



Coverage of suicide in traditional media in colombia, before and during the pandemic (2018 - 2021)

Cobertura del Suicidio en los Medios de comunicación tradicionales en Colombia, antes y durante la pandemia (2018-2021)

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The WHO made recommendations for the responsible publication of news about suicide, after the evidence of the effects of imitation of this behavior due to its inadequate transmission. The COVID-19 pandemic had a negative effect on the mental health of the human population, generating states of frank vulnerability. The main objective of this study was to analyze the characteristics of news about suicide published in traditional mass media in Colombia, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic (2018-2021), according to the aforementioned recommendations. **Methodology:** A documentary study was carried out in which the content of 92 news items on suicide was analyzed. **Results:** 100% of the news shows deficiencies in following the WHO recommendations, especially in taking advantage of the opportunity to educate the public about suicide

(96.7%); using photographs or videos cautiously (98.9%); paying attention when reporting celebrity suicides (100%) and providing information on where to seek help (95.7%). There were differences in the follow-up of the recommendations before and during the pandemic. **Discussion:** Follow-up to the WHO recommendations in the transmission of news about suicide was very low, which may be a risk factor that increases the probability of occurrence of the Werther effect. **Conclusions:** Mass media have a high responsibility in the transmission of news about suicide and can contribute decisively in imitation but also in prevention and education about this behavior.

Keywords: Suicide; Pandemic; Mass Media; Colombia; Public Health; Mental Health; News.

RESUMEN

Introducción: La OMS realizó recomendaciones para la publicación responsable de noticias sobre el suicidio, tras la evidencia de los efectos de imitación de esta conducta por la transmisión inadecuada de las mismas. La pandemia de Covid-19 tuvo un efecto negativo sobre la salud mental de la población humana, generando estados de franca vulnerabilidad. El objetivo principal de este estudio fue analizar las características de las noticias sobre suicidio publicadas en medios de comunicación masiva tradicionales de Colombia, antes y durante la pandemia de COVID-19 (2018-2021), según las recomendaciones mencionadas. **Metodología:** Se realizó un estudio documental en el que se analizó el contenido de 92 noticias sobre suicidio. **Resultados:** 100% de las noticias presentan deficiencias en el seguimiento de las recomendaciones de la OMS, especialmente en aprovechar la oportunidad para educar al público sobre el suicidio (96.7%); usar fotografías o videos de forma precavida (98.9%); prestar atención al informar sobre suicidios de celebridades (100%) y proporcionar información sobre dónde buscar ayuda (95.7%). Hubo diferencias en el seguimiento de las recomendaciones antes y durante la pandemia. **Discusión:** El seguimiento de las recomendaciones de la OMS en la transmisión de noticias sobre suicidio fue muy bajo, lo que puede ser un factor de riesgo que aumente la probabilidad de ocurrencia del efecto Werther. **Conclusiones:** Los medios de comunicación masiva tienen una alta responsabilidad en la transmisión de noticias sobre el suicidio y pueden contribuir de manera determinante en la imitación de conductas suicidas pero también en la prevención y educación sobre estas.

Palabras clave: Suicidio; Pandemia; Medios de comunicación; Colombia; Salud pública; Noticias; Salud mental.

1. Introduction

Suicide is a public health problem present in all age groups, with devastating consequences for individuals, families, and communities, and a significant socioeconomic impact on countries (World Health Organization, 2021). This behavior represents a complex and multifactorial phenomenon (Gabilondo, 2020; Gómez, 2020). Among the risk factors for suicidal behavior are: barriers to accessing healthcare (Paramo and Herrera, 2022); access to means for suicide (Bulger et al., 2019; Berman et al., 2022); stigma associated with help-seeking behaviors (Horwitz et al., 2020; Bornheimer et al., 2022); disasters and conflicts (Karimi et al., 2022; Safarpour et al., 2022); discrimination (Butler-Barnes et al., 2022; Madubata et al., 2022); stress due to cultural changes (Kanamori et al., 2022; Syed et al., 2022); abuse (Brokke et al., 2022); feelings of isolation (Landa-Blanco et al., 2022); lack of social support (Angelakis and Gooding, 2022); relationship conflicts (DeVillie et al., 2020); previous suicide attempts (Demesmaeker et al., 2022); mental disorder diagnosis (Casey et al., 2022); harmful substance use (Quimby et al., 2022); job or financial losses (Choi et al., 2022); feelings of hopelessness (Niu et al., 2020); chronic pain (Pakniyat-Jahromi et al., 2022); family history of suicide (Favril et al., 2022); biological factors (Nishanth and Jha, 2022); inappropriate media reporting (Menon et al., 2020; Arafat et al., 2022; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2022).

Mass media play a decisive role in reporting cases and situations related to suicide, reaching all populations and diverse age groups. Transmitting this type of news can have positive consequences as it contributes to suicide prevention. In this regard, the "Papageno effect" has been described, whereby certain elements of suicide-related news content are associated with a decrease in suicide rates and therefore have a protective or preventive effect (Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2010).

"Journalists, media outlets, and organizations must carefully monitor the content of reports before they are published."

However, the consequences of transmitting news about suicide can also be negative, as exemplified by the Werther effect (Ha and Yang, 2021; Kim et al., 2022). According to this effect, suicides increase immediately after the publication of a news story or narrative about suicide (Phillips, 1974), and this increase can extend up to two weeks afterward before stabilizing and beginning to decrease (Jeong et al., 2010). The more publicity a story receives, the greater the number of suicides or suicidal behaviors that are triggered in the area where the news was communicated. It is known that the tendency to imitate

suicide is greater if the person who committed suicide is prestigious and their circumstances are similar to those of individuals susceptible to suicide (Phillips, 1974; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2019). Non-fictional news about suicides published in traditional mass media outlets, such as newspapers and televised news, is associated with an increase in subsequent suicide rates, proportional to the quantity, duration, and prominent nature of the news in the media (Gould, 2001; Pirkis and Blood, 2001). This effect is not exactly the same but also not harmless compared to fictional news about suicide (Pirkis and Blood, 2001).

The WHO (2014) emphasizes that inappropriate media practices can sensationalize and glorify suicide, increasing the risk of imitation among vulnerable individuals. This organization has indicated that for every adult who dies by suicide, 20 others will commit suicide. Practices are considered inappropriate if they "report on uncommon suicide methods or clusters of suicides, show images or information about the method used, or refer to suicide as an acceptable response to crisis or adversity as if it were normal" (WHO, 2014; p. 32). Worldwide, the evolution of digital media has increased connectivity and access to information for the population (Kim et al., 2022). In Colombia, while analog-free television continues to be a significant news source, media digitalization has been increasing, resulting in a significant portion of the Colombian population having greater access to information sources and the audience playing a more active role in news production and circulation (Open Society Foundations, 2012). Gutiérrez-Coba et al. (2017) studied mental health coverage in the Colombian press and found that the mental health topics with the highest presence were addictions (65.5%), followed by suicidal behavior (22.4%).

In order to educate and promote responsible transmission of information in news about suicide, the WHO proposed the following recommendations (WHO, 2008): 1) seize the opportunity to educate the public about suicide; 2) avoid language that sensationalizes or normalizes suicide or presents it as a solution to problems; 3) avoid prominent placement of the news and undue repetition of suicide stories; 4) avoid explicit descriptions of the method used for suicide or suicide attempts; 5) avoid providing detailed information about the location where the suicide or suicide attempt occurred; 6) use headline wording carefully; 7) exercise caution when using photographs or video sequences; 8) be especially cautious when reporting on celebrity suicides; 9) show due consideration for those grieving a suicide; 10) provide information on where to seek help; 11) acknowledge that media professionals themselves can be affected by suicide stories.

Since then, and in consideration of the importance of responsibly transmitting news about suicide, modifications have been proposed (Sisask and Värnik, 2012) and various recommendations have been developed for reporting on suicide (WHO, 2008; WHO, 2017; Reporting on Suicide, 2022). In the case of Colombia, the Colombian College of Psychologists [COLPSIC] (2017) issued a statement regarding the broadcasting of news and content related to suicide, succinctly referring to the main recommendations that have been developed for communication about suicidal behavior. In response to the proposed recommendations, Bohanna and Wang (2012) concluded that adopting them can modify the approach to reporting on suicide in the news and thus prevent suicidal behavior. This confirms that irresponsible transmission of news about suicide can be a risk factor for this behavior. COLPSIC (2022) reiterates that suicide should be considered a preventable behavior and that psychologists are committed as professionals to developing health promotion and disease prevention actions aimed at implementing effective prevention and intervention measures for suicidal behavior.

Niederkrotenthaler et al. (2010) conducted a study aimed at testing the hypotheses of the Werther effect and the Papageno effect. They conducted content analysis and latent class analysis of 497 suicide-related news articles published in Austrian print media over six months (January to June 2005). The findings of their study indicated a positive association between suicide and repeated news about the same suicide, news about suicidal

myths, expert opinions, and epidemiological data. On the other hand, news about individual suicidal ideation not accompanied by suicidal behavior was negatively associated with suicide rates. Similarly, studies such as that by Chandra et al. (2014) included an assessment of protective factors against suicide: contact information for support services; debunked myths; focus on prevention programs; addressing and addressing suicidal ideation; expert opinions; the individual's suffering resulting from suicidal acts; focus on suicide research; providing suicide-related statistical data; mental disorders related to suicide. However, the results showed that few news articles referred to such protective factors. For example, only 16% of the news articles reported on mental disorders and less than 4% mentioned other protective factors.

In the study by Sinyor et al. (2021), the elements most strongly and independently associated with a decrease in suicides were: unfavorable characteristics (negative judgments about the deceased) (OR 1.85, CI 1.20-2.84); mentions of suicides by jumping in front of a train (OR 1.61, CI 1.10-2.36); mentions of completed suicides by cuts or stabbings (OR 1.59, CI 1.19-2.13); deaths and individual murder-suicides (OR 1.50, CI 1.23-1.84). In the study by Chandra et al. (2014), they evaluated 341 news reports on suicides published in 550 newspapers over three months (between October and December 2011) to verify compliance with guidelines for responsible reporting of such news. They found limited compliance with these guidelines. In fact, the majority of news articles (87%) reported completed suicides, mentioned the method (89%), mentioned gender (95%), mentioned the name of the deceased (90%), age (80%), place of suicide (80%), life events related to suicide (75%), occupation (70%), explicit headlines about suicide (69%), and single causality (61%).

Sinyor et al. (2021) analyzed 6367 articles, aiming to establish associations between harmful elements and protective elements contained in media reports about suicide, published in 13 major sources in Toronto, and subsequent deaths between 2011 and 2014. They found that the elements most strongly and independently associated with an increase in suicides were statements about: the inevitability of suicide (OR 1.97, CI 1.07-3.62); suffocation as a method other than dying from carbon monoxide poisoning (OR 1.72, CI 1.36-2.18); jumping from a building (OR 1.70, CI 1.28-2.26); suicide pacts (OR 1.63, CI 1.14-2.35); and headlines that included the suicide method (OR 1.41, CI 1.07-1.86). Other studies indicate that vulnerability to the Werther effect is higher in individuals with depression and in young people (Cheng et al. 2007; Scherr and Reinemann, 2011).

Armstrong et al. (2018) conducted a study in India aimed at evaluating the quality of journalistic information related to suicide based on WHO recommendations. To do so, they used content analysis of news articles published in 9 widely read newspapers in Tamil Nadu (India) between June and December 2016. They analyzed 1681 articles, of which 95.9% focused on reporting specific suicide incidents, 43.3% provided detailed information about the suicide method, and only 2.5% included useful data such as support services. In recognition of these effects, various countries have adopted measures to control them. India, for instance, adopted guidelines for reporting suicide in 2019, based on WHO recommendations. These guidelines prohibit news outlets from: prominently placing suicide stories and repeating them excessively; using language that sensationalizes or normalizes suicide or presents it as a constructive solution to problems; explicitly describing the method used; providing details about the location of the suicide; using sensational headlines; and utilizing photographs, video sequences, or links to social media (Vijayakumar, 2019).

In Colombia, some research has been conducted regarding news coverage of suicidal behavior. Rubiano et al. (2007) analyzed suicide-related news articles published in two newspapers in Huila during the period 2001-2004. They found that: 17% (first newspaper) and 13% (second newspaper) of the cases published were on the front page; 48% and 31% included a photo of the deceased; both newspapers mentioned the method used (64%) with specific characteristics that could lead to its recognition; in 80% of the news articles, simplistic explanations of suicide were given, and none of the reports presented alternatives to suicide. These findings contradict several of the WHO's recommendations.

Muñoz and Sánchez (2013) analyzed 135 news articles published between August 2009 and August 2011 and found that while the three print media outlets they analyzed had different styles of presenting information (sensationalist, suggestive, and revealing the impact on survivors), none of them fully complied with WHO recommendations. The authors suggest that it's relevant to continue research in this line and include the influence of different audiovisual media and information distributed through the internet.

Rátiva-Osorio et al. (2013) analyzed 8 years of publications in a regional Colombian newspaper according to WHO recommendations, showing that the publications did not adhere to the parameters proposed by the Organization. The authors recognize the importance of creating spaces to disseminate communication guidelines about suicidal behavior. Bilbao et al. (2016) conducted a study that addressed suicide reports published in the written press of the city of Barranquilla. They found that all the news articles violated at least one of the suicide communication recommendations proposed by the WHO. Additionally, Granada et al. (2022) analyzed suicide reports from a newspaper and concluded that they did not comply with 7 out of the 9 WHO recommendations. They identified that the reports did not educate about suicide and presented details of the suicide in the publications.

The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the recent events with a significant impact on global health (Sinyor et al., 2021). It has generated numerous consequences in all aspects, including disruptions and mental health problems, among which suicide is included. In Colombia, the epidemiological pattern of suicide is alarming. However, the decrease that occurred in the suicide rate between 2019 (5.81 per 100,000 inhabitants) and 2020 (5.21 per 100,000 inhabitants) is noteworthy (INMLCF, 2021). In 2022, this institute reported a 9.25% increase compared to 2021 (INMLCF, 2022). In the context of the pandemic, Garcés-Prettel et al. (2023) studied the relationship between media exposure and suicidal ideation in Colombia and found that exposure to entertainment programs related to spiritual aspects acted as a protective factor. In contrast, frequent negative news consumption about the pandemic and intentional access to suicide-related news became risk factors for suicidal ideation.

Indeed, the effect of news coverage on suicide in traditional mass media is evident (Ortiz and Khin Khin, 2017), and therefore, it is necessary to continue developing mechanisms and strategies for monitoring and controlling the responsible transmission and content of suicide-related news, based on international recommendations. Journalists, media outlets, and organizations must carefully monitor the content of reports before they are published (Sinyor et al., 2021). Building upon this, we ask: What are the characteristics of news articles published in mass media outlets in Colombia, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic? Did the publications on suicide in traditional mass media outlets in Colombia, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, adhere to the recommendations established by the WHO for this purpose?

2. Objectives

This study aimed to achieve the following objectives:

- 1) Analyze the characteristics of suicide-related news articles published in traditional mass media outlets in Colombia, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic (from January 2018 to December 2021), according to the responsible suicide reporting guidelines established by the WHO.
- 2) Determine whether the publications on suicide in these media outlets adhered to the WHO recommendations.
- 3) Explore differences in the adherence to these recommendations before and during the pandemic.

3. Methodology

We conducted a retrospective documentary study in which we analyzed the content of suicide-related news articles published in traditional mass media outlets in Colombia (two national newspapers, four televised news programs, and six radio news programs). These news articles were published between December 2018 and December 2021, both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic year of 2020. The analysis was carried out following the responsible suicide reporting recommendations established by the WHO (WHO, 2008; 2017). We applied descriptive statistics to establish the proportion of articles that complied with each recommendation. We used the approach proposed by Guix (2008) for content analysis. Accordingly, we began with a pre-analysis phase in which we familiarized ourselves with the topic and its sources (publication of suicide-related news in traditional mass media), exploring various materials, sources, and empirical background related to this specific topic.

Subsequently, we proceeded to the design phase, in which we conducted a comprehensive literature search for similar publications in Colombia. Using the WHO recommendations for responsible suicide news reporting as a theoretical framework, we formulated our research question and the objectives to achieve it. Our hypothesis assumed that the mentioned recommendations are not followed when transmitting news related to suicide. We considered the study's approach to be mixed, with press, radio, and television as units of analysis, and news articles published between January 2018 and December 2021 as units of record. We considered the following inclusion criteria for news articles: immediate (from the previous day or more recent), related to significant events or figures, chronological, human interest stories (directly appealing to emotional responses), service-related, supplementary, local, national, and international, freely accessible on the internet, from digital press, television, and highly-rated radio broadcasts. We excluded columns, opinion pieces, editorials, and future news. The sampling was intentional.

3.1. Procedure

A digital search was conducted for suicide-related news articles published in two national newspapers, one national magazine, four radio stations, and three televised news programs. The search utilized the following keywords: suicide, taking one's own life, committing suicide, dying by suicide, death by suicide, resulting in a total of 147 news articles. Out of these 147, 33 were discarded based on the headline alone. The remaining 114 news articles were read in their entirety, and 22 were further discarded for various reasons, such as the type of news, implied suicidal behavior (e.g., assisted suicide requests, non-fatal suicidal intent), and metaphorical use of the word "suicide". Ultimately, the sample consisted of a total of 92 news articles.

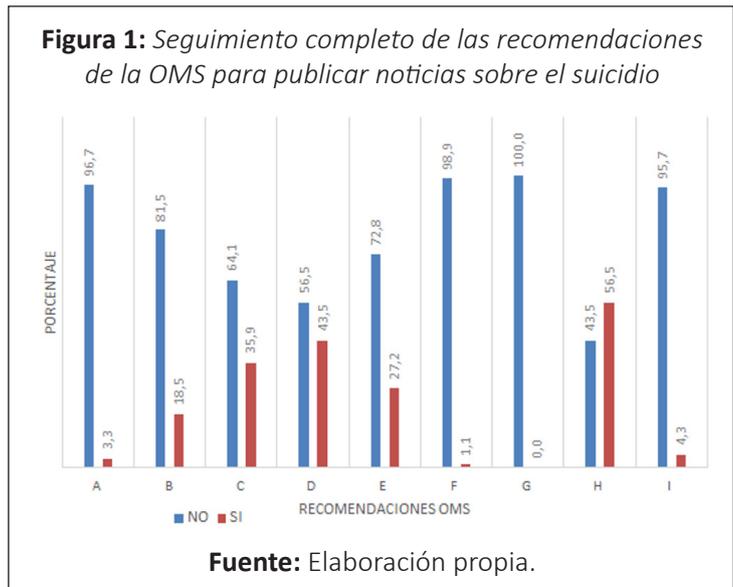
A matrix was designed using Microsoft Excel, employing a category tree. Nine of the WHO's recommendations for responsible suicide reporting were selected for analysis since it wasn't possible to determine in digital media whether the news was prominently featured or if there were undue repetitions of suicide stories. The same challenge was faced when trying to identify how media professionals might be affected by suicide stories. During the analysis phase, all news articles were characterized and assigned a code according to the media outlet, news source, and publication timing with respect to the COVID-19 pandemic. This was done using an Excel matrix containing the title of the news article, date, media outlet, type of news, and format (video, written, audio, image). A mixed analysis approach was chosen, constructing a four-level tree (categories, subcategories, codes, and subcodes) aligned with the study's objectives and the WHO's recommendations. This facilitated content analysis, allowing for the inclusion of emergent elements.

Within the analysis, various themes addressed in the news articles were identified (e.g., causes and methods of suicide), concrete actions based on WHO recommendations (semantic analysis), and frequently mentioned actors, actions, and objects (grammatical matrix analysis) (Guix, 2008). The obtained information was analyzed and interpreted from an interdisciplinary perspective, incorporating psychological and journalistic viewpoints, informed by theoretical and empirical insights into suicide and news communication. To ensure reliability, four coders were involved, each analyzing all news articles according to the code tree. They achieved an agreement and concurrence rate exceeding 90%, indicating a high level of agreement.

4. Results

The majority of the analyzed news articles (79.3%) were published during the COVID-19 pandemic year, 2020; in print media (71.7%); without content warnings (96.7%); predominantly using written language (95.7%), accompanied by images (87%), and with a combined use of both modalities (96.7%). The objectives of the news articles were analyzed, revealing that half of them (50%) aimed to report the case, some aimed to educate about suicide (21.7%), and very few (8.7%) sought to inform about the legal implications of this behavior. Additionally, there was heterogeneity in the presumed causes of suicide, with violence (12%), emotional ruptures (7.6%), and legal processes (5.0%) being the predominant factors. In the majority of the news articles (41.3%), the causes were not identified. While some of the criteria that make up the WHO's recommendations were followed in the writing of the news articles, most of them did not consider all of these criteria (see Figure 1).

Note: The WHO's recommendations (WHO, 2008) are as follows: A= Seize the opportunity to educate the public about suicide; B= Avoid language that sensationalizes or normalizes suicide, or presents it as a solution to problems; C= Avoid explicit description of the method used in a completed or attempted suicide; D= Avoid providing detailed information about the location of a completed or attempted suicide; E= Craft headlines carefully; F= Exercise caution when using photographs or videos; G= Exercise special care when reporting celebrity suicides; H= Show due consideration for those grieving a suicide; I= Provide information on where to seek help. In recommendation G, 19 news articles were analyzed, so the calculation of the proportion of compliance/non-compliance was based on this figure.



4.1. Recommendation A. Seize the opportunity to educate the public about suicide

As recommended by the WHO, several of the analyzed news articles present warning signs or risk factors for suicide (32.6%); acknowledge its impact on the social environment (45.7%), specifically highlighting the suffering of those bereaved (54.2%), and its complex and multifactorial nature (33.7%). In describing possible causes of suicide, socioeconomic factors (38.7%); depression (35.5%); deficits in coping with interpersonal conflicts (32.3%); cultural factors (29%); mental disorders (25.8%); deficits in coping with life stressors (25.8%); romantic breakups (19.4%); genetic factors (16.1%); legal issues (12.9%); impulsivity (9.5%); substance use (9.5%); sexual violence (9.5%); criminal activities (9.5%); academic loss (6.5%); bullying (6.5%), among others, were mentioned. However, the majority of the analyzed news articles (96.7%) did not fully follow the criteria to include information that educates the public about suicide. Only 5.4% of these provided some form of help source, and 2.2% informed about individuals who had overcome a suicidal crisis, in all cases, with less than 50% compliance with the recommendations. Among the news articles that did not fully follow this recommendation, 43.5% speculated about the reasons for suicide; 39.1% referred to suicide as a simple and single-caused phenomenon, specifically associated with problem-solving (29.3%). Depression, substance use, academic loss, deficits in coping with life stressors and interpersonal conflicts, genetic, cultural, and socioeconomic factors were not recognized as the sole cause of suicide.

4.2. Recommendation B. Avoid language that sensationalizes or normalizes suicide, or presents it as a solution to problems

We observed that the use of sensationalist or normalizing language in the news is common (81.5%). However, to some extent, good practices are used, such as avoiding: 1. the use of the term "suicide" out of context or for attention-grabbing (85.9%); 2. using language that misinforms about suicide; 3. portraying suicide as a solution to problems (72.8%). More than half (51.1%) of the news articles used appropriate terms to refer to suicide, as can be seen in the following quotes: "Apparent suicides and a hunger strike on stranded cruises with crew members" (N41SM01D, press, 2020); "John McAfee, creator of the renowned antivirus, found dead" (N76TMP03D, press, 2021). Similarly, we found that only 30.7% of the news articles referred to suicide as a public health problem. Often, emotional content about suicide is referenced (33.7%).

4.3. Recommendation C. Avoid explicit description of the method used in a completed or attempted suicide

Several of the analyzed news articles (35.9%) avoided providing explicit descriptions of the method used in the completed suicide or suicide attempt. However, among the news articles that did provide details, 77.2% described the step-by-step process of the suicide, and 52.2% mentioned the specific method, specifying actions such as jumping (37.5%), asphyxiation using gas generators (31.3%), gunshot (25%), and poisoning (16.7%): "A man jumped from the 21 Angels Station bridge" (N94SM01D, press, 2020).

4.4. Recommendation D. Avoid providing detailed information about the location of a completed or attempted suicide

Among the analyzed news articles, 92.4% avoided promoting the location where the suicide was completed or attempted: "A person lost their life after falling from a bridge in the north of Bogotá" (N36SM01D, press, 2021). However, in several news articles, sensationalistic language was used to describe the place where the suicide occurred (34.8%), and details of the location were provided (32.6%).

4.5. Recommendation E. Craft headlines with caution in word selection

Regarding the crafting of headlines, it was observed that in the majority of the analyzed news articles (72.8%), the headlines were carefully written, as demonstrated by the following quotes: "What is known about the death of weight loss guru Frank Suárez?" (N69TMP01D, press, 2021). In fact, in 69.9% of the news articles, mentioning the method or location was avoided in the headline, although in several cases (55.4%), the word "suicide" was mentioned.

4.6. Recommendation F. Use photographs or videos with caution

It was found that in 98.9% of the news, caution was not exercised when using photographs or videos, and there is no evidence of family authorization; 33.7% showed the person who died by suicide through these media, prominently placing them in the news (41.3%). Additionally, it was found that in most of the analyzed news, suicide notes were not published (95.7%), and the photographs or videos did not romanticize suicide (89.1%).

4.7. Recommendation G. Pay attention when reporting on suicides of celebrities or public figures

There were 19 news articles about celebrity or public figure suicides: 8 related to celebrities; 3 to historical figures; 5 to justice offenders; and 3 to cases that went viral. None of these news articles fully complied with the criteria established by the WHO regarding caution when reporting on celebrity suicides. None mentioned the impact on others; 63.15% speculated about the cause of death; 31.6% specified that the cause of death is unknown; 21% used language that idealizes/romanticizes suicide, and all described the method of suicide.

4.8. Recommendation H. Show due consideration for people in mourning due to suicide

This recommendation had the highest percentage of full compliance (56.5%) among the analyzed news articles. Specifically, personal/family details of the person who died by suicide were avoided (80.4%), as well as interviews with the bereaved (77.2%). However, in several of the news articles, the privacy of the bereaved was not respected (43.5%).

4.9. Recommendation I. Provide information on where to seek help

The majority of the analyzed news articles (95.7%) did not fully comply with the recommendation to provide information on where to seek help. No resources or assistance actions were presented (83.7%): helpline numbers (94.6%); community resources (e.g., support groups, foundations) (92.4%); expert information (90.2%); and accurate and precise information about sources of help (93.5%). Regarding the latter condition, sources were verified. Help information was also not provided at the end of the news article (95.7%), nor were hyperlinks to online help resources included (95.7%).

4.10. Differences in compliance with the WHO's recommendations for responsible reporting of suicide-related news, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic

With the purpose of identifying whether there were differences in compliance with the recommendations before and during the Covid-19 pandemic, a Chi-Square test was conducted, which revealed that the only recommendation that showed these differences was Recommendation B ($\chi^2: 5.428, df: 1, p: 0.020$). This means that during the pandemic, the use of sensationalist language or language that normalized suicide or presented it as a solution to problems was avoided. Recommendation B was where the highest number of good practices followed by the analyzed news articles was found.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The findings of our research confirm the low adherence to the WHO recommendations found in previous investigations conducted in Colombia on print media (Muñoz and Sánchez, 2013; Rátiva-Osorio et al., 2013; Bilbao et al., 2016; Granada et al., 2022). This highlights that mass media in Colombia largely disregard the WHO guidelines for responsible reporting of suicide-related news. There is a lack of dialogue between science and journalism. In fact, the lack of responsibility in reporting on suicide can lead to a copycat effect among recipients, known as the Werther effect (Domaradski, 2021). Recognizing the need to contribute to suicide prevention and following the recommendations of COLPSIC (2022) and Rátiva-Osorio et al. (2013) regarding the development of prevention strategies and dissemination of communication guidelines on suicidal behavior, rather than evaluating the overall compliance with WHO recommendations, both good and poor practices in Colombian media in relation to this issue were identified. Identifying and disseminating these practices (see Table 1) can contribute to improving communication about suicide. This approach acknowledges the effective strategies used by Colombian communicators and proposes specific elements that they can modify to enhance communication while maintaining the goal of disseminating socially relevant information, characteristic of communicators and journalists.

Table 1: Practices of Colombian mass media when reporting news about suicide.

Good practices	Bad Practices
Using appropriate terms to refer to suicide. Avoid using the word "suicide" out of context or for attention-seeking purposes. Avoid using language that misinforms about suicide or presents it with an alternative solution to problems. Avoid promoting the location where the act took place. Carefully craft headlines for news articles. Avoid disclosing personal information about individuals related to the suicide and refrain from showing interviews with grieving individuals.	Speculating about the reasons for suicide. Describing suicide as a simple phenomenon and the result of a single cause. Mentioning the specific method. Providing details about it. Describing the step-by-step process of suicide. Not exercising caution when using photographs or videos. Not providing evidence of family authorization. Displaying photographs of the person who died by suicide prominently. Not providing information about resources for seeking help.

Source: Author's own work.

News related to celebrities presents the highest number of bad practices, specifically ignoring the impact on others, speculating about the cause of death, and describing the method employed by the celebrity. Publications about suicide have been frequent, even if the number and characteristics of news articles do not correspond to the epidemiological pattern of suicide in the country. In the 92 news articles analyzed between 2018 and 2021, there were reports about 29 Colombian cases, while in just the year 2022, there were 2689 suicides reported in the country (INMLCF, 2022). Regarding the causes, INMLCF (2022) reports that the main reason for suicide is mental illness (29.11%), followed by relationship conflicts (17.4%), whereas in the analyzed news articles, the main identified causes were violence (12%) and romantic breakups (7.6%). The disparity between the epidemiological behavior of reasons and suicide rates in Colombia compared to those reported in the news raises questions about what is considered newsworthy in mass media

"The findings of our research confirm the low adherence to the WHO recommendations found in previous investigations conducted in Colombia on print media"

In light of the above, it can be established that aspects like the probability of news readership are prioritized over ethical considerations when reporting on suicide. Sensationalistic language is very attractive to journalism and mass media, often at the expense of public health or the effects on media consumers. As Colombian journalist Javier Darío Restrepo states in "La constelación ética" (2018) while referencing psychiatrist Erich Fromm: "Our moral problem is the moral indifference of man towards himself." One of Gabriel García Márquez's most important quotes, often remembered at the Gabo Foundation, is precisely the following: "In journalism, ethics is inseparable from technique, like the buzzing to the fly." However, in ethical terms, journalism does not precisely adhere to the recommendations of the WHO in its coverage of suicide.

News about suicide in Colombia was published more frequently during the pandemic. However, a greater adherence to Recommendation B (avoiding sensational or normalizing language about suicide, or presenting it as a solution to problems) was observed during the pandemic, indicating some of the good practices mentioned earlier, such as using appropriate terms to refer to suicide, avoiding the use of the word "suicide" out of context or for attention-grabbing purposes, not using language that misinforms about suicide, and refraining from portraying suicide as a solution to problems. In general, it can be concluded that the harmful effects of improperly, sensationally, or irresponsibly conveyed suicide-related news on mental health and suicidal behavior of the audience seem to be overlooked. If mass media outlets responsibly publish news about this topic, they can contribute to protecting the population from suicidal behaviors. We agree with the WHO's statement (2017) that emphasizes the potential harmful and protective effects resulting from the use of digital information about suicide. In fact, recently, the PAHO trained over 100 journalists in the Americas for the responsible publication of news on this topic, with the aim of preventing contagion (PAHO, 2023).

Our study has some limitations, such as the inability to generalize the results due to the nature of the research conducted. We found that the publication of news in digital format makes it unfeasible to access certain aspects (e.g., sections in which they were published, prominence, repetition) described in the WHO's guidelines for responsible news reporting on suicide. It is necessary to generate recommendations that fit this increasingly prevalent digital format.

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