve the population by informing them about risk factors, signs, and available support systems.

The consequences of this gap are far-reaching. Research by Pindiga and Taylor (2018) on the Nigerian press's treatment of suicide shows a consistent pattern of underreporting and shallow framing. In most cases, suicide is reported with minimal context, no follow-up, and often without any mention of mental health resources. This kind of reporting contributes to a culture of silence and stigma, where suicide remains a taboo topic, and those affected are further isolated. Without media reinforcement, public health campaigns lack the amplification they need to shift societal attitudes and mobilize institutional response.

Moreover, the impact of this underreporting on government and civil society intervention cannot be overstated. Public policy is often shaped by public discourse, and discourse, in turn, is shaped by media visibility. Issues that receive sustained media attention often trigger institutional responses, budget allocations, awareness campaigns, policy reforms. When suicide is barely visible in the press, it becomes easy for

policymakers to overlook it or deem it a low-priority issue. The silence of the media effectively becomes complicity in systemic neglect.

There is also the issue of sensationalism. When suicide is covered at all, it is often in the form of breaking news or metro stories, which provide few insights and sometimes border on voyeurism. Headlines are crafted for shock value rather than reflection or understanding. According to Stack (2003), this kind of coverage risks trivializing the subject and can even contribute to suicide contagion if done irresponsibly. Responsible reporting, as outlined in the WHO's guidelines on suicide media coverage, involves providing help-seeking information, avoiding graphic details, and including expert commentary to guide readers toward understanding.

To fulfill its social responsibility, the Nigerian media must shift from episodic, event-based reporting to more sustained, thematic coverage of suicide. This includes regular features on mental health, survivor stories, expert interviews, and analysis of systemic causes like poverty, unemployment, and academic pressure. Media outlets must also invest in training journalists on sensitive reporting practices. Suicide is not just a news event, it is a social phenomenon with complex roots that require thoughtful, compassionate storytelling.

The media plays a pivotal role in shaping public consciousness and can either reinforce stigma or inspire change. The current underreporting of suicide in Nigerian newspapers represents a missed opportunity to inform, educate, and potentially save lives. As custodians of public discourse, journalists must embrace their responsibility to spotlight not just the spectacular, but also the silent suffering that characterizes much of the suicide crisis in Nigeria today. A press that is truly free must also be fundamentally responsible.

3.2. How the Media Shapes What We Think About Suicide

The second key finding of this study concerns the relationship between media coverage and suicide rates in Nigeria. Despite the prevalence of suicide cases reported by global health agencies, this study found no discernible evidence that newspaper coverage, whether in frequency or framing has influenced suicide trends in the country. This observation brings into question the extent to which the media in Nigeria performs its role as an agent of social influence. According to George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory (2014, 2022), the media, when presenting consistent patterns over time, has the capacity to shape an audience's perception of social realities. If suicide were reported with regularity, depth, and public health framing, readers might internalize a sense of urgency and awareness about the issue. However, the infrequent and often superficial manner in which suicide stories are presented suggests minimal opportunity for cultivation to take root.

Gerbner emphasized that cultivation effects rely not on singular exposures, but on prolonged and patterned storytelling. In the case of The Punch and The Guardian, suicide stories are sporadic, categorized under metro or miscellaneous news, and rarely revisited with follow-up or broader thematic framing. This contradicts the necessary conditions for cultivation to occur. Rather than cultivating a nuanced understanding of suicide as a societal concern linked to mental health, unemployment, and socio-economic stressors, the newspapers inadvertently present suicide as a string of isolated and unfortunate events. This episodic framing hinders long-term learning and obscures patterns that might otherwise galvanize public concern and policy action.

The Agenda-Setting Theory by McCombs and Shaw (2000) complements this discussion by proposing that the media shapes public priorities not by dictating opinions, but by influencing what people think about. The theory suggests that issues given more visibility by the media tend to rise in public consciousness. In the case of suicide in Nigeria, the findings from this study support the notion that lack of media salience contributes to societal neglect. Suicide coverage remains tucked in less-visible sections of newspapers, overshadowed by political drama, celebrity news, or sensational crime stories. The media, therefore, is failing in its agenda-setting role by not elevating suicide to the level of a public discourse-worthy issue.

As Cohen (2016) pointed out, "the press may not be successful in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about." This insight is critical when evaluating how suicide is framed in Nigerian newspapers. By not assigning headline status or editorial commentary to suicide issues, the media implicitly signals that the topic is less important. In effect, this silence shapes audience perception, reinforcing the idea that suicide is a private matter rather than a collective concern demanding societal response.

To genuinely fulfill its agenda-setting role, the media must shift toward thematic reporting a type of journalism that focuses on the why behind events and emphasizes patterns, context, and solutions. Thematic reporting on suicide would not only inform the public about causes and warning signs but also provide coverage of available support systems, such as mental health services and government initiatives. Luo et al. (2021) stress that such an approach helps the media become a partner in national development by sparking public dialogue and influencing decision-makers. In their absence, suicide remains under-recognized in both policy and public consciousness.

Another layer to this discussion is how suicide stories are framed when they do appear. Reports often lack psychological depth, context, or sensitivity. There is minimal engagement with mental health professionals or inclusion of hotline information. This contrasts sharply with WHO's guidelines for suicide reporting, which recommend that media outlets avoid sensationalism, provide educational context, and link to support services. Without adopting these standards, Nigerian newspapers risk not only under-informing the public but also perpetuating stigma and misinformation about suicide and mental health in general.

Moreover, the findings indicate that even when coverage is present, the format matters. Suicide stories that appear as part of metro or crime news sections tend to be treated with less seriousness. They are often presented without commentary or investigation, reducing them to fleeting news bites. This shallow presentation limits audience engagement and prevents the kind of emotional or cognitive investment that drives public concern and policy change. In contrast, suicide stories featured in op-eds, health columns, or investigative reports tend to stimulate more reflection and conversation, a technique largely missing from the newspapers analyzed in this study.

Both Cultivation Theory and Agenda-Setting Theory offer valuable frameworks for understanding the potential power of the media in shaping public attitudes toward suicide. Unfortunately, in the Nigerian context as revealed by this study, the media is not leveraging that power effectively. Without consistent, meaningful, and empathetic storytelling, the press cannot fulfill its dual responsibility of influencing perception and setting the agenda. For the media to play a meaningful role in suicide prevention, it must go beyond sporadic reporting and instead cultivate a sustained conversation that educates, destigmatizes, and motivates action.

4. Conclusion

This study investigated the coverage of suicide cases in Nigeria by analyzing content from two prominent online newspapers, The Punch and The Guardian, over a nine-month period (April–December 2019). The findings revealed that only 75 stories related to suicide were published across both newspapers, a figure that starkly contrasts with national statistics reported by the WHO. Most of these stories were presented in the metro section with brief reporting and minimal analysis, indicating a general lack of prominence and depth in suicide-related journalism.

Further analysis through the lens of Agenda-Setting, Cultivation, and Social Responsibility theories showed that the Nigerian media has not significantly influenced public perception or policy regarding suicide. The underreporting of such cases, particularly from rural and lower-income populations, demonstrates a failure in journalistic duty to serve public interest and promote awareness. The coverage lacked preventive messaging, contextual explanation, or sustained framing that could help reduce stigma or inspire action.

This study is limited in scope by its sample size, focusing only on two newspapers and a specific timeframe. Future research could expand to other media platforms such as television, radio, and social media, while employing audience analysis to assess public understanding and response to suicide coverage. Longitudinal and comparative studies could also explore how media framing differs across regions or cultures and its measurable impact on suicide awareness and prevention efforts.

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