



RELIGIOUS REACTIONS TO SUICIDE CASES IN NIGERIA: A NETNOGRAPHIC STUDY

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Cite this article:

Collins Ikeokwu Nwafor
(2025), Religious Reactions to
Suicide Cases in Nigeria: A
Netnographic Study. African
Journal of Social Sciences and
Humanities Research 8(2),
126-135. DOI:
10.52589/AJSSHR-
SOY1EJRT

Manuscript History

Received: 10 Apr 2025

Accepted: 12 May 2025

Published: 24 Jun 2025

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ABSTRACT: *Death by suicide elicits reactions depending on one's perception of the phenomenon or affiliation with the victim. In Nigeria, various motifs characterise the responses to the news of suicide deaths. Some of these reactions are based on religious sentiments and cultural taboos ascribed to such death. There is, however, a dearth of studies that examine the reactions or comments over the news on death by suicide, for most available research only focuses on the impact of this reportage. This study investigated the religious sentiments in the reactions to deaths by suicide as reported on digital media. A netnographic method was used, where 13 social media platforms and online newspaper sites were consulted to collate reports of death by suicide. The comments (164) to these reports were thematically categorised to determine their religious/theological outlook. These reactions were classified under the following themes: prayer to God, the role of God in tragedy, judgment and sin, and worldly and supernatural forces. These help to see that there are Nigerians who still hold and mediate their thoughts within a theological, religious, and/or spiritual lens in the face of a growing number of suicides among young people and adults.*

KEYWORDS: Suicide, Religion, Nigeria, Theology, Netnography.



INTRODUCTION

Suicide has become a prevalent form of death across the universe. The Suicide Worldwide (2019) and Global Health Estimates (2021) have classified it as the fourth leading cause of death, especially among young people. WHO reveals that more than 700,000 people die due to suicide every year. It agrees, too, that for every suicide, many more people attempt suicide. Over 77% of this form of death occurs more in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) (World Health Organisation, 2021). It is commonly completed by the following methods: ingestion of pesticide, hanging, and firearm. Nigeria falls within the countries where suicide has become widespread, and its rate is on the rise among young people. With an estimated 10,994 deaths in Nigeria (MacroTrends, 2023), suicide contributes significantly to this rate. In 2019, Nigeria had a suicide rate estimated at 6.9 per 100,000 (Dania 2021), which is classified among the LMICs that recorded a slightly lower rate of 10.1 per 100,000, in comparison with the global average of 9.0 per 100,000 and 11.2 per 100,000 for Africa (World Health Organisation, 2021). Despite the suicide estimate of Nigeria being below the global average, this percentage still shows that suicide is a notable phenomenon in Nigeria.

Anthropologically speaking, the occurrence of death constitutes one of the most fundamental contexts where one has the chance to observe and evaluate various views and positions of individuals, as well as of social groups in society, towards religion and spirituality. A particular form of death is suicide, characterised by an individual's decision to end his/her life. The topic of this netnographic research is the resultant theological/religious/spiritual reactions (comments) on social media after the incidents of suicide. Therefore, the research question is as follows: How do people react theologically/religiously/spiritually to incidents of suicide on social media about the increasing rate of suicide among young people in Nigeria? What does this reveal about the lived religion/theology of Nigerians?

It is common to find reports of death by suicide on various online and print media platforms. Digital media has become a source of information for many people in the contemporary world. Over 120 million Nigerians have access to the internet (Olibamoyo *et al.*, 2021). Among them are the many young Nigerians who rely on various online platforms for news. As in print, most traditional print media now have online platforms sharing duplicate news content. Hence, a netnographic study that carries out a content analysis of comments on the reportage of deaths by suicide reaches a sizeable number of the population. Nevertheless, while there is a large body of literature on the impact of media reporting on suicide in developed countries (Lee *et al.*, 2014; Niederkrotenthaler *et al.*, 2012; Sisask & Värnik, 2012; Zalsman *et al.*, 2016), there is a scarcity of research in sub-Saharan African countries like Nigeria to assess the contents of the reactions of people to the suicide reportage. The work of Olibamoyo *et al.* (2021), for example, is an attempt to ascertain if the various reporting sites abide by the WHO guideline on reporting suicides. There is, however, gross underreporting of suicide in Nigeria. Because there is a deficient statistical storage system (Alabi *et al.*, 2014; Gureje & Alem, 2004), the sensitive nature of the subject, where it is a cultural taboo and religious sentiments (Nwafor & Vandenhoeck, 2021), and the fact that it is still a crime in Nigeria (Section 327 of the Criminal Code).

When someone dies by suicide, the consequences of such a death are experienced by everyone, from the bereaved to the immediate community and society at large (Jacob, 2017). John R. Jordan refers to this reality by asserting that 'there is considerable evidence that the general stigma that continues to be associated with suicide in our society "spills over" to the bereaved



family members' (Jordan, 2001: 93). This fear of associated stigma forces people to lie about the death by suicide of those they know. They often prefer to designate it as either accidental death or homicide (Islam & Islam, 2003; Muhammad, 2021). All these contribute to the perception of having a lower suicide rate; the actual number would have helped in raising awareness of the phenomenon of suicide as a societal menace, thereby eliciting in-depth intervention and development of appropriate preventive strategies.

METHODOLOGY

The focus of this research is to gather and analyse theological/religious/spiritual reactions on social media based on well-known incidents of suicide in Nigeria. Those incidents include the deaths of Samuel Elias, Kaivi Kayode, Hikmat Gbadamosi, Joseph Mayowa, Seun Omogaji (DJ Xgee), Grace Opeyemi Dara, Seun Adedutan, Chukwuemeka Akachi, and Michael Arowosaiye. Content analysis was used to identify the common religious themes in comments reacting to reported suicide deaths by young people. In total, 13 social and online newspaper media sites used by Nigerians were consulted in the study. They include Daily Post, Facebook, GistmoreNG, Gist Mania, The Guardian, Linda Ikeji's Blog, Nairaland Forum, PM News, Punch Nigeria, Sahara Reporters, Today, Twitter, and YouTube. One hundred sixty-four comments were studied. This study acknowledges the possibility that any of the sites included in this study might breach the WHO guidelines for responsible reporting on suicide (Olibamoyo *et al.*, 2021; World Health Organisation, 2017).

The project was undertaken in two phases. In the first phase, the task was to collect data by exploring social media sites, online Nigerian newspapers, and YouTube video comment feeds to collect relevant comments. In the second phase, the data (comments) that had been gathered during the first phase were analysed to map out the central tendencies (motifs) of the general population in Nigeria regarding their theological/religious/spiritual positions on suicide. The analysis of motifs and categories was then conducted in the third phase to create a synthesis in response to the research question.

Ethical consideration: It is necessary to state that the materials for this research are public property without ethical restrictions. Because this study is a retrospective assessment, it qualifies for 'exempt' status under human subjects' regulations. The study is based on comments and reactions of people in the online and digital space on the suicide deaths of some Nigerians. The suicide cases are the actual names of the suicide victims as reported on the various media platforms studied. The aim was to identify answers to the research questions listed above. The inclusion criteria for this study focused on news of completed suicides for young Nigerians across the six geopolitical regions and available on online (social and news) media. This study excluded news on attempted suicide and suicide bombing.



RESULTS

Overall, the analysis of the comments and reactions on the social media platforms resulted in over ten motifs. Although not all motifs can be looked at in detail, it was decided that the top ten most recurring motifs would be placed into four categories: Prayer, the Role of God in Tragedy, Judgment and Sin, and Worldly and Supernatural Forces. I have added references to the comments on the suicide news. These comments were also classified based on the categories they belong to.

Category A: Prayer

Among the most frequently occurring elements in religiously based comments on suicide cases are prayers to God. These are often prayers for the victims themselves, the family members left behind by the victim, people in similar situations to the victims before ending their lives and/or people in general, and for themselves in cases when they seem to struggle with the idea of committing suicide.

More specifically, the main element in the comments about the victims is the request for mercy from God ('May the Good Lord have mercy on his soul!' [A.10], 'Lord, please be kind to him. Do not judge him harshly. May he not be miserable in the hereafter as he was on earth' [A.13]). Other people seem to pray also about the families that have been left behind, either in a way that shows compassion to the victim ('Our thoughts and prayers go to his immediate family members. May God Almighty help to comfort them and give them the strength to bear this irreparable loss.' [A.10]) or in a way that undermines totally his/her decision to commit suicide ('Am not sorry for him but his mother. May God console his mother' [A.2]). In addition, other kinds of prayers include general requests for other people who are thinking about suicide ('So sad, what a waste! May God help the youth of this country' [A.16]). Finally, some comments express prayers about the people (that is, themselves) who are struggling with the idea of committing suicide: 'Lord, I am also depressed but do not let me end this way' [A. 8]; 'I am just very depressed here, but everyone around me seems to be happy, they do not care bout me. God, please see me through these hard times.' [A.7].

Category B: The Role of God in Tragedy

Several online religious reactions to the selected cases of suicide place emphasis on God's role in the prevention of suicide. Such comments can be divided into three sub-groups: God as a solution to depression, reflections on the grace of God in the lives of the commenters, and God has a plan and purpose for everyone. Comments focusing on God, or in some cases Jesus, as the solution to depression note that suicide is preventable by turning to God for help in cases of depression. Some who express this view may do so sympathetically. For example, 'our govt is even the worst thing that can happen to Nigerians, people should not judge him, depression is a fast killer, people dey say why him go kill himself, pray you no see depression pray e no hit you, not everybody fit stand d heat of depression it takes only GOD to solve it, and our govt even made it worst for him. May your soul rest in peace in Jesus' name [B.1.1]. Others are harsher and even more condemnatory in their approach, as seen in the following comment: 'A lot of young people have drifted away from God. Did he attend any student fellowship or church in School?... Did he know God himself? ... All these twisted thoughts that God is not real should be discarded by the young people of today. If you know God, He will care for you, mentally, physically, spiritually, and in every area of your life [B.1.12]. Whereas some



commentators believe that God's help should be sought alongside talking to one's fellow human beings [B. 1.7], others seem to believe in an exclusive dependence on God [B.1.10].

The second motif within this category is comments reflecting on God's grace in the lives of the commenters, particularly how God saw them through difficult situations. Strikingly, some of the commenters pointed out that they had considered committing suicide but were able to avoid doing so by the grace of God. For example: 'I was very depressed some years back, but if you know God and are very prayerful, you can survive depression. I was suicidal three times in three months and ended up in the emergency room three times. I have been on medication for depression for the past 12 years now, and when I started having suicidal thoughts, I started praying earnestly, rebuking the spirit of the dead. Praying goes a long way if you are in Christ [B.2.1].

The final motif in this category is the idea that God has a purpose for everyone in life, and they will get there eventually if they can persevere. Thus, going through a period of struggle and depression should be no excuse to take one's life because everyone who perseveres will eventually fulfil God's good purpose for them. Exemplifying this motif is the following comment: 'Fine, I know suicide is not an option too. It is a mindset since I know whether I graduate or not, whether I have learned or not, where God has planned for me with grace and mercy, I will get there...Had it been [the victim] knew this, she should have given it a second and different thought' [B.3.1].

Category C: Judgment and Sin

The motif touching on eschatological judgment had a range of reactions on various social media platforms. An overwhelming amount of comments condemned the person for committing suicide ('Foolish boy! Your parents sent you to school to study, not to be diving into women... Stupid boy. Go and rot in hellfire since that was your choice' [C.1.4]. This big-for-nothing mofo never really loved those he mentioned in his letter; if he did, he would not have chosen the path of suicide. I am only concerned about those who truly loved you, who you left discombobulated. May God give them a reason to forget your demise quickly. For you, I care less. Go to hell for all I care. Nonsense!' [C.1.9]). Others ruthlessly criticised the person's reasons for committing suicide ("Go to hell! Even if I should die, it can never be because of a woman" [C.1.6], 'Because of a woman hahahahahahaha. Ridiculous guy. Rest in hell' [C.1.8]). By stark contrast, the case of Hikmat Gbadamosi's suicide inspired the most empathy in this section ('This is sad, God rest her soul...' [C.1.13]), although many often paired their sympathies with a reference to her beauty ('She looks so happy and pretty. Who would think she would suffer depression? Rest well' [C.1.14]).

In the comments that dealt with the motif of suicide as a sin, it was clear that the people writing used religious justification to moralise and condemn a person's action as unforgivable before God ('It is a sad one though, and it is so unfortunate because this is one sin that is unforgivable' [C.2.4]). In the connection between suicides and sin, it was evident that some commenters acknowledged the idea of responsibility for the person's actions and not as being forced, influenced, or destined to commit suicide ('Chai! He committed sin upon sin. What a wasteful life. You made your life lost in an act of ignorance that must face a query hereafter. Hiss!!' [C.2.3]). An outlier prayed for the person's forgiveness, despite acknowledging the action as sinful ('I pray Allah forgives her sins and grants her family the strength to bear the loss' [C.2.5]).

*Category D: Worldly and Supernatural Forces*

The rate at which suicide occurs in Nigeria, especially among the youth, causes worries and raises doubts. Given Nigerians' religious nature or belief in spirits, seeing people considering these recurrences as a transcendental phenomenon is not out of place. They perceive that 'the spirit of suicide is hovering over Nigerians, especially the undergraduates and young adults; I pray it will not visit my household' [D.1.1]. Another comment reflects this more vehemently: 'No no no no no This thing don pass depression, na village people dey bewitch people now' [D.1.6]. No matter the situation and pressure in life, people's reactions reveal that the sanctity of life must be preserved. For example, this comment believes 'it was not the best option to take your borrowed life that does not belong to you' [D.2.3]. Thus, one who takes life (theirs or another's) answers to the Author of life – God [D.2.4]. Surprisingly, some comments disregarded depression and mental health disorders and preferred to look at another dimension of suicide cases. For them, it is an act of cowardice that gives credence to the devil's powers [D.3.3]. They argue that the triumph of the devil (through atheistic reactions) could be said to be responsible for suicide, like in the case of Akachi [D.3.4].

In cases of suicide, people tend to apportion blame to the causes of the suicide, thereby defending the suicide victim. For example, in these reactions: 'These occult members called churches have no shame...' [D.4.1]. This is why the institution (here, the Church), and reporting the body's reaction, is vital to ascertain the relationship with the victim while he was alive. Others reveal the necessity to teach people how to overcome temptations, and the Church retracts from being a 'business centre' [D.4.3/D.4.4]. It is important, however, that the churches (and all religious bodies) preach against the materialistic and consumerist mentality that is destroying the human person and the world in general.

DISCUSSION

Death is a topic that inspires much reflection, questioning, and emotion in human beings. It is the only destination that is certain in life and yet triggers myriad reactions (Attig, 2010; Tomer & Eliason, 2007). Whether accidental or naturally caused, people tend to empathise with the person who passed and his or her family. However, when death is brought about by suicide, people's reactions can quickly become tarnished by sentiments of despair, anger, and judgment. In the past, it may have either been communicated to close circles of friends and family or left to one's thoughts, but now, any person can express those feelings to the world in discussion threads on social media platforms. This study was narrowed to the Nigerian context, where suicide cases have been increasing in number among young people. The focus of this investigation is to know what role theology, religion, and spirituality play in people's reactions upon hearing about suicide.

The first category deals with the motif of prayer in people's comments on social media. From many of the comments, it can be said that death often tends to make a person turn toward God. Although it cannot be known to what degree the people who wrote their comments are serious about their religious beliefs, the fact remains that suicide makes people think about God. Furthermore, from this turning to God, many are inspired to pray or talk to Him. From the comments, it is noticeable that many prayers are in the form of prayer requests. One question from this study is, why is the request the only form of prayer? Why are there no other kinds of prayer? Additionally, the results show that there is a strong tendency for people to care more



about the family that the victims leave behind than they care for the spiritual well-being of the victim. This perhaps shows a tendency for people to be more concerned about what remains and see the victim as a lost cause (Jordan 2001). The prayers for the victim asking God for mercy and forgiveness towards the victim show that, in general, people assume that the person has gone to hell rather than heaven. A question for further research could be to investigate what people's reaction is to those who have not committed suicide but strongly consider it.

In the category that deals with God's role in tragedy, it was noted that for many religious commentators in Nigeria, God has power over life and death. As the giver of life (Genesis 2:7), God is often seen as the giver of peace and joy, even amid struggles (2 Corinthians 1:3). Therefore, it does not come as a surprise when commenters state that Jesus and/or God are the way and the solution to depression. The presentation of God as a solution is meant to encourage people to consider suicide as a kind of gnosis to happiness in life. Of course, this is often accompanied by people's testimony on how God showed grace in moments of depression, weakness, and loneliness. More than other kinds of motifs analysed, perhaps this is the most compassionate and encouraging, even if only to encourage those who still live and struggle with similar problems as the victims, so that they do not attempt to take their lives. Other commenters would encourage other readers by stating that God has a purpose for each life. This kind of encouragement is meant to empower people experiencing possible anxiety about their situation and to contextualise the moment of struggle into a larger scheme of life. Furthermore, in casting a long-term view of a person's situation, a person can see their current situation as a moment to grow and become strong. Of course, this approach can be overly optimistic for someone who cannot even get out of bed. Rather than assisting, it can cause the opposite effect and undermine the efforts if not done cautiously. It would be helpful to know if there are any testimonies of people who found consolation in these types of comments.

The third category was heavily charged with emotion directed toward the victim. Many commenters influenced by a religious background consider life a gift from God. Therefore, when someone commits suicide, it is seen as sinful and offensive to God and even deserving of hell and punishment (Potter, 2021). Many commenters expressed themselves as if they had authority from above to condemn a person without the slightest empathy and compassion for the person's struggles. The reasons why people committed suicide were often related to depression and the combination of relationship problems, school, or financial challenges. Commenters were especially judgmental of suicides that came because of a broken relationship, since they saw this reason to be ridiculous and foolish. In other cases, comments were casting God's judgment on the person(s) who may have caused the suicide. In this case, commenters usually call for God to punish whoever it was that caused the victim to commit suicide. When it comes to suicide, however, one cannot simply eject this sort of condemnation and judgment on the person or any other person as faulting, since one can never truly know the turmoil someone experiences that leads them to commit suicide. There is no greater or lesser reason; it is still a lost life in the end.

In the final category, I saw that commenters attributed suicide not solely to the person, but also to non-natural factors. Some commenters even went so far as to relieve the victim from personal responsibility for his or her actions. Whether attributed to spiritual or supernatural forces, this shows the broader African religious worldview in which the spiritual constantly penetrates the physical world while existing on a separate plane (le Rossignol *et al.*, 2022). Others saw the growing number of suicides because of atheism. To these people, atheism was seen as a victory of the devil, and in the same vein, they saw suicide as a direct consequence. Regardless of the



nature of many of the comments, many reactions see life, whether good or challenging, as a gift and something worth fighting for. Some blame the Church, particularly those with wealthy pastors who preach the prosperity gospel (Barga, 2018), as being the cause of suicide. In the view of these commenters, the prosperity gospel, with its emphasis on the need for Christians to achieve good health and wealth (Kitsiiri, 2019; Smith, 2021), combined with the showing off of material wealth on social media by some Christian leaders, is the cause of depression among many underachievers who are then forced to commit suicide since they view themselves as failures (Bishau, 2013). Given this, some comments call on churches to reform their teachings. They see that religious care has been sacrificed for material acquisition. Meanwhile, the institution's (here, the Church and reporting body) reaction post-suicide is vital to ascertain the relationship with the victim while he was alive.

CONCLUSION

As seen from this analysis, suicide remains a negative response to life's challenges, as an escape and failure rather than as a dignified or triumphal action. In the context of Nigeria, where the number of suicides among young people has increased, many people react from a place of anger, frustration, disbelief, and pity. Whether from a Christian or spiritual background, many recognise the role of God, hold suicide to be sinful, and see this action as having repercussions on whether they go to heaven or hell. The study, of course, is limited only to people's reactions on social media platforms. The exact reasons for many of these suicide victims cannot truly be known, and I also do not have evidence or comments from people who were close to the person. Therefore, only a sometimes one-sided perspective was gathered from strangers who, though maybe compassionate, still have no grasp on the life of the victim. It can be ascertained that death, whether natural, accidental, or self-inflicted, causes many to think about God and life after death, moves people to reflect on their own lives, and in many cases reaffirms life, even if challenging and complex.

SOURCE OF FUNDING

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationship that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I appreciate all the media platforms and those whose comments were used in the study. I also pray for eternal repose for the departed, whose demise was reported.



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