



GUIDELINES FOR REPORTING AND SHARING OF SUICIDE- RELATED CONTENT

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BY :
Sri Sarguna Raj,
Steven Cheek Hou Cher
& Nicole Chong

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Introduction

According to the World Health Organization, over 720,000 individuals die by suicide each year, not including those who attempt it.¹ Suicide affects communities globally, regardless of background or nationality.² The rising incidence of suicide has prompted urgent calls for multisectoral suicide prevention strategies. In Malaysia, the rise in suicide incidents globally has caught the attention of the Ministry of Health's ("MOH"), which has responded with a renewed focus on intervention measures.

The Influence of the Media

From a cursory glance, suicide attempts are commonly known to have a direct association with psychological health. However, it may also be externally influenced by a wide range of factors. For the purpose of this article, the spotlight will

be focused on the power of media communications and its influence on suicide. Although suicide attempts are committed by people of different age groups, studies have demonstrated that it mainly impacts the younger generation.³ Through the seamless access to media online and offline, the younger demographic of consumers tend to be more susceptible to suicidal behaviour from the convenient exposure to suicide-related content. This could be in the form of uncensored photographs of the deceased, prominent headlines of celebrity suicide attempts and much more.

From a business approach, media platforms inevitably experiment with dramatic or prominent formats of publishing content in hopes of taking the lead amongst the oversaturated media and communications ecosystem. However, choosing engagement metrics over empathy may potentially lead to adverse outcomes in the form of manifesting negative thoughts into the minds of its consumers.

¹ World Health Organization, 'Suicide' (*World Health Organization*, 25 March 2025) <<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/suicide>> accessed 4 July 2025

² Ibid.

³ Keith Hawton, Kathryn Williams, 'Influences of the media on suicide' (2002) <<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC1124845/>>

Purpose of the Guidelines

Taking into consideration the role of media consumption in shaping perspectives, YB Fahmi Fadzil, the Minister of Communications of Malaysia, officially launched the Guidelines of Reporting and Sharing of Suicide-Related Content (“**Guidelines**”) on 3rd June 2025 as an initiative to prevent imitative suicides. The notion of the Guidelines was influenced by a global phenomenon known as the “Werther Effect” named after “*The Sorrows of Young Werther*”. The theory stemmed from the imitation effect of suicide incidents that were connected to the suicidality of Werther in the novel.⁴ In today’s climate, the Werther Effect applies to imitative suicides due to amplified or detailed media coverage of similar incidents, especially involving celebrities. Microscopic publications often include graphic details, elaborated descriptions of the method used, or even sensational headlines without their consumers’ discretion. This may result in consumers being subconsciously influenced or affected by the graphic news, potentially causing a

high risk of copycat suicides. In theory, the concept of the copycat model illustrates the human tendency to imitate the behaviour of others.⁵

Circling back to the Guidelines, the intention of its release was supported by the determination of the Ministry to elevate public consciousness about ethical reporting for the purpose of suicide prevention, as well as advocating for help-seeking behaviour to be adopted.

General Principles

As a rule of thumb, the Guidelines centralise on reflecting the local cultural and ethical sensitivity with regard to reporting on suicide. Compassion and empathy are crucial ingredients to suicide-related content, as media outlets must always bear in mind the deceased’s affected loved ones. This is due to the role of media and communications platforms as they wield significant influence to shape perceptions through the choice of words or content used. In order to uphold journalistic integrity, suicide-related content must be verified as to its accuracy as well as finding

⁴ Thomas Niederkrotenthaler, Arno Herbeth, Gernot Sonneck, ‘The “Werther-effect”: legend or reality?’ 21(4):284-90 (2007) <<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/18082110/>>

⁵ Saverio Gualtieri, Maria Cristina Verrina, Matteo Antonio Sacco, Lucia Tarda, Luca Calanna, Jasmine Calafiore, Stefano Lombardo, Santo Gratteri, Isabella Aquilla, ‘Copycat in Suicide: A Systematic Review of the Literature’ (2024) <<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11641853/>>

a middle ground to spread awareness. At the same time, confidentiality of personal and sensitive information relating to the deceased and their families ought to be maintained. The balance of ensuring suicide-related content remains within the Guidelines' boundaries essentially prevents potentially misshaping the perception of cultural diversity through false indications of stereotypes or misconceptions.

As such, the recurring theme of the Guidelines inevitably circles back to its aim of minimising further harm to the media consumers. Media platforms should take reasonable efforts to refrain from sensationalising or glamorising suicide, especially when celebrity suicide incidents emerge. This includes but is not limited to placing such content on front pages of media platforms which translates as glamorising suicide. Concurrently, compliance with relevant legal considerations should always be practiced.

Steps Moving Forward

The ideal and thoughtful approach of reporting suicide-related content boils down to firstly comprehending the complexity of suicide. As an extract of the Guidelines, reporting suicide incidents should take a neutral, if not empathetic,

standpoint. Tilting the content to be too detailed or over-simplified may have an adverse influence on the consumers.

- **Over-detailed Descriptions**

Publications of suicide incidents with overly detailed descriptions may subconsciously foster imitative behaviour amongst at-risk individuals. Highly granular information about the method, location, or even images of the incident are often considered to be unnecessarily explicit. This is due to the concern that magnified details of the incident may fuel the distress internally experienced by consumers or, specifically, at-risk individuals.

- **Over-simplified Descriptions**

Although averting intimate details may make the suicide-related content more digestible, however omitting details to which the reports consequently become over-simplified could potentially leave room for consumers to overthink or be misconceived from the truth. Media outlets should have a thoughtful blend of perspectives to publish such content that is inclusive of well-balanced information. For instance, reports should steer clear of

placing sole emphasis on a single event, content that implies the suicide was a result of a single cause, or even that it was painless or inevitable. The concern of oversimplifying the content also stretches to using cartoons.

Thus, the pragmatic approach would be to report the incidents with a compassionate tone that pays respect to the deceased and their loved ones whilst raising awareness to prevent further harm to the public at large. It is best to first obtain consent from the affected family members of the deceased before the publication process takes place. Media outlets should demonstrate compassion by refraining from disclosing any statements that directly refer to the bereaved family members. Unless consent to interviews or releasing personal photos is expressly permitted, publications of suicide incidents ought to be cautious of the materials used.

What should be included?

The Guidelines provide that it would be beneficial for suicide-related content to incorporate warning signs of suicide along with the resources for help, such as mental health services and crisis intervention resources. It should always be highlighted in the content that suicide is not the answer

and that help is always available. If possible, portraying the individuals as heroes should be omitted to prevent their actions from being idolised. Alternatively, the publication should create a safe, open discussion or threads of recovery stories to encourage consumers to seek help and connect to mental health professionals.

Legal Guidelines

Aside from ethical considerations, further legal regulations should also be taken into account. Journalistic integrity should not only be upheld to the highest standards by means of being culturally and religiously sensitive, it should also be compliant with the regulations that are set in stone. Various media and communications platforms have specific sets of guidelines and regulations in place to avoid circulating explicit content that may cause distress to its consumers, especially children. As publications are conveniently circulated in a borderless manner, the rise of sharing suicide-related content seems to be inevitable. As such, the Guidelines emphasise that users of these platforms should be considerate, particularly social media influencers. Should influencers wish to share their personal experiences, it should be clarified that the information shared is not in any way expert advice.

Disclaimers as well as content warnings are to be cautiously utilised to prevent potential social and legal consequences from arising.

Conclusion

The issue of suicide prevention is not black and white; it is, in truth, a human concern. Priority should be given to cultivating social

consciousness on suicide prevention without undermining at-risk individuals. Members of society play a vital role in supporting one another whilst dispelling stigmatised perceptions surrounding suicide and mental health issues. Henceforth, the power honed by the media industry could be fostered into a force for healing the unveiled pain and grief.

This article was written by our Intellectual Property, Media, Sports & Gaming partners, Sri Sarguna Raj, Steven Cheok Hou Cher & Nicole Chong, with the assistance of Soo An Qi, Lim Chaw Zen, Michelle Yap Siew Hui and Emily Ong Wenyen (Managing Associate, Associate & Pupils). It contains general information only. It does not constitute legal advice or an expression of legal opinion and should not be relied upon as such.