

Suicide, the Individual, and Context: Social Representations of Suicide in a Brazilian Newspaper

Suicídio, Indivíduo e Contexto: Representações Sociais de Suicídio em um Jornal Brasileiro

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Suicide, Individu et Contexte : Représentations Sociales du Suicide dans un Journal Brésilien

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Abstract

This study examined social representations of suicide in news reports published by the newspaper Folha de São Paulo, guided by three a priori themes: i) how suicide is portrayed; ii) how people who die by suicide are characterized; and iii) how everyday practical contexts are linked to suicide. The data source comprised 103 reports disseminated on Twitter by Folha de São Paulo between 2015 and 2021. The textual corpus was subjected to content analysis. The results showed i) relations of opposition and complementarity regarding the object “suicide”; ii) descriptive, pejorative, and positive labels applied to people who die by suicide; and iii) individual and social contexts associated with the phenomenon. The discussion addresses anchoring processes, the role of naming the object as a mental disorder, the contextual dimension of social representations of suicide, and the objectification of people who die by suicide as disordered, problematic, and victimized. We conclude that these representations sustain a duality in the construction of public discourse: on one hand, they foster debate on suicide as a preventable public health issue; on the other, they employ devices that can increase the number of self-inflicted deaths to amplify news impact.

Keywords: suicide, social representation, social psychology, media.

Resumo

Este estudo investigou as representações sociais de suicídio em reportagens veiculadas pelo jornal Folha de São Paulo, a partir de três eixos temáticos definidos a priori: i) como o suicídio é retratado; ii) como quem se suicida é caracterizado; e iii) como os contextos práticos do cotidiano se associam ao suicídio. Como fonte de dados, foram utilizadas 103 reportagens veiculadas entre 2015 e 2021 no Twitter pelo jornal Folha de São Paulo, cujo corpus de dados textuais foi submetido à análise de conteúdo. Os resultados demonstraram: i) relações de oposição e complementariedade em relação ao objeto suicídio; ii) denominações descritivas, pejorativas e positivas sobre quem se suicida; e iii) contextos sociais e individuais associados ao fenômeno. Discute-se sobre os processos de ancoragem, a função da nomeação do objeto como transtorno mental, a dimensão contextual das representações sociais de suicídio e a objetivação de quem se suicida como pessoa com transtorno, problemática e vitimizada. Conclui-se que tais representações mantêm uma dualidade na construção de um discurso público que, por um lado, estimula o debate do suicídio como problema de saúde pública evitável e, por outro, faz uso de recursos que têm o potencial de aumentar o número de mortes autoprovocadas para repercutir as notícias.

Palavras-chave: suicídio, representação social, psicologia social, mídia.

Resumen

Este estudio investigó las representaciones sociales de suicidio en reportajes vehiculadas por el periódico Folha de São Paulo, a partir de tres ejes temáticos definidos a priori: i) como el suicidio es retratado; ii) como quien se suicida es caracterizado; y iii) como los contextos prácticos del cotidiano se asocian al suicidio. Como fuente de datos, fueron utilizadas 103 reportajes vehiculadas entre 2015 y 2021 en Twitter por el periódico Folha de São Paulo, cuyo corpus de datos textuales fue sometido al análisis de contenido. Los resultados demostraron: i) relaciones de oposición y complementariedad con relación al objeto suicidio; ii) denominaciones descriptivas, peyorativas y positivas sobre quien se suicida; y iii) contextos sociales e individuales asociados al fenómeno. Se discute sobre los procesos de anclaje, la función del nombramiento del objeto como trastorno mental, la dimensión contextual de las representaciones sociales de suicidio y la objetivación de quién se suicida como persona con trastorno, problemática y victimizada. Se concluye que tales representaciones mantienen una dualidad en la construcción de un discurso público que, por un lado, estimula el debate del suicidio como problema de salud pública evitable y, por otro, utiliza recursos que tienen el potencial de aumentar el número de muertes autoprovocadas para repercutir las noticias.

Palabras clave: suicidio, representación social, psicología social, medios.

Résumé

Cette étude a examiné les représentations sociales du suicide dans les reportages publiés par le journal Folha de São Paulo, en s'appuyant sur trois axes thématiques définis à l'avance : i) comment le suicide est décrit; ii) comment la personne qui se suicide est caractérisée ; et iii) comment les contextes pratiques du quotidien sont associés au suicide. En tant que source de données, 103 reportages diffusés entre 2015 et 2021 sur Twitter par le journal Folha de São Paulo ont été utilisés, dont le corpus de données textuelles a été soumis à l'analyse de contenu. Les résultats ont montré : i) des relations d'opposition et de complémentarité par rapport à l'objet suicide ; ii) des désignations descriptives, péjoratives et positives concernant ceux qui se suicident ; et iii) des contextes sociaux et individuels associés au phénomène. On discute des processus d'ancrage, du rôle de la nomination de l'objet en tant que trouble mental, de la dimension contextuelle des représentations sociales concernant le suicide et de l'objectivation de ceux qui se suicident en tant que personnes atteintes d'un trouble, problématiques et victimisées. On conclut que ces représentations maintiennent une dualité dans la construction d'un discours public qui, d'une part, stimule le débat sur le suicide en tant que problème de santé publique évitable et, d'autre part, utilise des ressources susceptibles d'augmenter le nombre de décès auto-infligés afin de répercuter les nouvelles.

Mots-clés : suicide, représentation sociale, psychologie sociale, médias.

Social representations allow mediation between the individual and the world and are intrinsically linked to the public sphere. They emerge and are generated in this universe through communicative practices of public life, spaces for dialogue, different forms of language, rituals, work patterns, and varied modes of social mediation that structure groups (Jovchelovitch, 1996, 2011).

As mediators between the individual and the social world, social representations function as common-sense theories produced by communities' communicative practices and are therefore intrinsically tied to the public sphere (Binotto & Bruno, 2021; Jovchelovitch, 2011). As a practical, socially elaborated form of knowledge, the construction of social representations about a given social object serves, among other purposes, to guide how phenomena associated with that object are lived and experienced by social actors (Jovchelovitch, 2011; Moscovici, 2004).

With respect to suicide as a social object, its social representations have often relegated it to the realm of silence, the unsaid, repulsion, and the intolerable (Meira et al., 2020). In the scientific community, suicide is understood as death caused by the individual themselves through an act intended to be lethal, constituting the end of a continuum that includes suicidal behavior and suicidal ideation (Moutier et al., 2021). Suicidal behavior spans a spectrum of actions, from suicide attempts to preparatory behaviors for suicide. Suicidal ideation refers to the process of thinking about, considering, or planning suicide (Moutier et al., 2021). The phenomenon can evoke moral judgments and, in common sense, is often deemed unacceptable, portrayed as cowardice, selfishness, or weakness (Lucas & Bonomo, 2022; Meira et al., 2020). These pejorative and stereotyped elements, present in social representations of suicide, underscore the importance of understanding how they are formed so that appropriate interventions can be designed for contemporary social contexts (Lucas & Bonomo, 2022).

With the advent of new technologies, the contemporary public sphere is increasingly digital (Binotto & Bruno, 2021; Jovchelovitch, 2011). In this landscape, the media plays a central role in the theories groups formulate about objects perceived as salient in everyday life (Moscovici, 2004). The media is prominent in producing popular knowledge, both because it is a major vehicle for disseminating ideologies, beliefs, and values and because it fosters debates that spur social engagement (Oliveira et al., 2024).

Online news about suicide and discussions on social networks have become common spaces where the topic is addressed with growing frequency (Lucas & Bonomo, 2022; Sinyor et al., 2021). Media coverage can pose risks — by increasing suicides — or confer benefits — by contributing to prevention — depending on how reports are crafted (Sinyor et al., 2023; Till et al., 2020).

Given these specificities, the World Health Organization (WHO) has updated manuals for professionals across media sectors to reduce the harmful effects of inadequate coverage of suicide (OMS, 2000, 2008, 2017). Considering suicide as a social object present in online public debate, questions arise about how such coverage may contribute to the sociogenesis of social representations on the topic and how those representations might guide individual and collective actions.

Social representations form through socially regulated cognitive processes — objectification and anchoring — shaped by groups' needs, interests, and desires (Jodelet, 1984; Trindade et al., 2011). Objectification is the structuring operation that makes the abstract concrete. It simplifies the new object and makes it appear as a naturalized dimension of social life. This process creates a new parameter for perceiving the object, such that the figurative nucleus becomes a mediator between the subject and reality (Jodelet, 1984; Trindade et al., 2011). Its development involves three movements (Moscovici, 2004): a) selection and decontextualization — individuals select a portion of the total information set, related to cultural and religious values and prior experiences; b) formation of the figurative nucleus from elements of the conceptual nucleus; and c) naturalization — constructed elements become identified as part of the object's reality (Moscovici, 2004).

Anchoring, in turn, is the way the elements of an object are incorporated into pre-existing systems of thought, allowing the individual to assimilate the object within a reference system of values (Moscovici, 2004). New representations are inscribed in existing knowledge systems and transform prior knowledge. The process comprises three stages: a) attribution of meaning, in which meanings and names are assigned to the new object; b) instrumentalization of knowledge, which confers a functional value on social representations; and c) rooting in pre-existing systems of thought, through which new representations become familiar (Moscovici, 2004; Trindade et al., 2011). Anchoring approaches social categorization by classifying and assigning naming systems to what is unknown (Bonomo et al., 2020; Cabecinhas, 2004; Silva, 2021).

Moscovici (1961/2012) also described three modes of communication used by news organizations that shape the formation of representations: diffusion, propagation, and propaganda. Diffusion seeks to create common knowledge from content of interest to a diverse audience (Moscovici, 1961/2012). Propagation adapts information to a pre-established belief system, aiming to protect it from the threats posed by new knowledge and to orient individuals' attitudes (Doise, 2011). Propaganda intervenes in specific, conflictual behaviors by highlighting contrasts between “true” and “false” knowledge (Moscovici, 1961/2012).

In studies of social representations of suicide, depression consistently appears as a central element across different populations. In many groups, the suicidal act is viewed as the final consequence of a depressive state (Alexandre et al., 2021; Bezerra et al., 2021; Calile & Chatelard, 2021; Kravetz et al., 2021; Lucas & Bonomo, 2023; Lucas et al., 2021; Meira et al., 2020; Oliveira et al., 2023), even though this view is not universally accepted in psychology and psychiatry, as it privileges pathological features over individual multiplicity and collective historical contexts (Hjelmeland & Knizek, 2017). When suicide is understood as the result of an illness process and anchored in the clinical symptoms of depression — the most prevalent mental disorder in Brazil today (Boaventura et al., 2021) — common-sense prevention tends to materialize in individual medical and psychological follow-up (Alexandre et al., 2021; Bezerra et al., 2021; Lucas & Bonomo, 2023; Melo et al., 2020).

Regarding the sociogenesis of social representations, it unfolds through community members' practices and discourse, which derive from what they see in the media and from everyday experience (Jovchelovitch, 1996, 2011). Thus, in this formative process, the media can play an important role in the theories groups develop about objects considered salient in daily life. The context in which representations are formed and expressed must also be regarded as crucial (Justo et al., 2014). Distinct representations may be activated depending on the contextual demands surrounding the social object, given that context encompasses factors contingent on situations of social interaction (Flament & Rouquette, 2003; Justo et al., 2014). This notion aligns with the concept of a metasystem, composed of social norms that regulate the cognitive system (Doise, 2011).

The interaction among subject, object, and context is dynamic and dialogical: suicide takes shape as a person's elaboration in direct interaction with their social environment (Marková, 2006; Palmonari & Cerrato, 2011). Examining social representations of suicide in media discourse may support changes that raise the quality of reporting for prevention. It can help move away from stereotypes that harm people who suffer and broaden what is understood as mental health beyond purely individual issues.

In light of the above, this study set out to investigate social representations of suicide in reports published by the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo*. We pursued three a priori objectives: i) to understand how suicide is portrayed in the analyzed journalistic pieces; ii) to examine how people who die by suicide are characterized in the textual corpus; and iii) to identify everyday practical contexts associated with the phenomenon of suicide.

Method

Data Source

Data comprised 103 news reports posted by the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* on its Twitter profile that addressed suicide. Reports were included in the corpus if they met the following criteria: i) suicide was the central theme, evidenced by suicide-related descriptors in the title and/or subtitle; ii) the full text was available free of charge; iii) the item had prompted discussion with at least one user comment on Twitter or on the newspaper's website; and iv) publication occurred between 2015 and 2021. All items that did not meet these criteria were excluded.

The start year, 2015, was chosen because the topic gained increased prominence in the media and on social networks with the launch of the national suicide-prevention campaign Yellow September (Oliveira et al., 2020). *Folha de São Paulo* was selected based on data from the Instituto Verificador de Comunicação (IVC), which identifies the Grupo Folha outlet as the most widely read Brazilian newspaper website (IVC, 2020).

Data Collection Procedure

We used Twitter's advanced search tool with the following settings: Language set to Portuguese; "From these accounts" set to the official Folha de São Paulo profile (@folha); "Filters" set to include replies and links; "Minimum replies" set to 1; and dates spanning January 1, 2015, through December 31, 2021.

To retrieve journalism specific to suicide, the field "Any of these words" included terms commonly used by the media in discussions of the topic: "suicídio," "suicídios," "suicida," "suicidas," "ideação suicida," "pensamento suicida," "pensamentos suicidas," and "parassuicídio." Of the 103 reports identified, 69 were found via the descriptor "suicídio" ($f=69$), 15 via "suicídios" ($f=15$), 16 via "suicida" ($f=16$), two via "suicidas" ($f=2$), and one via "pensamentos suicidas" ($f=1$). Duplicates were removed after applying the filters.

Data Processing and Analysis

Selected reports were organized in a data-extraction table with fields for title and subtitle, publication date, full text, and direct link to the online content. Corpus underwent content analysis (Bardin, 2002; Oliveira, 2008) to identify three thematic axes proposed by Lucas & Bonomo (2022): i) how suicide is portrayed; ii) how those who die by suicide are characterized; and iii) how the context of suicide is addressed. This guiding classification structured the base corpus. Categorization was performed by two judges for each content set generated, using the a priori axes defined by Lucas & Bonomo (2022).

For each axis, text fragments from the reports were selected as context units (CUs), segments whose length allows the meanings of recording units (RUs) to be understood. RUs are the segments from which the text is partitioned for analysis, i.e., passages containing an assertion about the object of study (Oliveira, 2008). Categories and subcategories for each axis were then identified and are presented and described in the Results.

Results

The findings are organized around the three a priori thematic axes (Lucas & Bonomo, 2022) to address the guiding questions: i) how is suicide portrayed? (Table 1); ii) how are people who die by suicide characterized? (Table 2); and iii) how is the context of suicide addressed? (Table 3). Each axis is presented with its corresponding thematic categories and subcategories, along with their descriptions, CUs and RUs.

Table 1 displays the categories for Axis 1, which concerns how suicide is portrayed across the analyzed reports. The content reveals both i) oppositions: *Motivated by a single cause* ($f=32$) versus *Multifactorial phenomenon* ($f=25$), and *Associated with crimes* ($f=19$) versus *Assisted suicide and euthanasia* ($f=14$); and ii) complementarities in meaning: *Preventable* ($f=31$) alongside *Public health issue* ($f=24$), and *Associated with mental disorders* ($f=22$) alongside *Escape from reality* ($f=16$).

Table 1.*Categories for Thematic Axis 1 — How suicide is portrayed*

Category	Category description	CU	RU	Subcategories	<i>f</i>
Motivated by a single cause	Attributes a single cause to the reported suicide episode	“Competition starts early, and it is hard for adults to switch off the competitive drive they developed as children. (...) Last week brought one of the most bizarre examples of South Korea’s competitive nature.”	32	Result of a competitive society	4
				Result of bullying	3
				Result of cyberbullying	3
				Result of challenge games	3
				Result of stress	2
				Result of legends about evil spirits	1
				Result of transphobia	1
				Result of drug use	1
				Result of a “crazy” society	1
Multifactorial phenomenon	Understands suicide as a multifactorial phenomenon associated with diverse factors	“Scholars mention issues involving sexuality, difficulty coping with frustration, bullying, pressure to choose a career and to perform well at school as conflicts that arise at this age and can act as aggravating factors.”	25	—	—
Associated with crimes	Discusses suicide within contexts of crimes and police investigations	“The Federal Police operation that investigated embezzlement at UFSC (Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina) and culminated in the suicide of rector Luiz Carlos Cancellier, days after his arrest, is a portrait of Brazil, says Paulo Markun, author of <i>Recurso Final</i> , a newly released book on the case.”	19	Associated with police investigations	9
				Suicide attack	6
				Homicide followed by suicide	4
Assisted suicide and euthanasia	Specificities of assisted suicide and euthanasia as individual rights	“The role of the State is to protect citizens from harm others may cause them, not to prevent the harms they may inflict upon themselves.”	14	Individual right	7
Preventable	Frames suicide as preventable and notes that multiple preventive measures exist	“This means that nine out of 10 suicides are preventable.”	31	Assisted suicide	7
				Preventable	24
				How to avoid the contagion effect	7
Public health issue	Mentions the topic as a public health issue, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic	“In 2017, the Ministry of Health released the first epidemiological bulletin on suicide in Brazil, which showed an increase in the overall rate — from 5.3 per 100,000 individuals in 2011 to 5.7 in 2015 — and set a goal of reducing suicide mortality by 10% by 2020.”	24	Associated with the COVID-19 pandemic	13
				Public health issue	11
Associated with mental disorders	Presents suicide as a consequence of mental disorders, especially depression	“‘If you create a dialogue that makes it clear that suicide is generally the end point of depression, that it is a permanent solution to a temporary problem, and that depression is treatable, many lives would be saved,’ says Solomon in a phone interview with <i>Folha</i> . This seems to be Solomon’s main message; he has been treating his depression for decades.”	22	Result of depression	14
				Associated with mental disorders	8
Escape from reality	Understands suicide as a way of escaping reality in different contexts	“Such a discrepancy suggests that police suicides are directly related to these professionals’ living and working conditions, who deal daily with a reality full of pain and sadness. Homicides, pursuits, rapes, robberies, and fights, among other violent situations, are part of their routine.”	16	Way of escaping work reality	11
				Way of escaping reality	4
				Way of escaping school reality	1

CU = context unit; RU = recording unit.

Regarding how suicide is portrayed, in the category *Motivated by a single cause* ($f=32$), the reports attribute a single cause to the suicide episode under discussion. The specific cause, however, varies by report: a competitive or “crazy” society, bullying or cyberbullying, challenge games, legends about evil spirits, stress, drug use, or transphobia. In contrast, the *Multifactorial phenomenon* category ($f=25$) frames suicide as a phenomenon associated with multiple factors.

In the *Public health issue* category ($f=24$), suicide is defined as a matter situated in the public sphere and in the health domain — a view strengthened especially by its association with the COVID-19 pandemic. In the *Preventable* category ($f=31$), suicide is treated as avoidable, with multiple measures available for prevention. Particular emphasis is placed on how to reduce contagion effects through responsible media coverage.

When *Associated with mental disorders* ($f=22$), suicide is depicted as the end point of various disorders — such as mood and/or personality disorders (e.g., borderline) — and as a consequence of depression. The phenomenon is also characterized as an *Escape from reality* ($f=16$), implying a supposed dissociation from reality in different contexts, such as work and school. In *Assisted suicide and euthanasia* ($f=14$), coverage addresses the specificities of these practices and represents them as an individual right. In opposition, when *Associated with crimes* ($f=19$), discussion of the phenomenon is embedded in news about police investigations and criminal events, such as suicide attacks and homicide followed by suicide.

Table 2 presents the categories of the second thematic axis, which centers the analysis on the individual who dies by suicide. The content includes i) descriptive conceptions: *Having mental disorders* ($f=48$), *According to social markers* ($f=43$), and *According to occupation* ($f=18$); ii) pejorative conceptions: *Problematic* ($f=24$) and *Criminals* ($f=20$); and iii) positive meanings: *Through positive connotations* ($f=16$).

Table 2.

Categories for Thematic Axis 2 — How people who die by suicide are characterized

Category	Category description	CU	RU	Subcategories	<i>f</i>
Having mental disorders	Portrays the person who dies by suicide as ill, with mental disorders — especially depression	“Bruna Correia, 23, is a freshman and the first in her family to enter USP. Diagnosed with bipolar disorder, she takes medication but does not attend therapy because she depends on public provision. ‘I went to the Institute of Psychology and the University Hospital to try to get care, but I gave up because the line is huge,’ she says.”	48	With a mental-disorder diagnosis	17
				Depressive	12
				Ill	10
				Stressed	8
				“Crazy”	1
According to social markers	Characterizes the person who dies by suicide by age, sex, and sexual orientation	“According to specialists, adolescents are also more vulnerable to suicide because, among other factors, they tend to be more immediate and impulsive. ‘The adolescent brain is not yet fully mature. The system of checks and balances needs to be formed through social and cultural “gestation”,’ explains Neury Botega, psychiatrist and professor at Unicamp.”	43	Children and adolescents	20
				Older adults	8
				Men	5
				Young adults	4
				Women	3
				LGBTQIA+ population	3
According to occupation	Characterizes those who die by suicide by occupation — public figures, students, or military	“The numbers were published the same week fashion designer Kate Spade and celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain took their own lives.”	18	Public figure	8
				Students	4
				Police officers	4
				War veterans	2
Problematic	Portrays the person who dies by suicide as someone facing varied problems that generate feelings and reactions such as isolation and despair	“The problems began in 2004, after his first Olympic experience, and Phelps even sought refuge in drugs. In 2008 he was photographed smoking marijuana, something he says he regrets. The drugs were an attempt to escape ‘from all the things I was trying to run away from,’ he explains.”	24	Use drugs	8
				Isolated	7
				Desperate	5
				With financial problems	4
Criminal	Labels the person who attempts or dies by suicide as a criminal, whether due to police investigations or terrorist attacks	“This is the first suicide case involving a high-ranking politician investigated in the Lava Jato scandal — a former Colombian government secretary also died by suicide, but he was only a witness in the case and was not accused of wrongdoing.”	20	—	—

Through positive connotations	Characterizes the person who dies by suicide through positive connotations and highlights the deceased's qualities	"Lorna was not the only coronavirus-related suicide victim among New York health professionals."	16	Victimized	6
				Many positive qualities	4
				Warriors	4
				"Had everything"	2

CU = context unit; RU = recording unit.

The *Having mental disorders* category ($f=48$) portrays those who die by suicide as *ill* individuals with *diagnosed mental disorders*. Among the conditions cited, depression stands out: individuals are described as *depressed*, i.e., presenting the clinical symptoms of depression. In the *Problematic* category ($f=24$), people who die by suicide are labeled in pejorative terms as facing varied problems — such as *drug use* or *financial difficulties* — alongside reactions like *despair* and *social isolation*.

Another category characterizes those who die by suicide *According to social markers* ($f=43$). *Children* and *adolescents* appear most prominently, followed by *older adults*, *men*, *young adults*, *women*, and the *LGBTQIA+ population*. In the same descriptive vein, *According to occupation* ($f=18$) groups reports that identify individuals by their professional roles — *public figures*, *students*, *police officers*, or *war veterans*.

The *Criminals* category ($f=20$) aggregates content that attributes criminal status to the person who attempts or dies by suicide, whether due to involvement in police investigations or terrorist attacks. In contrast, *Through positive connotations* ($f=16$) portrays those who die by suicide in positive terms, emphasizing the deceased's qualities: they are depicted as *victimized*, *highly capable*, "*warriors*," or as people who "*had everything*."

Table 3 presents the categories of Thematic Axis 3, focusing on the context in which suicide occurs. Content describing the context is subdivided into two main categories: *Social context* ($f=46$) and *Individual context* ($f=43$).

Table 3.

Categories for Thematic Axis 3 — How everyday contexts are associated with suicide

Category	Category description	CU	RU	Subcategory	<i>f</i>
Social context	Depicts the social context of suicide episodes across different social groups, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and poor working conditions	"For the first time in more than a decade, the number of suicides has risen again in Japan — a trend researchers attribute to the coronavirus pandemic."	46	COVID-19 pandemic	11
				Poor working conditions	10
				Political/economic disputes	7
				Competitive society	5
				Media exposure of suicide	5
				School/university routine	4
				Access to firearms	3
				Challenge games	3
				Access to drugs	1
				Social inequality	1
				"Haunted" forest	1
Individual context	Portrays the individual context of the reported case, covering diverse themes	""At 43, the writer has faced depression and anxiety since adolescence, when she began to develop 'a very strong desire to die.'"" 43	43	Psychological illness	12
				Police investigation	12
				Physical illness	5
				Aging	5
				Homicide followed by suicide	3
				Personal debt	2
				Exposure on social networks	2
				Workplace prejudice	1
				Drug use	1

The *Social context* category ($f=46$) highlights report content that situates suicide episodes within different social groups from a macro-social perspective. Suicide is discussed in the context of the *COVID-19 pandemic*, *poor working conditions*, *political/economic disputes*, and a *competitive, unequal society*. The topic also appears through *media exposure of suicide*, the *school/university routine*, ease of access to *firearms and drugs*, *challenge games*, and the so-called “*haunted forest*.”

Individual context ($f=43$) refers to publications that present the life circumstances of individuals who attempted suicide. These contexts emphasize *physical and psychological illness* and involvement in *police investigations*. Other themes include *aging*, *homicide followed by suicide*, *personal debt*, *exposure on social networks*, *workplace prejudice*, and *drug use*.

Figure 1 presents a schematic that brings together the three dimensions investigated and the answers to the guiding questions: i) how is suicide portrayed? ii) how are people who die by suicide characterized? and iii) how is the context of suicide addressed? Relations of opposition and complementarity among categories, as well as the descriptive, pejorative, and positive meanings identified, are also highlighted in the schematic.

Figure 1.

Synthesis of the categories and subcategories across the thematic axes.



Regarding Thematic Axis 1 — *How suicide is portrayed* — oppositional and complementary relationships were observed among the meanings in the analyzed content. The categories *Motivated by a single cause* ($f=32$) and *Multifactorial phenomenon* ($f=25$) present opposing ideas about what motivates suicide: the former posits single causes, whereas the latter advances the notion of multifactoriality. The categories *Associated with crimes* ($f=19$) and *Assisted suicide and euthanasia* ($f=14$) also stand in contrast: in the former, suicide is tied to criminal contexts; in the latter, it is framed as an individual right in situations of illness (primarily physical) and aging. Complementarities appear between *Preventable* ($f=31$) and *Public health problem* ($f=24$), since associating suicide with health issues aligns with treating it as preventable. Complementarity is likewise evident between *Associated with mental disorders* ($f=22$) and *Escape from reality* ($f=16$), given the understanding that “escape from reality” can be subsumed within conceptions of mental disorders.

For Thematic Axis 2 — *How people who die by suicide are characterized* — categories and sets of categories convey descriptive, pejorative, and positive meanings. *Having mental disorders* ($f=48$), *According to social markers* ($f=43$), and *According to occupation* ($f=18$) describe those who die by suicide using commonly employed research descriptors such as sex, occupation, age, and the presence of a mental-disorder diagnosis. Pejorative meanings are concentrated in *Problematic* ($f=24$) and *Criminals* ($f=20$), where the person is depicted as criminal, a drug user, or socially isolated. Positive meanings are concentrated in a single category, *Through positive connotations* ($f=16$), which portrays individuals in light of their achievements and qualities that are positively valued by the social environment.

Discussion

The analysis showed that communications about suicide in *Folha de São Paulo* occurred largely through the diffusion modality. In line with the characteristics of each communicative modality (Moscovici, 1961/2012), diffusion is defined by an informational focus—that is, informing diverse audiences about the social object at issue. By presenting suicide as a public health issue, listing ways to prevent it, and debating possible causes using statistics and social markers, the newspaper contributes to the formation of common knowledge on the topic and to the adjustment of that knowledge to the interests of varied audiences (Moscovici, 1961/2012).

With respect to the sociocognitive processes that form social representations, Thematic Axis 1 evidences anchoring of suicide in different knowledge systems (Jodelet, 1984; Moscovici, 2004). Through anchoring, the phenomenon is incorporated into familiar and functional preexisting categories, with certain adjustments in how the object is understood. This assimilation is not value-free, given the historically elaborated evaluative dimensions attached to the categories in which suicide is inscribed, which are manifested even in its naming (Jodelet, 1984; Trindade et al., 2011).

In the stage of meaning attribution — one step of the anchoring process (Jodelet, 1984) — suicide is named here as a *mental disorder*, an *individual right*, and a *crime*. The presence of ambiguities and dissonances in this naming indicates that the phenomenon is constituted by different units of meaning (Moscovici, 2004). These articulated and hierarchized networks of meaning allow for more precise understandings of the object in light of social reality and, being anchored in multiple bodies of knowledge, approach the process of social categorization (Trindade et al., 2011).

The familiarization of suicide can also be considered through social categorization, which organizes semantic structures into categories that, in turn, gain meaning through social representations (Bonomo et al., 2020). Unlike categorization, however, anchoring enables transformations of already established social representations (Cabecinhas, 2004). By rooting new representations in prior systems of thought, they are simultaneously inscribed in preexisting systems and transform previous knowledge (Jodelet, 1984; Trindade et al., 2011).

In this study, such transformations are visible in the units of meaning that frame suicide as a *mental disorder*. Once named in this way, the object is integrated into a network of meanings that places it within the logic of health care. Narratives are strongly oriented by the medical paradigm, which can sometimes emphasize individualizing and pathologizing aspects to the detriment of other parameters, such as psychosocial ones. Considering the instrumentalization stage of anchoring, this naming appears to respond to demands to update social representations of suicide that arise with new values, traditions, and social practices (Jodelet, 1984; Moscovici, 2004).

By contrast, naming the object as a *crime*, within a system of categories historically marked by stereotypes and negative valuation (Bonomo et al., 2020), does not fully align with socially accepted practices concerning health topics in the 21st century. Even in reports that include content conducive to prevention, this discourse may reinforce representational dimensions with potential to contribute to stigma surrounding suicide.

New demands for assimilating the phenomenon disturb the vocabulary and language used in journalistic communication, which can be seen in the oppositional meanings identified in this study (Jodelet, 1984; Silva, 2021). Ambiguities arise particularly among the terms *crime*, *individual right*, and *mental disorder* and among the terms associated with each naming — such as *commit*, *dignity*, and *illness*. As meanings are assigned according to anchoring processes, the media appear to mediate between discourses on suicide and everyday practices, attributing and sharing these meanings through accessible language (Moscovici, 2004; Silva, 2021).

Whereas Axis 1 reveals ongoing updates to social representations of suicide through anchoring, Axis 2 shows that suicide is objectified through the image of the individual who dies by suicide. In relation to the public face of the phenomenon that becomes visible through the subject (Jovchelovitch, 2011), objectification gives concrete form to abstract concepts and organizes the elements that constitute social representations of suicide (Moscovici, 2004).

Based on the results, the figurative nuclei appear to converge on three main images of the person who dies by suicide: i) as the *disordered person*, frequently depicted in reports as *children* and *adolescents* with *depression*; ii) as the *problematic person*, portrayed as a *drug user* or involved in *crime*; and iii) as the *victimized person*, cast as an unjustly treated “warrior.” These stereotypes may not reflect available Brazilian statistics on the profile of people who die by suicide or the multiplicity of factors that lead to suicide; nevertheless, they reproduce the object in a concrete, selective, coherent manner, becoming expressions of a naturalized reality in the analyzed reports (Boaventura et al., 2021; Jodelet, 1984; Moscovici, 2004).

Beyond the psychosocial work that entails a dialogic relationship between social subject and object, social representations can only manifest within the immediate context of social interaction — which, in this study, is mediated by news media (Marková, 2006; Palmonari & Cerrato, 2011). Assessing the implications of contextual insertion in Thematic Axis 3 shows that context shapes how report content is presented (Flament & Rouquette, 2003; Justo et al., 2014). When individual life factors used to explain the suicidal act are foregrounded, the strength of medical/scientific discourse stands out in forming representations, particularly by attributing the act to the person’s suffering. When social factors surrounding those who attempt suicide are emphasized, they appear as drivers that intensify individual suffering — macro-social forces projecting onto the subject in ways that individualize the issue.

Different representations of suicide are mobilized according to situational demands, since context encompasses contingencies of social interaction and allows the same representation to manifest differently (Flament & Rouquette, 2003; Justo et al., 2014). In other words, discussing social representations of suicide also requires considering the conditions under which they emerge and are expressed (Justo et al., 2014). This notion of social context can also be approached through the concept of a metasystem, made up of normative social regulations that govern cognitive processes and within which individuals may intervene across different metasystems depending on the occasion (Doise, 2011; Justo et al., 2014).

With regard to editorial choices at *Folha de São Paulo*, the media game appears to employ narratives that may foster stigma. Among many possible ways to report on the topic, dualities such as “science versus religion,” “good versus evil,” and “illness versus character” recur as patterns underpinning coverage. Alongside the strong presence of scientific discourse, this horizon of social representations sustains a dual public narrative that, on the one hand, encourages debate on suicide as a preventable public health issue and, on the other, uses devices that may increase self-inflicted deaths to amplify news impact (Binotto & Bruno, 2021; Jovchelovitch, 2011).

Reassessing how such content is presented in the media could improve reporting for prevention purposes, given that prevention becomes viable only when the social dimension is also considered. Broadening mental-health conceptions beyond individual factors may help clarify the role of everyday structures and practices in producing collective suffering. Emphasizing the psychosocial aspects of suicide in public discourse is therefore essential.

Final Considerations

This study investigated social representations of suicide in reports published by *Folha de São Paulo*. To meet the overall aim, the inquiry was guided by three specific objectives: i) how the social object “suicide” is addressed in the reports; ii) which meanings are associated with the person who dies by suicide; and iii) which contexts are described within the phenomenon as portrayed in the journalistic content.

The findings show oppositional and complementary relations in the meanings attributed to suicide. Regarding the person who dies by suicide, the coverage employs descriptive, pejorative, and positive labels. For context, meanings were organized around the social context in which the act occurs and the individual life context of the person who suffers. The discussion addressed anchoring and objectification processes and the contextual dimension of social representations of suicide. In anchoring, naming the object as a *mental disorder* appeared to meet demands to update representations in line with 21st-century health practices. In objectification, three images of the person who dies by suicide stood out: the *disordered person*, the *problematic person*, and the *victimized person*.

This investigation was limited to reports from a single Brazilian newspaper, within a specific time frame, and focused only on content posted by the newspaper on Twitter. Even so, the role of media outlets in producing popular knowledge on public-health topics — especially suicide — remains central to ensuring that coverage is responsible and beneficial to the population. Future studies should examine other types of media considering the importance of the context in which social representations of suicide are embedded and how this context may influence individual and collective actions.

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