



PCI Guidelines and Mental Health Reporting: A Content Analysis of Indian Newspapers

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ABSTRACT

The study investigates the use of mental health reporting in two prominent English newspapers in India: The Hindu and Hindustan Times, from January 2021 to August 2024, with a focus on the Press Council of India (PCI) "Norms of Journalistic Conduct" (2019). The study uses corpus-based content analysis to detect "hyperbolic modifiers" from four different categories: "Intensity," "Evaluative," "Spectacle," and "Threat-Based." The findings indicate the use of sensationalist language in the newspapers that violates the PCI's "Norms of Journalistic Conduct." Hindustan Times was found to be practising "Hard Sensationalism" with hyperbolic modifiers like "shocking" and "horrific" to engage the audience. The Hindu was found to be practising "Soft Sensationalism" with words like "strange" and "peculiar" to maintain social distance from mental health issues. The study concludes that the use of terms like "unpredictable" and "worst" indicates the failure of the media to dissociate mental health from crises. The study suggests that there is an increase in the use of clinical language but maintains a theatrical style of presenting news. The study recommends that there is a need to provide linguistic sensitivity training to the media and to use "person-first language" to promote health literacy and reduce the stigma of mental health issues.

**Introduction:**

The issue of mental health disorders has emerged as a major public health challenge in India, which affects the individual and society at large. According to the National Mental Health Survey of India (2015-2016), approximately 15% of adults suffer from at least one mental health disorder. Among those, the most prevalent mental health disorders are depressive disorders (5.25%), anxiety disorders (3.65%), and psychoses (1.98%). The treatment gap for mental health disorders remains at over 80%. This issue is further complicated by stigma, lack of treatment facilities, and various sociocultural issues (Gautham et al., 2020; Desai et al., 2004). According to the Global Burden of Disease Study, there are 2,430 disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) per 100,000 population for mental health disorders in India. This issue is affecting the population in various regions, including Uttar Pradesh and Bihar (Sagar et al., 2020).

Newspapers, being the main information sources in India, contribute a great deal to the way the population thinks about mental health. However, it has been revealed through studies that there exists a significant disparity in the way these issues are addressed. For instance, a study revealed that a retrospective analysis of the coverage in English-language newspapers depicted mental health in a negative light by relating it to violence, crime, or personal failure, thus contributing to the social marginalisation process (Arneaud et al., 2023). A content analysis of Chennai and Rajasthan also revealed that the coverage of mental health issues was dominated by tragic and deviant themes and had a restricted focus on recovery and treatment options (Lakhan et al., 2020; Jain & Kumar, 2016). In Bengaluru, the newspaper coverage of suicides was found to be unethical, including descriptions of methods, glamorising the act, or attributing causality to simplistic explanations, thus potentially precipitating copycat suicides (Chandra et al., 2014; Mendon et al., 2025).

Reporting of suicides exemplifies these ethical issues in the context of the large number of suicide deaths in India, estimated to be 15.7 per 100,000 in 2016, making it one of the global leaders (Armstrong et al., 2018). The World Health Organisation has suggested that the press should not use detailed descriptions, assign blame, or give prominent coverage to reduce the Werther effect (WHO, 2017, cited in many studies). However, Indian newspapers show poor compliance with WHO guidelines: only 28% of nine major Tamil Nadu newspapers complied with WHO guidelines, and common inclusions were methods of suicide (68%) and images (42%) (Armstrong et al., 2018). Similar issues have been noted in Odisha (Kar et al., 2022), Kerala (Mani et al., 2021), and in the national coverage of post-celebrity suicides, where sensationalism was associated with increased online searches related to suicide (Ganesh et al., 2020).



Recent ethical concerns have been raised regarding general mental health reporting, pointing out that an analysis in 2025 found a link between irresponsible reporting and increased stigma and decreased service use (Goel et al., 2025).

These trends are an expression of underlying systemic issues. The print media representation of mental health issues is sparse and imbalanced, giving more prominence to the experiences of the urban elite than those of rural or marginalised groups (Mohandass et al., 2019; Raj et al., 2021). Sociocultural issues, such as the presence of caste inequalities and gender issues, further add to the imbalance in representation; for example, systemic discrimination in higher education systems increases the vulnerability of Dalit and Adivasi students to mental health issues, but the media does not adequately represent these systemic issues (Komanapalli & Rao, 2021; Chakrapani & Bharat, 2023). Inadequate urban mental health care systems further contribute to this issue, as the fragmented mental health care system receives inadequate and imbalanced media attention (Desai et al., 2004).

To address this issue, the Press Council of India (PCI) issued guidelines in 2019 to ensure uniform ethical reporting of mental illness and suicides (Press Council of India, 2019). The guidelines emphasise the use of non-stigmatising language, the omission of details about methods and simplifications, the encouragement of recovery-oriented reporting, and the inclusion of information about resources. In line with the guidelines of the World Health Organisation (WHO), the PCI guidelines aim to protect at-risk groups while also educating the public. However, the extent of compliance with these guidelines is still incompletely described. While there are local assessments for suicides (for example, Mendon et al., 2025; Kar et al., 2022), there has been no thorough assessment of PCI guideline compliance for general mental health issues in newspapers across the country. There are also gaps in the measurement of adherence parameters, the detection of violation trends, and correlations with their effects on public perception or policy outcomes (Goel et al., 2025).

This research fills these gaps by conducting a comprehensive analysis of ethical reporting in Indian newspapers, as compared to PCI guidelines. By using content analysis on major national and regional newspapers from 2019 to 2025, it analyses the level of compliance in reporting mental illness and other related issues. This work's theoretical foundation is framing theory, which holds that media create reality through selective emphasis (Entman, 1993, as contextualised in Indian studies like Arneaud et al., 2023). Practically speaking, the results could support NMHP expansions and the Mental Healthcare Act of 2017 by influencing PCI enforcement, journalist training, and advocacy. Ethical media practices are emerging as a low-cost solution for stigma reduction and service promotion as India struggles with growing mental



health needs, which are expected to worsen after COVID (Chakrapani & Bharat, 2023). Thus, by encouraging a narrative change from pathology to resilience, this study supports evidence-based media reforms.

Review of Literature

Several empirical studies examining how newspapers in India report on suicide and other mental health issues have found that there is typically a great deal of inconsistency in how well these newspapers have adhered to the established best practices, and shows the media's power to reduce or increase the risk of harm to the public as noted by Jain and Kumar (2016); in their content analysis of newspapers from Rajasthan, Jain and Kumar found that 70% of the suicide articles were found to be written irresponsibly (sensationalized titles and methods) violating the standards of ethical reporting. Additionally, Armstrong et al. (2018) conducted a more detailed analysis of newspapers in Tamil Nadu to assess their level of compliance using a scorecard; the overall score across all nine newspapers came to an average of only 28% compliant according to WHO guidelines, where 68% described methods of suicides, 42% included images, and very few had helplines included with the articles, which further correlate to the increased risk of contagion.

Regardless of when the studies were conducted, regional disparities in compliance with the guidelines were evident. In a high-burden state such as Kerala, Menon et al. (2021) reported on low compliance between certain placements (65%) and blame attribution (52%) rates. As such, Menon et al. noted that localised intervention is important for increasing compliance. Similarly, Kar et al. (2022) in Odisha reported on low levels of newspaper compliance (35%), and continued to identify flaws in compliance (e.g. use of graphic descriptions) in addition to awareness campaigns that have been conducted to date. In Chhattisgarh, Armstrong et al. (2023) identified similar deficiencies in terms of the quality of coverage of the guidelines, with a specific emphasis on the underrepresentation of rural areas. Finally, Vimala et al. (2025)—likely to be the same authors as Mendon et al. for other reasons—conducted analyses similar to those conducted in Bengaluru, confirming partial compliance with WHO guidelines, while continuing to evidence remaining stigma associated with compliance.

The move to online media and specialised media has raised several issues of interest that are similar. Raj et al. (2020) evaluated online platforms for compliance with responsible suicide reporting guidelines and found that only 40% of these platforms adhered to the guidelines regarding the method of suicide. Ganesh et al. (2020) found that coverage of celebrity suicides caused a 25% increase in online searches/interest about methods of suicide; they attribute this increase to an increase in sensationalised



reporting about suicide. Shamlal et al. (2023) assessed online media reporting of suicides and attempted suicides and found that the quality of reporting was poor, while online media usage has increased. Kar et al. (2021) focused on the coverage of suicides in online newspapers from Uttar Pradesh and found poor compliance with PCI reporting guidelines. In a subsequent study, Kar et al. (2022) analysed the coverage of suicides among prisoners and found ethical violations such as the use of dehumanising language. Menon et al. (2020) viewed the public education about suicide prevention, through Tamil dailies, as ineffective and determined that the articles did not properly demystify the topic of suicide prevention.

The discussion was enriched through stakeholder engagement and innovative tools. The authors (Vijayakumar et al., 2021) piloted a scorecard to measure media engagement and found that it was effective at stimulating the uptake of guidelines through training. Armstrong et al. (2021) found that professionals were receptive to guidelines, with the vast majority (78%) being in support; however, they reported barriers such as deadlines and competition. Repeat analyses reported the role of progress indicators in the previous work of Armstrong et al. (2025), who revisited Tamil Nadu, reported modest increases in the use of prevention-focused reporting following interventions; however, gaps remain.

The studies in this review report that collectively, they confirm systemic failure to comply with guidelines, averaging around 30-40% non-compliance across all measures of compliance (e.g., method omission, neutral language, resource referral) with the PCI guidelines (2019) representing an underutilised resource as a substitute for the WHO Proxies. The gaps identified in this review include longitudinal national audits using the PCI; additional metrics for the PCI, and additional breadth of mental health coverage beyond that of suicide. In framing the current study, this review provides a foundation for measuring compliance with the PCI in a variety of newspapers, thereby facilitating the attainment of accountability in journalism.

The current study aims to investigate the character of news reporting on mental health in Indian newspapers, specifically focusing on sensationalism. The study uses a corpus-based analytical technique to find and quantify linguistic patterns that lead to fear-inducing framing and emotional exaggeration, especially when evaluative adjectives and alarmist verbs are used. The study intends to evaluate the degree to which mental health news coverage complies with the ethical requirements of responsible journalism as highlighted in the Press Council of India rules by using these language indicators.

Sensationalism in news reporting is mostly expressed through the application of hyperbolic evaluative language and fear-based framing, rather than the selection of the topic. Media ethics researchers argue that sensationalist reporting is often heavily reliant on the application of emotive linguistic features to



create dramatic effects and enhance reader response (McQuail, 2013). Discourse analysis studies using corpora reveal the importance of evaluative adjectives as key features of emotional exaggeration in news stories (Bednarek, 2006), whereas alarmist verb usage creates crisis-based fear frameworks to support sensationalist reporting (Baker, 2006; Entman, 1993). The aim is to identify sensationalist reporting in mental health news stories by analysing Concordance Lines (Key Word in Context) and determining the frequency and application of hyperbolic language according to the Press Council of India's (2019) Norms of Journalistic Conduct.

Research Methodology

The study conducts a corpus-based quantitative content analysis focused on sensationalism in mental health-related news articles from Hindustan Times and The Hindu, covering the period from January 2021 to August 2024. A specialised corpus was developed through the retrieval of keywords related to mental health and mental illness, adhering to established corpus compilation methods (Baker, 2006; McEnery & Hardie, 2011). This methodology facilitates a systematic and objective investigation of sensational language in the media representation of mental health issues.

To analyse sensationalism in mental health reporting within a recognised ethical framework, this study uses the Press Council of India's (PCI) journalism norms. The PCI, which serves as the self-regulatory body for the Indian press, emphasises the importance of avoiding sensationalised language, provocative phrasing, and alarming headlines in sensitive topics. Their guidelines, particularly relevant to suicide and mental illness reporting, advocate against exaggerated presentations and offer broader applicability to health reporting overall (Press Council of India 2020). To identify the presence of sensationalist framing in mental health news through the analysis of Concordance Lines (Key Word in Context), specifically evaluating the frequency and usage of hyperbolic modifiers in accordance with the Press Council of India's (2019) Norms of Journalistic Conduct.

Result

These categories are specifically developed to implement the PCI directive, which asks the media to avoid using language that sensationalises or normalises mental illness and to avoid provocative phrasing and overblown presentations. The following framework to categorise and score the concordance results:

Table 1: Adopted Framework for Sensationalism Analysis

Category	Linguistic Function	PCI Violation/Rule
Intensity	Emotional Provocation	Use of "provocative phrasing."
Evaluative	Dehumanisation/Othering	"Exaggerated presentation" of illness.
Spectacle	Commercial/Click-driven	Sensationalising personal distress.
Threat-Based	Stigmatisation/Fear	Linking illness to alarmist outcomes.

The application of these categorical frameworks is necessary to identify the presence of unique “modes” of sensationalism in the media reporting of mental health issues. This study seeks to enhance the standards of ethics beyond the general guidelines offered by the Press Council of India (PCI) by using detailed linguistic features to reveal the violation of these guidelines through the application of Concordance Lines (Keyword in Context).

To determine the level of sensationalism in the reporting, the study utilises Intensity Modifiers to measure the extent of the reporting by using adjectives intended to elicit emotional shock. This method provides a quantitative measure of the violation of PCI guidelines, which prohibit the use of provocative language in the reporting. In addition, Evaluative Modifiers are key to the recognition of “Othering” practices in the media reporting. By using Labelling Theory, as proposed by Link & Phelan (2001), the study analyses the application of certain words to label a behaviour as “strange” or “bizarre,” thereby establishing a social distance from the individual. This practice contradicts the PCI guidelines, which aim to create a normalised attitude towards mental health issues.

Furthermore, the study recognises the presence of Spectacle Framing to identify the commercial sensationalism in the reporting. This category is in compliance with the PCI guidelines, which prohibit the reporting of personal trauma as a spectacle to attract more readers, thereby promoting the theatrical representation over the actual medical condition. In addition, the study recognises the presence of Threat-Based Modifiers as the most serious violation of the PCI guidelines. By using the “Media Madness” Paradigm, as proposed by Wahl (2003), the study recognises the violation of PCI and World Health Organisation (WHO) standards, which reject the association between mental illness and sensationalism in the media reporting.



Corpus-Based Analysis of Hindustan Times

An analysis of the Hindustan Times corpus indicates the use of sensationalist framing characterised by hyperbolic modifiers. Despite the paper's focus on mental health issues, the language used does not conform to the seriousness prescribed by the Press Council of India (PCI) Norms (2019). The following results categorise these linguistic deviations based on the four-tiered analytical framework adopted for this study.

Intensity: Emotional Provocation through Hyperbolic Modifiers

The high-intensity adjectives, such as "shocking" in the given terms, are linguistic devices used to surprise and provoke emotional responses in readers. The term "PCI Violation" refers to a violation of guidelines related to provocative language usage in phrasing and headlines. The Hindustan Times corpus uses the word "shocking" to describe conditions and highlight their social and organisational significance related to mental health issues.

Example 1: "Poonam Pandey created a **shocking** revelation when she announced that she was alive"

Example 2: "In a shocking claim, woman was **sacked** while she was on a 'mental health leave'."

Example 3: "Simone Biles' **shocking** withdrawal generated two million social media interactions"

Example 4: "revealed his **shocking** mental health diagnosis and struggle with alcoholism"

Intensity markers like "horrific" and "unbelievable," alongside "shocking," were found in clinical narratives, elevating them to dramatic events.

Example 5: "details of the **horrific** experience shared by the actor regarding his struggle"

Example 6: "It was **unbelievable** to see the star revealing such deep-rooted mental health issues"

Example 7: "witnessing the **worst** phase of her mental health struggle, the actress took to social media to share her ordeal."

Evaluative: Dehumanisation and "Othering"

Variable definitions characterise psychiatric behaviours as abnormal. PCI violations indicate breaches against exaggerated illness presentations. Evaluative modifiers used in the Hindustan Times contribute to



the "othering" of those with mental health conditions, emphasising atypical behaviours rather than the medical realities of disorders.

Example 8: "suffering from a **bizarre** mental health disorder, he was unable to"

Example 9: "reports of his **strange** behaviour during the early years of fame surfaced"

Example 10: "The **peculiar** case of an employee being sacked during a mental health break"

Spectacle: Commercial and Click-Driven Framing

Variable Definition refers to a language style that emphasises the dramatic aspects of distress to engage audiences. A PCI Violation occurs when there is a breach of the guideline against sensationalising personal distress. A qualitative audit reveals a "Spectacle" frame in entertainment and lifestyle sections of a newspaper, where emotive verbs and dramatic metaphors portray mental health challenges as a public performance.

Example 11: "was seen **crying out for help** amid his ongoing mental health struggles"

Example 12: "posted **crying** selfies on Instagram, sparking a conversation on mental health"

Example 13: "fans rushed to express thoughts on the **bit about her mental health** telecast on national television."

Threat-Based: Stigmatisation and Alarmist Outcomes

The varying definitions emphasise the close proximity to words that connote danger or unpredictability. An interesting breach in the guidelines for PCI relates to the transgression of the recommendations to not align illness with alarmist consequences. An examination of the Hindustan Times corpus indicates a close alignment to the volatility of mental health and the perception of threat, thereby aligning with the "dangerousness trope."

Example 14: "linked his **unstable** mental health condition to the recent violent outburst"

Example 15: "witnessed a **dangerous** mental health collapse that led to immediate intervention"

Example 16: "The **aggressive** nature of the patient was highlighted in the mental health report"

Example 17: "experts warn that the nature of such mental health relapses remains **unpredictable** and potentially dangerous for those around them."

Table 2: Categorisation of Sensationalist Framing in *Hindustan Times*

Category	Dominant Linguistic Marker	PCI Adherence Status
Intensity	Shocking, Unbelievable, Worst, Horrific	Breach of "Provocative Phrasing"
Evaluative	Bizarre, Strange, Peculiar	Breach of "Exaggerated Presentation"
Spectacle	Spiralling, Revelation, Crying	Breach of "Sensationalising Distress"
Threat-Based	Unstable, Aggressive, unpredictable, Violent	Breach of "Alarmist Outcomes"

The Hindustan Times employs a “vocabulary of sensation” which frequently pushes the limits of responsible health journalism. The emphasis on the emotional impact of the stories, rather than the actual communication of health facts, is a clear indication of the newspaper’s focus. In this way, the health journalism does not meet the standards set by PCI (2019) in terms of dignity and sobriety, but rather tends towards sensationalism.

Corpus-Based Analysis of The Hindu

The analysis of the Hindu corpus indicates a unique linguistic profile in contrast to modern tabloids. The publication generally employs a formal and clinical tone, yet a qualitative audit of Concordance Lines uncovers elements of "Soft Sensationalism." This type of sensationalism highlights the emotional "otherness" or "atypicality" of mental health issues, at times straying from the Press Council of India (PCI) Norms (2019) that advocate for the normalisation of mental illness.

The following sections detail the findings based on the established analytical framework.

Intensity: Narrative-Driven Provocation

The document considers the use of emotional adjectives in reporting, with a special emphasis placed on the variable definition of these words, aiming to enhance the emotional impact of the narrative. It describes a possible violation of the Publication Content Initiative (PCI), defined as a subtle violation of the rule on provocative language, which heightens the drama of a given report. The reporting style of the newspaper "The Hindu" can be described as the use of intensity markers, which aim to stress the gravity of a given situation. Nevertheless, this style can sometimes lead to the use of words that stress the "shock" component, especially in medical and psychological emergencies.



Example 1: "Abhinav Bindra gave a **rare** insight into the world of mental health and mental performance"

Example 2: "sought professional help to tide over the **crisis** after winning the Olympic gold"

Example 3: "an **alarmingly** high percentage of medical students were found to have mental health"

Example 4: "medical students described the period of examinations as the **worst** for their mental health, citing extreme academic pressure."

Evaluative: The "Othering" of Behavioural Symptoms

Variable definitions in mental health settings commonly incorporate terms to describe experiences as abnormal. The PCI Violation refers to a violation of rules on "exaggerated presentation," which entails a need to normalize mental illness. The Hindu newspaper has a consistent trend in their reporting, where evaluative terms are used to highlight the "strangeness" of mental health issues. This highlights abnormal behaviour in relation to societal norms, thereby creating social distance, as described by Link & Phelan (2001).

Example 5: "People found my behaviour **strange**; I was supposed to be on top of the world"

Example 6: "the **peculiar** psychological state of athletes during high-pressure events was..."

Example 7: "patients reported feeling a **void** that was described as a psychological crisis"

Spectacle: Metaphorical and Emotional Framing

The document examines the use of dramatic metaphors in the field of journalism, especially in the depiction of private suffering. It identifies a violation of PCI, which is a result of the lack of sobriety and the prevalence of sensationalism. Although the newspaper "The Hindu" does not resort to the use of "crying selfies," it still employs a "narrative spectacle" in its depiction of the motifs of depletion and emptiness, emphasizing the dramatic "downfall" of successful individuals.

Example 8: "Once the dream was achieved, I felt **drained** and a **void**"

Example 9: "When we stop enjoying the journey, there is a **red flag** regarding mental health"

Example 10: "individuals experienced **panic** attacks out of fear that a relapsed habit"

Threat-Based: Clinical Linkage to Instability

The concept of variable definition highlights the proximity of keywords and words indicating volatility and lack of control. On the other hand, violation of PCI indicates breaches in which disease is associated with alarmist outcomes. In the case of *The Hindu*, threat-based framing is less common and leans more towards a clinical tone; nevertheless, there are a few cases in which mental health is associated with words such as “instability” and “attacks,” which could provoke fear in readers.

Example 11: "experiencing **panic** attacks out of fear that a relapsed smoking habit"

Example 12: "the **unstable** nature of post-COVID psychological recovery was noted"

Example 13: "health support is referred to counsellors... if reassurance does not **suffice** for the crisis"

Example 14: "the impact of the pandemic on the psychological well-being of the youth was **unpredictable**, leading to a surge in demand for counsellors."

Table 3: Categorisation of Sensationalist Framing in *The Hindu*

Category	Dominant Linguistic Marker	PCI Adherence Status
Intensity	Rare, Alarmingly, Worst, Crisis	Subtle Breach of "Provocative Phrasing"
Evaluative	Peculiar, Void, Strange	Breach of "Exaggerated Presentation"
Spectacle	Panic, Drained, Red flag	Breach of "Sensationalising Distress"
Threat-Based	Unstable, Crisis, unpredictable, Attacks	Occasional Breach of "Alarmist Outcomes"

The analysis shows that *The Hindu* is more likely to adhere to the PCI (2019) guidelines compared to its competitors by frequently employing a "Sober/Clinical" lexicon. However, the qualitative results from the Concordance Lines show a continued use of Evaluative and Spectacle markers. By portraying mental health issues as "strange" or "rare," the publication occasionally fails to normalise. Although the shock value is low, the "narrative drama" serves to attract the audience, resulting in a moderate deviation from the sobriety requirements deemed necessary for good health journalism.



Conclusion

The research reveals a significant gap between the ethical guidelines provided by the Press Council of India (PCI) and the linguistic features of Indian English media. An analysis of the concordance lines reveals the presence of clinical vocabulary in the reporting of both The Hindu and Hindustan Times.

However, the clinical vocabulary is often accompanied by sensationalist rhetoric. Hindustan Times is an example of "Hard Sensationalism," where emotionally charged adjectives like "shocking" and "horrific" are used. This is not only in contrast to the PCI guidelines but also sensationalizes personal and medical issues. On the other hand, The Hindu is an example of "Soft Sensationalism," where adjectives like "strange," "peculiar," and "void" are used. This inadvertently contributes to the stigmatization of mental health issues. Although it is less sensationalist compared to Hindustan Times, it is still in contrast to the PCI guidelines of destigmatizing mental health issues.

Furthermore, both the newspapers repeatedly use adjectives like "unpredictable" and "worst," thereby perpetuating the "dangerousness trope." This is an exaggeration of the issue and thereby contributes to the stigmatization of mental health issues. The research concludes that the Indian media is still far from adhering to the PCI Norms (2019) in the true sense. Although the media avoids explicit sensationalist rhetoric like the use of inappropriate images and explicit content, it still uses sensationalist rhetoric like adjectives to report mental health issues. A significant change is the need of the hour to bring about a change in the way the Indian media reports mental health issues. This change must involve the consistent use of person-first language and the integration of resources for assistance.



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