A Comparative Study of Suicide News Reporting in Chinese and British Media from an Ethical Perspective

-- A Case Study of The Guardian and The Paper

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Abstract

Based on the ethical guidelines outlined in the World Health Organisation's 'Suicide Prevention: Guidelines for Media Professionals,' this study selected 162 suicide-related news reports published by The Guardian in the United Kingdom and The Paper in China between 1 July 2023 and 30 June 2024 as samples. Quantitative content analysis and discourse analysis methods were employed to conduct a cross-cultural comparative analysis. The findings reveal multi-dimensional ethical practice differences between the two media outlets in their suicide reporting practices: In terms of content structure, The Guardian tends toward diverse narratives, focusing on the social issues underlying suicide and demonstrating a broader international perspective; The Paper, however, places greater emphasis on local events and the events themselves, with a relatively fragmented reporting structure. In terms of linguistic features, both media outlets' headlines exhibit strong sensationalism, but The Guardian's main text contains fewer traumatic narratives and often includes mental health support information; The Paper's reports feature detailed traumatic narratives but lack sufficient preventive messaging. Additionally, the two media outlets differ in their suicide attribution models and reporting completeness. These differences reflect varying interpretations and implementations of ethical norms across cultural contexts, highlighting the current ethical dilemmas and state of responsibility fulfilment in suicide reporting.

Keywords

Ethical norms, suicide reporting, content, language, culture.

1. Introduction

Due to their deviation from social norms and reflection of deep-seated contradictions, suicide incidents have become a focal point of media coverage. Existing research has identified two opposing communication effects. The 'Werther effect' suggests that vulnerable individuals exposed to reports of suicide may exhibit imitative behaviour through social learning mechanisms. However, the 'Papageno effect' demonstrates that media coverage of individuals successfully overcoming suicide crises or sharing hopeful stories can reduce suicide rates [1] .

Based on these findings, the World Health Organization (WHO) developed the 'Suicide Prevention: Guidelines for Media Professionals' in 2017 (revised in 2023; hereafter referred to as the 'Guidelines'), which propose 14 recommendations for reporting on suicide and establish a systematic ethical framework. However, empirical research indicates that global media practices still widely violate the Guidelines. Duncan and Luce analysed suicide reports from 2008 and identified five categories of deviation from the Guidelines, including the sensationalisation of the emotional reactions of family members, detailed descriptions of suicide methods, inappropriate speculation about the deceased, the use of sensationalised

language, and the association between suicide and the internet. Gao et al[2,3]. conducted a quantitative analysis of 1,538 online suicide reports and found that 89.54% involved the privacy of or details about the deceased, 66.67% used sensationalised language and only 0.05% included recommendations for suicide prevention.

This phenomenon of non-compliance is not merely a practical operational issue, but also reflects cultural differences in the perception of news ethics. Therefore, within the framework of the WHO's ethical guidelines, a comparison of suicide news reports in China and the United Kingdom could provide empirical evidence for cross-cultural journalism studies and help the media to optimise their reporting strategies.

2. Review of Chinese-English News Text Comparison Studies

From a textual perspective, Chinese and English are two completely different language systems with significant differences in language structure, grammatical rules, and vocabulary usage. Li conducted a comparative study showing that Chinese news reports frequently use additional words to modify news content, such as vague modifiers expressing 'possibility' and 'uncertainty,' while English texts tend to use definitive expressions[4].

This difference is particularly evident in disaster reporting: Zhuanalysed the coverage of the Shanghai Bund stampede incident by China Daily and The Economist[5]. Chinese media focused on depicting the on-site atmosphere and quoted the direct feelings of multiple witnesses, while British media used evaluative terms to accurately describe the on-site situation and response measures.Some scholars have offered explanations for these textual differences, arguing that the Chinese language is more conservative, abstract, and literary, while English, as an alphabetic language, is more concise and straightforward, enabling efficient communication of news events[6,7].

In areas involving different social cultures, Chinese and English reports exhibit even greater differences. Taking the LGBTQ+ community as an example, Shu compared the differences in China Daily and The Guardian's coverage of same-sex marriage[8]. The Guardian framed same-sex marriage within the context of political and religious conflicts, arguing that LGBTQ+ individuals' agency was not recognised by the government,while also highlighting their efforts to assert their rights. China Daily, however, labels same-sex marriage as an issue concerning a marginalised group, focusing more on societal evaluations of homosexuality and the numerous challenges faced by the community. This discrepancy stems from the differing levels of acceptance of homosexuality in the two countries, as well as the differing societal attitudes towards homosexuality[9,10]. These studies, with their focus on language and culture, provide a diverse perspective and valuable reference for my textual analysis. Social and cultural differences are particularly significant in the field of suicide reporting: as a social issue significantly influenced by the media, suicide reporting urgently requires inclusion in a cross-cultural comparative framework. However, existing research has yet to establish a systematic comparative framework for Chinese and British suicide reporting, which constitutes the theoretical starting point of this study.

3. Research Methods

3.1. Sample Selection

This study selected suicide-related news articles from The Guardian in the United Kingdom and The Paper in China as samples. As mainstream media outlets in their respective countries, both have a wide audience and significant social influence, making them suitable for cross-cultural comparison. The sample timeframe spans from 1 July 2023 to 30 June 2024 to cover the seasonal fluctuations in suicide rates.The keyword 'suicide' was used to search the Nexis

database and the official website of The Paper. After initial screening by two independent reviewers to exclude irrelevant items (non-event-related, non-individual suicide behaviour), and consistency testing (Cohen's Kappa coefficient ≥ 0.85), a total of 76 articles from The Guardian and 96 articles from The Paper were selected as valid samples.

3.2. Coding scheme

This study adopted a mixed method combining quantitative content analysis as the main approach and discourse analysis as a supplementary method. The 14 guidelines were used as the ethical judgement criteria to construct a multi-dimensional comparative framework. Table 1 presents the content structure coding, which includes four dimensions: characteristics of suicide victims, event elements, reporting formats, and reporting completeness. Open coding was adopted, with a new coding type assigned each time a new content element appeared. Reporting formats were classified based on the categories proposed by Xia and Yellowbrick, combined with sample attributes, retaining three categories: news reports, feature articles, and investigative reports; reporting completeness was a self-developed assessment dimension[11,12].

Table 1. Coding Book 1

Gender of suicide victims	Male	Female	Transgender	Unknown	
Identity of the suicide victims	Students (including children and adolescents	School workers (teachers, principals, etc.)	Medical personnel	Police officer	Murderer
	Public figures (singers, actors, etc.)	Others	Unknown		
Methods of suicides	Hanging	Leaping	Drowning	Self-burning	Charcoal-burning
	Taking medicines	Cutting the wrist and carotid	Shooting	Assisted death	Unknown
Causes of suicides	Single factors	Multiple factors	Unknown		
News forms	News reports	Feature articles	In-depth investigations		
Completeness of news	Complete timeline	Complete reasons	Complete follow-up		

Table 2 is the language ethics coding book. Based on Pajunen summary of newspaper text research, the ethicality of news headlines and news terminology is analysed, and each indicator is coded as binary (1) if present and (0) if absent[13]. For language features that cannot be quantified, such as metaphorical rhetoric and emotional bias, CDA will be used for further analysis.
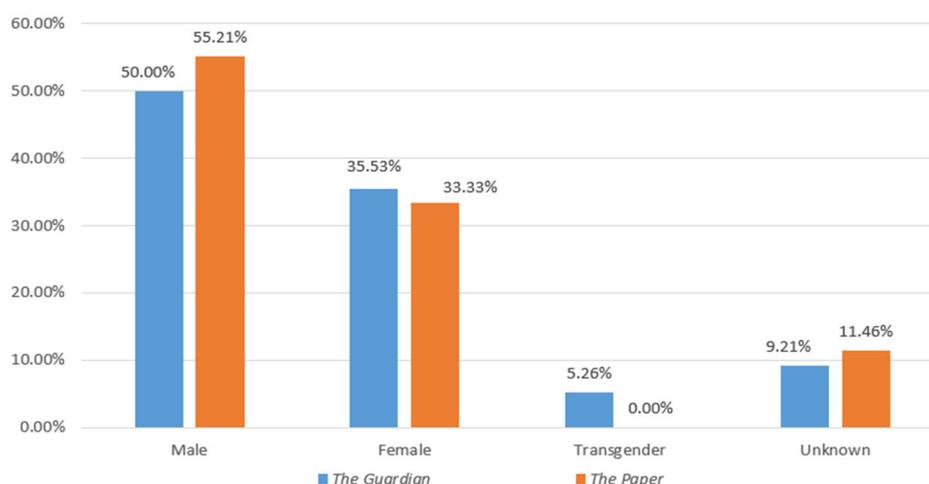
Table 2. Coding Book 2

News headlines	Explicitly mentioning "suicide"	Disclosing specific details about the suicide victims	Sensationalism		
News language ethics	Disclosure			Trauma narratives	Prevention Communication
	Disclosing details about the suicide victims	Disclosing details about the suicide victims' family	Disclosing details about principal parties	Describing the method of suicide or the condition of death	Providing psychological assistance support
Opinion attitude tendency	Describing family members' emotional attitudes	Social evaluation	Calling for greater attention to suicide-related issues		

4. Structural Analysis of Suicide Report Content

4.1. Analysis of the demographic characteristics of news report subjects

As shown in Figure 1 and 2, both media outlets' suicide reports exhibit a male-dominated gender dimension. The Guardian reported on a transgender case, whereas The Paper avoided such cases due to the sensitivity of LGBTQ+ issues in China. In terms of identity construction, both outlets significantly focused on students, educators and celebrities (who accounted for nearly half of the cases), as suicide incidents involving minors and celebrities are more likely to spark public attention and media scrutiny. However, The Paper disclosed the social identities of suicide victims at a significantly higher intensity than The Guardian. While this may enhance the authenticity of the news, it also increases the risk of imitation among specific groups. Conversely, obscuring specific identities strikes a better balance between news value and ethical responsibility.

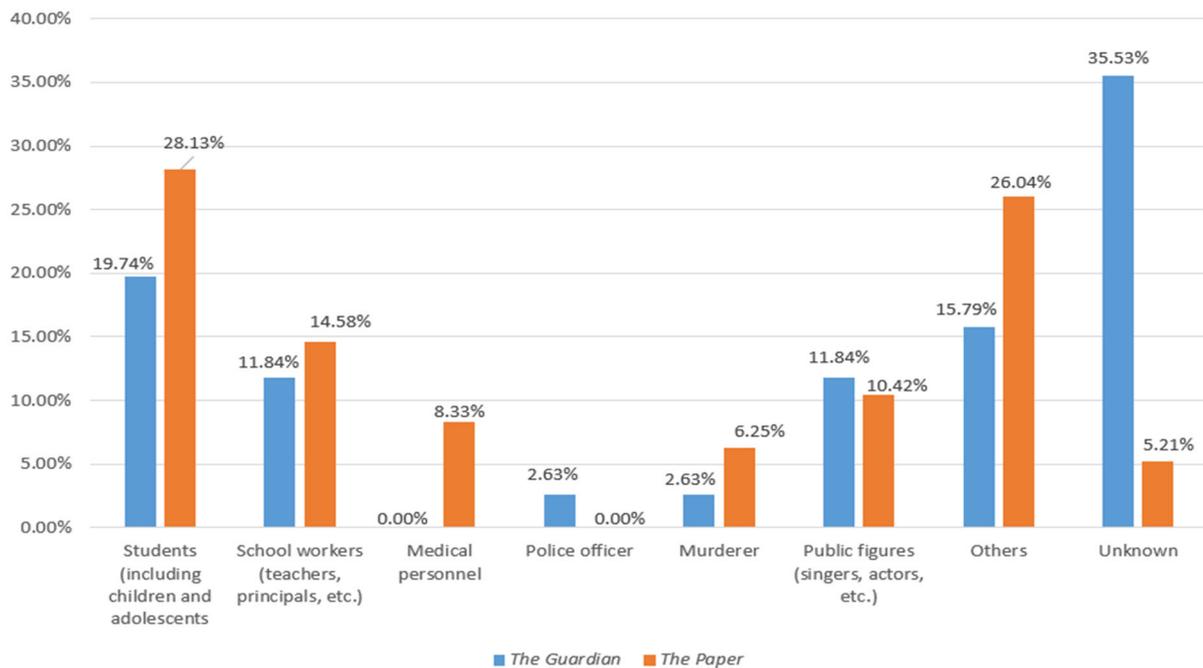**Figure 1.** Gender of suicide victims

Figure 2. Identity of the suicide victims

4.2. Analysis of the Characteristics of News Reporting on Events

4.2.1. Comparison of Ethical Considerations in Reporting Suicide Methods

As shown in Figure 3, there were significant differences between the two media outlets in their adherence to the WHO guideline of 'avoiding detailed descriptions of suicide methods.' In The Guardian's sample, 61 articles followed the 'vague treatment principle,' with specific methods disclosed only in discussions of social issues related to the legalisation of assisted dying, such as euthanasia, and such disclosures were made to serve the needs of public policy debates. In contrast, 20.83% of the samples from The Paper provided detailed descriptions of jumping from buildings, 12.5% disclosed the location of drowning incidents, 9.38% mentioned charcoal burning, and even described the type of poison used. Such explicit descriptions are likely to trigger the 'Werther effect.'Additionally, gunshot suicides accounted for a significant proportion (10.53%) of reports in The Guardian, which may be related to its focus on international issues such as gun-related suicides in the United States.
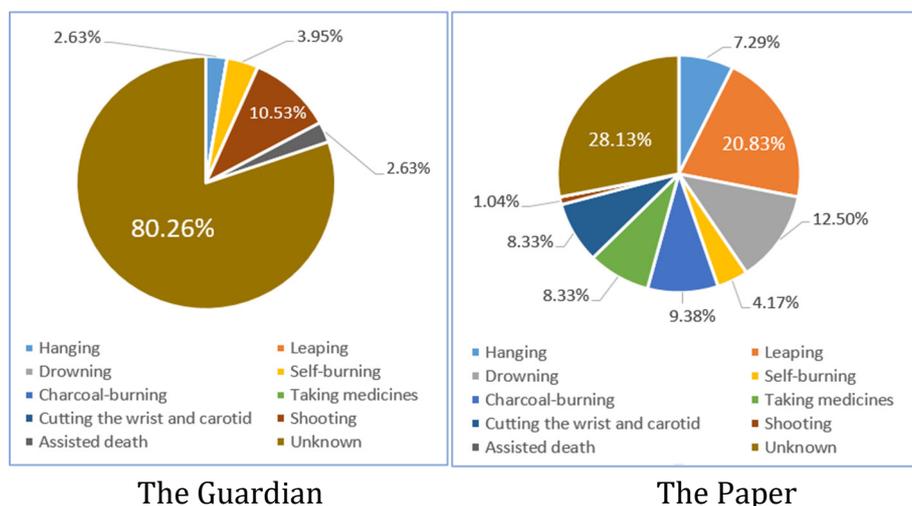

The Guardian   The Paper

Figure 3. Methods of suicides

4.2.2. Comparing Suicide Attribution Patterns

As a complex social and public health issue, suicide often stems from long-standing and intricate underlying issues and motivations. Media attention on the causes of suicide and how they are attributed can help to reveal deeper societal problems and play a vital part in prevention and intervention. Research has identified systematic differences between two media outlets.

As shown in Figure 4, in terms of attribution dimensions, The Guardian employed a multi-attribution model in 42.11% of cases (e.g. Vinter, who considered factors such as school bullying, gender identity disorder and inadequate mental health services in a case involving the suicide of a transgender youth[14]). In contrast, The Paper relied on single-attribution explanations in 72.92% of cases, with economic and family pressures being the main focus. Frequent use of uncertain expressions such as 'suspected' and 'possible' (approximately 3.3 times per thousand words) was also evident, as was reliance on statements from family members as primary sources.

In terms of assigning responsibility after attribution: The Guardian extended the discussion of suicide incidents to systemic reflection through expert interviews and multiple sources, covering issues such as educational supervision, minority rights, youth bullying and assisted dying and other social structural contradictions. They emphasise that societal organisations or institutional failures trigger social reflection.

The Paper, however, focuses responsibility on individual experiences. They frequently use the formulaic response that 'the relevant authorities have pledged to address the issue'. This difference is evident in reports on the suicide of a South Korean teacher. While The Guardian analysed systemic flaws through four sources, The Paper merely relayed government statements. This shift in attribution from individuals to institutions directly affects the extent to which the reports are effective in preventing suicide.
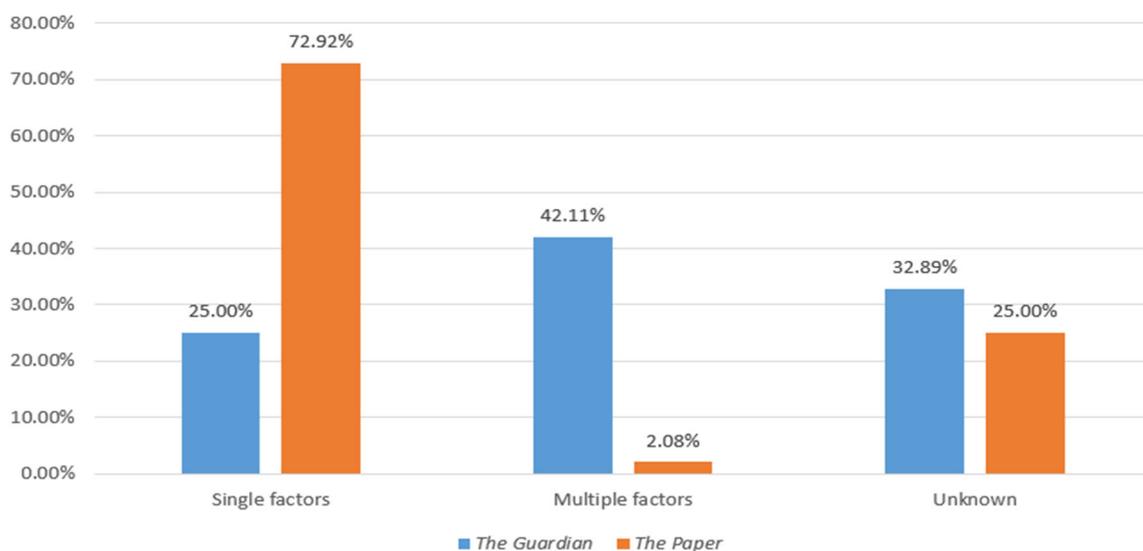

Figure 4. Causes of suicides

4.3. Analysis of Structural Differences in News Reporting

The narrative patterns of the two media outlets differ significantly. As shown in Figure 5 and 6, the Guardian's news formats are evenly distributed (feature articles 28.95%, in-depth investigations 22.37%), with a core focus on social issues. It employs scene-based narratives (e.g., Lawrence using a case study to explore racial issues[15]) or a 'weak event-strong issue' framework, transforming individual tragedies into platforms for discussing public issues,

demonstrating in-depth research into social issues. Suicide incidents are only mentioned at the beginning to introduce social issues. The Paper, on the other hand, consists of 77.08% news reports, using a standardised '5W' structure, with low proportions of feature stories and in-depth investigations (13.54%/9.38%) and exhibiting a 'strong facts-weak opinions' characteristic, confirming the trend towards fragmented and superficial reading[16]. This decontextualised narrative adopts an extremely simplified structure of 'headline characterisation followed by police reports' (with news articles averaging around 100 words). While this enhances dissemination efficiency, it results in a lack of social context in many reports, reflecting the narrative challenges faced in reporting on complex social issues under China's constructive journalism philosophy[17].
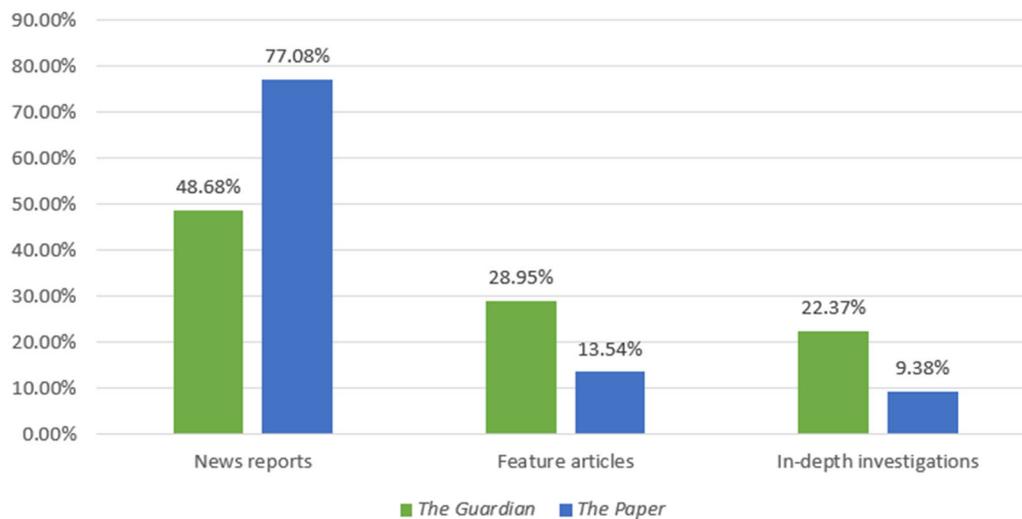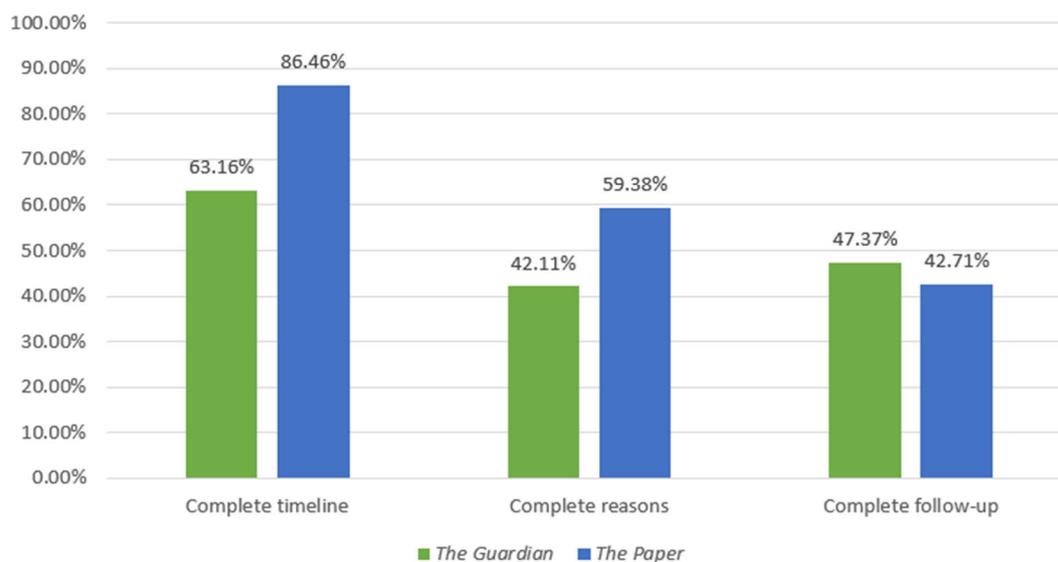

Figure 5. News forms

Figure 6. Completeness of news

5. Linguistic Characteristics of Suicide Reporting

5.1. News headlines

A comparative study of suicide report headlines in The Guardian and The Paper reveals coexisting features of both homogeneity and heterogeneity. As shown in Figure 7, both media outlets exhibit a high proportion of direct references to 'suicide' in their headlines (57.89% in The Guardian and 67.71% in The Paper), with The Paper tending to disclose more information. The specific mention of suicide methods in its headlines was nearly 10% higher than in The Guardian (e.g. 'drowning', 'jumping from a building'), and nearly one-third of its headlines included information about the deceased. This significantly violates the WHO's ethical guidelines on avoiding detailed descriptions of methods or locations in headlines.

Emotionally, the study introduced the 'incitement' evaluation framework[18]. Analysis showed that The Guardian's incitement index was 43.42% (14 percentage points higher than The Paper). The Guardian skilfully uses rhetorical questions and literary devices to evoke emotion (e.g. Koul questions a child star's suicide[19]). However, The Paper focuses on detailed descriptions to create shock (e.g. Examples include 'elderly man beaten → grandson jumps into the river' and 'savings stolen → elderly woman commits suicide'[20,21]). While appearing objective on the surface, these articles implicitly suggest causality.

In the dilemma of constructing emotionally driven headlines, media outlets often find themselves caught in a vortex, balancing the maximisation of communication effectiveness with news ethics. This can lead to a breach of ethical norms.
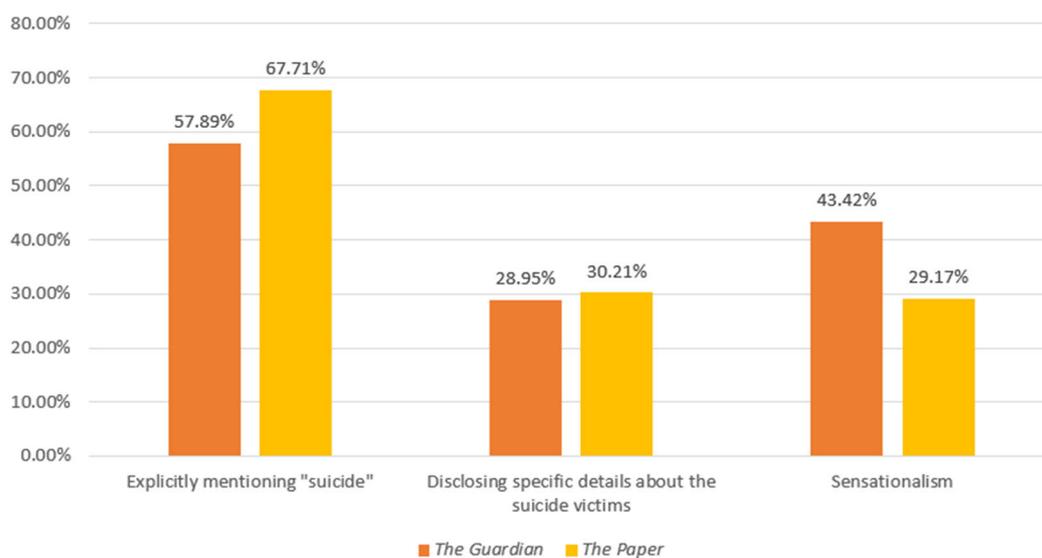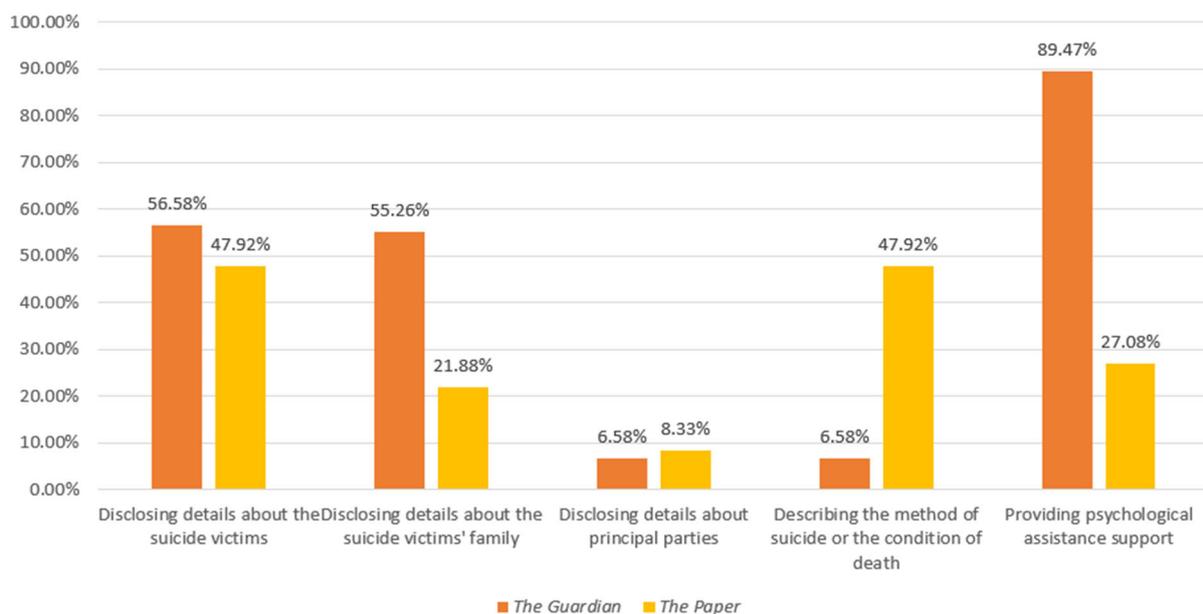

Figure 7. News headlines

5.2. News texts

Figure 8 shows that The Guardian and The Paper exhibit systematic differences in terms of information disclosure, trauma narrative and prevention dissemination. In terms of disclosing information about suicide victims, both media outlets tend to expose them excessively (56.58% for The Guardian and 47.92% for The Paper). However, The Guardian places greater emphasis on linking the identity of the suicide victim to the social value of the news story. For instance, in a case concerning the suicide of a transgender woman, Banfield-Nwachi aimed to raise awareness of specific group rights, whereas The Paper opted for symbolic anonymity[22]. For example, in the case of Du, the suicide victim's name was withheld, but their social identities,

such as 'bank president' and 'member of the Financial Association', were detailed[23]. This places greater emphasis on the social sensationalism of the suicide victim's identity, with the aim of gaining attention and economic benefits. This results in information overload in the non-essential information dimension.

The Paper exhibits clear ethical misconduct at the level of trauma narrative: the proportion of explicit descriptions of suicide methods reaches 47.92%, significantly crossing ethical boundaries. Such as 'throat wounds bleeding profusely', 'multiple open wounds across the body' and adds geographical coordinates, directly violating the WHO's dual norm of 'avoiding detailed descriptions of methods/locations', thereby increasing the risk of secondary harm.
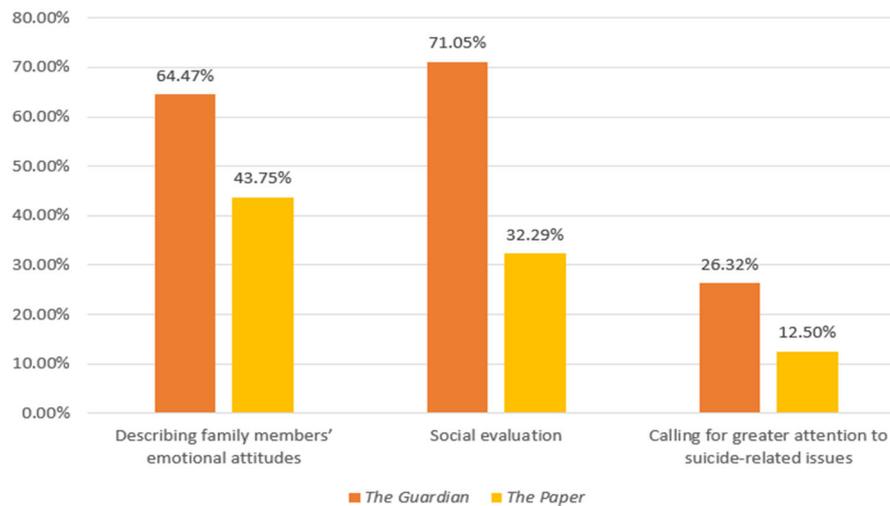
A comparison of suicide prevention-oriented reporting is even more enlightening. The Guardian embedded actionable psychological assistance in 89.47% of its reports, establishing a closed-loop system of 'crisis narrative–intervention pathway'; Pengpai, however, only included assistance prompts in 27.08% of its reports, and these were vague, exposing the breakdown of preventive mechanisms.

Figure 8. News language ethics

5.3.   Interpretation of positive semantic tendencies

At the emotional narrative level, The Guardian uses direct quotations to convey a sense of reconstruction (e.g. Vreeland quotes her mother as saying, 'We will be brave'), transforming the pain of bereavement into a public display of psychological resilience and taking on a positive guiding role[24]. In contrast, The Paper uses indirect paraphrasing to emphasise the passive situation of family members, with more negative semantic connotations and a lack of psychological support or positive social models for rebuilding life. Both outlets demonstrate an ethical consensus in celebrity reporting. For example, in reports on the suicides of footballer Simon and singer Li Yuchun, they both avoided the tendency to 'glorify suicide'[25]. While recounting the deceased's achievements, both outlets handled details of death with caution, demonstrating a convergent cautious attitude. This progression from providing individual emotional support to establishing industry-wide ethical norms highlights the constructive role of the media in conveying societal emotions.

Figure 9. Opinion attitude tendency

6. Discussion and Reflections

The ethical practices of suicide news reporting in China and the UK are jointly shaped by cultural context and media responsibility. Research findings indicate that traditional Asian philosophy views 'restraint' as an important virtue, which leads The Paper to focus on the surface of events and downplay discussions of social issues and multi-source interviews[26]. In contrast, Western media, driven by an 'open' philosophy, use The Guardian to deeply explore social issues through diverse sources, treating suicide incidents as a lens through which to analyse societal problems.In terms of audience targeting and ethical priorities, Western media emphasise civic rationality and equality of human rights, with The Guardian prioritising privacy protection and minority rights[27]. China, influenced by Confucian culture, has developed an ethical framework emphasising blood ties, family and social responsibility. This leads to reports highlighting the social identity of suicide victims and stressing individual responsibility and blood-based ethics.However, Western ethics emphasise the 'subjectivity' of the individual, even in the face of death, prioritising the maintenance of individual dignity[28]. Consequently, The Guardian focuses more on reconstruction plans for families of suicide victims and systemic improvements to social issues, emphasising the subjective agency of individuals.

However, both Chinese and British media exhibit ethical lapses. Some reports fail to adhere to WHO guidelines by disclosing excessive suicide details and amplifying negative emotions, thereby increasing the risk of the 'Werther effect'. In terms of guiding public opinion, they tend to attribute suicides solely to academic or work pressure, neglecting deeper underlying causes such as mental illness. This hinders the public from forming a scientific understanding.

This study confirms that the dynamic interaction between cultural context and ethical norms significantly influences how the media handle suicide reporting. Western culture emphasises individual dignity, whereas Eastern culture stresses familial responsibilities, resulting in significant differences in reporting perspectives and ethical choices. Future research should expand the scope of the sample to further explore the cross-cultural characteristics of ethical practices in suicide reporting. It should also urge the media to strengthen their sense of responsibility and balance information dissemination with social value orientation.

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