



Photographic Frames in the Westgate Mall Terror Attack Coverage

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Abstract

Literary studies have evolved over the past few decades to include popular culture fields as text. Proponents of this inclusion argue that songs, memes, tweets, local dialects, and slogans say as much about people and cultures as traditional texts – perhaps even more. The opinion is that, by over-relying on traditional text for literary fodder, scholars shut themselves off from current and relevant information about the rapidly evolving literary and cultural landscape. The disregard for popular culture also turns away a younger audience that seems to prefer a more informal approach to art and literature. Thus, the reading of popular cultures as text is forcing the literary field to re-evaluate the fundamental principles that define its work. Literary scholars have to rethink their traditional ideals of writing, reading, and teaching texts. Yet, there remains a reluctance to accept such informal forms of communication as memes and tweets as legitimate literature. Popular culture is not well regarded in literary studies and some stakeholders fear its classification as text could dilute the impact of the field. This paper investigates this trepidation by analyzing how reading popular culture fields as text impacts the identity of text in literary studies. Based on selected tenets of Literary and Cultural Studies (LCS) Research, particularly cultural literacy, this paper examines the legitimacy of different popular culture formats to determine if they hold enough value to warrant literary analysis. The author argues that many forms of popular culture deserve a closer look, especially through a literary lens, because they reveal the cultures, beliefs, and practices of their audience. He suggests that the incorporation of popular culture into literary studies offers many opportunities for growth and discovery but only if implemented diligently. Finally, this paper investigates why the literary field is reluctant to read popular cultures as text and how scholars can navigate this inclusion to create a more cohesive definition of text.

Introduction

The seamless intertwining of print and electronic media creates a dynamic interplay that creates public awareness. As Bullock et al. (2001) indicated, media is a powerful catalyst that informs, educates, and moulds public awareness and attitudes. Sometimes referred to as the fourth estate, the media is tasked



to make fair, balanced, and timely information available to public members to allow them to make informed decisions. However, due to distance, time, media ownership, and political affiliation factors, the effectiveness of journalists in objectively informing has been limited (Hester & Gibson, 2003). Such limitations have made the media frame news content by selecting, excluding, and emphasising specific areas of the story. Media reporting entails a variety of aspects, including terrorism and related occurrences. Given the massive transformation that communication has undergone during the last three decades, it is expected that the publication of a delicate issue such as terrorism should not be characterised by sensational portions. However, Eid (2013) noted that journalists still publish sensational content.

An unavoidable and symbiotic relationship exists between terrorism and journalism (Nacos, 2007). The reason is that each helps the other increase popularity, readership, and viewership. Terrorists are capable of causing attention-seeking and dramatic incidences that the media cannot avoid. Publishing more about terrorist events increases the popularity of terrorism, which is usually the planners' aim (Kampf, 2014). Although terrorists primarily seek the attention of the media to drive their agenda of causing fear, the latter does not specifically look for violent incidents to increase their viewership, but the two mutually benefit from each other knowingly or unknowingly. Eid (2013) further indicates that most news media, both national and international, are private entities. Such firms thrive through competition and profit making, so they are often compelled to sensationalise news stories to increase their circulation of print and viewership for broadcast. Photojournalists can report terror attacks without sensationalising them by avoiding publishing graphic images or descriptions and dramatisation.

Additionally, news reporters can focus only on facts, impact, and implications. Thirdly, they can include expert insights in the reporting. However, a terrorist attack provides a timely opportunity for the media to thrive in circulation and distribution by sensationalising the stories while terrorists gain the popularity they want.

Previous acts of terrorism in Kenya include the 1980 Norfolk Hotel bombing in Nairobi by Qaddura Mohammed Abdel al-Hamid, a Moroccan (Momanyi, 2015; Onyango, 2023). Other terrorist attacks occurred on August 7, 1998, at the American Embassy in Nairobi (Aronson, 2013) and on June 15, 16 and 17, 2014, in Mpeketoni in Lamu County of Kenya (Anderson, 2014). In April 2015, at Garissa University, Garissa County, another violent attack occurred (Mutisya & Owuor, 2018). Finally, there was another terrorist attack on January 15, 2019, at the DusitD2 complex in Nairobi (Bryden & Bahra 2019). In the wake of these attacks, the mass media played an effective role in informing the public. Newspapers particularly made the occurrences of these extremist acts vivid by publishing the photographs in the local and international dailies.

The Westgate Mall terrorist attack, which is the focus of this research, occurred in 2013. On Saturday, September 21st, 2013, at about 1230 HRS (East African Time), an Al-Shabaab-affiliated terrorist group stormed the Westgate Shopping Mall in Westlands, Nairobi, Kenya. Four terrorists armed with AK-47 assault rifles and hand grenades launched an assault on –shoppers inside the mall premises. The attack lasted approximately 80 hours, ending on the fourth day after its launch (Ong'onda, 2016). The attack claimed 67 lives, leaving 240 seriously wounded. Among the casualties were 18 foreigners from countries such as Australia, Canada, China, England, France, Ghana, India, Netherlands and North America (Omayio, 2015). The Al-Shabaab considered the shopping mall as the best target because the mall was popular with wealthy Kenyans, politicians, expatriates, diplomats and tourists. Such a target, therefore, would give them worldwide media coverage because they were likely to get nationals from numerous countries at any given time (Ong'onda, 2016). This terrorist attack was the second largest assault after the 7th August 1998 bombing of the US Embassy in Nairobi that left more than 200 people



dead. The victims of the attack were children and adults, both male and female, ranging from eight to 78 years old. It was reported that the big part of the assault took place within the first hour of the attack and mainly targeted non-Muslim civilians (Ong'onda, 2016). The attack at the Westgate Mall successfully raised Al-Shabaab's global profile as a terrorist group (Ong'onda, 2016). Tunman (2003) asserts that terrorists desire to attract global media coverage. Therefore, by targeting victims from many parts of the world, the Westgate Mall terrorist attack attained maximum publicity from multiple media houses across the globe. Considering how the event was covered by different media, this study aimed to assess the visual framing of the photographs published by the *Daily Nation*, *the Standard*, and *the New York Times* in covering the Westgate Mall terrorist attack.

Framing of Photographs Covering Violent Events

The framing of photographs covering violent events such as terrorist attacks has been studied before. For instance, Bruce's (2014) study on the framing of terrorism in the *Al-Jazeera* and *Al-Arabiya* television channels established that the media framed photographs by stereotyping terrorism as Muslim and focused more on information that supported government policies on terrorism, ignoring the human aspects brought about by the terrorism acts. Schwalbe (2006) analysed how three print media, the *Times*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report*, visually reported the 2006 Lebanon War. It was established that human interest frames and military conflict dominated the publications, although the tone of covering the events differed across media outlets. Reed (2017) investigated how *Fox News* and *MSNBC* (*Microsoft Network Broadcasting Company*) framed images in the coverage of the Syrian Refugees and found that the media houses reported the incidents using an episodic frame. The reason is that reports from MSNBC News revealed a positive bias towards Syrian immigrants. Given its global influence, Zhang and Hellmueller (2017) identified 'human interest' as the most dominant visual frame portrayed in *Der Spiegel* and CNN International news outlets in reporting the European refugee crisis. The 'loss/gain' frame was also dominant. Findings from Fahmy (2010) showed that the American media deemphasised civilian atrocities caused by the U.S. army, while on the other hand, it stressed the human suffering of the 9/11 terror attack. Greenwood and Jenkins (2015) examined the visual framing of the Syrian crisis in public issue magazines and found that U.S. news magazines focused on intense fights and the destruction of property. These authors posit that international news pays close attention to sporadic news items that are traumatic and disastrous. Parry (2011) conducted a study aimed at developing a model to help analyse visual frames of photographic representation. The researcher compared two British mainstream newspapers, the *Times* and the *Guardian*. It was found that the newspapers visually framed the photographs by steering readers to focus on human interest aspects of the conflict and demeaning emphasis on the lives lost during the conflict. Considering the findings, Western media has the potential to frame news for specific agenda goals.

Based on the Framing Theory, this study assessed how salience was applied in photographs published by the three newspapers. As indicated by Entman (1993), news frames will always be present to influence the audience's perception of the meaning of a particular communication genre. Messaris and Abraham (2001) have outlined three specific features that distinguish the visual frame, the analogical, indexical, and explicit propositional syntax aspects. Analogical quality denotes the relationship between an image and its meaning based on analogy. Viewers do not require learning specific rules to understand visuals because images are similar to the objects they represent. The notion that visuals are closer to reality than texts makes it even more difficult for viewers to grasp that images can be artificially constructed to convey specific messages. Indexicality, as used by Messaris and Abraham (2001), refers to the quality that distinguishes photographs from other images. Photographs are considered to represent reality more closely than other forms of images. Viewers of photographs believe what they see as the true representation of the real world. However, photographs can mislead viewers by either staging or manipulations. Basic photographic techniques such as cropping and



selection can emphasise one view at the expense of the other. Messaris and Abraham's (2001) principles of visual framing served as a guide for this study.

Methodology

This section explains the data collection and analysis procedures adopted by the research. In this case, a systematic process was followed to achieve empirical results. The chapter includes the research design applicable to this study, followed by the target population and the study's sample size. The sampling procedure, data collection tools and instruments, and data analysis procedures are also discussed.

Research Design

A qualitative descriptive research method was adopted in this study. As indicated by Punch (2013), qualitative methods seek to interpret meaning non-numerically to provide a deeper understanding of various research phenomena. The qualitative method was suitable because it facilitated the collection of in-depth information to answer the research questions (Epkins, 2011; cf. Mudogo, Barasa & Matseshe, 2023). Specifically, this study adopted a descriptive content analysis as a qualitative approach to data analysis. Therefore, as specified by Mohajan (2018), a detailed and systematic method was used to interpret written and visual communication messages to identify patterns, themes, or biases.

The study also adopted semiology as an additional method of data analysis. Mingers and Willcocks (2017) define semiology as "the study of how meaning is generated and interpreted through signs and symbols" (p. 2). As a method of inquiry, semiology answered the pertinent question of how images/photographs made meaning beyond the superficial view (Longton, 2015). In this method of inquiry, semiology dissected images under investigation to generate wider systems of meaning that would have been missed when using related methods of inquiry. Chandler (2007) asserts that semiology effectively addresses the central concern for interpretation through its ability to illustrate the connection between connotative and denotative meanings. Consequently, visual representation could trigger hidden meanings similarly and effectively as written words (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). Semiology was, therefore, a viable method through which news photography could be studied free from emotionally caused biases.

Sampling and Sample Size

To examine the types of frames used in the photographs published to portray the terrorist attack at the Westgate Mall, the photographs published on the first three pages of *the Daily Nation*, *the Standard* and *the New York Times* Newspapers were analysed. A total of 50 newspaper pages related to the Westgate terrorist attack were analysed. Because it was a sufficiently large sample size to ensure diverse representation and extensive analysis. Moreover, the selected images were manageable for a thorough and detailed examination. Therefore, using purposive sampling, 21 (42%) photographs were drawn from *the Daily Nation*, 19 (38%) from *the Standard* newspaper, and 10 (20%) from *the New York Times* newspaper. The analysis unit was termed a figure, where a figure denoted a single page of *the Daily Nation*, *the Standard*, or *the New York Times* newspaper, containing one or more sub-figures. The study strictly focused on the coverage of the first three days of the attack. These days were the 22nd, 23rd, and 24th of September 2013. The first three days were chosen for coverage due to the intensive coverage that took place then and because the study aimed to assess the visual framing of the terrorist attack during the period when photojournalists were capturing events involving suffering, despair, and other negative connotations. The selected time frame was critical for examining whether the media toned down the presentation of the situation or focused on making it sensational. The fourth day, often associated with the aftermath and potential resolution, was less relevant for this specific analysis, which aimed to understand the initial impact and framing of the tragedy. According to Jay



(2002), crisis communication tends to influence the media, both print and electronic, for only a short period before long-term communication strategies are put in place. Print media was chosen because it covers a wider range of news content than radio and television. Despite the space constraints of print media, it offers a depth and detail that broadcast media cannot match because it is limited by time. Every inch in print is valuable since it allows for comprehensive storytelling, which sets benchmarks for what is newsworthy.

On the other hand, television's dynamic visuals provide immediacy and impact. However, this study preferred print media due to its ability to offer detailed visual framing and in-depth analysis. The static nature of print images, especially newspapers, allows for a focused examination of how photojournalists depict intense emotions, providing a clearer understanding of their framing choices without the influence of motion and sound.

Data Management, Analysis, and Presentation

The study employed a coding process to condense data by categorising photographs into manageable groups, utilising three coding strategies: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, following Williams and Moser's (2019) framework. Open coding was applied to the first objective, open and selective coding was used for the second objective, and selective and axial coding for the third. Due to the complex nature of photograph analysis, MaxQDA software was chosen for data coding, as recommended by Elliott (2018). MaxQDA facilitated the development of complex code groups that would have been challenging to manage manually, enabling precise retrieval of data associated with specific codes for comprehensive review and analysis. MaxQDA addresses the limitations of traditional qualitative data analysis methods and is widely used for coding and analysing various forms of unstructured data, such as interviews, audio-visuals, and social media content (MAXQDA, 2020). To facilitate the coding process, a code sheet schema guided the identification of data-driven codes by examining and reviewing sampled photographs. The identified themes were integrated into cohesive and meaningful expressions. The first level of visual analysis by Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011) was adopted to establish the types of frames used in photographs published after the Westgate attack. The main aim was to describe the photographs to determine their superficial meaning to the communicator or photojournalist and the recipient of the messages or the viewer.

Results and Discussions

The study's findings, discussion, and interpretation of the data are presented in the current chapter. First, the types of frames used in the photographs published by the Daily Nation, the Standard, and the New York Times newspapers during the Westgate Mall terrorism attack are examined. In this case, the positive frames include heroic rescuers, humanitarianism, and combat prowess. However, the coverage was dominated by negative frames such as pain and misery, survivors' dread, survivors' vulnerability, mass destruction of property, desperation, survivors' grief, and victim's death.

Types of Frames

The study's findings established 11 frames depicted in newspaper coverage of the Westgate Mall terrorist attack. The frames depicted the print media's perception of the various aspects of the terrorist attack considered newsworthy to report. Table 1 shows a summary of the frames and their characteristics.



Table 1: Summary of frames and their characteristics

Newspaper	DN	ST	NYT	Total
Number of pictures	21	19	10	50
Percentage (%)	42	38	20	100
Type of Frame	DN	ST	NYT	TOTAL
Pain and Misery	4	5	2	11
Heroic Rescuers	3	4	3	10
Survivors' Despair	3	1	0	4
Survivors' Dread	2	5	4	11
Vulnerability of survivors	3	9	4	16
Humanitarianism	3	6	3	12
Destruction of property	1	1	0	2
Combat Prowess	8	9	1	18
Survivors' desperation	3	1	2	6
Survivors' Grief	2	1	1	4
Victims' Death	2	0	1	3
TOTALS	34	42	21	97
SUMMARY OF FRAMES				
Positive frames	14	19	7	40
Negative frames	20	23	14	57
Percentage of Positive Frames (%)	41	45	33	41
Percentage of Negative Frames (%)	59	55	67	59
TOTAL FRAMES	34	42	21	97

1 Pain and Misery

The findings of this study established that the reviewed newspapers published photographs that featured the Pain and Misery frame. Eleven (11) out of fifty (50) photographs the researcher analysed depicted survivors in pain and misery. Images showing injured people lying on the ground, covered in blood, were published to depict pain and misery. Proponents of the audience attraction and profit maximisation concepts in media reporting assert that the public’s strongest human interest is survival (Schmid, 2021). Therefore, any news that signals danger to survival, such as terror attack-related reports, is eagerly absorbed. Journalists are compelled to publish graphic images of victims of terror attacks because such events are more newsworthy than other news that does not signal any danger. Consistent with the findings of this study, Muindi (2020) observed that media reporting was very subjective concerning how photographs were captured and published. The media's portrayal of such suffering victims emotionally impacts viewers and fosters sympathy (Hutchison, 2014). Those watching such atrocities can also be considered victims. However, publishing such sensationalistic photos on front pages inadvertently serves terrorists' aims by spreading fear and grief. As indicated by Laa (2005), graphic images are published to evoke sympathy and increase audience engagement, presenting victims as innocent individuals struggling with adversity caused by terrorists.

2 Heroic Rescuers

All three newspapers, the Daily Nation, the Standard, and the New York Times, featured the heroic rescuers’ frame. A total of ten (10) photographs were published, with *the Daily Nation* publishing three (3), *the Standard* four (4), and *the New York Times* three (3). One of the images published by *the Standard*

showcased a plain-clothes police officer evacuating a baby and a woman from the scene, with the officer appearing determined despite evident anxiety. These images positively frame the heroism of rescuers, inspiring admiration and unity among the public while undermining the terrorists' narrative. However, it is crucial to maintain balance in coverage, ensuring victims' stories and experiences are not overshadowed. Responsible journalism should avoid oversimplification and stereotypes, presenting a diverse perspective of terror attacks. Such reporting can generate public outrage against terrorism and bolster counterterrorism efforts, ultimately diminishing support for the perpetrators.

3 Survivors Despair

The Survivors' Despair frame was explicit in four (4) photographs the researcher analysed. *the Daily Nation* published three (3) photographs featuring this frame while *the Standard* published one (1) photograph portraying survivors' despair. Figure 4.5, published by the Daily Nation, shows how the print media exploited the survivors' despair frame. The image shows a severely wounded Asian man sitting in a pool of blood outside the mall. His face is marked by distress, with bloodshot eyes and a tear rolling down his cheek. The figure effectively conveys the sense of hopelessness and grief experienced by the victim. While they serve the media's role of informing the public and eliciting empathy, they also raise ethical concerns. Such images can sensationalise the tragedy, infringe on victims' privacy, and potentially traumatise them and their families. The media's portrayal of survivor despair in images from the Westgate Mall attack aims to inform and evoke empathy. However, responsible journalism should strike a balance between conveying the emotional toll of terrorism and respecting the dignity and privacy of the survivors.

4 Survivors' Dread

A total of eleven (11) photographs featured the frame of survivors' dread. The Daily Nation published two (2) photographs that featured survivors' dread, the Standard five (5), and *the New York Times* four (4). This study did not publish graphic photos or those that present dehumanising content. Instead, images emphasising human impact and resilience were presented to sustain victim dignity. Figure 4.1 shows how the newspapers depicted the survivors' dread frame.



Figure 4.1 STD 22/09/2013, P. 2

The subjects framed in this shot depict a mixture of race, age and gender. Based on the analysis drawn from MaxQDA software, five (5) out of the ten subjects depicted displayed a frowned facial expression. Four (4) of the five (5) victims whose facial appearance was captured displayed an open-mouth posture, with the lady at the extreme right (towards the background) palming her cheeks in



utter shock and dread. In summary, the kinesics and facial expressions depicted in the figure signify the survivor's dread. According to Annis (2022), such photographs, depicting emotional victims, evoke strong emotions in distant viewers and are not solely published for this purpose but also to boost newspaper sales. These images allow viewers to imagine the fear experienced by survivors during the terrorist attack, contributing to the propagation of terror by terrifying the audience.

5 Survivors' Vulnerability

The vulnerability of survivors' frames was exhibited in 16 photographs published by the three newspapers. *The Daily Nation* published three (3) pictures, *the Standard* nine (9) and *the New York Times* four (4) photographs featuring this frame. The images show people, particularly, women, some with children in desperate situations. Some of the photographs were taken from a high angle. The images highlight the suffering of women during such attacks and the need for their evacuation. The media often frames women and children as the most vulnerable victims in disasters and terror attacks, emphasising their suffering and vulnerability (Hutchison, 2014). However, this framing can inadvertently glorify terrorism by suggesting that terrorists target the most vulnerable. To maintain ethical reporting and avoid misrepresentation, the media should adopt a gender-neutral approach in disaster reporting (Anis, 2022; Jařab, 2020). Terrorist groups strategically seek maximum media coverage to gain global attention, exploiting the media's fascination with dramatic images.

6 Humanitarianism

Humanitarianism as a frame was featured in twelve (12) photographs published by the three newspapers after the Westgate terrorism attack. *The Daily Nation* featured humanitarianism in three (3) photographs, *the Standard* in six (6), and the *New York Times* in three (3). Some images show Red Cross paramedics assisting victims, while others show people holding placards, campaigning for blood donations to aid attack victims, and affirming the humanitarian efforts witnessed. Such depictions of humanity in adversity are a positive reminder of Kenyan resilience and the value placed on human life. These photographs elicit empathy and care, aligning with ethical reporting practices. They evoke emotions that drive support for those affected and uphold the ethics of reporting on humanitarian issues.

7 Mass Destruction of Property

Mass destruction of property was also identified as a major frame in the photographs covering the Westgate Mall attack, as published by *the Daily Nation* and *the Standard* newspapers.



Figure 4.2: DN 24/09/2013, P. 1



Figure 4.2, featured on the Daily Nation's front page, displays an aerial view of Westgate Mall engulfed in a massive cloud of smoke. The image aims to capture the rising smoke, generating anxiety and fear among viewers because it shows the massive destruction resulting from the terrorist attack. This portrayal leaves viewers doubtful about the successful rescue of captives within the mall. The finding concurs with Muindi's (2020) research that established that the Kenyan public was not confident that the government was in full control of the situation at Westgate Mall. For example, in response to the question raised by the media and the public after visually depicting the plumes of smoke that rose above the Mall, the authority's report contradicted. Initially, they asserted that it was a military tactic aimed at forcing the terrorists out but later claimed that the assailants were responsible for it (Muindi, 2020). Publishing such a photograph in front of two national dailies in the wake of terrorism alludes that the media is inadvertently aggrandising the course of terrorism.

8 Combat Prowess

The frame of combat prowess was featured in a total of eighteen (18) photographs from the sampled data. Eight (8) of these photographs were published by the Daily Nation while nine (9) were published by the Standard newspaper, and the New York Times published one (1) photograph with this frame from the sampled data. Images depicting combat prowess showed Kenya Defense Forces officers in full military gear prepared for or in combat. The absence of civilians in such images indicated the area's transformation into a battlefield.

The images communicate the government's commitment to combating terrorism and ensuring citizens' safety. By showcasing the security forces' skills and determination, they inspire hope and confidence in the public, fostering national unity and pride. These images inadvertently serve as deterrence messages to potential terrorists, as they depict the formidable response capabilities of the armed forces. Overall, the framing of combat prowess in these images plays a crucial role in shaping public perception and encouraging support for security efforts.

9 Desperation

The frame of desperation frame was featured in six (6) photographs from the sample data. The *Daily Nation* published three (3) photographs featuring this frame and the Standard one (1) photograph, and the *New York Times* two (2) photographs. Images depicting desperation showed survivors seeking cover in desperation. The photos indicated that the terrorists took victims by surprise, implying Kenya's lack of preparedness. This inadvertently glorifies terrorism by highlighting victims' desperation, which would gratify terrorists.

10 Survivors' Grief

Survivors' grief featured in a total of four (4) photographs from the sampled data that the researcher analysed. The *Daily Nation* published two (2) photographs featuring this frame, and the *Standard* and the *New York Times* published one (1) photograph each.



Figure 4.3: NYT 23/09/2013, P. 1

Figure 4.3 features mourners dressed in black comforting a young man whose father was a victim of the attack. The image symbolises the culmination of the Westgate Mall siege. The consistent focus on mourning rather than triumph over the terrorists could unintentionally aggrandise terrorism, aligning with Hutchison's (2014) findings on media portrayal of disaster victims.

11 Victim's Death

The victim's death was featured in a total of three (3) photographs published from the sampled data. The *Daily Nation* Published two (2) photographs and the *New York Times* one (1) photograph. The images depicting death showed victims' bodies scattered on the ground. These images, framed around death and horror, evoke emotions, shape public perception, and influence attitudes and policies regarding terrorism. However, as the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) (2022) indicates, media outlets should exercise sensitivity when publishing such images to preserve victims' dignity by respectfully depicting the human impact of events without graphic content or dehumanising elements.

Conclusion

The study established that media's coverage of terrorist attacks often sensationalises events, inadvertently aiding terrorists by spreading fear-inducing images. Most frames (59%) were negative, showing suffering and destruction. Even the few available positive frames, such as heroic rescues, had negative elements. While the media must inform the public, journalists should prioritise ethics because sensationalism for profit can increase fear and harm mental health. Media should avoid excessive graphic content, respect victims' dignity, and limit terrorist publicity. Profit-driven media compete for coverage, especially print media, which can influence public perception. However, responsible journalism can inform without harming by using empathetic storytelling to encourage action while respecting victims.

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