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Ethical Concerns in Television News Reporting of Male Deaths in Sri Lanka: A Case Study Approach

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Background: Television news reporting in Sri Lanka plays a pivotal role in shaping public perception, particularly in relation to sensitive issues such as sudden or tragic deaths. However, such coverage often raises ethical concerns, including sensationalism and breaches of privacy. Male deaths were chosen as the focus because these cases are frequently framed through culturally specific gendered narratives that highlight risk-taking, violence, or sacrifice, thereby reinforcing stereotypes and intensifying sensationalisation compared to female deaths. The widely publicised case of Sathsara Nimesh, a Sri Lankan student whose death attracted intense media attention, exemplified these issues and prompted this study.

Objective: To assess the ethical standards applied in television news reporting on male deaths in Sri Lanka and to examine how such portrayals affect journalistic integrity and audience perception.

Methods: A qualitative case study design was adopted, analysing news coverage broadcast between January and June 2025 across five major Sri Lankan television channels selected purposively for their national reach and audience influence. Data sources included 15 news bulletins related to sudden male deaths, eight semi-structured interviews with journalists and media scholars, and three focus group discussions with 12 frequent viewers. Participant selection considered professional expertise and viewing frequency. Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, supported by NVivo software to ensure rigour and transparency. Ethical safeguards, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, were strictly observed.

Results: Three key ethical concerns were identified: overexposure of victim identities (80.0%), use of sensational and emotionally manipulative language (73.3%), and failure to obtain family consent before broadcasting personal details (66.7%). These percentages reflect frequency counts across coded datasets. Focus group participants (91.6%) overwhelmingly described the coverage as "exploitative" or "unethical." Triangulated findings revealed that newsroom culture and institutional pressures to increase ratings were significant drivers of these ethical breaches.

Conclusion: The study concludes that ethical violations in reporting male deaths are systemic within Sri Lankan television journalism. It recommends mandatory ethics training for journalists, the integration of trauma-informed practices in newsrooms, and the establishment of clear national guidelines on death reporting, to be enforced by media regulatory bodies, press councils, and newsroom editors. Additionally, promoting public media literacy is crucial to fostering critical engagement with televised news.

Keywords: Male Deaths, Media Ethics, Sensationalism, Sri Lanka, Television Journalism