

วิเคราะห์การรายงานข่าวการฆ่าตัวตายประเทศไทยโดยอ้างอิงแนวทางสำหรับวิชาชีพสื่อขององค์การอนามัยโลก

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บทคัดย่อ

วัตถุประสงค์ เพื่อวิเคราะห์การรายงานข่าวการฆ่าตัวตายในประเทศไทยโดยอ้างอิงแนวทางขององค์การอนามัยโลกสำหรับผู้ประกอบวิชาชีพสื่อ

วิธีการศึกษา นำบทความข่าวที่ได้รับการตีพิมพ์แบบออนไลน์โดยองค์กรสมาชิกหนังสือพิมพ์ส่วนกลางของสมาพันธ์สื่อมวลชนแห่งชาติระหว่างเดือนกรกฎาคม - ธันวาคม 2563 มาวิเคราะห์หาลักษณะที่อาจมีคุณและลักษณะที่อาจให้โทษตามแนวทางสำหรับวิชาชีพสื่อขององค์การอนามัยโลก

ผลการศึกษา การศึกษานี้ได้วิเคราะห์บทความข่าว 313 บทความ พบการรายงานข่าวที่มีลักษณะที่อาจให้โทษเป็นสัดส่วนที่มากที่สุดที่อาจให้โทษที่พบมากกว่าร้อยละ 75 ในบทความฆ่าตัวตาย ได้แก่ การใช้คำว่าฆ่าตัวตายหรือใกล้เคียงในหัวข้อข่าว การรายงานวิธีการฆ่าตัวตายในหัวข้อข่าว การรายงานชื่อ อายุ เพศ สถานที่ และวิธีการฆ่าตัวตายของผู้ที่ฆ่าตัวตายในเนื้อหาข่าว ลักษณะที่อาจมีคุณที่พบบ่อยในการรายงานข่าวการฆ่าตัวตายคือการรายงานสัญญาณเตือนของการฆ่าตัวตายที่พบใน 25% ของบทความข่าว

สรุป บทความข่าวการฆ่าตัวตายในประเทศไทยอาจส่งผลเสียต่อพฤติกรรมการฆ่าตัวตายโดยอ้างอิงจากการที่การรายงานข่าวไม่เป็นไปตามแนวทางสำหรับวิชาชีพสื่อขององค์การอนามัยโลก การศึกษาเพิ่มเติมอาจทำให้เข้าใจสถานการณ์มากขึ้นและยังผลไปสู่กระบวนการพัฒนาต่อไป

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Suicide News Coverage in Thailand in The Light of The World Health Organization Guideline for Media Professionals

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To assess online suicide news articles in Thai language using the World Health Organization (WHO) reporting guidelines and The Mental Health Act (Second issue) B.E. 2562.

Methods: Eligible suicide articles published online in Thai newspaper websites during July - December 2020 were analyzed for potentially harmful and potentially helpful characteristics using the WHO guideline for media professionals and The Mental Health Act (Second issue) B.E. 2562 as guides. Descriptive statistics by means of frequency and percentage were used to describe the findings.

Results: 313 suicide news articles were assessed in the study. Potentially harmful characteristics were present in news articles in high frequencies as evident by more than 75% of the article mentioning the word "suicide" or similar in the title, mentioning the method of suicide in the news title, mentioning name, age, gender of the victim (s) in the news body and mentioning of location and method of suicide in the news body. Among the potentially helpful characteristics, warning signs were reported in more than 25% of suicide news.

Conclusion: News articles found on websites of Thai newspaper might have negative impact on suicidal behavior as they have shown poor compliance to the World Health Organization guideline for media professionals in reporting suicide. Further studies are needed to better understand the situation in hope of designing a better intervention.

Keywords: suicide, media reporting, Thailand, Thai, Werther effect, Papageno effect

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INTRODUCTION

Suicide is a global phenomenon. The world loses more than 700,000 lives to suicide every year. While suicide occurs in every region of the world, more than 77% of global suicides took place in low- and middle-income countries in 2019.¹

Media reporting can affect suicide. Quantity and quality of media coverages of suicide have shown to affect incidences of suicide, both positively and negatively, as reported in several studies²⁻⁴ and review.⁵ Negative outcome from potentially harmful characteristics of suicide news is called the “Werther effect”.⁶ Several characteristics of news report were noted to have this effect. Demographic data and celebrity status of the victim were the most extensively studied and showed strong association with copycat suicide^{3-5,7-8} Positive outcome from potentially helpful characteristics is called the “Papageno effect”.⁹ News articles that educate the public on suicide and its prevention as well as showing alternatives to suicide has shown to be associated with protective effects for suicide.¹⁰

These effects of media reporting led to effort from various party. Past studies revealed interventions aiming at media were correlated with more appropriate news reporting.¹⁰⁻¹² Which is why several recommendations and laws were made in order to monitor characteristics of suicide article which may contribute to an increasing in suicide incidence.¹³⁻¹⁴ The WHO guideline for media professional is a guideline created by reviewing scientific evidences of impacts of media reporting of suicide on suicidal behaviors. Example recommendations are “Do provide accurate information about where to seek help.”, “Don’t explicitly describe the method used.”, “Don’t use photographs, video footage or social media links.”, etc.¹³ The guideline was used by several studies to assess suicide news report in Asia^{9,15-17} and the rest of the world.^{12,18} Thus emerging a trend of studying media reporting.

Suicide is a major issue in Thailand. Thailand is an upper-middle income country located in south-east Asia.¹⁹ In 2019, suicide was the cause of 6,200 deaths in Thailand.²⁰ There are few studies on media reporting of

suicide in Thailand. One study focus on charcoal-burning suicide news article and found worrying characteristics of news reporting, including featuring of the news on the headline and detailed suicide method.²¹ Two studies analyzed news article (online article on suicide of English language newspaper in Thailand,²² and news article from Thai newspaper²³) using the World Health Organization guideline for media professionals and found high prevalence of harmful characteristics that might have negative impacts on suicide. However, study that focuses on online news article in Thai language has not been done yet. The purpose of this study is to examine characteristics of online articles on suicide of Thai language newspaper in Thailand using the World Health Organization guideline for media professionals as the main guide.

METHODS

Search of news reports

This study is a document research using online news articles which were publicly available at the time of study (data collection was done during March - April 2021). Inclusion criteria for news websites were as followed;

- 1) The site was listed as an official website of a Central Newspaper Organizational member of The National Press Council of Thailand or can be found online as the official website of such organization²⁴

- 2) Website must show publicly available news articles in various topics

- 3) Website must be accessible during the time of data collection

- 4) Website must show news articles in Thai

The websites eligible were individually explored using Google advanced search within the sites. The search term is “ฆ่าตัวตาย” or suicide. The filter used is time of publishing between 1st July 2020 - 31st December 2020. Only the first 300 results with higher relevance via Google algorithm from each site are consider eligible for the study. As the protocol was recommended by the search engine and further inquiry mostly revealed irrelevant articles and duplications. The first author was responsible for excluding articles meeting the exclusion criteria.

Exclusion criteria for the news article were as followed;

- 1) the article is not about suicide
- 2) the article is about suicide-bombing, politic, military or murder
- 3) the article is a duplicated article or the link to the article is broken.

Sample size calculation was not done as the purpose of this study is to study all news article published in one timeframe, in order to be comparable with similar studies found in Thailand²² and other countries.^{9,12,15-18} The timeframe was purposefully chosen as six months as the authors deemed the resulted articles will reveal the trend of the news reporting. As this study used data which were publicly available online, no ethical clearance was sought.

Quality analysis of documents

News articles eligible for the study will then be split for the main author and the second author to analyze. The guideline "Preventing suicide: a resource for media professionals Update 2017"¹³ by WHO as well as The Mental Health Act (Second issue) B.E. 2562¹⁴ of Thailand were used to guide which are potentially harmful or potentially helpful characteristics. Issues covered in the WHO guidelines are necessary information for populations at risk of suicide and laypersons, information that should not be included in the news article as it may lead to copycat suicide or stigmata of suicidal behaviors as well as language and editorial that may reevaluate suicide.¹³ Both authors agreed on a general guideline for analysis of each characteristic prior to the analysis. Content analysis was done in a simple yes-or-no fashion as to whether it reports the news with characteristics or content that were mentioned in the aforementioned guidelines. If possible, the characteristics would be in the same vein as in the previous study which were done on English news site in Thailand.²² 10% of the analysis would then be triangulate by blindly re-analyze with the other author. In case of more than 5% mismatch, all the analysis will then be re-analyzed by both the authors and the third analyst (a psychologist) would also be invited to decide on any disagreement between the first two authors.

Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics by means of frequency and percentage were used to describe the findings. Microsoft Excel for Mac version 16 was used for statistical analysis.

RESULTS

Distribution of reports

Sixteen news sites were found listed as official websites of Central Newspaper Organizational members of The National Press Council of Thailand. Nine of these sites were eligible for the study. The names of all sixteen websites, their URL, as well as details of their inclusion are showed in [Table 1](#).

More than 1,276 news articles were found across the nine included websites. After careful analysis using the exclusion criteria, 313 suicide news articles were deemed eligible for the study. These results are showed in detail in [Table 2](#).

The eligible 313 suicide news articles were analyzed for 46 characteristics. The total of 14,398 characteristic of all articles were analyzed initially. 1,472 characteristics were re-evaluated by the other analyst and cross-checked for disagreements. 39 (3.3%) of those characteristics were deemed as disagreements, hence the third analyst was not needed. The analyzed characteristics were compiled using descriptive statistics.

Potentially harmful characteristics

Various potentially harmful characteristics were found in the news articles, both in the title and in the body of the articles. The most common potentially harmful characteristics found in news titles were mentioning of the word "suicide" or similar and mentioning of the suicide method which were found in 79.2% and 77.0% of news titles, respectively. Gender of the victim, occupation of the victim and speculated cause of suicide were quite common as they were found in 63.6%, 47.6% and 44.1% of the news titles, respectively.

Mentioning of demographic information of the victim was prevalent in news articles, with name mentioned

TABLE 1 List of news portal found in the official website of Central Newspaper Organizational members of The National Press Council of Thailand and their inclusion in the study

Site name	URL	Inclusion in the study
Daily Manager 360°	https://mgronline.com/	included in the study
Daily News	https://www.dailynews.co.th/	included in the study
Kom Chad Luek	https://www.komchadluek.net/	included in the study
Lok Wan Nee	http://www.lokwannee.com/	included in the study
OPT News	http://www.opt-news.com/	included in the study
Post Today	https://www.posttoday.com/	included in the study
Siamrath	https://siamrath.co.th/	included in the study
Thai Post	https://www.thaipost.net/	included in the study
Thairath	https://www.thairath.co.th/	included in the study
Bangkokbiznews	https://www.bangkokbiznews.com	not included in the study ¹
Bangkokpost	https://www.bangkokpost.com	not included in the study ²
Dara Daily	https://www.daradaily.com	not included in the study ¹
Saiklang	https://www.saiklang.com	not included in the study ³
Siamturakij	https://www.siamturakij.com	not included in the study ¹
Thansettakij	https://www.thansettakij.com	not included in the study ¹
The Nation	https://www.nationthailand.com	not included in the study ⁴

¹ The website only shows specialized news

² The website does not show news article in Thai

³ The website does not show news article

⁴ The website is not accessible at the time of study

TABLE 2 Inclusion status of articles found from nine included newspaper websites

Site name	Total results	included from studies	excluded from studies
Daily Manager 360°	294	84	210
Daily News*	>300	40	>60
Kom Chad Luek	89	22	67
Lok Wan Nee	2	0	2
OPT News	1	0	1
Post Today	49	12	37
Siamrath	128	50	78
Thai Post	111	12	101
Thairath*	>300	93	>207
Total	1276	313	963

*The search results from Google yielded more than 300 results for these two sites. Only the most relevant 300 was categorized and the rest were excluded per our protocol

in 75.4%, age mentioned in 87.2% and gender mentioned in 97.8% of the news articles. 92.7% of news articles mentioned method of suicide and 93.0% of news articles mentioned location of suicide in the news articles as well. Full findings of potentially harmful characteristics are showed in Table 3.

Potentially helpful characteristics

The most common potentially helpful characteristics found in news articles were reporting of warning signs and mentioning that relation between suicide and mental illness, which were found in 25.6% and 20.1% of news articles, respectively. Full findings of potentially helpful characteristics found in suicide news articles are showed in Table 4.

DISCUSSION

Internationally, there has been study that suggests increasing in prevalent of potentially harmful characteristics in suicide news over the years.¹⁸ While there are studies done on media reporting of suicide in Thailand,²¹⁻²³ none of the studies analyzed online suicide news article in Thai language.

Compliance to the WHO guideline is the key objective of this study. Potentially harmful characteristics that were common in suicide news articles (reported in more than 75% of the articles) are mentioning of the word “suicide” or similar in the title, mentioning the method of suicide in the news title, mentioning name, age, gender of the victim (s) in the news body and mentioning of location and method of suicide in the news body. The only potentially helpful characteristic that was reported in more than 25% of suicide news articles was reporting of warning signs. These results showed poor compliance to the World Health Organization guideline for media professionals in reporting suicide and thus might have negative impacts on suicidal behavior.¹³

Another objective of this study is to analyze news articles using the Mental Health Act (Second issue) BE. 2562. The Mental Health Act (Second issue) BE. 2562 was

introduced in Thailand in 2019 and it prohibited printing or electronically distributed what can lead to shame or damage to mental, honor, or rights of the patients and their families.¹⁴ While the authors were not part of the committee involved in enforcing this regulation, analysis of characteristics potentially comparable to the act was done. Of note is the percentage of suicide news article that possibly can bring shame or damage to the victim was found in 17.6% of article title and 24.3% of article body. These results showed poor compliance to the regulation.

Poor compliance of Thai media reporting of suicide to WHO guideline has been noted before. The results of this study largely mirrored results from a similar study done on Thai online news article in English language²² and results from a similar study done on Thai newspaper article from the top three newspapers in Thailand.²³ While not directly comparable, the percentage for most common potentially harmful characteristics shows little differences. For instance, the percentage of news mentioning name of the victims in the article was 75% in study of Thai news in English language and 89.6% in study of Thai newspaper articles, compared to 75.4% in this study. The percentage of reports of foreign nationality were roughly the same as well (22% of Thai news in English language and 12.3% of Thai newspaper article compared to 18.8% in this study). Several studies across Asia^{9,15-17} and the rest of the world^{12,18} also shows high prevalence of harmful characteristics in suicide news report. These results raise concerns for current state of media reporting worldwide.

Detailed observation of various characteristics revealed more worrying insight. Demographic data of the victim and celebrity status of the victim, two characteristics that were extensively studied to be associated with copycat suicide,^{3-5,7,8} were commonly reported in the news article included in this study. Suicide method is another characteristic that showed Werther effect as it does not only determine outcomes of a suicidal attempt but also plays a role in predicting another attempt as well.²⁵ A study in undergraduate students with suicidal risk in a university

TABLE 3 Potentially harmful characteristics found in news articles

Characteristics	Frequency	Percent
Potentially harmful characteristics of news title		
The word "suicide" or similar was mentioned	248	79.2
Name mentioned	27	8.6
Age mentioned	67	21.4
Gender mentioned	199	63.6
Method of suicide mentioned	241	77.0
Location of suicide mentioned	77	24.6
Cause of suicide mentioned	149	47.6
Occupation mentioned	138	44.1
High impact or celebrity status of the victim(s) mentioned	42	13.4
Possible shame or damage to the victim	55	17.6
Possible shame or damage to the family or friends	7	2.2
Potentially harmful characteristics of news body		
Name mentioned	236	75.4
Age mentioned	273	87.2
Gender mentioned	306	97.8
Method of suicide mentioned	290	92.7
Location of suicide mentioned	291	93.0
Cause of suicide mentioned	207	66.1
Occupation mentioned	204	65.2
High impact or celebrity status of the victim(s) mentioned	48	15.3
Steps of suicide narrated	171	54.6
Life event mentioned	178	56.9
Suicide note mentioned	55	17.6
Suicide note cited	35	11.2
Description of the characteristics of the victim(s)	122	39.0
Repeated reporting of previous case(s)	45	14.4
Reporting the interview with the bereaved	80	25.6
Foreign nationality	59	18.8
Showing photo(s) of the victim(s)	208	66.5
Tells the story through celebrity or high impact storyteller	25	8.0
Using words that imply death is a desirable outcome	22	7.0
Showing VDO(s) of the victim(s)	7	2.2
Showing social media(s) of the victim(s)	13	4.2
Possible shame or damage to the victim	76	24.3
Possible shame or damage to the family or friends	10	3.2

TABLE 4 Potentially helpful characteristics found in news articles

Characteristics	Frequency	Percent
Suicide related to mental illness	63	20.1
Suicide related to drug or alcohol use	33	10.5
Reporting effects to family or friends	58	18.5
Reporting warning signs	80	25.6
Tell positive story of the victim	42	13.4
Expert opinion about suicide	3	0.9
Research finding about suicide	1	0.3
Reporting statistics of suicide	1	0.3
Reporting prevention program or approach	1	0.3
Any educative information	4	1.3
Mentioning contact for help seeking	6	1.9
Reporting the sources for further information	0	0

in Thailand has shown that more than 60% of sample reported unintentionally receiving information on suicide methods from the internet, while more than 30% read about them from newspapers.²⁶ This is a cause of concern as this study found that the vast majority (>90%) of the news article included mentioned method of suicide and more than 50% narrated the steps of suicide.

Some result of this study showed better compliance to WHO guideline by Thai media professionals. Mentioning of mental illness is a potentially helpful characteristic that is more common in our study compared to other similar studies elsewhere.^{9,15-17} The author hypothesized that this might be due to better mental health awareness or the difference in stigmata. Further study is clearly needed to confirm this hypothesis.

A few of the strengths and limitations of this study is noted here. For strength; all eligible articles in the period

were analyzed, thus eliminating bias during the selection process. To the authors' knowledge, this is the first study to utilize the Mental Health Act (Second issue) BE. 2562 as a guide for analysis. It's also one of the few studies on media coverage of suicide in Thailand. This study has limitations. As it was a cross-sectional study, only the characteristics of news reporting at the time are reflected. The exclusive use of newspaper that were Central Newspaper Organizational members of The National Press Council of Thailand leave some newspaper and other forms of media out of the picture. As only the keyword 'ฆ่าตัวตาย' was used, selection bias might occurred as news articles that did not explicitly use the keyword are not included in the study. No critical analysis of the language used in the news was performed as it was beyond the expertise of the authors.

As this study provided a glimpse of the situation of suicide news report in Thailand, the following steps should be study reporting of suicide articles in other form of media such as social media and to study suicide news reporting further as to see the change in trends in suicide news reporting or to better understand perspectives of the media in order to further inform better planning for better intervention in the future.²⁷ The result of this study was sent to inform the relevant organization (the Psychiatric Association of Thailand).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, suicide news articles found in the website of Thai newspaper might have negative impact on suicidal behavior as they have shown poor compliance to the World Health Organization guideline for media professionals in reporting suicide. Further studies are needed to better understand the situation in the hope of designing a better intervention.

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Authors' contributions

Poom Chompoosri: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, project administration, validation, visualization, original draft preparation, reviewing & editing; Nirchaya Suthakam: data curation, formal analysis, investigation, original draft preparation; S.M. Yasir Arafat: conceptualization, methodology, project administration, supervision, validation, reviewing & editing

All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript. The corresponding author has full access to all of the data in this study and takes complete responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the data analysis.

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