Prevention of the Werther effect: compliance of the Italian newspapers to the ‘reporting on suicide’ recommendations

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Abstract

Objectives: Suicide media coverage could lead to imitation, the so-called "Werther effect". The World Health Organization (WHO) published specific recommendations for reporting suicide news. This study aimed to quantify the compliance of Italian newspapers with the WHO suicide reporting guidelines.

Study design: quantitative content analysis study.

Methods: All articles published by the three main Italian newspapers from June 2019 to May 2020 describing suicides or attempted suicides were included. The articles were analysed using a checklist based on the WHO recommendations, which included 18 "negative" items (e.g. "presence of the word "suicide" in the title") and nine "positive" items (e.g. "the article reports the contacts of a suicide prevention hotline"). Each negative item was scored -1 and each positive item was scored +1. Multivariate linear regressions were performed to identify factors

associated with lower adherence to WHO recommendations and higher social media engagement with the articles.

Results: 3483 articles were screened, and 110 articles were included in the final analysis. The suicidal was male in 73.6% of cases. The median checklist score was -6 (IQR 3). 5% of the articles had at least one positive item. The word "suicide" was found in 90% of the titles. Female suicides were associated with a higher checklist score (coeff 0.81, p=0.039). No correlation was found between the checklist score and the social media engagement of the articles.

Conclusions: Italian newspapers do not adhere completely to the WHO recommendations on reporting suicide, leading to a potential imitation effect. Public health professionals should make decision-makers and journalists aware of the importance of these recommendations.

Keywords: suicide, newspapers, Werther effect, suicide prevention, media

INTRODUCTION

Suicide is an act of deliberate self-harm with the intention of dying[1]. It is a leading cause of death worldwide: according to 2021 data, approximately 700,000 people die by suicide each year [2]; the number of attempted suicides could be up to 30 times higher [3]. Suicide is the second leading cause of death in the 15-29 age group, and the third cause of death in the population under 44 years [3]. In Italy, about 3700 people die by suicide every year [4], with a suicide rate of 11.8 per 100,000 for men and 3.0 per 100,000 for women, while the global suicide rate is 10.05 per 100,000 [5].

Suicide is a multidimensional phenomenon with complex biological, psychological and social risk factors [6,7]. Examples include psychiatric illness, previous suicide attempts [6], chronic pain,

loss of functional ability [8], caregiver dependency, low quality of life [9], debt burden and social isolation [10].

Many risk factors are preventable. One that is of a public health concern is the "Werther effect" [10], which describes how suicides increase following media sensationalist reporting of suicides [3,11,12]. Different media might be responsible of the Werther Effect, not only print media, but also broadcast and online ones, as well as television news and movies [13]

The influence of media reporting on suicide was named after the protagonist of Goethe's novel "The sorrows of young Werther", a piece of literature which is thought to have led to an increase in suicides all across Europe, among many of its readers who were able to identify with the main character [14]. Indeed, there is greater susceptibility to Werther effect among readers who better relate with the person died by suicide [15].

According to the social learning theory, for a media-induced copycat effect on suicide to occur, people who are already suicidal must be involved. Then, suicides would result from an excess of positive definitions (e.g. sensationalizing, glorifying the suicidal, as well as rationalizing suicides explaining motives for suiciding) over negative definitions (e.g. focusing on pain, as well as solutions or alternatives to overcome suicidal thoughts) of suicide [16]. Hence, the more an article focuses on positive definitions of suicide, without empathizing with the suicidal, the bereaved or with the reader, the more intense the Werther effect will be. When it comes to celebrity suicide the effect increases [15], as celebrity suicides are 14.3 times more likely to be associated with copycat suicides [17]. Indeed, according to the differential identification theory, the impact of suicide story on copycat suicides depends on the degree of identification between the model and the observer. From this theory is derived the concept of vertical identification, according to which people are more likely to imitate the behaviour of others who are perceived as superior, such as celebrities, more than that of those who are perceived as inferior [16]. On the

other hand, social similarity (e.g. same age, gender, social status) between the imitator and the model, known as horizontal identification, is also an important factor in imitative behaviour [18]. Due to the Werther effect, suicide rate in the population could have noteworthy peaks (up to 16.4%) in the days after the news [19].

Conversely, suicide news focused on resource-oriented aspects, rather than only on the negative aspects, could lead to a decrease in copycat suicides. This is known as the Papageno effect [12], from Mozart's "The Magic Flute" character, who was supported by other characters who showed him alternatives to suicide. The Papageno effect is more effective when presenting successful coping strategies with crises, and/or by mentioning professional help services and when contacts for help are provided [20].

Many authors proposed some best practices for reporting a suicide [21], which led to the creation of specific guidelines by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2001, updated in 2017 [22]. The WHO provides 12 recommendations and distinguishes between protective and harmful elements, stating that it is important to avoid highlighting and unduly repeating suicide stories; to avoid sensationalizing or normalizing language (neither in the article text nor in the title), or presenting suicide as a constructive solution to problems; to avoid explicit description of the method used nor details about the location, as well as photographs, videos or social media links. Instead, media should provide accurate information about how to seek help; they should educate the public about suicide prevention, without spreading myths, and reporting stories of how to cope with life stressors or suicidal thoughts; particular caution should be put when reporting celebrity suicides, and when bereaved family or friends are involved; also media professionals may be affected by stories about suicide.

The use of WHO recommendations has been evaluated in many studies [23–34]. Most of them found poor compliance by newspapers. One US study [23] found that less than 40% of the

evaluated articles contained protective elements, whereas most of the articles contained at least four harmful elements. Another study [32] found that, although most articles followed at least three out of 12 WHO recommendations, very few followed at least four of them.

In Italy there are no specific guidelines, except for some non-binding recommendations written in the Deontological Code of Order of Italian Journalists. Articles 6 and 8 state that it is necessary for the information given to be essential, useful to people and respectful of the dignity of the person whose story is told [35].

To our knowledge, there are no studies assessing the adherence of Italian newspapers to the WHO recommendations on how to prevent the Werther effect. Thus, the main purpose of this study is to evaluate how the articles about suicide, wrote by the three most important generalist Italian national newspapers, are compliant with the WHO guidelines. Secondary aims of the present work were to investigate any predictors of compliance with the WHO guidelines and the readers' social media interactions with the included articles.

METHODS

This is a study based on a quantitative content analysis of articles about suicides and suicide attempts published by Italian newspapers. The study design was set up according to the purpose of this study and according to the existing international peer reviewed literature [23,24,27–30,32–34].

Setting

The analysis was carried out on articles written in Italian and published online by the three most widespread daily generalist newspapers in Italy: [36] “Corriere della Sera” [37], “La Repubblica” [38], “La Stampa”[39]. The newspapers “il Sole 24 Ore” [40] and “la Gazzetta dello

Sport" [41], were excluded from the analysis due to their specific focus on economics and sports, respectively.

The articles were retrieved through the Google search engine [42], which is the most frequently used search engine in Italy [43].

All the search strings were written in Italian and the keywords were selected using the following criteria:

- terms starting with "suicid-";
- synonyms and euphemisms for suicide and suicidal ideation (e.g.: to kill oneself, to end it, to want to die,…);
- most frequent methods of suicide in the Italian population [44].

The keywords were entered in the query string declining them according to gender and number, conjugating them in the past simple tense and infinitive. The advanced search operator 'site: ' was used, allowing to launch every string specifically for each newspaper's website. A string for every expression was launched, as the Google search string could contain a maximum of 32 words, and the results displayed may have been influenced by the order of presentation of the terms contained in the strings. All search terms that were used for this research are listed and available in the Supplementary Material (SM 6).

To exclude from the results articles about terrorist attacks or euthanasia the following terms were excluded in every search: "terrorist" (and related words), "assisted suicide", "euthanasia".

To include articles written before and during the COVID-19 pandemic period, articles from 01/06/2019 to 31/05/2020 were included.

To collect all the URLs of the articles and to eliminate duplicates, Linkclump software (a webscraping software) was used. To standardize the evaluation of the articles and to train the two independent researchers in charge of the screening, 5% of the

articles was analyzed conjointly and in the presence of a third and a fourth researcher. A Cronbach's alpha analysis was performed and only after having obtained an alpha ≥ 0.70 we proceeded with the actual analysis.

Articles were screened by reading the full text: if they satisfied the inclusion criteria - described in the below Supplementary Material (SM 1) – they were analysed. Any conflicts were resolved by a third researcher and reviewed by a fourth.

Evaluation instruments

The included newspaper articles were analysed following an ad-hoc checklist, described in Supplementary Material (SM) 2 and SM 3, and carried out on the basis of previous studies on this topic [23,27–30,32].

The checklist for the content analysis of articles was translated from a previously validated 27 items checklist [23]. Other variables were also retrieved from a study by Pompili and Tatarelli [45]. To validate the checklist in Italian, two independent researchers translated it. Conflicts in the translation were resolved by two additional researchers. The Italian version was re-translated into English. The final version of the translated checklist is available in SM 2.

The content analysis of the articles was conducted by two independent researchers. In addition to the data of the abovementioned checklist, data about the method, place, time of the suicide or suicide attempt, as well as the reporting of warning signs of suicide and socio-demographic data about the suicidal were retrieved (SM 3).

For each of the three selected journals, information about on-line and printed distribution of the journals in 2020 or the last available year was collected.

Analysis of social media interactions of selected newspaper articles

The tool Sharedcount was used to identify, per each article posted on Facebook, the number of reactions, the number of shares, and the number of comments on this social network.

Statistical analysis

Percentages and absolute numbers were used for describing categorical variables (fisher exact test), medians and interquartile ranges (IQR) for continuous variables non-normally distributed (Shapiro-Wilk test).

A score was assigned to each article: +1 point for the presence of each protective element of the checklist (from item 19 to item 27), -1 point for each harmful element (from item 1 to item 18). Each article could therefore obtain a score that ranged from -18 points to +9 points.

The articles were then dichotomized in highly or lowly adherent to the guidelines, based on the median score.

To assess any predictors of WHO guidelines adherence, linear and ordered logistic regression models (both univariable and multivariable analyses) were carried out, using as outcome the score of the checklist (as a continuous variable) and the presence of harmful items related with the title of the article ("The term "suicid*" used in the title and/or subtitle" and /or "Method of suicide or suicide attempt mentioned in the title and/or subtitle"). Characteristics of the journal and of the article, as described in Table 3, were included in the models. The covariates to be included into the final model were selected using a stepwise backward selection process, with a univariable P-value <0.25 as the main criterion [46]. Results were expressed as Coefficients or Odds Ratios, with 95% Confidence Intervals (CI), and a two-tailed P-value <0.05 was considered significant for all analyses. All data were analysed by using StataMP16 statistic program (Stata Corp., College Station, TX, 2016).

Articles' engagement was analysed as a continuous variable and expressed as median and IQR. Differences of engagement medians between articles with low and high checklist score were

analysed through a Mann Whitney test. To assess potential predictors of higher engagement, univariable and multivariable linear regression analyses were carried out using Facebook engagement-related items (number of reactions, number of shares, number of comments), and "Facebook engagement rate", (calculated as reactions+shares+comments) as dependent variables, and the characteristics of either the article and the suicidal - as from Table 2 - as independent variables, in order to evaluate whether the adherence to the WHO checklist influenced the readers' engagement with the article on social media.

Nationality and age of the suicidal were not retrieved in all the articles, leading to a high percentage of missing. Therefore, these independent variables were included in separate multivariable models.

Results:

A total of 3483 articles were retrieved through the web search. Of these, 3373 articles were excluded for not meeting the inclusion criteria or for being duplicates, leading to 110 articles included in the final analysis.

The most represented Journal was "il Corriere della Sera". Data on author's gender were available for 65 articles: half were males. 85.4% of the articles reported a unique case of suicide (or suicide-related act). The median age of the subjects was 44 years (IQR 23). In 73.6% of the articles the suicidal was male. 68.2% of the articles reported a case of suicide, 14.5% reported a case of homicide-suicide, and 9.1% reported a case of feminicide-suicide (Table 1). Data about the marital status and sexual orientation of the subjects were present in only 19 and 60 articles, respectively. The majority of the subjects were conjugated (57.9%) and heterosexual (98.3%).

Table 1: description of the sample

Description of the sample

Characteristic		N (%)
Journal	Corriere della Sera	49 (44.55%)
	La Stampa	24 (21.82%)
	La Repubblica	37 (33.64%)
Number of sold annual paper copies (2019)	Corriere della Sera	295918
	La Stampa	174433
	La Repubblica	241115
Gender of the author	Male	33 (50.77%)
	Female	24 (36.92%)
	Both	8 (12.31%)
Section of the journal in which is published the article	Chronicles	54 (48.18%)
	Others	56 (51.82%)
Number of suicides or suicide attempts included in the article	1	94 (85.45%)
	2	12 (10.91%)
	3	4 (3.64%)
Word count (excluding titles) (median (IQR))		357 (259)
Age of the suicidal / suicide attempter (median (IQR))		44 (23)
Nationality of the suicidal / suicide attempter	Italian	48 (50%)
	Foreign	48 (50%)
Gender of the suicidal / suicide attempter	Male	81 (73.64%)
	Female	29 (26.36%)
Type of suicide	Feminicide-suicide	10 (9.09%)
	Homicide-suicide	16 (14.55%)
	Suicide	75 (68.18%)

Suicide attempt	9	(8.18%)

Prevalence of the checklist items and checklist score

The median score of the checklist was -6 (IQR 3). The most represented harmful item was the presence of the word "suicide" (or related words) in the title (90.9% of the articles). The name of the suicidal was included in most of the articles, as well as the place of the death. Most of the articles shared details about methods of suicide and described suicides as due to a single cause ("Depression and distrust in the future" the most reported) (Table 2).

The most frequent positive item was "Inclusion of a story or information about someone who overcame a suicidal or a suicide attempt" (5.4%). Six of the nine positive items were not retrieved in any of the articles included in the analysis. A total of 51.3% of the articles had a score of less that -6, while 48.7% had a score of -5 or more. No articles reported telephone numbers of suicide hotline or textline, neither signposting support (Table 2).

Table 2. Percentage of items of the checklist present in the analysed articles.

Item in the checklist	**N (%)**
Word "suicide" (or related words) included in the title of the article	100 (90.91%)
Method of suicide or suicide attempt mentioned in the title of the article	23 (20.91%)
Photos/videos of the location of suicide/suicide attempt	10 (9.09%)
Photos/videos of the method of suicide/suicide attempt	4 (3.64%)
Photos/videos of the grieved family, of friends, memorials, or funerals	2 (1.82%)
Suicide described as unexplained / sudden	14 (12.73%)
Suicide described as due to single event or cause	59 (53.64%)
Mention of a suicide note	30 (27.27%)

Quoting non-expert personnel about the causes of suicide	30 (27.27%)
Use of non-recommended suicide-related terminology	4 (3.64%)
Description of a suicide pact	3 (2.73%)
Report of a celebrity suicide	44 (40%)
Presences of sensationalized language	10 (9.09%)
Presence of the name of the suicidal in the article	91 (82.7%)
Presence of the name of the school in the article	4 (3.64%)
Presence of the time of death (or attempted suicide) in the article	43 (39.09%)
Presence of the place of death (or attempted suicide) in the article	87 (79.09%)
Presence of the method of suicide (or attempted suicide) in the article	65 (59.09%)
Presence of contact information about a suicide prevention hotline	0
Presence of contact information about a suicide prevention text-line	0
Presence of information about resources for treatment, information or assistance about suicide	0
Encourages individual help seeking or mentions treatment options	0
Presence of any information for family, friends, bystanders on what to do to help someone showing warning signs	0
Presence of suicide warning signs in the article	0
Mention of suicide prevention expert on causes and treatments of suicide	5 (4.55%)
Mention of statistical information retrieved from official sources	1 (0.92%)
Inclusion of a story or information about someone who overcame a suicidal or a suicide attempt	6 (5.45%)

No significant difference has been found in the prevalence of the items among the three included newspapers, with the exception of “Photos/videos of the location of suicide/suicide attempt” (Fisher exact test=0.015, table SM 5)

Univariable and multivariable regressions

Table 3: Univariable and Multivariable logistic regression analysis. Outcome: presence in the article of at least one of the.two items of the checklist related to the title ((“Word “suicide” (or related words) included in the title of the article” and/or “Method of suicide or suicide attempt mentioned in the title of the article”).

		Univariable			Multivariable*		
		Odds ratio	**C.I. 95%**		**Odds ratio**	**C.I. 95%**	
Journal	**Corriere della Sera**	ref			/	/	
	La Stampa	1.600	0.564	4.540	/	/	
	La Repubblica	1.076	0.426	2.718	/	/	
Section of the journal (chronicles)		1.079	0.487	2.415	/	/	
Word count (excluding title)		0.999	0.997	1.001	/	/	
Gender of the suicidal / suicide attempter (female)		**0.334**	**0.123**	**0.904**	**0.255**	**0.085**	**0.766**
Type of suicide	**Feminicide-suicide**	ref			ref		
	Homicide-suicide	**9.354**	**1.581**	**55.317**	**12.372**	**1.931**	**79.259**
	Suicide	3.941	0.886	17.538	**6.718**	**1.338**	**33.727**

Suicide attempt	6.074	0.846	43.571	**12.491**	**1.484**	**105.148**

Significant results in bold.

* adjusted for gender of the suicidal7suicide attempter (female) and type of suicide.

Being female was inversely associated with the presence of negative at least one of the two negative items of the checklist referring to the title ("Word "suicide" (or related words) included in the title of the article" and/or "Method of suicide or suicide attempt mentioned in the title of the article") (table 3). Articles reporting homicide-suicide cases, suicides and suicide attempts had a higher likelihood of the presence of at least one of the two abovementioned items, if compared with feminicide-suicide, when adjusting for gender. (Table 3)

Regarding potential determinants of the score of the checklist, with the increase of the age of the suicidal, the likelihood of a high checklist score decreased (coeff. -0.03, <95% C.I. -0.05; -0.006) (data not shown).

The multivariable regression model showed that female suicide was correlated with a higher score of the checklist (coeff 0.816; 95% CI 0.042, 1.590) (Table SM4).

Engagement of the articles

The median Facebook engagement rate was 522 (IQR 1478). Table 4 shows the median of the engagement level dichotomized by the median score of the checklist. No significant differences were retrieved between the two score-categories in terms of engagement.

Tab 4: Engagement of the articles. Medians (Interquartile Ranges (IQR)).

	Checklist >-6	Checklist <=-6	Total	p

Facebook engagement	534 (1020)	522 (3153)	522 (1478)	0.251
Likes on Facebook	375.5 (719)	344 (1923)	344 (913)	0.356
Shares of Facebook	95.5 (146)	93 (434)	95 (226)	0.252
Comments on Facebook	47.5 (178)	120 (460)	64 (327)	0.158

Univariable and multivariable linear regression models showed no correlation between the Facebook engagement and the score of the checklist, or the presence of the two "negative" items of the checklists related with the title of the article (data not shown).

Discussion

Responsible media reporting is one of the main large-scale suicide prevention strategies [47]. Thus, the purpose of this study was to assess the adherence of the three most common Italian newspapers to the WHO guidelines about the reporting of suicide-related news and how they are reported overall. Moreover, the present work aimed to explore any predictor of adherence to the WHO guidelines, and the readers' interactions on social media to the included articles.

Difference in frequency of suicide reporting news between the three newspapers were consistent with the annual paper journal copies sold: the more the journal was popular, the more it reported suicides. The demographics of the suicidal reflected the national epidemiological data, by which in Italy suicides are more frequent among adult Caucasian males [48].

Most only national and international-relevant suicide cases were reported, with high repetition of the same cases and a high prevalence of foreign suicide cases (like the Jeffrey Epstein case). This is probably due to the fact that local newspapers were excluded from the research, and to the fact that suicides of higher profile people (famous people or coming from a middle and

upper-class background) could be much more interesting for the general Italian readership [49,50]. Indeed, since most Italian newspaper-readers have a medium-high educational level [51], it would be much easier for them to feel a connection with someone matching their own profile [49].

According to our results, low adherence to several recommendations was found and harmful reporting violations were common. Few recommendations were most likely to be applied (for example the "presence of pictures or videos of the family at the funeral" one).

These results were consistent with previous literature [23,30,52] and were unsatisfying, as following the WHO guidelines has been shown to be able to positively influence suicidal behaviour and reduce the risk of the Werther effect. Indeed, the introduction of media reporting guidelines has been associated with less sensational and more sensitive reporting [53,54], as well as being associated to a decrease in suicides [11]. Notwithstanding this, further research is needed to clarify how guidelines exert their effect [55].

The complete absence of signposting support in our sample was particularly concerning, and it has already been detected in previous international studies [56,57]. The lack of any kind of reference to support groups or to suicide crisis lines, useful for those readers suffering from suicidality, is a severe negligence and a major problem that undermines suicide prevention. Indeed, although yet to be implemented with proactive follow-up services and a more comprehensive prevention program, crisis line services are a cornerstone of suicide prevention, especially for people at greater risk of suicide [58].

From our results, out of more than 100 articles from the most read Italian generalist newspapers, no article reported resources for treatment options or assistance; no article encouraged the seeking of help; no article reported useful information for raising awareness on suicide warning signs or links with the deceased's mental health. As stated in prior research [23], the reasons for the non-inclusion of protective elements in the news are not fully understood: one of the drivers could be the absence of neither incentives, nor obligations for publishers to

include additional information. Low mental health literacy among journalists - and shortage of mental health specialists collaborating with newspapers - lowers the capacity of obtaining high quality data and research about suicides, as well as about suicide support activities [59].

On the other hand, far more thoughtfulness has been reserved to details such as the name of the suicidal, sensationalizing words in the title, place, and method of death. In 53 articles (54% of the sample) the suicide has been described as due to a single event or cause. All the unnecessary details, such as method, place and time of the suicide - together with the deceased's sociodemographic information - contribute to the horizontal identification process of the reader with the suicidal [60]. As for the suggested monocausalty: as stated by Armstrong and colleagues, it is known that suicides become more newsworthy if it is possible to frame them in single causes, even better if they can be superficially perceived as "silly" ones [49] , despite being serious potential threats to people's mental health (such as having bad marks in school, or marital problems) [49]. However, suicides are never the result of a single cause or event, but the outcome of complex interactions between multiple factors over time, encompassing psychiatric, socio-economic and cultural risk factors [61]. Not only speculating on the causes is disrespectful to the deceased, but it can also have damaging effects to both the bereaved and the readers. Especially if one event is implied as the cause of the suicide, readers facing similar issues could over-relate with the deceased and be at higher risk of Werther effect [56]. Specifically, the present study showed that the most common single cause implied in the reported suicide was "depression and distrust in the future". While this association could often be valid, one must keep in mind that negatively associating a mental illness to violent events - such as suicides - without adequately contextualizing it, could contribute to psychiatric illness social and self-stigmatization [62].

Moreover, the univariable regression model yielded a significant correlation between being female and a higher score in the checklist. Being female correlated also with less harmful

elements in the title of the article. While this might represent a positive finding, there could be an overlooked problem when it comes to the reporting of male suicides. Indeed, it seems that male suicides were more sensationalized than female ones. This could be possible because unusual methods of suicide, homicide-suicide, apparent monocasuality and other characteristics easy to be exploited for obtaining a more sensational article could be more recurring in male suicides, as they are more frequent among the population [48]. Reporting male suicides with lesser caring about the WHO guidelines is a serious risk for increasing the copycat effect in the male population, which already has higher risk of dying by suicide.

The absence of any correlation between the social media engagement and the checklist score or with the harmful items in the titles probably suggests that there is no point in trying to write a more sensational title. Indeed, not only it appears to be useless for ethical reasons, but even for clickbait purposes, because it seems to have no effect on social media engagement. This might also be explained by the relatively low sample (that anyway included all the pertinent articles of the three main newspapers through a whole year) and by the fact that no articles had a positive checklist score.

Limitations

The study has several limitations. Firstly, only the three most distributed generalist newspapers were scrutinized, considering only their online publications and excluding local newspapers from the research. This might limit the possibility to generalize the results and determine how much Italian newspapers complied with media recommendations for suicide reporting. However, these three journals together represent around 27% of the journals sold daily, excluding sport and economics journals [36]. Another limit is that 110 articles were analysed. However, these articles represent the 100% of the eligible articles of the three newspapers for

one year, and they were selected by screening 3483 articles. Previous studies on this topic have similar sample sizes [63–65].

A third limitation is that no information on the impact of Italian newspapers reporting on the copycat effect is provided with the results of the present study. However, studies conducted in other countries demonstrated that, when newspapers follow the above mentioned WHO guidelines [22], the copycat effect decreases [11]. Upcoming studies on this topic in the Italian context should include a larger sample size as well as local newspapers, and should focus on the potential impact of the Italian newspapers on the copycat effect.

A fourth limitation is represented by the score developed to assess the adherence of the Italian newspapers to the WHO guidelines on how to report a suicide case. The score has not being weighted on the basis of the importance of the items for the copycat effect. However, analysis of the single items were also performed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the analyzed articles seem not to follow completely the WHO guidelines on how to report a suicide case. There was little or no interest in spreading useful information such as reliable statistics, preventive information and expert opinions.

In order to provide the general public with better quality information regarding the dynamics of the event and, most importantly, for rising awareness among society on suicide and mental health, media should be able to better address the complexity of this topic [65]. Media should have educational responsibilities, other than simply providing news. Reporting about suicides is still often skewed for sensationalism, simplifying the complex causes behind an individual's gesture. Suicide myths are still perpetuated and too often the suicide matter is approached frivolously, notwithstanding the scientific evidence collected over the decade [66].

In order to improve this lack, it will be fundamental to involve various stakeholders, to build up better collaborations [57,59]: the Ministry of Health, nongovernmental organizations, psychiatric associations, suicide prevention associations, media professionals should all take part in this process. It will be important not only to create specific Italian guidelines, but also to provide accurate and periodic training courses and advice for media professionals, as well as a follow up. Editors should be periodically updated and aware of the guidelines and the news related to suicide should be prepared by specialized health reporters, rather than crime reporters, in order to decriminalize suicide.

High quality suicide related news is one of the pillars of suicide prevention, but it must be framed in a wider and comprehensive public health approach, considering the overlapping of individual, relationship, community and societal factors [67].

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Ethical approval

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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