

# Suicide and representation of its triggering factors in the Spanish general press in 2017

*Suicidio consumado y representación de sus factores desencadenantes en la prensa generalista española en 2017*

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## Abstract

This article focuses on the analysis of the informative treatment that the Spanish newspapers *El País*, *ABC*, *El Mundo*, and *La Razón* gave to the suicide, more precisely regarding its triggering factors, since January 1st to December 31st, 2017. By conducting a content analysis, the research shows that Spanish newspapers portray the subject of suicide as a way to solve a problem, including details such as the suicidal procedures used, and the suicide note, too. Some cases are depicted under a sensationalist narrative. The information reflects the actual suicide data, but moves away from WHO's indications to treat the issue from a more comprehensive and less newsworthy perspective.

**Keywords:** Suicide, Spain, press, motives suicide, method used.

## Resumen

Este artículo se centra en el análisis del tratamiento informativo que los diarios españoles *El País*, *ABC*, *El Mundo* y *La Razón* realizan sobre el suicidio consumado, concretamente sobre los factores desencadenantes del mismo, desde el 1 de enero de 2017 hasta el 31 de diciembre de 2017. Aplicando una metodología de análisis de contenido, los resultados muestran que los diarios analizados abordan el tema del suicidio consumado como la solución a un problema y, además, incluyen detalles como el mecanismo empleado y la nota de suicidio, llegando en algunos casos al sensacionalismo. Las informaciones reflejan los datos reales sobre suicidio, pero se alejan de las indicaciones de la OMS para tratar el tema desde una perspectiva más integral y menos noticiosa.

**Palabras clave:** Suicidio, España, periódicos, motivos suicidio, mecanismo empleado.

## 1. Introduction

Suicide is death caused by oneself with the precise aim of ending one's own life (Villanueva & Hernández, 2004, p. 708). The World Health Organization (WHO) considers that suicidal behavior includes thinking about taking one's life, crafting a plan, searching for the means, trying and carrying out suicide (OMS, 2003, p. 201). It implies a voluntary way of behavior including suicidal thoughts (suicidal ideation), as well as the suicidal act itself (Gutiérrez, Contreras, Rosselli & Orozco, 2006, pp. 66-67), something that is not coincidental and that has reasons that are difficult to discover (Ballús, 2006, pp. 4-5). Every year over 800,000 people lose their lives this way, being the second highest cause of death among young people between the ages of 15 and 29. In Spain, 3,679 people took their own lives in 2017, which is a rate of 8.7 per every 100,000 inhabitants. Worldwide the rate is around 12 and in Europe it is 11.4 (INE, 2017). 74.6% of them are male (2,718) and 25.4%, female (961). It doubles the deaths provoked by traffic accidents and is the number one cause of non-natural death in the population aged between 15 to 34.

It is a public health problem shaped by psychological, social, biological, cultural, and environmental features (Hawton & van Heeringen, 2009). Nevertheless, suicide has become taboo and the family suffers the loss in silence, and the media, to a certain degree, have followed that policy for decades. Because of that, and following González (2018), media, advised by specialists, must help society and contribute to changing the current social perception regarding suicide. The WHO elaborated a serie of recommendations for communication media regarding reporting on suicide (2000, 2008, and 2017). Among other guidelines, the WHO recommends avoiding sensationalist coverage and situating the news in the spotlight, do not use the word "suicide" in the title, and be careful in using pictures, videos, or social networks, and by no means release the suicide notes. WHO recommendations also include not blaming, not informing on specific details such as the method used or the location of the suicide, as well as not glorifying the person who committed suicide, do not showing it as something normal or as a solution to difficulties, nor as a way of facing them, nor as a comprehensible response to social or cultural changes.

The WHO also indicates media must contribute to suicide prevention, as well as highlight alternatives to suicide, providing information about how and where to ask for help, share community resources and hotlines available, as well as informing about risk factors and signs of alarm. The guidelines also suggest providing tips and resources to survivors, disseminating resources that can help them get support, as well as reporting on the relationship that exists between depression and suicidal conduct, and that it can be treated (Acosta, Rodríguez & Cejas, 2017, p. 5). In terms of how suicide is depicted by Spanish media, the Spanish Journalists Association Code of Ethics (*Código Deontológico de Asociaciones de Periodistas de España*, FAPE), makes no reference to suicide. At the same time, the stylebooks of *El País* (2014, p. 33) and *El Mundo* (2002, p. 67), consider that it should only be publicized when it is a high-profile or famous person, while *ABC* does not mention suicide, and *La Razón* does not have a stylebook. There is quite a lot of research from the psychiatric point of view that determines a high percentage of suicides stem from mental health conditions, such as personality disorders, anxiety, and depression (Gelder, Gat & Mayou, 1989; Roy, Nielse, Rylander, Sarchiapone & Segal, 1999; De la Gándara, 1995; Morcillo, Saiz, Bousoño & Bobes, 2000; Tejedor & Sarró, 2005; Sadock & Sadock, 2008; Mínguez, García & Gándara, 2010, p. 146; and Gómez, Forti, Gutiérrez, Belmonte & Martín, 2016). Other aspects that research addresses are suicidal behavior (Nock et al. 2008), the method used to carry out suicide (Sudak & Sudak, 2005; Pirkis, Blood, Beautrais, Burgess & Skehams, 2006; Robledo, Koutsourais, López, Serrano, Villareal & Martín, 2015), and suicide notes (Chávez, Macías & Luna, 2010; Casado, Mata & Raya, 2012; and Acinas, Robles & Peláez, 2015).

Focusing on the press, the release of *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* (Goethe, 1774) triggered questions such as whether the media can contribute to increasing the number of suicides. Related to this subject in the United States, Motto (1967) discusses the suggestion of suicide, meanwhile Phillips (1974) analyzes what is called the Werther effect, effect of imitation, or copycat effect. It considers that the more it is publicized, the larger the number of subsequent attempts (Phillips, Lesnya & Paight, 1992; Müller 2011). A large amount of re-

search has been done on the increase in suicide and attempted imitated suicide described in the media (Pirkis & Blood, 2001; Dare, Andriessen, Nordentoft, Meier, Huisman & Pirkis, 2011; Ladwig, Kunrath, Lukaschek & Baumert, 2012; Sisask & Värnik, 2012; and Scherr & Steinleitner, 2015, just to name a few). On the contrary, other studies indicate that a responsible news depiction could have have a preventative effect on suicide, which is known as the Papageno Effect (Herrera, Ures & Martínez, 2015, p. 125).

Regarding how news depict suicide, a study on printed media in Colombia concludes that the information published does not comply with the WHO recommendations (Muñoz & Sánchez, 2013; Rátiva, Ruiz & Medina, 2013). Along these same lines are studies done by other authors, although positive changes are observed (Rubiano, Quintero & Bonilla, 2007; Acosta, Rodríguez & Cejas, 2017; Garrido, Eleazar & Catalán, 2018). Olmo and García (2015) establish that the way media uncover suicide could lead to improving public opinion on the subject or, on the contrary, it does not comply with being a useful service to the public.

Suicide has a tremendous social relevance and many studies have been conducted under a diversity of frameworks, such as health's, forensic's, and psychiatric, addressing aspects like the triggering factors and the procedures used. However, there are very few carried out within scholarly traditions of media and communication nor addressing these specific dimensions but under their informative coverage. Herein lies the relevance of this study that analyzes suicide through the lenses of news published by Spanish newspapers *El País*, *El Mundo*, *La Razón*, and *ABC* during 2017.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Objectives

This research analyzes the news coverage deployed by the Spanish press when informing about suicide. Particularly, the paper quantifies the news items published on this subject in the newspapers analyzed; explores whether the reports included details that led to the suicide and, if so, identify if articles mention predominant factors or not; ana-

lyzes whether the articles include the procedures used for suicide and which are the leading methods, and, overall, explores whether newspapers follow the WHO guidelines when reporting on suicide.

### 2.2. Methodology

To carry out the analysis, we considered the headlines<sup>1</sup> of Spanish newspapers *El País* (1976), *El Mundo* (1989), *ABC* (1903), and *La Razón* (1998). These are quality outlets published by consolidated media corporations, with national coverage, and editorial frames covering the whole range of a complex society. Therefore, they are top newspapers, opinion-making influencers, and agenda-setters. The period analyzed ranges from January 1st to December 31st, 2017, date on which the WHO released its guidelines *Preventing suicide: a resource for media professionals – update*, including recommendations for media. The unit of analysis is each one of the items published in the newspapers, regardless of the journalistic genre used (informative, interpretative, or op-edit piece), containing the word "suicide". The search for news was conducted through the newspapers' websites. After retrieving a first set of search results, all the pieces featuring suicide as the main topic were selected and those that featured the theme of suicide as circumstantial or used it as a metaphor were eliminated.

We identified 878 news items. The final sample includes 347 pieces (39.5%) that actually address committing suicide: *El País* (n= 127, 36.6%), *ABC* (n= 112, 32.3%), *El Mundo* (n= 62, 17.9%), and *La Razón* (n= 46, 13.2%). It was necessary to design a specific chart, as done in previous work (Miguel et al., 2005; Acinas, Robles & Pelaéz, 2015; and Santurtun et al., 2016), in order to code the data according to the following variables: date of publication, origin, factors leading to suicide (depression, gender violence, justice/court system, corruption, harassment, terrorism, undetermined); procedure used (firearm, hanging, fall or jumping from height, drug overdose, suffocation, explosion, undetermined). We also considered the frame of the news, including: the headlines, the body of article, and whether it publishes the suicide note or not. To test the reliability of coding, 70 pieces were

chosen randomly (20% of the whole sample), and two codifiers coded separately each one, obtaining 67 and 66 coincidences. The Kappa de Cohen coefficient (K) shows a reliability of 0.90% and a reliability index of 95%. These are results that guarantee reliability ( $\geq 80$ ), according to researchers like Landis & Koch (1977, and Igartua (2006, p. 221). We conducted a content analysis, considered the most appropriate regarding this type of research. Content analysis is a technique suggested by authors such as Berelson (1952), Holsti (1969), Krippendorff (1980), Bardin (1986), Piñuel & Gaitán (1995), and Igartua (2006). It allows to study texts systematically, objectively, and quantitatively (Wimmer & Dominick, 1996, p. 170), and produced relevant data (Bardin & Suárez, 2002, p. 7; Gonzáles, 2015, pp. 321- 328; and Piñuel, 2002, pp. 1- 42).

coincide in publishing more news during July (*La Razón* 21.8 %, *El Mundo* 22.7 %, *ABC* 21.4 % and *El País* 17.35%). On the contrary, June is the month with the least media attention in the sample (*El País* 7.9%, *La Razón* 2.2%, *El Mundo* 1.6% and *ABC* 0.9%). When analyzing the source of the information, the national realm stands out (53.89%), although with differences among newspapers (*La Razón* 71.7%, *El Mundo* 58%, *ABC* 54.4%, and *El País* 45.6%). When reviewing suicide news items by autonomous communities, Madrid has more coverage (18.4%), followed by Andalucía (9.2%), and the Murcia Region (4.3%). The information coming from the international realm (45.8%), led by the United States (20.4%), followed by Latin American countries (4.6%), the United Kingdom (3.4%), Korea (2.3%), Netherlands, Italy, and Russia (2% each one), and Japan (1.5%).

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Suicide in the media agenda

During 2017, 347 news items uncovered suicide (*El País* 36.6%, *ABC* 32.3 %, *El Mundo* 17.9%, and *La Razón* 13.2%); 27% of which focused on celebrities or high-profile individuals (*El País* 31%, *ABC* 31%, *El Mundo* 23%, and *La Razón* 10%).

Considering all newspapers combined, there is a larger number of pieces published in July (20.2 %) and December (11.3 %). All the newspapers

#### 3.2. Factors leading to suicide

Regarding sex, 46.1% of people committing suicide reported by the news analyzed are men and 31.4%, women, ages 20 to 40 (23%). Married people make up 20.2% of the sample. Among the factors identified as triggering suicide, mental health/depression disorders is in the first place, making up 18.4% of the news items analyzed, and followed by problems related to gender violence (12.1%) and corruption (8%), as it is shown in Table 1.

	<i>La Razón</i>		<i>El Mundo</i>		<i>El País</i>		<i>ABC</i>		Total	
	Qty. pieces	%	Qty. pieces	%	Qty. pieces	%	Qty. pieces	%	Qty. pieces	%
Depression	3	6,52	20	32,2	24	18,89	17	15,17	64	18,44
Gender Violence	2	4,34	2	3,22	24	18,89	14	12,5	42	12,10
Justice/Court System	2	4,34	8	12,90	12	9,44	16	14,28	38	10,95
Corruption	6	13,04	3	4,83	8	6,29	11	9,82	28	8,06
Harassment	6	13,04	5	8,06	8	6,29	8	7,14	27	7,90
Terrorism	2	4,34	3	4,83	1	0,78	2	1,78	8	2,30
Undetermined	25	54,34	21	33,87	50	39,37	44	39,28	140	40,34
TOTAL	46	100	62	100	127	100	112	100	347	100

Source: Author

### 3.2.1. Depression

The World Health Organization estimates in about 300 million people suffer from depression (WHO, 2017), a mental disorder that can affect one's work and personal life and increase the risk of suffering other ailments and, even, in more serious cases, suicide. Studies on the psychological forensics state that in 90 to 95% of suicide cases there is at least one mental-health diagnosis at the time of suicide (Nock et al., 2008; and Forti-Sampiero & Forti-Buratti, 2012). As shown in Table 1, problems stemming from mental depression (18.4 %) are shown as the most frequent causes, percentage that increases up to 40.5% in news uncovering celebrities or high-profile individuals (*El Mundo* 54.6%, *El País* 45.2%, *ABC* 32.2% and *La Razón* 20%). It corresponds to a group of the population aged 20 to 29 and there is a higher percentage of males (60.9 %) than females (28.2 %), although with differences among the newspapers. Males predominate in *La Razón* (100%), *El País* (87,5%), and *ABC* (52,9%), and in *El Mundo* men and women are covered at a similar rate (45% each one). In 10.9% of the news items, no sex is identified.

### 3.2.2. Gender Violence

We consider that "all acts of sexist violence that may possibly or actually result in physical, sexual, or psychological damage, including threats, coercion and kidnapping, where it occurs in the public or private life" (ONU, 1995). In the newspapers analyzed, this factor explains the 12.5% of the whole sample (*El País* 18.9%, *ABC* 12.5%, *La Razón* 4.3%, and *El Mundo* 3.2%), with a majority of men (78.6%), (*El País* 83.3%, *La Razón* 81.8%, and *ABC* 81.2%), aged 40 to 49 (28.6%), and aged 20 to 39 (42.8%). Meanwhile, women constitute 11.9% (*El Mundo* 50%, *ABC* 18.8%, *La Razón* 18.2%, and *El País* 4.1%) and in 28.5% of cases, their age is 40 to 49 and 42.8% are age 20 to 39. It is noteworthy that among gender violence perpetrators, a high suicide rate has been detected (21,15 %), according to a report by the National Prosecutor (2017, p. 454).

### 3.2.3. Justice/Court System

This topic encompasses the news referring to sentences and legal processes related to the topic. 10.9% of the whole sample is about justice or the court system (*ABC* 14.2 %, *El Mundo* 12.9 %, *El País* 9.4%, and *La Razón* 4.3%), rates that decrease when the subjects are celebrities or high-profile individuals (4.2%). The majority are men (57.9%), age 70+ (*ABC* 68.7%, *El Mundo* 62.5%, *La Razón* (50%), and *El País* 41.7%). The percentage of women is of little significance (5.3%) and is only relatively significant in *El Mundo* (12.5%) and *ABC* (6.3%).

### 3.2.4. Corruption

We coded news items on suicide triggered by corruption as the main reason understanding corruption as the abuse of public power to obtain private benefits via favorable decisions on behalf of the powerful (Código Penal LO 1/2015). These constitute 8.8% of the articles in the sample (*La Razón* 13%, *ABC* 9.8%, *El País* 6.2%, and *El Mundo* 4.8%). Regarding sex, men make up 85.1%, of which 39.2% are between 60 and 69 years old, reaching high percentage level in all newspapers (*La Razón* 100%, *El País* 100%, *El Mundo* 75%, and *ABC* 72.7%). No case of corruption behind suicide was published linked to women, and in 27.3% sex was not determined by news items.

### 3.2.5. Harassment

We understand harassment as serious, sometimes frequent, behaviors, such as coercion and threats, that jeopardize freedom and dignity, imply persecution, stalking or surveillance, harassment that can upset daily life, recognized as a crime by the criminal law (LO 1/2015, of March 30). This news makes up 7.9% of the whole sample (*La Razón* 13%, *El Mundo* 8%, *ABC* 7,1%, and *El País* 6,2%). Age ranges between 8 and 17 years old (55.5 %) and this cause is more frequent in women (66.6%), as reflected in *El Mundo* (80%), *ABC* (75%), *El País* (50%), and *La Razón* (66.6%). In the case of men, it is less than 25%.

### 3.2.6. Terrorism

This factor explaining suicide in news coverage shows low percentages in the sample (*El Mundo* 4.8%, *La Razón* 4.3% and *ABC* 1.7%, and *El País* 0.8%). There is no registered case involving women and in half of the articles analyzed, there is no mention of sex of the affected.

### 3.3. Method used to commit suicide

The WHO recommends not going into details about the methods used or the place when reporting on suicide in order to prevent at-risk people from copying the *modus operandi* (WHO, 2017). As shown in Table 2, 62.5% of articles analyzed specified the suicide method (firearms 20.1%, hanging 16.4%, and falling or jumping from height 11.5%). However, there are differences between newspapers: in *La Razón* there is more falling from height (17.3%), in *El Mundo*, hanging (20.9%), while *ABC* and *El País* coincide on firearms (22% and 22.3% each one). It is interesting to note that the first option for celebrities and high-profile individuals is by hanging (26.6%), followed by firearms (11.8%) and suffocation (7.4%). Other methods like falling or jumping from heights, explosion and drug overdose have lower percentages (2.1%). In terms of sex, men use more firearms (87.2%) and hanging (61.4%), while women opt for hanging (29.8%) and overdoses (26.1%) based on the articles published.

### 3.3.1. Firearms

This method appears most often, in 20.1% of cases (*El País* 22%, *ABC* 22.3%, *El Mundo* 19.3% and *La Razón* 10.8%), is most used by men (87.2%) rather than women (5.7%). In suicides using this method, motives include problems related to corruption (27.1%) and the justice/court system (17.2%), although with differences between newspapers. In *La Razón* and *ABC* corruption is the highest (80% and 28% respectively), in *El Mundo* its depression (25%) and in *El País* issues related to the justice/court system (21.4%). In terms of age, most are over age 60 (34.2%), in all the newspapers' articles included in the sample (*La Razón* 60%, *ABC* 36%, *El Mundo* 33.3%, and *El País* 28.6%).

### 3.3.2. Hanging

Asphyxia by hanging is mentioned in 16.4% of all pieces (*El Mundo* 20.9%, *El País* 19.6%, *ABC* 12.5%, and *La Razón* 10.8%). Motives that can lead to this type of suicide include depression (24.6%) and gender violence (19.3%). There are more men (61.4%) than women (29.8%) that end their life this way and their age ranges between 30 and 49 (42%).

Table 2. Method used to commit suicide

	<i>La Razón</i>		<i>El Mundo</i>		<i>El País</i>		<i>ABC</i>		Total	
	Qty. pieces	%	Qty. pieces	%	Qty. pieces	%	Qty. pieces	%	Qty. pieces	%
Firearms	5	10,86	12	19,35	28	22,04	25	22,32	70	20,17
Hanging	5	10,86	13	20,96	25	19,68	14	12,50	57	16,42
Falling from Height	8	17,39	8	12,90	4	3,14	20	17,85	40	11,52
Drug Overdose	4	8,69	9	14,51	8	6,29	2	1,78	23	6,62
Suffocation	3	6,52	5	8,06	5	3,93	7	6,25	20	5,76
Explosion	0	0	4	6,45	1	0,78	2	1,78	7	2,01
Undetermined	21	45,65	11	17,74	56	44,09	42	37,50	130	37,46
TOTAL	46	100	62	100	127	100	112	100	347	100

Source: Author

### 3.3.3. Falling from height

This is understood as throwing oneself from a height. It is mentioned in 11.5% of the articles included in the sample, yet in different proportions comparing newspapers (*ABC* 17.8 %, *La Razón* 17.4%, *El Mundo* 12.9%, and *El País* 3.1%). The main motives are gender violence (22.5%), that shows a higher percentage in men (57.5%) than in women (25%). In terms of age, this ranges from 20 to 39 (32.5%). In *La Razón*, it especially occurs between young people of age 29 (62.5%), in *ABC* they are younger than 40 (45%), and in *El País* the age varies between 30 and 49 (75%).

### 3.3.4. Drug overdose

This category includes news items mentioning the intaking of drugs, medicines, or toxic products as a method to commit suicide. They make up 6.6%, yet with differences when comparing newspapers (*El Mundo* 14.5%, *La Razón* 8.6%, *El País* 6.9%, and *ABC* 1.78%). It is used by subjects with ages between 40 and 59 (26%) and older than 70 (21.7%), although once again there are differences when comparing newspapers. In *ABC* (50%) and *La Razón* (25%), more of the items mentioning overdose as the cause of suicide are between 40 and 49 years old, *El Mundo* reports over 70 (44.5%), and in *El País*, age ranges between 50 and 59 (37.5%). Motives of suicides by overdose include depression (26.1%) followed by gender violence, and the justice/court system (13.5% each one), as mentioned by the newspapers.

### 3.3.5. Suffocation

This term is understood as facial obstruction, thorax compression, or denial of oxygen in a closed space (Celis, Hernández, Gómez, Orozco & Rivas, 2004: 503). It constitutes 5.7% of the articles in the sample (*El Mundo* 8%, *La Razón* 6.5%, *ABC* 6.2%, and *El País* 3.9%). Regarding the motives of suicide by suffocation, these include depression (20%), result found in all the items analyzed (*El País* 100%, *La Razón* 45%, *ABC* 42.8%, and *El Mundo* 20%), followed by the justice/courts system (20 %). It is performed by men (60%) and women (10%) ages 20 to 29 (18.5%), although there are differences when comparing newspapers. *El Mundo* mostly mentions 18 and 19-year-olds (11.1 %) and over age 60 (11.1 %). *El País* mentions 20 to 29-year-olds (50%), and *ABC* 29 or younger (22.2 %) and also in *La Razón* (18.5 %).

## 4. Other WHO Recommendations

WHO recommends avoiding the use of the word "suicide" in the headline. However, among the newspapers analyzed, 29.3% of cases mention the term suicide (*El Mundo* 38.7%, *ABC* 32.2%, *El País* 24.4%, and *La Razón* 23.9%), percentage that decreases to 21.3% when it comes to celebrities and high-profile individuals (*ABC* 29%, *El Mundo* 22.7%, *El País* 16.2%, and *La Razón* 10%). It is not included in 35.8%, although with significant differences between the newspapers (*La Razón* 45.7%, *El País* 44.1%, *El Mundo* 29%, and *ABC* 25.9%). Regarding the headlines, 34.8% of the sample analyzed used terms like "dead" (*El País* 77.5%, *ABC* 68.8%, *El Mundo* 65.5%, and *La Razón* 64.2%), "taking his/her life" (14.8%), "hanged" (8.51%), "corpse", and

Table 3. Mention of the word suicide in headlines

	<i>La Razón</i>		<i>El Mundo</i>		<i>El País</i>		<i>ABC</i>		Total	
	Qty. pieces	%	Qty. pieces	%	Qty. pieces	%	Qty. pieces	%	Qty. pieces	%
Mentioned	21	45,7	18	29,1	56	44,1	29	25,8	124	35,8
Not mentioned	11	23,91	24	38,70	31	24,40	36	32,14	102	29,39
Other terms	14	30,43	20	32,25	40	31,49	47	41,96	121	34,87
TOTAL	46	100	62	100	127	100	112	100	347	100

Source: Author

“passed away” (4.25% each one). In the case of celebrities, 55.3% are not mentioned in the headline and 23.4% are (*ABC* 29%, *El Mundo* 22.7% *El País* 16.4%, and *La Razón* 10%).

In terms of the body of the text, 62.6% of cases mention the method used to commit suicide and in addition to that, 52.7% go into detail about it (*El Mundo* 62.9%, *ABC* 58%, *El País* 48%, and *La Razón* 39.1%).

WHO also recommends not treating suicide under a sensationalist frame, as well as avoid providing detailed information about the place of suicide. Nevertheless, in 9.7% of the articles, there is information that can be considered sensationalist (*El Mundo* 19.3%, *La Razón* 15.2%, *El País* 7.8% and *ABC* 4.4%). In other words, it goes into the gory details in order to cause intense emotions in the reader (Acinas, Robles & Peláez, 2015: 74).

Some examples are:

A man, age 47, was found dead in a car in Toledo today at noon. He had a plastic bag covering his head and a gas cylinder connected via a plastic tube, according to what the National Police told abc.es. He used carbon dioxide, said other sources (*ABC*, 22/11/2017).

“A woman and her children were found strangled in their home and the husband died having jumped out of a window”. “When I looked over the balcony, I saw a man on the ground. It was the neighbor: Manuel Bustamante, who had fallen dressed in only his underwear –in underwear and socks– from the second floor (*La Razón*, 03/2017).

“The loose threads of the mysterious ‘Lesvy Case’”. “On the cold forensic table lies the na-

med body of Lesvy Berlín Osorio. Her eyes are softly closed and her mouth, half open showing dry lips. Her left cheek has a sore that has turned black, with scabs, and the left side of her neck has been marked forever by a thin, deep mark of a telephone cord” (*El País*, 13/07/2017).

Another WHO recommendation mentions not publishing suicide notes in any way. In the texts analyzed, the farewell note appears in 5.5% (*El Mundo* 6.5%, *El País* 6.3%, *ABC* 4.5%, and *La Razón* 4.4%). However, the percentage increases until reaching 14.9% when it comes to celebrities and high-profile individuals (*El Mundo* 27.3%, *El País* 16.2%, and *ABC* 9.7%).

Some examples are:

Kim Jong-hyun, singer of the band Shinee, left a suicide note before dying that said: “I am broken inside. The depression that has been slowly eating at me has now devoured me, and I haven’t been able to overcome it. It is incredible how much it hurts. No one is more tormented or debilitated than I” (*El País*, 19/12/2017).

Just as bad is the young man who records and laughs as the one who hits. She was, for her classmates, “fat and ugly”, and she felt terribly unhappy, claims her own suicide note (*ABC* 3/2/2017).

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

The objective of this article was to analyze the informative treatment that major Spanish newspapers perform on suicide, focusing on triggering factors and the methods used mentioned in the items

**Table 4. Allusions to a suicide note**

	<i>La Razón</i>		<i>El Mundo</i>		<i>El País</i>		<i>ABC</i>		Total	
	Qty. pieces	%	Qty. pieces	%	Qty. pieces	%	Qty. pieces	%	Qty. pieces	%
No note	44	95,65	58	93,54	119	93,70	107	95,53	328	94,52
Note	2	4,35	4	6,46	8	6,30	5	4,47	19	5,48
TOTAL	46	100	62	100	127	100	112	100	347	100

Source: Author

analyzed. It is important to better understand the media coverage of suicide and, also, know if such coverage has a social purpose, as McCombs proposes (2006).

The study shows that suicide is a topic of interest in the Spanish national press, given that news items about it are published every month, although a larger number appear in July and December, dates related to suicides of celebrities and high-profile individuals (Herrera, Ures & Martínez, 2015). However, it is important to note that the number of suicides in Spain in 2017 was 3,679, and most of the articles refer to cases about celebrities and high-profile individuals or those that are newsworthy or present general interest. Such results are along to the stylebooks guidelines of *El País* (2014, p. 33) and *El Mundo* (2002, p.67), while *ABC's* stylebook does not mention suicide and *La Razón* does not have a stylebook. Meanwhile, the European Journalists Code of Ethics and the FAPE do not make a specific reference to the way news on suicide should be handled. Previous research has concluded that there has been an increase of news pieces published on suicide (Garrido, Eleazar & Catalán, 2018, p.815; and Herrera, Ures & Martínez, 2015, p.130). This increase suggests that suicide is no longer taboo, after decades of silence in the media and with it, they serve society (González, 2018).

Suicide is presented in the majority of cases as a way-out to a problem. There are numerous studies that claim that psychological personality disorders, anxiety, and depression constitute the first cause of death (Gelder, Gat & Mayou, 1989; Roy, Nielse, Rylander, Sarchiapone & Segal, 1999; Sadock & Sadock, 2008; Mínguez, García & Gándara, 2010; Gómez, Forti, Gutiérrez, Belmonte & Martin, 2016). Research done with forensic and psychological data also matches (Dorpat & Ripley, 1960; Barraclough, Bunh, Nelson & Sainsbury, 1974; Arató, Demeter, Rihmer & Somogy, 1988; Rich, Ricketts, Fowler & Young, 1988). Research results confirm the evidence that depression is an individual mental disorder that more and more leads to the act of suicide and therefore carries more risk (Casado, Mata & Raya, 2012, p.3). Some data coincide with Garrido et. al (2018, p. 815), but are higher than those obtained by Muñoz & Sánchez (2013, p.16). These results show that the newspapers analyzed report on the motives driving people to commit suicide and with it are far from the WHO guidelines

and its program SUPRE (SUICIDE PREVENTION) (Navarro, 2017, p. 29).

In terms of the *modus operandi* used, this is specified in 62.5% of cases, less than what is reported by Muñoz & Sánchez (2013, p.16) (74.8%). The sample analyzed highlights violent methods like firearms, falling from heights, hanging, compared to non-violent means such as drug overdoses or ingesting other toxic substances and suffocation and gases (Gómez et. al., 2016; Herrera, Ures & Martínez, 2015). Other studies show that violent methods appear more often (Miguel et al. 2005, p. 6; Gómez, Forti, Gutiérrez, Belmonte & Martin, 2014; Santurtún, Santurtún, Agudo & Zarrabeitia, 2016; and INE, 2017). This data is not consistent with previous studies, such as the one published by Sánchez, Orejarena & Guzmán (2004, p.220), research conducted by Miguel et al. (2005, p.46), and Romero & Gamero (2005, p.7), according to which hanging is first place, followed by firearms. Therefore, it is true that the newspapers analyzed publish information on the methods used to commit suicide, something that is contrary to the recommendations given by WHO, in order to prevent proliferation of suicidal behavior (Sudak & Sudak, 2005; Pirkis, Blood, Beautrais, Burgess & Skehams, 2006). Once again, the media do not comply with WHO recommendations in that they give detailed information and descriptions of the methods used.

In the newspapers analyzed, the word "suicide" is mentioned in the headline (29.3%) together with other terms like "dead", "taking his/her life", as well as mentions to the method used to commit suicide, which in the body of the news text reaches 52.7%, together with details that can be considered sensationalist (Acinas, Robles & Peláez, 2015, p. 74). There are also mentions of suicide notes (5.5%), although proportionately less than that referred to in other studies (Acosta, Milian & Viña, 2012 Rátiva, Ruiz & Medina, 2013, p.5; Muñoz & Sánchez, 2013, p.16).

In conclusion, the newspapers analyzed provide an informative treatment of suicide that we could classify as dichotomic. In other words, on one hand, the information published is similar to those obtained in research conducted by clinical, forensic, and mental health fields, and media operate as a reflection or mirror of that realm. However, at the same time, it is a treatment that does not

follow the indications by the WHO and that emphasizes sensationalist features, given that they offer details related to the method used and mention or reproduce suicide notes, and that show suicide as a way out to a problem. In addition, there is a lack of content referring to subjects like prevention, alternative paths to suicide, information about risk factors, community resources, hotlines and support group telephone numbers, all key elements recommended by the WHO. Nevertheless, future

research should study whether or not WHO guidelines (2017) are effectively followed by media and journalism in their coverage of suicide.

## Notes

1 elpais.com; elmundo.es; abc.es; larazon.es

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