

# Suicide Narratives in Contemporary Japanese Newspapers: An Analysis of Media Inventories

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## ABSTRACT

Suicide in Japan has long been a debated topic. In recent decades, the focus has turned towards the media and the Werther effect (copycat suicides), which seemed to spark some arguable Moral Panics throughout the 2000s. In the following decade, suicides have subsequently decreased. As a result of this decrease has been a lack of research focusing on the media and suicide in the 2010s. Drawing on narrative analysis through a Moral Panic framework, this thesis strives to see how newspapers reflect the current suicide situation, and if there were any indications of Moral Panics. The thesis relies on collected data from *Asahi* and *Yomiuri Shimbun*, as well as the suicide statistics provided by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. It was discovered that both newspapers focus their reporting on rarer circumstances such as school-related reasons or jumping. Furthermore, a potential Moral Panic was identified in 2012, which was analysed through aforementioned framework. The analysis showed that the central problem constructed in the newspapers was the concealment of bullying instead of the actual suicide. This thesis argues that the newspapers' inventory was framed toward a Moral Panic.

**Keywords:** Moral Panic, Suicide, Media, Narrative, Newspaper, Japan.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT.....</b>	<b>II</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....</b>	<b>III</b>
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS.....</b>	<b>IV</b>
<b>CONVENTIONS .....</b>	<b>VI</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES.....</b>	<b>VII</b>
<b>LIST OF TABLES .....</b>	<b>VII</b>
<b>1 INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 BACKGROUND.....	1
1.2 RESEARCH PROBLEM AND QUESTIONS.....	2
1.3 SIGNIFICANCE.....	3
1.4 CHAPTER OVERVIEW .....	3
<b>2 LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>4</b>
2.1 SUICIDOLOGY.....	4
2.2 THE SUICIDE NATION?.....	5
2.3 JAPANESE NEWS MEDIA.....	6
2.4 MORAL PANIC .....	7
2.5 SUICIDE IN JAPANESE NEWS MEDIA.....	8
2.6 SUMMARY.....	10
<b>3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK .....</b>	<b>11</b>
3.1 UNDERSTANDING MEDIA .....	11
3.2 NARRATIVE ANALYSIS .....	11
3.3 MORAL PANIC .....	12
3.4 SUMMARY.....	15
<b>4 METHODOLOGY.....</b>	<b>16</b>
4.1 DATA.....	16
4.2 DATA COLLECTION FOR INITIAL DATA ANALYSIS.....	17
4.3 DATA COLLECTION AND MORAL PANIC NARRATIVE ANALYSIS.....	17
4.4 LIMITATIONS AND ETHICS.....	18
<b>5 INITIAL ANALYSIS .....</b>	<b>21</b>
5.1 COMPARISON BETWEEN <i>ASAHI</i> AND <i>YOMIURI</i> IN RELATION TO THE MHLW STATISTICS .....	21
5.2 SUICIDE ARTICLES.....	22
5.3 METHODS OF SUICIDE.....	25
5.4 REASONS FOR SUICIDE.....	29

5.5	ADDITIONAL SEARCH TERMS .....	32
5.6	SUMMARY.....	35
<b>6</b>	<b>MAIN ANALYSIS .....</b>	<b>36</b>
6.1	OVERVIEW OF ARTICLES .....	36
6.2	OTSU INCIDENT.....	38
6.3	THE NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF THE NEWSPAPERS' INVENTORY.....	38
6.4	SUMMARY.....	43
<b>7</b>	<b>CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>45</b>
	<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>48</b>
	<b>APPENDIX I - KEYWORDS.....</b>	<b>62</b>

## CONVENTIONS

For this thesis, the modified Hepburn system will be used. Japanese words will also be written in italics, except for words normally in English, such as Tokyo or Osaka. Japanese names will follow Japanese standard, last name followed by first name. All translations are the author's own, unless otherwise specified.

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 – Yearly Suicide Articles .....	23
Figure 2 – Suicide Articles 2012-2013 by Month.....	24
Figure 3 – Monthly Suicide Articles - 2017.....	24
Figure 4 and Figure 5 – Number of Articles by Method.....	25
Figure 6 – Small Arms Reporting compared to Number of Suicides .....	26
Figure 7 –Yearly Suicide Articles by Reason - Yomiuri .....	29
Figure 8 – Yearly Suicide Articles by Reason - Asahi .....	29
Figure 9 and Figure 10 – Average Suicide Articles by Special Themes.....	32
Figure 11 – Bullying and School as Reason for Suicide.....	33
Figure 12 – Bullying Reporting by Percentage Contrasting Suicide Statistics.....	34
Figure 13 and Figure 14 – Articles Before and After Coding .....	36

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 – Percentage Distribution by Method .....	28
Table 2 – Percentage Distribution by Reason .....	31

# 1 INTRODUCTION

“If you are tired of work and relationships, and want to commit suicide in secret, do not hesitate to step into the sea of trees,” stated Tsurumi Wataru, the controversial Japanese author of *The Complete Manual of Suicide*, in the early 1990s (1993:70). Tsurumi (1993:1-8) explains the backdrop that his generation had to experience: the oil crisis, the end of the Showa period (1926-1989), the threat of nuclear war, and the looming possibility of the end of the world. Ultimately, the world did not end, and, if you wanted it to, you had to commit suicide. Tsurumi then posed two questions: Why must I live? Why should I not commit suicide? In the coming decades suicides would continue to rise in Japan. Contemporary research gradually turned towards understanding suicide and how to prevent them. One area of focus became the media and the Werther effect (copycat suicides), which was determined to be a problem throughout the 2000s. However, research on media reporting patterns and their potential Moral Panic tendencies in relation to suicides, which are arguably the foundation of the Werther effect, has become neglected. This thesis aims to identify media reporting patterns during a period of decreasing suicides, and to evaluate their narrative through a Moral Panic lens to understand the narrative construction of the individual media. This chapter will introduce the study by discussing the background and context, followed by the research problem and questions, the significance of the study and, finally, the chapter outline.

## 1.1 Background

Durkheim (2005[1897]:xlv), a founding father of sociology, stated that “each society has a definitive aptitude for suicide.” Therefore, suicide is expected in every society and not unique to individual countries. However, some countries are more known for it than others. Asia constitutes approximately 60% of the world’s suicides (Chen et al.,2012). Japan, in particular, stands out. Since 1998, suicides have spiked beyond 30,000 a year and have remained over that threshold until 2012 (MHLW,2020:259). This spike illuminates an ongoing debate in media and academia on Japanese suicides.

There has been a tendency to view Japan as a ‘suicide nation,’ meaning that the Japanese are uniquely predisposed to end their lives, which became the “conventional story of suicide” (Di Marco,2016:1-3). This view has been challenged in recent years, with the assertion that suicide in Japan is instead a culmination of modern realities and ‘ordinary’ motivations (Ozawa-de Silva,2008:516,536, Di Marco,2016:3). Throughout the 2000s,

suicide rates remained high. Over time, attention was turned towards solving the problem of suicide, and one aspect of this was turning the attention toward the media.

Since the mid-1970s, evidence showing a connection between news reporting and copycat suicides has become known as the Werther effect (Phillips,1974). In recent decades, the Werther effect has become a focus of study in connection with the Japanese media's long history of reporting on suicides. Already in the early 1990s it was noted that 'Japanese common sense' dictated that suicide news may trigger a rise in suicides (Ishii,1991:188).

In the 2000s, when the rates of suicide were the highest, the media was criticised by academia, primarily for their reporting on charcoal, hydrogen sulphide, and bullying-related suicides, which were found to trigger the Werther effect. The Werther effect happens as a *consequence* of excessive media narratives. Furthermore, these media narratives *can* be driven by Moral Panic tendencies, which was argued in the case of bullying-related suicides (Yamazato,2010).

Understanding the media, the media landscape, and the Werther effect is critically important to develop policies and guidelines to prevent more suicides, but also to publish news more ethically (WHO, 2017). Many studies in the Japanese context have investigated the relationship between the media and the Werther effect (e.g. Ueda et al.,2014, Hagihara et al., 2007). However, studies on the Werther effect, media, preventative measures, and suicide have generally focused on the 2000s or earlier, leaving the 2010s neglected. Furthermore, other aspects like a Moral Panic-driven media which can drive the Werther effect have also largely been neglected. This presents a gap in the literature, in the form of studying media reporting patterns of suicide while it has been decreasing, and its potential relation to Moral Panics. Because of the changing media landscape, considering how the media reports on suicides could help aid further preventative measures. As a result, the existing research is inadequate for understanding how the situation may have changed in the 2010s with the decreasing suicide rates in Japan.

## **1.2 Research Problem and Questions**

Due to the lack of research in the 2010s related to media reporting patterns fuelled by potential Moral Panics, this study will aim to identify and evaluate the patterns of media reporting regarding suicides in the 2010s. Furthermore, a suitable pattern will be further examined for Moral Panic tendencies. For these research aims, the following three research questions were formulated:

- 1) How do Japanese newspapers reflect the suicide situation in Japan?
- 2) Is the construction of the newspapers' inventory framed towards a Moral Panic regarding suicides?
- 3) What is the central problem of suicide framed in the narrative of the newspapers' inventory?

### **1.3 Significance**

This thesis seeks to contribute to the knowledge of suicide reporting patterns and potential Moral Panic tendencies related to these reporting patterns in the 2010s Japan. Drawing more attention to the topic as the media landscape evolves and expands could help to stimulate further debate regarding suicide reporting in Japan. These efforts could also help to give valuable information for guidelines to prevent potential suicide-related Moral Panics and the Werther effect consequences within the context of Japan.

### **1.4 Chapter Overview**

This thesis is organised into seven chapters, beginning with an introduction to introduce the thesis. Chapter two is a literature review that covers general suicidology and suicide in Japan. It also focuses on Japanese news media and introducing the concept of a Moral Panic. Chapter three focuses on the theoretical framework, namely narrative analysis, and utilises Moral Panic to guide the analysis. The chapter also briefly elaborates on how 'media' is used in the thesis. Chapter four covers the methodological choices in collecting and handling the data and discusses the limitations and ethics that needs to be considered. Chapter five showcases the initial analysis performed to demarcate the data needed for chapter six. Chapter six analyses the main data showcased by chapter five. Finally, chapter seven concludes the thesis.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

For the purposes of this thesis, three primary areas need to be examined in this literature review. First, establishing the field of suicidology with a primary focus on Japan as the ‘suicide nation.’ Secondly, attention will be given to the Japanese media with a focus on printed media and its depiction of suicide. Some discussion on the modern media landscape is also relevant. Thirdly, a summary of Moral Panic as a field will be discussed before turning to previous examples of Japanese Moral Panics related to suicide.

### 2.1 Suicidology

Throughout history people have been philosophising on the topic of suicide: Samson’s sacrifice in the Bible was described as the last brave act of a hero, for Plato, suicide could be a ‘noble’ act under the right conditions, Western religions shunning the act, and people (e.g. David Hume) defending suicide in ‘defiance’ of the church (Hecht,2013:6-9,16-19, Di Marco,2013:326-327). These historical examples show how the view on suicide has shifted over time. Durkheim and others helped to establish suicide as a social ill and by-product of modernisation (Cholbi,2017, Hecht,2013:195, Joiner,2007:33). Durkheim’s theories became the basis of suicidology, whereas other prominent theories did not emerge until the latter half of the twentieth century (Hecht,2013:193, Joiner,2007:35-36). A notable example is Schneidman, who believed that almost every suicide was caused by *psychache*, or psychological pain (Joiner,2007:36-37). This factor alone, however, is not sufficient to explain why people commit suicide. Schneidman argued that the decision must also contain a degree of lethality, which Joiner elaborated upon in a contemporary context, stating that suicide victims possess not only the desire, but also the capacity for self-injury (Joiner,2007:22,37-38,53). In other words, it is acquiring the ability to resist self-preservation. Still, these factors do not explain some types of suicides, e.g. *seppuku*, a ritualistic style of suicide. Although it can certainly be argued that *seppuku* requires the capacity for self-injury or lethality, psychache does not explain this phenomenon (Fusé, 1980).

When Durkheim published his work, he argued that, in some cases, imitation could be a factor of suicide, but dismissed it as a general cause, rather arguing that suicides would still occur (Hecht,2013:195-196, Phillips,1974:340, Durkheim,2005[1897]: 91-94). However, since the mid-1970s, research that indicates that media reporting on suicides leads to more suicides has been conducted (e.g. Phillips,1974). This came to be known as the Werther effect. Some factors in the news reporting that influence the Werther effect are fame, method,

and location of the individual in the reported suicide. These studies frequently come to the same conclusion: that reporting on suicide has a harmful effect on those affected with suicidal tendencies and may lead to increased suicide rates (WHO,2017:11-12).

## 2.2 The Suicide Nation?

For the past century there has been a tendency to view Japan as a ‘suicide nation’ (Di Marco, 2016:1-2). In 1917, the national newspaper *Yomiuri Shimbun* called it a “national disease” and the term ‘suicide nation’ was coined by Japanese in the 1950s (Ozawa-de Silva, 2008:521, Di Marco, 2013:332). This view still seems prevalent today, even though the suicide rate in Japan has consistently been dropping since 2009 and there are other countries with higher or comparable rates without the same stereotype (WHO,2019). Some argue that this stereotype is caused by Japan having an ‘unusually’ high number of altruistic suicides. Introduced by Durkheim, altruistic suicides occur when people are entrenched in a collective and become willing to ‘sacrifice’ themselves for it (Durkheim,2005[1897]:175-200, Joiner, 2007:102). This could be considered a remnant of Japanese history, from the samurai’s *seppuku* rituals or the modern emergence of those who kill themselves to give life insurance to their family (Kodama et al.,2017, Adelstein,2012, Fusé,1980).

Di Marco (2016) argued at length that the idea of Japan as a ‘suicide nation’ comes out of English and Japanese research alike, constructing suicide as a positive model that is grounded in the *nihonjinron* debate. Sugimoto (2010:1-5) defines *nihonjinron* as “theories of Japaneseness”, constructing Japan as homogenous and culturally unique. This debate became what Di Marco (2016:2) calls “the conventional story of suicide in Japan,” where Western and Japanese scholars did not write objective studies but rather popular sociology to frame a society and explain its economic success and to rationalise its wartime past. The scholarship of Japanese suicide can be summarised into four points (Di Marco,2016:2-3):

- Japan has one of, if not, the highest suicide rates in the world.
- Japanese are predisposed to end their lives.
- Every facet of suicide follows a tradition of distinct patterns.
- Suicide in Japan is culturally unique and can only be understood by the Japanese.

However, modern Japanese research seems to have turned away from this narrative. Since 1998, the suicide rates rose to be consistently above 30,000 people a year and did not subside until 2012. The sudden rise in 1998 was not due to an ‘inherent’ Japaneseness

grounded in *nihonjinron*, but rather the culmination of modern realities. These modern realities include modernisation (or lack thereof), *ikigai* (worth of living), the erosion of social and family structures, economic instabilities, the tragedies of 1995 (Kobe earthquake, Aum Shinrikyou's terror attack), or even mental health awareness (Ozawa-de Silva,2008:516,536). Instead, more focus has been laid on trying to understand the 'external' factors instead of the inherent 'Japanese' issues. Researching and understanding the reasons for suicide and teaching the public about suicide and mental health has become the focus of discourse, which is perhaps why suicides have been steadily decreasing throughout the 2010s.<sup>1</sup> With this in mind, it is too simplistic to call Japan a 'suicide nation.'

### 2.3 Japanese News Media

Despite a steadily falling circulation, Japan still had a total circulation of over 40 million printed papers in 2020 (NSK,2020). The national newspapers dominating the market are *Asahi Shimbun*, *Yomiuri Shimbun*, *Mainichi Shimbun*, *Sankei Shimbun* and *Nikkei Shimbun*. *Yomiuri* alone has a circulation of over seven million, making it the largest in the world (YS, n.d.A).

Despite constitutional protection of the press and the free word (Constitution of Japan, 1947), there are some limits to the support given. In Japan, broadcasting is not legally independent of the government, meaning that broadcasting stations can be influenced by the government (Kaye,2017:6-9,17-19). Furthermore, according to Gamble and Watanabe (2004:46), Japan's system of *kisha* (press) clubs is "about journalists suppressing journalism." In this sense, the clubs create a collective culture that you must abide by or face expulsion. 'Blackboard' agreements between members of the clubs prohibit publishing news until the journalists discuss it and get the same information at the same time, resulting in potentially similar articles (Gamble and Watanabe,2004:57-58, Borowiec,2016:49, Barkley, 2019:4, Kimura,2014:193). However, the perceived homogeneity of press clubs and blackboard agreements can be criticised (e.g. Seaton,2006). Their purpose is to protect the public's "right to know," but serve the opposite effect of narrowing access to certain information (Kaye,2017:10). The national newspapers ensure that other news outlets are brought into these clubs and follow the rules, which limits the number of participants. To journalists, the benefits of being in these *kisha* clubs outweighs the potential consequences

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<sup>1</sup> These following examples are for a variety of research related to suicide in contemporary Japan, such as prevention and social media. Dhungel et al.,2019, Fahey et al.,2020, Fahey et al.,2020, Kuwabara et al.,2006, Matsubayashi et al.,2014, Matsubayashi and Ueda,2016, Matsubayashi et al.,2016, Matsubayashi et al.,2013, Matsubayashi et al.,2020, Matsubayashi et al.,2014, Matsubayashi et al.,2019, Sueki,2020, Traphagan,2010, Ueda et al.,2017, Ueda et al.,2015, Yoshitomo et al.,1998.

for press freedom (Kuga,2016:14-15). Recent surveys show that people in Japan still trust newspapers and television more than other sources (Nippon.com,2019, Jiji Press,2018, NSK, 2015). Gamble and Watanabe (2004:34) have argued that the Japanese trust in the media is because the educational system does not teach critiquing authority, while Kaori (2018) argue that the Japanese are more indifferent to the news, rather than distrusting it.

The switch to online news, social media or otherwise, has been slower than in many countries. Japan's online news market is dominated by *Yahoo! News*, which is a news aggregator from a wide range of news providers including the aforementioned national newspapers (Sawa,2019:136-137). Although the Japanese government does not seem to directly engage in content restriction on the internet, some online news information could be censored and restricted (Kaye,2017:17), due to broadcasting or *kisha* clubs.

#### **2.4 Moral Panic**

Before discussing suicide in the Japanese media, the concept of Moral Panic needs to be addressed. The idea behind Moral Panic is attributed to Stanley Cohen from his classic study *Folk Devils and Moral Panic* in the early 1970s. According to Cohen (2002[1972]:vii,1), two important attributes of a Moral Panic is that the extent and significance of e.g. news reporting is exaggerated compared to other more reliable sources. Furthermore, societies will sometimes face a condition, such as individuals, groups, or events that become a threat to society's morals. This condition is then stereotyped by the media and 'moral barricades' arise, manned by those in power, such as editors, politicians, or 'right-thinking' people. Experts will address the situation and propose solutions, while the people adapt to deal with the situation, until the condition dissipates.

Cohen (2002[1972]) believed that the media is key to create the narrative of a Moral Panic. The construction of a Moral Panic's narrative is more theoretical and will be elaborated upon in the theoretical framework chapter. The narrative created, however, is stereotypical, an exaggeration and distortion of truth, and a creation of symbolism around the perceived threat (Critchler,2008:1129, Cohen,2002[1972]:21-46). In terms of suicide, this relates to the Werther effect, where media stereotypically presents suicide in an exaggerated fashion which distorts the reality of the situation where the symbol can become a method or the 'origin' of the suicide. This means that the Werther effect can become the 'end result' of media suicide reporting that can be driven by Moral Panic tendencies. This relationship will be explored in the next subsection.

## 2.5 Suicide in Japanese News Media

Suicides have long been discussed in Japanese media. An early example is the popular and sensational topic in the early twentieth century regarding lesbian double suicides (Robertson, 1999). In the past few decades, considerable attention has been given to Japanese newspaper reports of suicides. A notable example is found in Stack's (1996) study, where he observed that the Werther effect in Japan is only influenced by domestic suicide and not international celebrities. Though, it needs to be mentioned that Stack's choice of using *The Japan Times* (an English-language newspaper) instead of newspapers like *Yomiuri* could be criticised as unrepresentative. Ishii (1991:188) noted that "Japanese common sense says that suicide news sometimes triggers a rise in suicides." His study also concluded that on a national level the media creates a Werther effect. There are many studies confirming the Werther effect's relationship with the media in Japan, e.g. Ueda et al. (2014) and Hagihara et al. (2007).

In the 2000s, there are three larger issues that needs further elaboration: charcoal burning suicides and related internet suicide pacts during 2003-2007, child bullying in 2006-2007, and the hydrogen sulphide suicide cluster and internet suicide pacts in 2008.

In February 2003, three people committed suicide through burning charcoal (carbon monoxide poisoning). The following months caused many copycat suicides, many of which originated from people meeting online and collectively deciding to commit suicide by charcoal burning (Yoshioka et al.,2014:274, Yoshioka et al.,2016:862-863, Ozawa-de Silva,2008:526,531). These suicides were frequently published in the media at the time, which could have been a factor in the Werther effect. These reports were not only sensational, but also exaggerated. This is because internet suicides and charcoal burning was a rare occurrence that substantially increased after the media's first reports (Yoshioka et al., 2014:274,278-280, Matthews,2008).

Hydrogen sulphide poisoning was a relatively rare suicide method, first reported in 2007 (Morii et al.,2010:1). In early 2008, three people had met online and formed a pact to kill themselves using hydrogen sulphide (Hagihara et al.,2014:222). This was repeatedly reported by the media and led to suicides by this method increasing to 1056 incidents, a sharp escalation from 29 the previous year (CAO, 2009:99-102). Although the Japanese government is resistant to intervene with suicide guidelines due to concerns regarding freedom of the press, in this incident they observed the Werther effect and recommended to follow generally accepted media guidelines, such as those put forward by the WHO (CAO, 2009:99-102). This effect was also observed by Nakamura et al. (2012:136), who concluded that newspapers had a direct effect on the suicides in 2008. What becomes clear in both these

cases is that there seems to be a consensus that the media was involved and caused a Werther effect. Some critics (e.g. Matthews,2008, Takahashi, 1998) have argued since the 1990s that the media should follow guidelines on reporting on suicide. However, as stated above, the Japanese government is reluctant to intervene and is instead pleading for them to use WHO's guidelines (MHLW,2021A, WHO,2017). In both cases, as reported by Nabeshima et al. (2016) and Hagihara et al. (2014), many of the guidelines suggested by WHO or other organisations were repeatedly violated.

There does not seem to be any studies on these two cases in connection with Moral Panics, although they do possess many traits (e.g. exaggeration) that could warrant further studies. However, when it comes to the case of child bullying in 2006-2007, Yamazato (2010) did a study and concluded that it was a Moral Panic, in Goode and Ben-Yehuda terms (see chapter three). Yamazato (2010:49-76) explains the suicide clusters of student bullying and concludes that they fit the criteria of a Moral Panic as defined by Goode and Ben-Yehuda. The reporting was over-exaggerated, as bullying related suicides was a "minor issue" of only 2% of overall suicide statistics in Japan during the period. While it could be argued that Yamazato's (2010:23-29) methodology is flawed, such as focusing on *Asahi*, it shows the potential of discussing Japanese suicide in Moral Panic terms and showcases the need for further studies.

The central theme discussed in Yamazato's (2010) thesis is the concealment of bullying at the centre of the Moral Panic. Bullying has attracted more scholarship and press in recent times, and references to bullying in East Asian schools have increased, with the perception of bullying as an 'epidemic' (Rappleye and Komatsu,2020:310-311). Rappleye and Komatsu (2020:312), focusing on Japan, argue that bullying and its intensity is not as disproportionately high as scholarship and media reporting make it up to be. They do this by focusing on analysing new TIMSS and PISA data on bullying and found that, in both datasets, the negative stereotype of intense bullying in Japan is not supported, with Japan faring better than Anglo-American countries (e.g. the US and Australia). Previous scholars have questioned the validity of similar data, but Rappleye and Komatsu (2020:314,322) argue that such a position is hard to defend. This is because the definition of bullying was changed to what was perceived by the victim, and the more sophisticated TIMSS and PISA questionnaires would not be subject to the same "tampering or concealment" that domestic surveys might get. However, that may still present the possibility of those being bullied not answering the survey.

A question that is raised by Rappleye and Komatsu (2020:323-324) is why bullying is repeatedly raised in discourse, specifically linked to suicide in relation to schooling. They reviewed previous Japanese scholarship and argued that it translated domestic panics about bullying and suicide *as is* into English-language discourse. In other words, there was no notable attempt to contextualise the scholarship in comparable terms, such as “relative degree of the problem.” An extension of this issue was the lack of good comparative empirical data. However, despite the new existing data and understanding of different cultures, the stereotype remains. Rappleye and Komatsu (2020:324-325) used the example of OECD’s 2017 Report on Student Well-being, which they argue extends the view of bullying and its consequences as an epidemic.

## **2.6 Summary**

This literature review has briefly overviewed modern Western thoughts on suicide to help understand suicide in Japan. Research shows that despite a pervasive *nihonjinron* painting Japan as a ‘suicide nation,’ the argument that it is not unique to Japan is more convincing. Japanese newspapers are well established and important, although they can be influenced by the government in some issues. Before considering the Japanese media’s portrayal of suicide, the concept of a Moral Panic needed to be elaborated. It was argued that the Werther effect in suicidology is an effect of the media’s involvement in a Moral Panic. Furthermore, the bullying context and its relation to suicide in Japan was examined. Finally, although the Werther effect and bullying are well-studied subjects in Japan, their relation to Moral Panics together with the media presents a gap in the literature.

### 3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The literature review helped to establish that there is a gap in the literature: that the Werther effect is a *consequence* of excessive media *narratives* that *can* be driven by Moral Panic tendencies in the media, which can be seen in Japan. To illustrate this, there are two, intertwined theoretical frameworks that this section will discuss, namely narrative analysis and Moral Panic.

#### 3.1 Understanding Media

In the literature review, media was used rather interchangeably with the understanding of mass media. In other words, newspapers, television, radio, etc. This is the definition that Cohen worked with when his original Moral Panic framework was published. Yet, the media is much more complex and needs to be viewed in a broader context. A medium, such as newspapers, must have associated ‘protocols’ to have real meaning. Humans have their own self-imposed meanings attached to the ‘object,’ which then gains a life of its own, but without protocols, it has no meaning. Therefore, media (and protocols) is a cultural social construction according to Gitelman (2006:7). However, individuals ‘appropriate’ media when they incorporate a message into their lives. In that sense, it is not only necessarily a cultural construct, but a personal one, as the messages appropriated based on their lives become individual and subjective (Thompson,1995:111-112).

#### 3.2 Narrative Analysis

When employing narrative analysis, the focus shifts from “what actually happened?” to “how do people make sense of what happened?” (Bryman,2012:582). Because of this, narratives are subjective accounts from an ‘individual’s’ daily life, and how they interpret the world. Thus, as Daiute (2014:2) writes, “narrative is not so much that it is *about* life, but that it interacts *in* life.” These kinds of narratives extend beyond personal narratives, and form ‘collective narratives’ through, for instance, organisations. These interactions can be interpreted differently; Berger (1997:6) defined it as “stories that take place in time.” Barthes (1975) provided another viewpoint, namely the idea that a narrative can be any form of communication.

Journalists come from a long line of people throughout history whose job has been to parse communications into a coherent narrative that can be understood by a wider audience (Lule,2002:3). In this sense, the ‘event’ being reported must become a ‘story,’ a narrative, to become communicative (Hall, 2005:118). However, the newsworthiness of a story in the case

of journalism is subject to where the journalists are – or where censorship of narrative applies (Carruthers,2011:77-80,83-84,171). The ‘events’ may have their own meaning, but their dissemination is being constantly “mediated by and through language” into new narratives (Hall,2005:121). In this sense, media have their own distinctive narratives, through both written and visual language. Media, and society at large, use these narratives for societal discourse on how to act with demanding and complex societal ills (Hall,1975:18). Thus, a prevailing narrative that reflects the closest truth on how society views itself is likely to appear (Harcourt et al., 2020:1062). The narrative is not just a reflection of factual matters, but rather the creation of subjective meaning which must be ‘woven together’ (Harcourt et al., 2020:1066). Understanding narrative as outlined above provides a useful framework to ask what Pierce argues is the core of narrative analysis:

- Who is ‘writing’ the story?
- Who is telling the story? How?
- Who is the ‘target audience’?
- What is the story trying to achieve?
- What are its effects? (2008:299)

These baseline questions do not necessarily provide a direction. Due to the subjective and varied nature of narratives employed, narrative analysis is rarely able to provide guidelines to use when interpreting the narrative (Esin et al.,2014:206). Therefore, combining narrative analysis with Moral Panics, discussed below, becomes an ideal approach to understand the narrative.

### **3.3 Moral Panic**

As previously discussed in the literature review, a Moral Panic is a type of narrative that is constructed in society when a condition becomes a perceived threat to its morals (as in a society’s hegemonic values and interests). Since Cohen’s initial study, the idea of Moral Panic has been the topic of a lot of academic discourse in the past decades. To reiterate, according to Cohen, (2002[1972]:1), societies will every now and then face a condition that become a ‘folk devil,’ a threat to the morals of society. These threats are stereotyped by the media, and the ‘right-thinking’ people will man the ‘moral barricades.’ Experts address the situation while the people attempt to deal with the threats, and finally the condition dissipates. Critcher (2008:1129) terms Cohen’s model as the processual model, whereas he calls Goode and Ben-Yehuda’s model the attributional model (2008:1131-1132). The attributional model

identifies five key features, *concern, hostility, consensus, disproportionality, and volatility* (Citcher, 2008:1131-1132, Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 2009[1994]:37-43). Due to the nature of Moral Panic, these models overlap. However, as Citcher (2008:1134-1135) argues, there are three key differences that set them apart. First, in the processual model the media is an essential drive for creating the narrative, while in the attributional model the media is more passive, working as a conduit for others, e.g. moral entrepreneurs. Secondly, for the processual model, politicians and legislators do not just react to the Panic but are complicit to their construction. The attributional model does not deny their importance but places more emphasis on the strategies adopted by claims makers to persuade public opinion against the perceived threat. Finally, there is a different focus on conceptualising the language used. The processual model focuses on a macro emphasis through a wider range of discourses, while the attributional model has a micro emphasis on ‘claims-making rhetoric,’ or how particular styles of arguments are adopted. As Citcher (2008:1135) argues, these subtle, but clear, differences alter the focus of study and are often overlooked when studying Moral Panics.

As both these models demonstrate, Moral Panics encompass many aspects of society. Due to the focus of this thesis being on the media impact, a more in-depth overview on media and Moral Panic is required. Cohen argued that the media is essential to drive the narrative of a Moral Panic because the mass media *thrive* on it (Citcher,2008:1134). According to Garland (2008:15), the media are “the prime movers and ... beneficiaries” as Moral Panics “sell papers, entertain readers, and generate further news.” In this same vein, the media constitutes, inflames and generates public concern, which is why *most* panics are found in the media (Goode and Ben-Yehuda,2009[1994]:90). However, it is more difficult to discern “what *causes* this concern [of the folk devil] to burst forth - *whether* and *how*, specifically, systematically, and empirically, the media *influence*” a Moral Panic, and which media institution (e.g. newspapers, television) that most effectively flood the discourse with Panic (Goode and Ben-Yehuda,2009[1994]:94-95, original emphasis). The media landscape has changed considerably since Cohen’s original study, as the world moved into a *multi-mediated* social world that fractured media institutions and created more accessible media, such as the internet. The new landscape allowed both sides to be able to produce their own media, appropriating its messages (Goode and Ben-Yehuda,2009[1994]:98-99, Cohen, 2002[1972]: xxxviii, Thompson,1995:111-112). Fragmentation in the media landscape also fragmented Moral Panics, which means that there could be more of them (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 2009[1994]:99). This fragmentation is because of media development, which have assigned protocols to a lot more ‘objects.’ People may not interact with many of these media, and,

even if they do, it does not necessarily mean they use the right protocol to parse its information. Therefore, the fractured media market, as stated above, may create more Moral Panics. Interactions between these media form a larger whole. Studying an individual medium's Moral Panic would give a different result than studying a cluster of media in the medial landscape. This will be further discussed in limitations, section 4.4.

Regardless of how the media fragments, however, the media 'creates' an *inventory* (processual model) that consists of *exaggeration and distortion*, *prediction*, and *symbolisation* (Cohen,2002[1972]:21-46). *Exaggeration and distortion* refer to media reporting that exaggerates or distorts the situation being reported, e.g. calling an incident a 'riot' when a window is vandalised. *Prediction* refers to reporting predicting that the incident will become worse unless something is done to stop it. Lastly, *symbolisation* stereotypically presents an image of (or related to) the folk-devil in negative fashion. Together, the inventory helps create an image "sharper than reality," in other words, a *narrative* (Cohen, 2002[1972]: 40).

Both *prediction* and *symbolisation* are important aspects of a medium's inventory. However, *exaggeration* needs to be further elaborated. Exaggeration in the media refers to (Goode and Ben-Yehuda,2009[1994]:101-102):

1. Inflating the phenomenon being reported.
2. Providing claims about the phenomena that are untrue.
3. Devoting more attention to a less serious phenomena than to more serious ones.
4. Giving more attention to a phenomenon when it is less important instead of when it is more important.
5. Devoting more attention to a phenomenon among groups where it is less prevalent than groups where it is more common.

These practices are not meant to imply that the media always exaggerate, as, according to Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009:102), most "routine stories" are "at least approximately accurate". Nevertheless, as Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009:102) argues, "for certain topics at certain times, the media typically exaggerate." Exaggeration can then be summarised as a news story being *novel* and *unprecedented*; it becomes news which the media exaggerate *because* it is news – if a folk devil is responsible, it becomes doubly newsworthy. This is because news, and other media, tend to be focused on atypical or rare incidents and generate excitement by jumping the gun or stretching the truth of the reportage (Goode and Ben-Yehuda,2009[1994]:102-104).

Moral Panics can be summarised to be largely about *symbolic representations* – different parties struggle to locate folk-devils and define their ‘evil-doings.’ In other words, constructing a narrative, which is why narrative analysis was deemed appropriate for this thesis over other methods such as framing or discourse analysis. Since the focus is the media, the current thesis aims to employ the processual model’s *inventory* as a guiding framework of analysis with the narrative analysis. As Critcher (2008:1135) argued, this subtly alters the focus as the media can be the driver of the narrative instead of a conduit. Critcher (2008:1140) has suggested that combining the processual and the attributional model in contemporary analysis for a more ‘conventional’ analysis is a possibility. However, with the media as the focus, Cohen’s model becomes more appropriate as Goode and Ben-Yehuda’s focus steers away from that. Furthermore, using both models and their full extent is beyond the scope of this thesis. Although, the possibility exists that the *inventory* may give the conclusion that the media acts as a conduit for others, like the attributional model would imply.

### **3.4 Summary**

This chapter has overviewed theoretical frameworks employed in the analysis. It began by introducing the assumption that the ‘media’ is a set of associated protocols that are socially constructed. This was followed by an elaboration on narrative analysis to help guide the Moral Panic analysis. Then, the processual and attributional models of Moral Panic were discussed with a focus on media aspects. The processual model was argued to be more relevant to the current thesis. These frameworks have their own share of limitations, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

## 4 METHODOLOGY

Considering the research questions outlined in the introduction, an analysis of the Japanese media is required. To achieve this, several steps of data need to be collected. Methodology will discuss which data sources will be used and how to perform an initial analysis to identify potential Moral Panics. This analysis will be used to conduct a Moral Panic narrative analysis. Finally, the ethics and limitations of this methodology will be discussed.

### 4.1 Data

As discussed in section 2,3, Japan still has a wide newspaper circulation that shows its importance in Japanese society. While it would be important to discuss many different Japanese newspapers to understand construction of a Moral Panic, it is not feasible to select too many due to the sheer number of newspapers and articles. Likewise, focusing on a singular newspaper such as *Asahi Shimbun* like Yamazato (2010) did is not ideal either. Yamazato (2010:23) claims that *Asahi* represents the general way Japanese media portrays suicide. However, no evidence of this is given. Yamazato makes his choice between the five biggest newspapers (*Asahi*, *Yomiuri Shimbun*, *Mainichi Shimbun*, *Sankei Shimbun*, and *Nikkei Shimbun*) and their general perceived ideology, but the singular focus on *Asahi* seems unfounded. Beside these five, there are also other newspapers, but for the purposes of this thesis, only *Asahi* and *Yomiuri* are chosen because of their wide nation-wide circulation (Nippon.com, 2014, YS, n.d.A, Sawa, 2019:136). As Cohen (2002[1972]:24-25) argues, local press can be less biased in framing the reported narrative than reporters beyond the locale, and so search result selections from both newspapers will exclude local (non-national) pages and focus on national news. Furthermore, articles that share search engines, but do not belong to the national paper release, such as AERA, will also be excluded.

Additionally, the statistics provided in the yearly suicide countermeasures whitepapers that are now published by the Japanese Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare (MHLW) will be used as comparison data for the data this study collects. MHLW compiles the data through a number of sources, particularly the National Police Agency, to provide the most accurate statistics possible with monthly updates on the current situation (MHLW, 2020,2021B). However, these statistics are not without criticism. Adelstein (2012) claims that “many” of the suicides in the statistics are homicides. Both Adelstein (2012) and Fukue (2016) argues that Japan has a low rate of autopsies compared to other countries, concealing murders. This is certainly valid criticism. But Adelstein (2012) claim that some experts estimate up to 5% of all reported suicides are homicides, with no data to back these claims. It

is possible, as the cases they cite show that some of the suicides are homicides, but there is no evidence that suggest up to 5%. Regarding reasons/motivations, each suicide since 2007 gets attributed up to three reasons that can clearly be attributed based on suicide notes or other supporting documents (MHLW,2020:269). This poses the risk of subjectivity among the ones doing the investigation, and there is also the possibility of some tampering as the above cases would illustrate, which requires some reflexivity. Thus, these statistics are not flawless, but are also the most up to date statistics available.

#### **4.2 Data Collection for Initial Data Analysis**

The data collection was performed to search out potential Moral Panics for the qualitative analysis. Yamazato (2010:23-25) chose four years between 1998 and 2008 when suicides were high and assumed public concern would also be high. Between 2009 and 2019 suicide has been consistently going down. Since 2012, suicides have fallen below 30,000 per year and reached 20,169 in 2019 (MHLW,2020:259). Because this constitutes the largest change in the data, the data collection will be 01/01/2012 to 31/12/2019, a period of 8 years. 2008-2011 are not considered for this study as the suicides fluctuated during the period, while after 2012 it has been a consistent decrease. This was deemed more appropriate as a new ‘era’ of decreasing suicide that had not been seen since 1997 (MHLW, 2020:259).

This study employed a set of keywords based on the MHLW statistics, which were logged each month using *Asahi*'s and *Yomiuri* respective databases to identify potential anomalies for study. The base keyword was *jisatsu*, suicide. Additional keywords not based on the MHLW statistics were also used and this will be discussed in the initial analysis. A full list of keywords can be found in Appendix I. These anomalies were identified to determine over- and underreporting to approximate potential Moral Panics, which can be determined through percentage distribution. This will be elaborated upon in section 5.1.

#### **4.3 Data Collection and Moral Panic Narrative Analysis**

As was argued in the Theoretical Framework chapter, Moral Panics are a collection of narratives that are shared and constructed by the media, moral entrepreneurs, politicians, etc. (Cohen,2002[1972], Goode and Ben-Yehuda,2009[1994]). Cohen's processual model and Goode and Ben-Yehuda's attributional model places emphasis on different aspects in the media and their narrative. Goode and Ben-Yehuda emphasise that media channels conduit other people's narrative, while Cohen argues that the media is more influential in the

narrative. Because of this, the processual model becomes more appropriate as a structure for narrative analysis when analysing the data.

The purpose of the initial analysis was to provide an overview of the entire period of eight years. Furthermore, it provides a suitable smaller time frame that is appropriate for a Moral Panic analysis because an analysis of the entire period is not feasible. The broader use of keywords in the initial analysis was to provide a more detailed overview of potential timeframes for analysis. Once a timeframe was identified, the data would be gathered using the base keyword *jisatsu*, as it would gather all the articles that the initial analysis provided an overview for. The articles were sorted into four codes per article, ID (of the article), date of the article, article (incl. headline), and notes (information such as first page article). Then, before coding, unrelated articles, such as movie releases, foreign suicides, and tv guides were removed from the dataset.

This dataset was then imported into NVivo for further coding and each dataset was treated separately, *Asahi* and *Yomiuri* respectively. Each article was coded into three categories, headline, body and endnotes (e.g., image citations) for analysis purposes. The articles were then coded into incidents. There can only be one primary incident per article, so if an article was mostly about a singular incident, or written because of that incident, the article was coded to that particular incident. This is to make sure that the coding is mutually exclusive in order to prevent analytical issues (Bryman, 2012:303). Each individual incident of separate suicides in each article was coded into: age, reason/motivation, gender, method, and occupation in accordance with the MHLW statistics, which can be referenced in chapter six. This means that each article could be coded for these codes multiple times. If the data required additional coding, it is clearly marked in the relevant section. This coding will be optimal in guiding the Moral Panic narrative analysis.

#### **4.4 Limitations and Ethics**

If the ideas about imitation suicides and Moral Panics as discussed in the Literature Review holds true, the qualitative data collection within the period should reveal legitimate spikes or other anomalies that are suitable for analysis. However, this method of data collection provides a set of problems that needs to be addressed. Due to how varied language can be, the available databases, and the initial data collection and analysis, the results will have some inaccuracies. Even if the current author attempted to remove false positives, such as book releases about suicide, it is possible that these articles may still manage to be included (although in some cases it could be argued that these articles should be included).

Furthermore, the keywords are unable to detect ‘updating stories.’ For instance, if someone is found in the morning it can be reported as murder, while over the course of the day new reports may roll in that changes the story into a suicide - or vice versa. In both these cases it is then related to suicide, but it raises the question of which - or if all - of these articles should be included in the initial analysis. These faults are limitations of current technology in relation to the databases and can only be addressed by focused qualitative reading on each individual case, which is not possible within the current limitations. However, while these limitations may have some impact on each month, it is likely to not have too great of an impact over the collection period as a whole.

On one hand, the Moral Panic narrative analysis will be able to address some limitations of the initial analysis. In this analysis, unlike the initial analysis, the researcher can perform data cleaning, screening, and documentation of articles in a better, more systematic, way, because of the smaller number of articles (Huebner,2016). It also becomes possible to address the ‘updating stories’ on a case-by-case basis if they are meant to be included in the analysis or not. On the other hand, this analysis adds a different set of limitations. Yamazato’s (2010) article made the issue of positionality and limitations of coders abundantly clear. Automatic coding through the initial method poses the issues mentioned above, but individual coding by a lone researcher poses the risk of being subjective. However, due to the methodological structure, the researcher’s perception becomes more apparent and thus defensible. Furthermore, there is the possibility of misunderstanding the Japanese news articles when coded by a singular, non-native researcher, especially when attempting to understand the narrative in a context which is likely not clear in the text (Bryman,2012:314). To mitigate this issue, supplementary material such as English translations or native Japanese speakers can be utilised.

Current research does not use first-hand information from interviewees or other participants but relies solely on second-hand information from established newspaper databases, rendering ethics such as informed consent non-essential (Bryman,2012:135). Nevertheless, the handling of this data poses a different set of issues that constantly needs to be handled with self-reflexivity and care.

The theoretical framework in context to the methodology primarily concerns two issues. On the one hand, humans have entered a *multi-mediated* world with fragmented media. A critique can be laid against this thesis for only using newspapers. However, consuming news via newspaper is still quite widespread in Japan with 40 million printed papers in 2019, even after a 20 million drop since 2012. In comparison, the US, a country

with more than twice the population, went from 44 to 30 million circulated printed papers in a similar timeframe, 2012-2018. The prevalence of newspapers as a news source in Japan during the studied timeframe justifies the singular focus on newspapers (NSK,2020, PRC,2019). Considering exaggeration, arguments can be laid forward as to who decides what is exaggerated or what defines a Moral Panic. Cohen (2002[1972]:xxxiv-xxxv) argues that such critiques are valid “if there is nothing beyond a compendium of individual moral judgements.” However, empirically, there are Panics where judgement on the degree of proportionality can - and should - be made. This is a notion that Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009:75-76) agrees with, arguing that “many, possibly most, conditions” can be measured for their disproportion. It is ‘future-oriented’ threats such as nuclear warfare or the greenhouse effect that are likely impossible to calculate.

Lastly, this thesis is not concerned with all aspects of a Moral Panic but focuses on media inventory and its perceived potential of exaggerated narrative - which should have decreased. Thus, the use of a Moral Panic framework through narrative is justified.

## 5 INITIAL ANALYSIS

As established by the Literature Review, Japan has been viewed by many as a ‘suicide nation’. However, as focus shifted from this social construction towards preventing suicide, the suicide rates decreased. The purpose of this section is to look at how *Asahi* and *Yomiuri* characterise themselves when reporting on suicide and compare it with the MHLW statistics to identify anomalies that show potential Moral Panics.

### 5.1 Comparison between *Asahi* and *Yomiuri* in relation to the MHLW Statistics

To analyse potential Moral Panics more easily, most of the keywords used in the data collection match up with the MHLW statistics. That said, using the full list of factors employed in the statistics, such as gender and occupation, would not be feasible. This is because some assumptions would become too generous. To illustrate: searching for occupation is difficult because newspapers likely use different, more specific terms in contrast to the generalisable ones in the statistics. Newspapers could use the occupation ‘pachinko parlour employee’ (*pachinko kaishain*) instead of the ‘employee’ (*hikoyōsha*) used by the statistics. Because of this, the focus was laid on the base, *jisatsu* ‘suicide’ in conjunction with method and reasons, which will be laid out in their specific section. It is assumed that these generalisable terms would be more applicable to incidents of suicide. However, the method of suicide by solvents was not searched for and added to ‘other/unknown’ in the MHLW statistics. The reason for this was the variety of solvents that could be used and described by newspapers, making their generalisation impossible unlike other terms such as ‘jumping (off).’ This is not expected to affect the final results, as suicides by this method, according to the MHLW statistics, held an average of 67,25 incidents throughout the study which would be 0.33% of all suicides in 2019 (2020:272-273). Furthermore, the safety net of the general base ‘suicide’ would reveal if it were part of a potential Moral Panic when conducting the latter analysis. Concerning the reported motives for suicides, while the terms constitute a lot of varied reasons that are short handed into different categories, the specific words in question (e.g. family) are generalisable and used enough to deliver usable data.

An additional four keywords were deemed necessary to help evaluate for the main analysis: *karōshi* (death from overwork), *karōshi* (without *jisatsu* as base), *ijime* (bullying), and *ryūka suisō* (hydrogen sulphide). *Karōshi* was also searched without the base because it implies that the worker ‘died from overwork,’ which could mean suicide, but could also be health issues caused by work. The former two is because the phenomenon has become more

widely reported on, which the data collected also shows. The latter two were chosen because of the previous incidents as discussed in the literature review.

The idea of over- and underreporting that was previously mentioned needs to be clarified. The MHLW statistics and the results of the initial data collection are not directly comparable, as in the period studied there were 188,820 suicides but 14,298 articles published between the newspapers in the same period. Even assuming each of those articles were unique incidents it would still only constitute 7.57% out of all suicides. It is expected that the media does not report on every incident, and some incidents will be reported on more than others. Therefore, considering the percentage distribution would be a better way to approximate over- and underreporting to help identify the anomalies for the main study. The article distribution should not exceed the statistics too much. A few percentages above or under the percentage in the MHLW statistics would not prove anything substantial, which could mean that the collection method presents some errors. However, in some cases, the distribution would show an anomaly. To illustrate, if a newspaper average 24,3% of their yearly articles in this period that include methods on small arms suicide, that is barely over 0% (0,054%) out of all suicides in the same period, it indicates an approximation of overreporting. When considering errors and other possibilities, proportionally only about 0-5% of their articles should realistically include that method. Because of this, such an approximation is helpful to warrant further qualitative study that could verify the potential anomaly. Furthermore, this approximation could also be used to argue that some methods or reasons are underreported, which is certainly the case. Since the focus of this study is on Moral Panics, identifying the approximated overreporting anomalies becomes the target of interest.

## **5.2 Suicide Articles**

Suicides declined 28% between the period 2012-2019 (MHLW, 2020). As suicides declined, newspaper reporting on suicide also declined, resulting in a decrease of 37% for *Yomiuri* and a 46% decrease for *Asahi*. However, it needs to be noted that there is no suitable data that shows the number of articles published on the topic of suicide before 2012, when the study began.

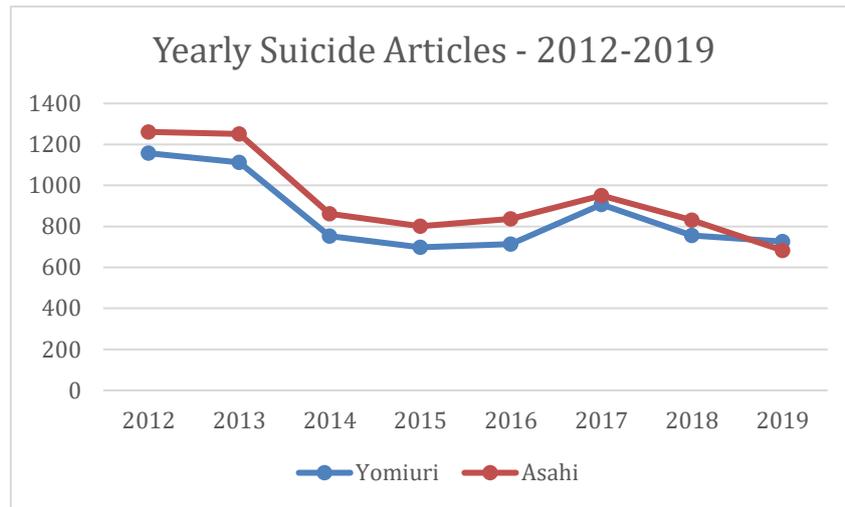


Figure 1

Figure 1 shows the reported yearly suicide articles based on the collected data per newspaper.

In the period studied, *Yomiuri* has an average of 852,9 articles about suicide per year, resulting in an average of 71,1 articles per month within those years. On the other hand, *Asahi* has an average of 934,4 articles per year, resulting in 77,9 articles per month. This shows that *Asahi* reports more on suicides than *Yomiuri* (up to 17% more in 2016, 10% on average), except for 2019 (6% less than *Yomiuri*). 2014, 2015, 2016, 2018, and 2019 are both reported less than the average and are more in line with the statistical average. This leaves 2012, 2013, and 2017 for potential anomalies. However, 2017 is only an increase by 6% for *Yomiuri* on average, and 2% for *Asahi*. 2012 stands out for being 35-36% increase and 2013 being an increase of 30-34% on averages in the period. Articles spiked 191% for *Yomiuri* and 185% for *Asahi* in July 2012 compared to June. From August 2012 there is a decrease in articles, but spikes again in January 2013. This spike is not as drastic as July 2012 but still presents an increase of 50% for *Yomiuri* and 69% for *Asahi*. This continues to fluctuate, but by 2014, articles have returned to average published within the studied time period.

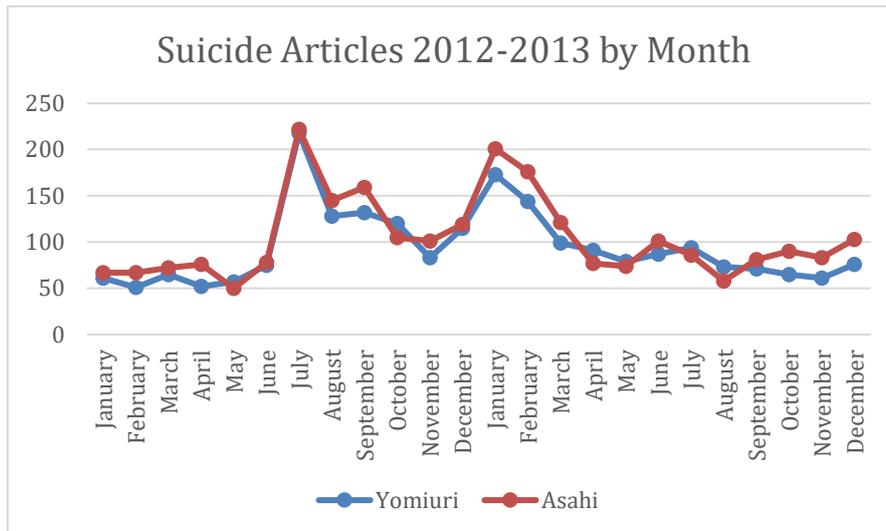


Figure 2

Figure 2 shows the spikes presented in the suicide articles of data collected in the 2012-2013 period.

2017 presents another spike of suicide reporting when considering a year-by-year basis. However, unlike 2012 and 2013, 2017 does not present any clear spikes. This suggests that throughout 2017 there were more incidents being reported on, but not the more singular focus that would indicate a Moral Panic. The largest spikes by the end of the year do not continue in 2018 either and instead return to the average. In addition, the spikes themselves are not large when compared to July 2012; the largest spikes for *Yomiuri* and *Asahi* are 49% and 52% smaller, respectively. This indicates that the sudden large influx of articles in 2012 and 2013 show Moral Panic tendencies, while 2017 does not show any clear tendencies.

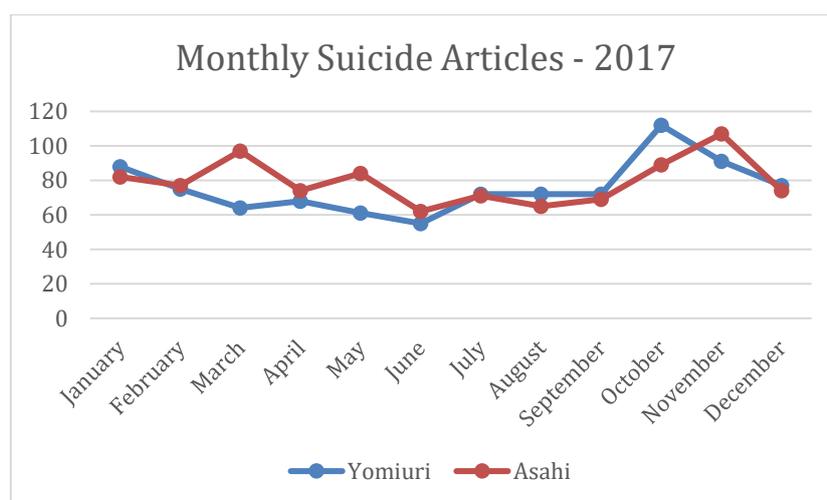


Figure 3

In contrast to figure 2, figure 3 shows the published articles in the 2017 period.

### 5.3 Methods of Suicide

Considering methods of suicides, both *Yomiuri* and *Asahi* report on some methods differently. For *Yomiuri*, there is primarily reporting of jumping (off) (e.g. buildings), and brief periods where charcoal burning and self-immolation are reported on more often than other methods. On the other hand, *Asahi* focuses more on small arms, jumping (off), and, to a lesser degree, self-immolation. When this is contrasted to the MHLW statistics, it becomes clear both *Asahi* and *Yomiuri* report more frequently on rarer methods, such as small arms and jumping (off) with *Asahi* or jumping (off) with *Yomiuri*, which will be elaborated upon below.

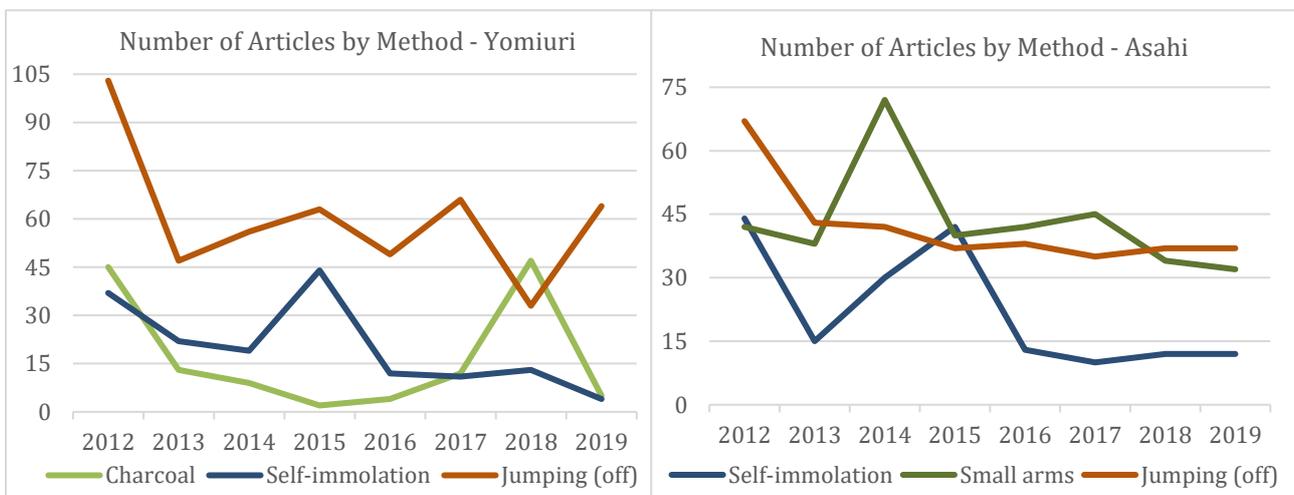


Figure 4 and Figure 5

Figures 4 and 5 shows the number of articles published per method. For the sake of visibility, only the three most reported on methods are shown. For more information, refer to table 1.

As discussed in the literature review, charcoal burning was a rare occurrence and became more common in the early-mid 2000s. In the period studied, this type of suicide constituted about 8%. But, in 2018, 28% of all *Yomiuri* articles were charcoal-related, and 13% of *Asahi* respectively. Considering self-immolation, despite only 1% of all suicides being self-immolation, both newspapers average 12% of all their reporting on the method. This by itself, is not necessarily surprising, considering the use of this method can often be a political statement. However, Norimatsu (2012) and Kingston and Ken'ichi (2012) argued that in previous political statements regarding self-immolation, Japanese media have been slow to report, which could in part be because of governmental influence as discussed in section 2.3. This presents a possibility to study further. Jumping (off) is about 10% of all suicides, while reporting is on average 24% of all articles for *Asahi* and 37% for *Yomiuri*, respectively. Most striking, however, is *Asahi*'s reporting on small arms. Despite it being the

second rarest method in the period studied (after explosives), *Asahi* reports on it the most, 24,3%, just slightly above jumping (off) at 23,6%.

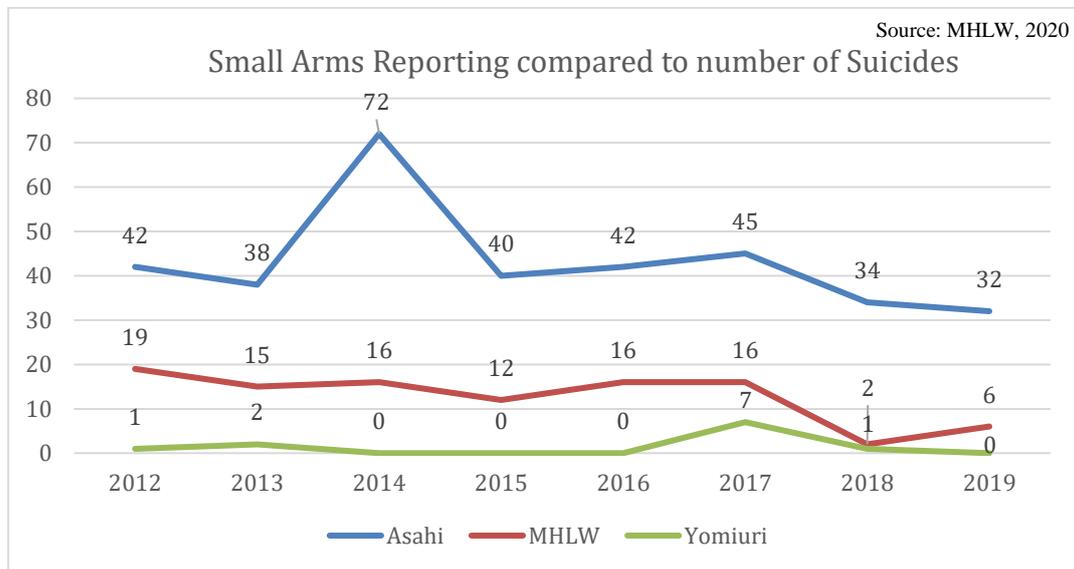


Figure 6

Figure 6 shows the number of articles with respective newspapers, while MHLW presents actual incidents in the statistics.

For the most part, *Asahi* reports on small arms suicides around two times more than actual incidents, and 2014 stands out as a clear spike. This data can be interpreted that *Asahi* overreports on small arms. On the other hand, *Yomiuri* underreports on the matter, and only has increased reporting in 2017, which does not correlate to *Asahi*'s increased reporting in 2014, 2018, or 2019. Contrasting *Asahi* small arms articles with the rest of their reporting, it does not seem to have any general impact on reporting. However, it does suggest that using *Asahi* alone like Yamazato (2010:23) does not represent how Japanese media report on suicide generally.

The previous figures 4, 5, and 6 show the major anomalies on a year-by-year basis per newspaper. Table 1 gives an overview on over- and underreporting based by method through percentage distribution. Reporting on several methods, such as hanging or poison, are rare compared to the other methods. *Asahi* reports have significantly decreased since Yamazato's (2010) 1998-2008 study. Hanging decreased 85,9% on average, while jumping (forward) (e.g. train suicides) decreased 73,2% on average. On the other hand, jumping (off) reporting increased 84,7% on average. In the case of *Asahi*, this suggests that the manner of reporting has shifted from the last decade to this decade. When considering both newspapers in the studied time frame, more 'dramatic' methods, such as self-immolation, explosion, jumping (off), etc. are reported on more. *Asahi*, as stated before, overreports on small arms (24,3%),

while *Yomiuri* overreports jumping (off) (37,2%) to a greater degree than *Asahi* (23.6%) throughout the entire period. The most common method, hanging, on the other hand is only reported on rarely, 3% for *Asahi* and 3,8% for *Yomiuri*, despite making up 68% of all suicide methods. However, both newspapers only report on suicide methods in 19% of all samples. Reporting on methods have also become rarer over the period studied, decreasing by 46% in the period for *Asahi* and 47% for *Yomiuri*, which could be expected with the shrinking reporting on suicide. Due to the low reporting on methods, overreporting on some methods become even more apparent, such as small arms. Because of this, the data show that 2012 becomes an ideal starting point for the main analysis. Other potential timeframes such as *Asahi*'s overreporting on small arms in 2014 could also be a candidate if one exclusively considered *Asahi*, but the lack of potential *Yomiuri* data would provide an incomplete analysis.

Method	2012			2013			2014			2015			2016			2017			2018			2019		
	A	Y	M	A	Y	M	A	Y	M	A	Y	M	A	Y	M	A	Y	M	A	Y	M	A	Y	M
Hanging	3%	7%	68%	6%	5%	69%	3%	5%	68%	2%	2%	68%	1%	3%	67%	5%	7%	68%	2%	2%	67%	1%	0%	67%
Poison	1%	1%	3%	1%	1%	3%	2%	2%	3%	1%	4%	3%	0%	0%	2%	3%	2%	3%	1%	1%	2%	2%	3%	2%
Charcoal	10%	<b>18%</b>	9%	5%	9%	8%	3%	7%	8%	0%	1%	7%	1%	3%	7%	6%	7%	6%	13%	<b>28%</b>	8%	2%	4%	8%
Exhaust Gas	0%	0%	0%	1%	1%	0%	1%	0%	0%	1%	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%	2%	0%	0%	1%	3%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Other Gases	4%	3%	1%	<b>9%</b>	<b>11%</b>	1%	<b>8%</b>	<b>12%</b>	1%	7%	6%	2%	<b>9%</b>	6%	2%	<b>15%</b>	<b>15%</b>	1%	4%	5%	1%	<b>8%</b>	<b>12%</b>	1%
Electric	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%	2%	2%	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	2%	0%
Self-immolation	<b>18%</b>	<b>15%</b>	1%	<b>9%</b>	<b>14%</b>	1%	<b>15%</b>	<b>15%</b>	2%	<b>22%</b>	<b>25%</b>	1%	<b>9%</b>	<b>10%</b>	1%	5%	<b>7%</b>	1%	<b>7%</b>	<b>8%</b>	1%	<b>9%</b>	3%	1%
Explosion	<b>9%</b>	4%	0%	<b>8%</b>	<b>7%</b>	0%	5%	<b>6%</b>	0%	<b>9%</b>	<b>6%</b>	0%	<b>7%</b>	<b>13%</b>	0%	<b>8%</b>	<b>8%</b>	0%	<b>11%</b>	<b>10%</b>	0%	5%	<b>8%</b>	0%
Small arms	<b>18%</b>	0%	0%	<b>22%</b>	1%	0%	<b>36%</b>	0%	0%	<b>21%</b>	0%	0%	<b>29%</b>	0%	0%	<b>24%</b>	4%	0%	<b>20%</b>	1%	0%	<b>25%</b>	0%	0%
Edged tool	5%	7%	2%	6%	7%	2%	4%	2%	2%	<b>8%</b>	6%	2%	<b>10%</b>	<b>17%</b>	3%	<b>12%</b>	5%	2%	<b>13%</b>	<b>10%</b>	3%	<b>18%</b>	<b>18%</b>	3%
Drowning	0%	2%	4%	1%	4%	4%	1%	4%	3%	2%	4%	3%	1%	6%	3%	0%	1%	4%	5%	7%	4%	1%	1%	4%
Jumping (off)	<b>28%</b>	<b>41%</b>	9%	<b>25%</b>	<b>31%</b>	10%	<b>21%</b>	<b>43%</b>	10%	<b>19%</b>	<b>36%</b>	10%	<b>26%</b>	<b>39%</b>	11%	<b>19%</b>	<b>39%</b>	11%	<b>21%</b>	<b>20%</b>	11%	<b>29%</b>	<b>48%</b>	11%
Jumping (forw.)	3%	3%	2%	7%	<b>9%</b>	2%	3%	4%	2%	7%	6%	2%	5%	4%	3%	2%	5%	3%	2%	4%	3%	2%	2%	3%
Total N	238	251	27010	174	152	26485	200	130	24664	193	176	23375	144	126	21255	185	169	20774	173	165	20311	129	132	19660
%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table 1

Percentage distribution of reporting and number of documented instances in MHLW statistics

A = Asahi, Y = Yomiuri and M = MHLW statistics. Boldness indicate approximate overreporting, considering 5% error rate.

M's N excludes 3% of total entries as they are other, unknown or solvents.

Furthermore, N for A and Y are based only on data that includes these methods, 81% of other articles are excluded.

Statistics Source: MHLW,2020.

## 5.4 Reasons for Suicide

In contrast to methods, *Asahi* and *Yomiuri* were more willing to discuss the reason(s) for suicide, as can be seen in figure 7 and 8. Economic + life (debt, unemployment, etc.) Reasons are calculated together in the MHLW statistics and so share a column in the figures. The data collected suggest that both newspapers generally focus on school and economic + life as the cause of suicide in their articles.

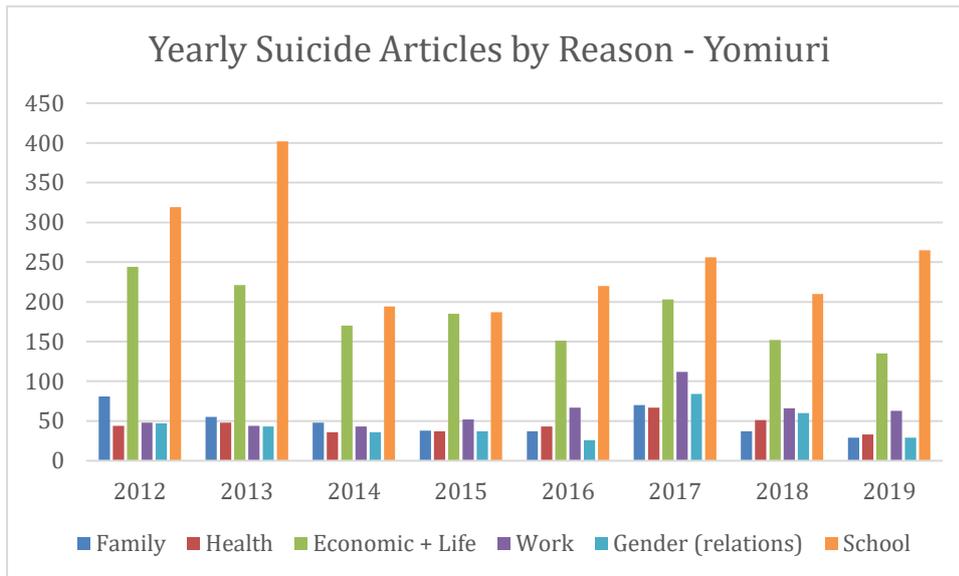
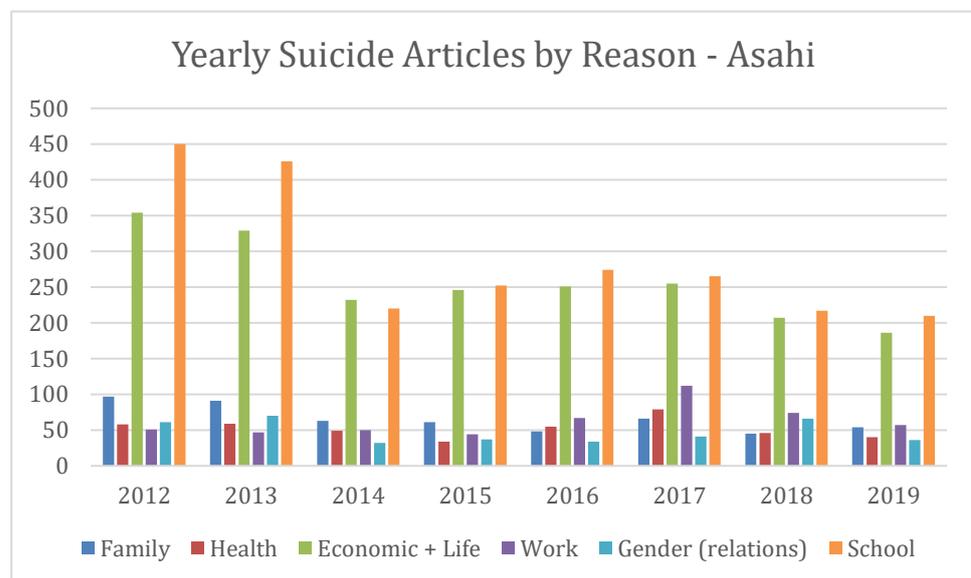


Figure 7  
Figure 7 shows the yearly suicide articles by reason for *Yomiuri*.

Figure 8  
Figure 8 shows the yearly suicide articles by reason for *Asahi*.



Both newspapers have more articles related to school and economic + life problems in 2012 and 2013, which decreased in the rest of the period. Despite less reporting over time, it is still more widely reported on than any other reason. In similarity to methods, *Asahi* and *Yomiuri* overreport on some reasons.

On average, health constitutes 52% of all recorded (known) reasons for suicide, while the reporting in each newspaper is 7% on average (MHLW,2020). *Asahi* reports on economic + life at 33% on average, and school at 37%, while *Yomiuri* reports 29% and 40% respectively. However, in the MHLW statistics (2020), 18% of recorded reasons are about economic + life, while only 2% are about school related reasons. Therefore, economic + life reasons are reported on almost two times more often, while school-related reasons are reported on up to 20 times on average respectively than they occurs in the statistics. From a distribution perspective, both newspapers report on four of the reasons, economic + life, work, gender (relations), and school, more than actual recorded instances, while family and health are not reported as often. It needs to be stated that the MHLW N is not the same as total suicides per year. This is because an incident can be recorded in up to three separate categories within reasons that can be seen in table 2. In the sample, work as a reason started to be more reported on in 2015 and forward but it remains a minor increase. Gender related reasons have been slightly overreported throughout the sample but falls within the expected error rate. Despite this, like work, it is a minor proportional increase from the MHLW statistics, with exception of 2018 where it is reported on 188% more on average by both newspapers (*Yomiuri* alone also overreported on it in 2017). As previously mentioned, economic + life and school are reported on more than actual occurrences throughout the entire period.

To briefly summarise this section, the frequent overreporting, primarily of economic + life and school reasons, showcase its persistence in media. The spikes were highest in 2012-2013, making that period most suitable for study.

Reason	2012			2013			2014			2015			2016			2017			2018			2019		
	A	Y	M	A	Y	M	A	Y	M	A	Y	M	A	Y	M	A	Y	M	A	Y	M	A	Y	M
Family	9%	10%	15%	9%	7%	15%	10%	9%	15%	9%	7%	16%	7%	7%	16%	8%	9%	16%	7%	6%	16%	9%	5%	16%
Health	5%	6%	51%	6%	6%	53%	8%	7%	53%	5%	7%	52%	8%	8%	53%	10%	8%	53%	7%	9%	52%	7%	6%	51%
Economic + Life	<b>33%</b>	<b>31%</b>	19%	<b>32%</b>	<b>27%</b>	18%	<b>36%</b>	<b>32%</b>	17%	<b>36%</b>	<b>35%</b>	18%	<b>34%</b>	<b>28%</b>	17%	<b>31%</b>	<b>26%</b>	17%	<b>32%</b>	<b>26%</b>	17%	<b>32%</b>	<b>24%</b>	18%
Work	5%	6%	9%	5%	5%	9%	8%	8%	9%	7%	10%	9%	9%	12%	9%	14%	14%	10%	11%	11%	10%	10%	11%	10%
Gender (Relations)	6%	6%	4%	7%	5%	4%	5%	7%	4%	5%	7%	3%	5%	5%	4%	5%	<b>11%</b>	4%	<b>10%</b>	<b>10%</b>	4%	6%	5%	4%
School	<b>42%</b>	<b>41%</b>	2%	<b>42%</b>	<b>49%</b>	1%	<b>34%</b>	<b>37%</b>	2%	<b>37%</b>	<b>35%</b>	2%	<b>38%</b>	<b>40%</b>	2%	<b>32%</b>	<b>32%</b>	2%	<b>33%</b>	<b>36%</b>	2%	<b>36%</b>	<b>48%</b>	2%
Total N	1071	783	26861	1022	813	25856	646	527	24182	674	536	23212	729	544	20934	818	792	20509	655	576	20089	583	554	19325
%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table 2

Percentage distribution of reporting and number of documented instances in MHLW statistics.

A = Asahi, Y = Yomiuri and M = MHLW statistics. Boldness indicate approximate overreporting, considering 5% error rate.

M's N is not identical to yearly number of suicides. Each suicide can be recorded in up to three reasons, based on available evidence. Additionally, 20% of entries are excluded for being unknown.

Furthermore, N for A and Y are based only on data that includes these Reasons, 21% of other articles are excluded.

Source: MHLW,2020.

## 5.5 Additional Search Terms

As outlined above, four additional terms were searched for: *karōshi*, *karōshi* (not combined with *jisatsu*), bullying, and hydrogen sulphide.

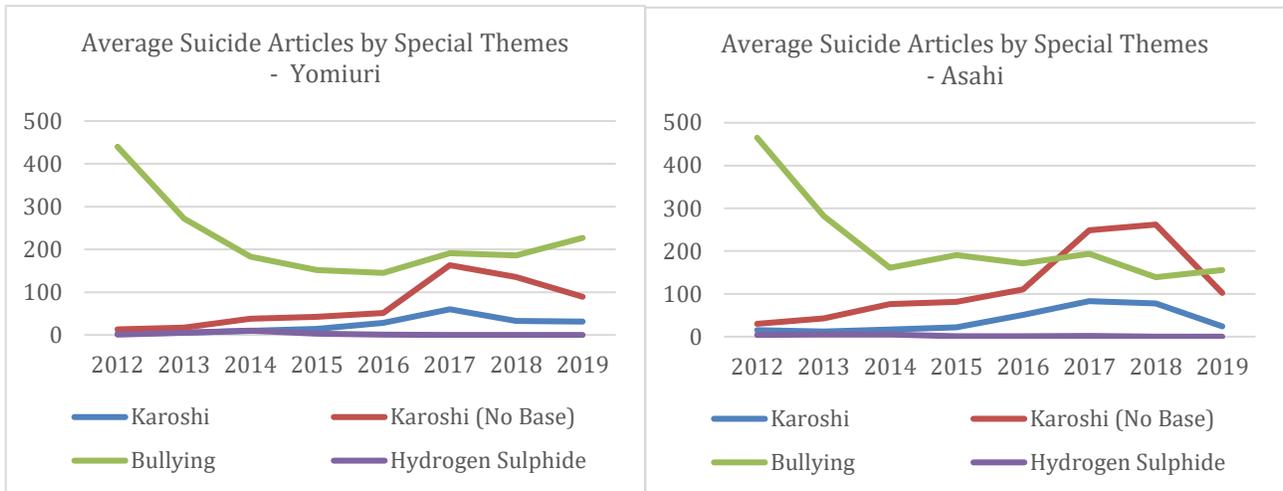


Figure 9 and Figure 10

Figures 9 and 10 show the average suicide articles by the special themes that were articulated in the methodology, separated into respective newspaper.

If we first focus on hydrogen sulphide, despite its prevalence in the media in 2008, the media no longer seem inclined to report on it. *Asahi*'s reporting that includes this method is 0,24% (18 articles), while for *Yomiuri*, it is 0,29% (20 articles), or 0,27% of both (N=14289) of all their reporting. The MHLW statistics do not clearly state how many use hydrogen sulphides as a method. Because of lack of available data, it is difficult to tell why the newspapers are not reporting on this method. On the other hand, this data supports the hypothesis that the 2008 hydrogen sulphide suicide cluster was a Moral Panic. However, it cannot be a point of reference for Moral Panic in the relevant study period.

Considering *karōshi*, both newspapers have steadily been increasing their reporting on this phenomenon, primarily focusing on it without connection to suicides. In total, 14% (1987) of all samples (14289) contains *karōshi* to some extent. 17% of all *Asahi* samples contain *karōshi* while *Yomiuri* contains 11%. *Yomiuri*'s reporting of *karōshi* peaked in 2017, and *Asahi*'s peak in 2017 and 2018, is a valid reference point for study. However, as the MHLW statistics do not contain dedicated entry points for *karōshi*, but rather separate the issue in different categories, it makes it difficult to reference for this study.

Out of the four additional search terms, bullying has the steepest curve. For both newspapers, it peaks in 2012 and remains high throughout the period. Bullying related articles has 3555 samples out of the total 14289, resulting in 25%.

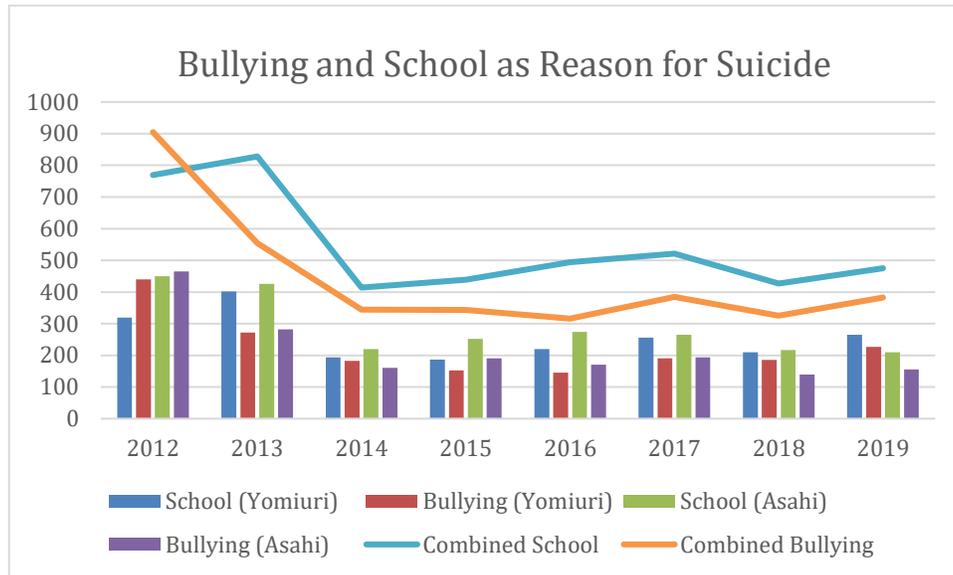


Figure 11

Figure 11 shows how many articles contained bullying and school related issues as potential reason for suicide in respective newspapers.

Throughout the period studied, for the most part bullying was reported on less than school itself (although they are related). The exception is 2012, where *Asahi's* yearly articles had 36% related to school and 37% related to bullying, while *Yomiuri* had 28% and 38% respectively. Both terms can be expected to overlap, but this is not an accurate representation because 'school problems' encompass more than just bullying, according to the statistics (MHLW,2020:269). These statistics include *worrying about entrance examination, other concerns about future paths, underachievement, personal relationships, other classmate disputes, other, and finally bullying.* In 2019, this had a total N of 355, with 6 bullying cases over four different age groups (up to 49 years), resulting in 1.69% of all 'school problems' categories. Furthermore, the category of school problems can be slightly inflated because each suicide gets characterised up to three times. This means that throughout the period on average, bullying related suicides only constitutes an average of 1.6% of all school related problems, or 0,021% of all problems.

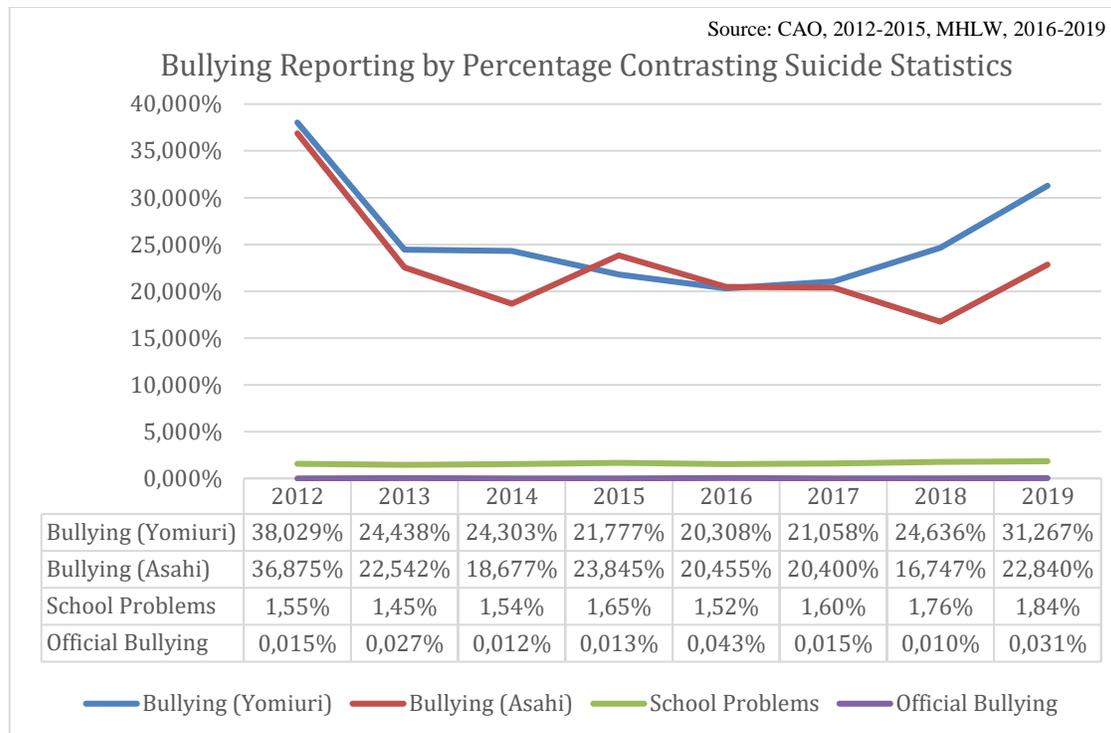


Figure 12

Figure 12 shows bullying as collected by the methodology in this study in contrast to the MHLW data. School problems are outlined in Table 2, which means it is not identical to yearly number of suicides because each suicide can be recorded up to three times. Furthermore, 20% of the MHLW data are excluded for being unknown.

Official bullying reflects the total percentage of *all* reasons for suicide within the given year. It is entirely possible some of the entries in the calculated percentage are duplicates as well, as it carries the same possibility as school problems. In other words, both are percentage distributions based on all suicide reasons per year, excluding the 20%.

Most of these school related suicides are done by people up to age 29, according to the statistics. However, when considering bullying to be a cause of suicide, in the period studied it has always been the minority reason. Throughout the studied period, a total of 37 were marked to be caused by bullying, resulting in 1.3% of all school reasons in this period. Even if one assumes all ‘school problems’ are bullying related (which is inaccurate), newspapers would still be overreporting on it, as *Yomiuri* reports on it in 40% of their articles on average that includes reason and *Asahi* 37% respectively.

To summarise, reporting of bullying was higher than school problems in 2012, then it decreased and has remained lower since. Still, bullying has remained a widely reported reason, despite the rarity in the MHLW statistics. The rarity of hydrogen sulphide reporting, in conjunction with the lack of MHLW statistics makes it difficult to study. On the other hand, *karōshi* has become more widely reported on in recent years, but due to lack of accessible data, it

does not become feasible for the study at hand. Because of this, bullying in 2012 becomes a better anomaly considering the previous findings.

## 5.6 Summary

This chapter has showcased the data that was collected in the initial analysis, as well as identified anomalies and media overreporting. Methods and reasons show that throughout the period, certain methods and reasons are overreported relative to actual occurrences. *Asahi* and *Yomiuri* have different priorities when reporting, such as *Asahi*'s reporting on small firearms, which *Yomiuri* barely reports on. Excluding the one-sided reporting of firearms, 2012 becomes an ideal year to study from a methods perspective. With regards to the reasons given for suicides, the 2012 and 2013 spikes become an ideal starting point also from that perspective. The additional search terms show that bullying is overreported, especially in 2012. These three perspectives support the initial idea that suggests the biggest anomaly for a Moral Panic study would be 2012-2013, making that period the ideal candidate. It could be assumed that this is the same Moral Panic, or possibly two different ones. However, due to the limitations of time and number of articles, the entire period cannot be studied in detail. Thus, for the purpose of analysis, the first spike through July and August in 2012 was chosen. This is because if the entire period is the same Moral Panic, starting by the middle/end would affect the Moral Panic's inventory differently than it does in its early construction. Furthermore, it would create additional limitations that could affect the study, such as information presented in the second half could implicitly rely on information from the first spike that would be unknown to the reader. This would make analysing the data more difficult than reading the information as it comes from the first spike.

## 6 MAIN ANALYSIS

This chapter applies the theoretical foundation from chapter three to the data that was collected after initial analysis to answer the research question. The main analysis will consist of three sections. The first section will focus on explaining the data collected for the period July and August in 2012, as outlined in the initial analysis. This section will deal with addressing accuracy to the other data, and how it will be treated in the third section. The second section will address the background of the primary incident that revolves around this potential Moral Panic. The third section will use the data the first section provides to analyse the primary incident within the established framework.

### 6.1 Overview of Articles

The period that was chosen in the initial analysis of July – August 2012, resulted in 713 total articles related to suicide. This data was then collected, and a total of 130 articles that did not fit the criteria (e.g. film reviews, TV guides, and unrelated politics) were removed. 296 articles from *Asahi* and 287 articles from *Yomiuri*, in total 583 articles were used for analysis.

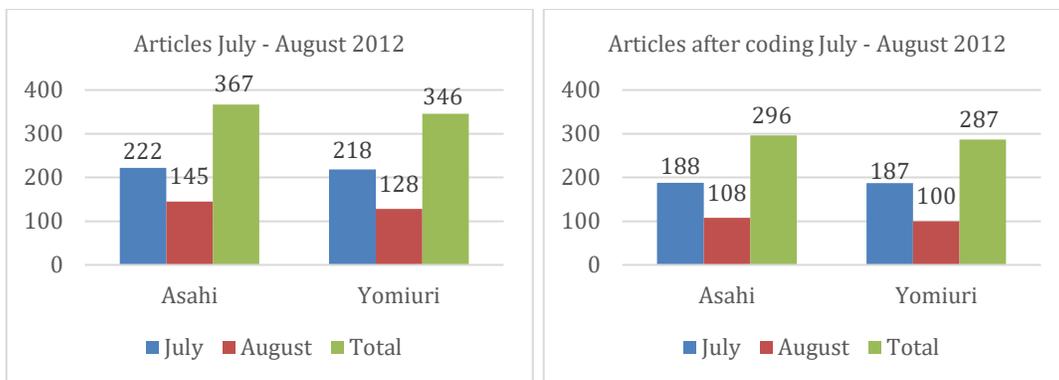


Figure 13 and Figure 14

Figure 13 and 14 shows the number of articles per newspaper before and after coding.

These 583 articles were coded into 55 separate incidents that were their major focus. 2% of the articles were connected to an incident in Osaka. 5% of the articles are related to bullying and suicide countermeasures that fit the criteria but did not report on an actual incident. 21% of the articles were marked as ‘other’, which constitutes 52 of the incidents. However, none of those incidents had more than 10 articles. The other 72% (417) of articles are of a singular incident in Otsu city, respectively 51% (213) from *Asahi* and 49% (204) from *Yomiuri*. Out of all

articles (583), 83% are news articles, and 17% are editorial or voice articles. Out of the editorial articles, *Yomiuri* had the most at 65% (15), while *Asahi* had the most voice articles (e.g. letter from the reader), at 85% (67).

The amount of suicide incidents mentioned in these all articles (583) totalled 634. These articles were coded based on the MHLW statistics (2020). Some articles could not be coded into these categories and were coded as 'not applicable'. Regarding the reported ages of the suicide victims, 80,6% were below 19, while the other categories had between 0,2% and 3%, except for unknown/not applicable, which constitutes 11,2% of the articles. In the MHLW statistics (2020), there are around 2.1% suicides below the age of 19. 73,66% of the incidents discussed male suicides, while female was at 6,47% and unspecified/not applicable is 19,87%. While the male distribution is proportional to the MHLW statistics (2-1 ratio), the data suggests underreporting on female suicides. This could be a side-effect of the focus on the Otsu incident, which will be discussed later. The occupations discussed were 80,3% students, 6,8% other occupations and 12,9% unknown/not applicable. In contrast, the MHLW statistics show around 3,7% on average are students, which also includes university students.

In the period studied, 69% of articles were 'generic', which means that the method was not specified. This was followed by 15% jumping (off) and 9% not applicable. Other methods mentioned in the period were e.g., train suicides at 2,1% and hanging at 4,1%. Overall, the findings when coding were consistent with the data found in the initial data phase related to methods. The initial analysis found that jumping (off) was reported in 90 articles, which became 94 after coded analysis. This was because of duplicates within articles that the search engine could not find. The primary differences were seen with gas, explosion, hanging, and jumping (forward). The coding process found that the figures for explosion and gas were related to false positives because of bomb threats. It became apparent with jumping (forward) that the newspapers often use different words to describe this, which normally are 'train suicides.' For the months of July-August 2012, the initial analysis revealed zero matches, while 13 were identified during the coding process. A similar issue was found with hanging, meaning that the newspapers used different words to explain the act, raising the initial 7 to 26. The combination of keywords and search engines were unable to detect these differences.

Reasons for suicide were more difficult to quantify in line with the statistics. 21% of the incidents are 'unknown', which is in line with the 20% average unknown in the statistics. 5% are

included in ‘other’ which is related to e.g. the 2011 tsunami and work. However, 74% (469) of all reasons were interpreted by the newspapers as a result of bullying. The initial analysis revealed high percentages of both economic + life and school related reasons, and bullying was also high throughout the period. Although the MHLW statistics may place up to three reasons per incident, the newspapers were focused on bullying. As a result, while the initial analysis on reasons (section 5.4) showed potential Moral Panics, it returned several false positives, particularly economic + life reasons.

Earlier in this section, it was written that 72% of the articles are about a singular incident in Otsu. This incident is a singular suicide that alone takes up a large portion of the statistics, where an underage male student committed suicide by jumping (off). As a result of the prevalence of these Otsu articles, this individual suicide is vastly overrepresented in all statistics based on the data collection. Because the statistics show that this incident was highlighted in the reporting, it will be the focus of the analysis.

## **6.2 Otsu Incident**

In October 2011, in Otsu city, the capital of Shiga Prefecture, a male junior high school student committed suicide. The school he attended conducted an internal investigation claiming that nothing that happened at the school caused the death, suggesting that family issues might be to blame. Eventually, after many attempts by the parents to get answers, the incident received nationwide media attention and finally the prefectural police investigated the school and education board. The investigation concluded that bullying was the cause of the boy’s suicide, that the school did not take any serious measures to prevent it, and that they tried to hide it from the public. This incident caused serious concern throughout the country and changes occurred, most notably of which was an anti-bullying law in 2013 (Iwasa,2017:59-60).

## **6.3 The Narrative Construction of the Newspapers’ Inventory**

When considering the aforementioned characteristics of an *inventory*: *exaggeration and distortion, prediction, and symbolization*, both newspapers engage in various angles of construction of these ideas. Yamazato’s (2010:47,77) study on *Asahi* found that the narrative focus was not on the students’ suicides but rather the schools’ and educational system’s concealment of bullying. Similarly, the same was found with *Asahi* and *Yomiuri* in connection to

the Otsu incident. As mentioned above, the suicide happened in October 2011, but was not reported on in detail until July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2012, when unacceptable conduct was revealed in court (YS, 2012U). After the death of the student, the school had conducted a survey to answer if bullying was involved, but parts of the survey, referring to so-called ‘suicide practice,’ where the students were coerced to pretend to commit suicide, was redacted from previous publication of the survey (YS,2012U). This concealment became the foundation that constructed the coming narrative.

As previously discussed in section 5.5, bullying related suicides are rare (average of 0,021% throughout the period (CAO,2012-2015, MHLW,2016-2019)), but seemingly often discussed in the newspapers, and was a primary factor in this incident. However, while the singular incident helps to distort the understanding of the phenomenon of suicide in Japan by taking over the narrative, the primary perception of the issue was related to the school’s and Board of Education’s (BoE) perceived inability to deal with bullying. The reported narrative came to focus on ‘suicide practice, the survey, and the actions of the school and BoE.’ Both newspapers used ‘suicide practice’ as a loose term that came to symbolise the concealed acts of bullying. The survey stands for the concealment of the existence of bullying, which the public perceived as a big threat, and the perceived corruption of schools and the systems governing them. The school and BoE originally represented the school in Otsu and their BoE who allegedly concealed bullying but became symbolic of ‘bigger problems,’ such as a ‘corrupt’ school system that allowed it to happen; it is a problem everywhere, not just in Otsu. In short, the school system became the scapegoat.

Turning to ‘suicide practice’, it was a particular phrase used throughout the period studied and became synonymous with bullying as it was constructed as a focal point of the media’s inventory. However, what it was referring to was not known, because the school and the BoE did not sufficiently investigate so-called hearsay (AS,2012A, YS,2012A). Over time, the various acts of bullying came to light, such as eating a dead bee, being tied up, and coerced to do things, including ‘suicide practice’ such as pretending to jump out the window, which is the method (jumping (off)) that was later used in the actual suicide (AS,2012B, YS,2012B). The school and BoE were targeted not only by the public, but also by the police (although they had previously ignored the problem), and the government, which will be discussed later. Just over two weeks after the initial reveal of the survey, the city and BoE had received around 14,000 complaints (AS,2012C, YS,2012C).

The narrative construction in 2012 became slightly different from the narrative construction that Yamazato (2010) studied for 2006-2007, because different ‘players’ had entered the construction, changing the narrative. While the 2006-2007 public in Yamazato’s (2010:32-33,50) study also engaged in complaints, they did so to a lesser extent (around 2000), and the lawmakers reacted by passing new laws on suicide countermeasures, but that is where the similarity ends. There are four aspects that sets the Otsu incident apart from Yamazato’s study, namely the bomb threats, the prefectural police raid, the attempted murder on Otsu BoE’s superintendent, and the internet. Six days after the initial concealment was revealed, it was reported that the school had to close temporarily due to bomb threats (AS,2012D, YS,2012D). Similar threats were laid against the school’s semester closing ceremony as well (YS,2012E). At least one of these were later attributed to a high schooler from Saitama Prefecture (YS,2012F). On July 11<sup>th</sup>, a few days after the initial bomb threat, the prefectural police raided the school and BoE office, seizing all the items related to the incident. Even the Ministry of Education (MEXT) found this to be unusual (YS,2012G, AS,2012E). On August 15<sup>th</sup>, another young student from Saitama attempted to murder Otsu BoE’s superintendent, claiming that “I think the superintendent was hiding the truth. I couldn’t forgive him, and I wanted to kill him.” (AS, 2012F, YS,2012H). Following the murder attempt, the BoE received over 400 calls where most of the messages supported the attack (AS,2012G). Throughout the period, the internet became an open space for spreading information, accurate or not, regarding the identity of the bullies and those in relation to them, causing unrelated people to get harassed (YS,2012I, AS,2012H).

These unusual reactions to the initial incident and its subsequent publication the year after shows a clear hostile reaction against the scapegoat, which also gave the media more material to construct their narrative. Bullying itself was perceived as an ‘epidemic’, and concealing the epidemic was the same as being part of the problem. In other words, it was not just the concealment of the bullying, but rather that it became the perception that the system (schools and BoE) allowed it to happen indiscriminately, and that many students died from it. A critical voice article in *Asahi* suggests this and adds that students should abandon school because the system neglects them (AS,2012I). Because of such criticism, some schools and BoE’s tried to get a more positive image in the media. Hokkaido’s prefectural BoE, and Aichi prefectural BoE’s, as examples, tried to distance themselves by showing active response to work against bullying (AS,2012J, YS,2012J). The Otsu BoE slowly started to agree with the criticism

admitting for the first time on July 12<sup>th</sup> that bullying was a factor (YS,2012K). These actions were attempts by the systems to act responsibly, to avoid being interpreted as irresponsible by the public and avoiding the feeling of shame and guilt, as Yamazato (2010:59) argued in the past. Amidst growing criticism revealing more information (e.g. the BoE superintendent travelling to Australia to inspect schools instead of dealing with the survey the previous year (AS,2012K, YS,2012L)), Otsu BoE were unable to uphold their narrative and formally apologised on August 9<sup>th</sup> for their failure of delivering and verifying the survey (AS,2012L). Despite this attempt to take responsibility, the findings of Otsu BoE's concealment of bullying grew larger, and articles and people arguing for changing the system, or dismantling it entirely, appeared (AS,2012M, YS,2012M, YS,2012R). This is because the implicit assumption became that the problem is so widespread that the failure of the school system will keep happening – unless the system is uprooted and changed.

For the concealment of bullying and bullying-related suicide to matter, there must also be a perception that both are a problem. However, as discussed in section 5.5, bullying-related suicides are rare. Furthermore, Rappleye and Komatsu (2020) argued that the perception of bullying as a widespread problem in Japan is not supported by the existing data on bullying. Despite this, and that the official motive of the suicide had yet to be determined, *Asahi* and *Yomiuri* alike reported suicide-related bullying to be a widespread problem beyond this incident and constructed it as a moral problem with the school system and its lack of moral education. The prefectural police seizing school property, as mentioned earlier, could be argued as an act by them to not only prohibit more concealment, but also to right the moral wrong in the eyes of the public. As an investigator stated, “because of the criticism against us [the police], we had to act.” (YS,2012G). Furthermore, it was their way to take responsibility as the father of the boy reported the bullying to police three times, and it was ignored (AS,2012A, YS,2012A). The feeling of ‘taking responsibility’ was later seen across the country, as *Yomiuri* (2012S) reports, the police acted on bullying cases on principle because of the Otsu incident. MEXT also became a centrepiece, sending officials, setting up new organisations, and requesting all schools and BoE's to do surveys to determine the problem nationwide (AS,2012N, AS,2012O, YS,2012N, YS, 2012O). Lastly, the Cabinet Office also announced a draft for suicide prevention laws as a response (AS,2012P, YS,2012P).

Early on, the new Otsu mayor took a stance against the school system and immediately wanted to set up an external committee (AS,2012Q). Over the course of the two months, this external committee was set up under the mayor with six members, three from the city and three chosen by the affected family (YS,2012T). Unlike what the BoE and school believed, the committee would operate under the assumption that the bullying had a causal relationship, because otherwise, according to the Otsu mayor, it would be hard to see the truth of the incident (AS,2012R, AS,2012S, AS,2012T). Similarly to the police, this was to take responsibility for Otsu city's perceived failures, which in turn was reflected on the school system, which had become distrusted. The students themselves did not believe that the school would act on the results of the survey (YS,2012Q).

For the most part, the narrative employed in *Asahi* and *Yomiuri* was consistent, focusing on the perceived misconduct and sticking to the concealment of bullying and bullying as the central problems. *Yomiuri* could be interpreted to insist on the bullying theme more, with a 2,22 weighted percentage (most common word) compared to *Asahi*'s 1,70 (third most common). The main difference that separates the two newspapers in this regard, is the voiced articles. *Yomiuri* relied more on presenting the facts as they came out, while not allowing the conversation to be derailed from the perceived central problem. *Asahi* also stuck to the facts of the perceived problem, but they also relied to a greater degree on letters from readers to convey the "moral force," as Yamazato (2010:74) called it, against the problem. In that regard, *Asahi* do not seem to have changed. There are several potential reasons for this discrepancy, e.g. the readership of the individual newspapers differ, with more people willing to write for *Asahi* than for *Yomiuri*. On the other hand, *Yomiuri* claims that they were the first to have a centre dedicated to the reader's voices and opinions from 2005 (YS, n.d.B). It is entirely possible that *Yomiuri* had the potential to publish more voices but refrained from doing so, possibly due to wanting more control of the sensitive subject in order to follow their own code of conduct. Further study beyond the scope of this thesis would be needed to accurately address why this is the case.

The more hostile environment in 2012 resulted in a 57% increase in *Asahi* articles in this incident in the first two months when compared to Yamazato (2010:47), though it should be noted that Yamazato covered four student suicides (incl. Werther effect) and two other related incidents, while this study only covers one (as others are unrelated). Similarly, *Yomiuri* only has a few less articles than *Asahi* in the period studied. Narrative-wise, these two newspapers did not

differ much, nor did it differ much from Yamazato's (2010) study, despite the more hostile environment. Both newspapers reported on a singular, rare, incident in hundreds of articles, and both predicted that the situation would get worse as more information was discovered to go against the moral good of society, which is why the anti-bullying trend must continue (AS, 2012U). Furthermore, both relied heavily on symbolism to help further their case against the concealment of bullying by the school system.

As was stated in the beginning of this section, the foundation of the narrative was the concealment of bullying. There was a reluctance to admit existence of bullying, and to admit a causal relationship between the bullying and suicide in this incident, similar to Yamazato's study (2010:76). The media attention was not directed at the singular act of suicide, but rather reporting on the issue of the perceived wrongdoings of the school system failing to address bullying and bullying-related suicide. The suicide as such, and the survey related to it, was merely a symbol in the newspapers' narrative that illustrated the ill conduct.

Lastly, as discussed in the literature review, the Werther effect (copycat suicide) is a concern in Japan. Yamazato (2010:69,77) argued the existence of the Werther effect due to overreporting in 2006-2007. However, Yamazato covered more cases over a longer period. For this study, such a conclusion is not possible, because of the limitations and the newspaper's singular focus on Otsu. While there were just over 50 other incidents of suicides that the newspapers reported on (28% of all articles), the other reports are too spread out, meaning that there were too few articles per incident. Because of this, with the addition of those articles being vague, additional analysis in relation to Otsu becomes difficult, which showcases the limitation of the time period being focused on the first two months instead of the entire period of mid-2012 to mid-2013.

#### **6.4 Summary**

This chapter further analysed the data in July-August 2012 after the initial analysis. After analysing and coding, it was discovered that most of the 583 articles were related to a singular incident, namely the Otsu incident. After explaining the results of the coded data, the focus was turned towards this incident. The data suggests that the reaction to the incident was more hostile than similar incidents that Yamazato (2010) discussed. Furthermore, the newspapers' central narrative was regarding the concealment of bullying, and bullying itself, rather than the actual

suicide incident that merely were an illustrative catalyst that allowed the newspapers' inventory to overflow in the direction of a Moral Panic.

## 7 CONCLUSION

This thesis examined the period of 2012-2019 where the Japanese suicide rate has steadily been decreasing, and how the newspapers have been constructing the narrative regarding suicide in their inventory during this time. The focus was laid on *Asahi* and *Yomiuri Shimbun*, analysing their reporting patterns, which revealed more unusual patterns in July and August 2012. This study was conducted to answer three questions:

- 1) How do Japanese newspapers reflect the suicide situation in Japan?
- 2) Is the construction of the newspapers' inventory framed towards a Moral Panic regarding suicides?
- 3) What is the central problem of suicide framed in the narrative of the newspapers' inventory?

To summarise the results:

1) Both *Asahi* and *Yomiuri* focus their reporting on rarer reasons (school and, to a lesser extent, economic + life) and methods (jumping (off), self-immolation, etc.) of suicide throughout the studied period. There is also a focus on bullying and bullying-related suicide, despite data presented by Rappleye and Komatsu (2020) suggesting bullying is not that widespread, and, at least officially, bullying-related suicides being extremely rare (0,021% on average (CAO,2012-2015, MHLW,2016-2019)). The newspapers' focus on these rarer aspects of the suicide situation in Japan presents an approximate view of overreporting that could have an inventory framed towards Moral Panic. *Asahi* uniquely overreports on small arms suicide despite it being one of the rarest methods. Why exactly only *Asahi* reports on it is unclear, one possibility could be the gun laws, but these laws are quite restrictive. Furthermore, in the past, a lot of small arms suicides were related to police officers, and if that remains the case it could be newsworthy; however, that does not explain why *Yomiuri* is not reporting on it (Umeda,2013). More studies on this would be necessary to illuminate the reasons. When considering July-August 2012, both newspapers overreported on age and occupation, and, to a lesser extent, on gender, although this cannot be assumed to represent the entire period.

2) The inventory is framed towards Moral Panic when considering the contents of an inventory: *exaggeration and distortion, prediction, and symbolisation*. The exaggeration and distortion of the situation was reflected on for the entire period in 1) and these patterns are seen in more detail in the main analysis. This is because the focus was primarily on a singular case

that distorted the actual situation of suicide in Japan at the time. The narrative was framed around bullying, jumping (off), student, and youth suicides, despite the combination of these traits being rare. Furthermore, the reporting on the singular Otsu incident became larger in scope than the collection of suicides that symbolised the period that Yamazato (2010) studied.

Concerning prediction, the newspapers arguably worked on the assumption that the situation would get worse, which it did in the form of a hostile reaction by outside groups towards the perceived scapegoat. But it also concerns the implicit assumption that the problem is widespread and rooted in the school system, and that suicides like these, and their concealment would happen again and again unless the system was changed. There were three sets of symbolisations, the concept of 'suicide practice,' survey, and the school and BoE, which came to represent different ideas of the perceived threat. The school and BoE represented the perceived failing school system, and the survey came to represent the concealment of the existence of bullying by the corrupt system. 'Suicide practice,' represented bullying, and was seen as the result of a failed school system, and the concealment of bullying and its potential consequences were perceived as a natural result of going to school in Japan. In other words, the newspapers' inventories were framed towards a Moral Panic.

3) As was briefly discussed at the end of 2), the symbolisation represented what would become the central problem that was constructed in the newspapers inventory. It was not the suicide itself, or the bullying of the student, but the concealment of the existence of bullying and the corrupt school system that would lead to bullying and worse. In this sense, it was consistent with what Yamazato (2010) found in the 2006-2007 period for *Asahi*.

The data presents some aspects that warrants some further consideration, specifically regarding 1). This is because the period studied was 2012-2019, but the only real reference of study for question two and three would be in 2012, and maybe 2017. Since the focus was on a period with decreasing suicide rates, it becomes notable that the only reference point for main study was when the suicides were at their highest. Another perspective that could be argued here, however, would be that with decreasing suicide rates, shows no need to excessively report on suicide or to construct a narrative towards a Moral Panic inventory. That said, the methodology employed does show some degree of accuracy with some terms, but as the main study found, it has some errors. Further refining it with additional search terms would help improve accuracy.

The answers to the questions present several possibilities to validate and extend the possibilities of studies. Extending the study to include more newspapers, like *Mainichi Shimbun*, or include other media, like *Fuji TV*, could help to validate the findings of this study. Furthermore, extending the study to include the months that could not be studied due to limitations, between September 2012 to around April 2013, could help to further validate these findings or help paint a different narrative that may have been constructed further as time went on. Further analysis on the Werther effect and this incident over the entire period would help to better illustrate media reporting patterns and their potential negative effects. Lastly, further analysis on *Asahi's* reporting patterns on small arms suicides and why it seems to differ so extensively from *Yomiuri* could prove valuable.

To conclude, the findings of this thesis is not to say that Japan does not have a problem with bullying and suicide, or to treat the related issues lightly. As Rappleye and Komatsu (2020:326-327) wrote: “for the victim, these issues are undoubtedly a major problem.” They further argued that they believe that ‘panics’ can generate more beneficial practical effects like lower rates of bullying and, by extension, bullying-related suicides. This idea is possible as the Otsu incident showed that many institutions tried to change for the better in its wake, which could help to reduce bullying and its consequences in the long term. However, while it is possible that it generates more practical effects, there is still the possibility of triggering the Werther effect, due to the media’s reporting on methods, reasons, and location. Because of this, understanding media reporting patterns and their potential downsides is necessary in order to suggest further reporting policies for the media like WHO (2017) has done previously. This could help leverage a ‘practical Moral Panic’ while avoiding unnecessarily triggering the Werther effect.

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## APPENDIX I – KEYWORDS

Some of these words are general approximations based on the MHLW statistics (2020).

English	Rōmaji
<b>Suicide</b>	Jisatsu
<b>Hanging</b>	Kubitsuri
<b>Poison</b>	Fukudoku
<b>Charcoal</b>	Rentan
<b>Exhaust Gas</b>	Haigasu
<b>Gas</b>	Gasu (Excludes previous entry in database)
<b>Electric</b>	Kanden
<b>Self-immolation</b>	Shōshin
<b>Explosion</b>	Bakuhatsu
<b>Small Arms (Gun)</b>	Jūki
<b>Edged Tool</b>	Hamono
<b>Drowning</b>	Jusui
<b>Jumping (off)</b>	Tobiori
<b>Jumping (forward)</b>	Tobikomi
<b>Family</b>	Katei
<b>Health</b>	Kenkō
<b>Economic</b>	Keizai
<b>Life</b>	Seikatsu
<b>Work</b>	Kinmu
<b>Gender (Relation)</b>	Danjo
<b>School</b>	Gakkō
<b>Karōshi (Death from overwork) + Suicide</b>	Karōshi + Suicide
<b>Karōshi (Death from overwork)</b>	Karōshi
<b>Bullying</b>	Ijime
<b>Hydrogen Sulphide</b>	Ryūka suiso