



Issue no: 01 | Vol no: 07 | February 2026: 01-13

Media, Images, and Meaning: The Role of Visual Framing in Shaping Public Perception

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Article History

Received: 2025.12.13

Accepted: 2026.01.14

Published: 2026.02.11

Cite this article in APA

Kinyanjui, B. M. (2026). Media, Images, and meaning: The role of visual framing in shaping public perception. *Editon consortium journal of media communication studies*,7(1), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.51317/ecjmcs.v7i1.671>

Abstract

This study analyses how visual framing influenced the presentation and interpretation of photographs released following the terrorist attack at Nairobi's Westgate Mall on September 21, 2013. It assessed how photojournalists framed this incident in the *Daily Nation*, *Standard*, and *New York Times* by examining the framing's effect on public perception of the attack. The research adopted a qualitative descriptive approach, utilising descriptive content analysis with MaxQDA software to examine photographs for recurring patterns, themes, and visual framing techniques. A sample of fifty (50) photographs from the first three pages of the *Daily Nation*, *The Standard*, and *The New York Times* published on September 21-24, 2013, was analysed. Nine media professionals were chosen for interviews using purposive sampling. Semiology was utilised to derive meanings from the images using Rodriguez and Dimitrova's four-tiered model, with a focus on denotative, stylistic-semiotic, connotative, and ideological representations. The findings revealed that media prioritised sensational images to boost viewership, and this influences audience perceptions through fear and inspiration. The visual framing created denotative meanings and ideological representations, though audience interpretations may have been swayed by cognitive biases and cultural norms, diverging from journalists' intentions. The study contributes to the field of communication by promoting visual literacy and empowering audiences to critically analyse media content and become discerning consumers of news. Ethical considerations are crucial in determining which frames to use. It is essential that journalists balance the need for information with respect for victims' dignity.

Keywords: Media ethics, media influence, photojournalism, public perception, visual framing.



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INTRODUCTION

The visual reporting of past terrorism incidents by the mass media, particularly through photojournalism, has long generated concern because of its powerful capacity to shape public opinion. Terrorist groups often seek to spread fear and attract widespread attention, and by publishing visually framed images of attacks, media outlets may inadvertently amplify this intended impact. Although previous studies have not comprehensively examined how visual framing influences public perceptions of terrorism, Kenya has remained a frequent target of terrorist attacks. Despite the rapid transformations in communication that have significantly reshaped society over the past three decades, the reporting of terrorism-related violence has largely remained sensational. Against this backdrop, this study analyses how visual framing influenced the presentation and interpretation of photographs published after the terrorist attack at the Westgate Mall.

On Saturday, September 21, 2013, at approximately 1230 hours (East African Time), an Al-Shabaab-affiliated terrorist group stormed the Westgate Shopping Mall in Westlands, Nairobi. Four terrorists armed with Avtomat Kalashnikova 1947 rifles (AK-47) and hand grenades launched an assault on innocent shoppers within the mall premises. The attack lasted approximately 80 hours, ending on the fourth day after it began (Ong'onda, 2016). In total, 67 people were killed and 240 seriously wounded. Among the victims were 18 foreigners from Australia, Canada, China, England, France, Ghana, India, the Netherlands, and North America (Omayio, 2015). The mall was reportedly selected as a target because it was popular with wealthy Kenyans, politicians, expatriates, diplomats, and tourists, making it likely that nationals from numerous countries would be present at any given time. Such a target guaranteed extensive international media coverage and, consequently, maximum publicity for the perpetrators (Ong'onda, 2016).

This attack was the second largest in Kenya since the August 7, 1998, bombing of the United States Embassy in Nairobi, which killed over 200 people. The victims ranged in age from eight to 78 years and included both children and adults, male and female. Reports indicate that the majority of the assault occurred within the first hour and mainly targeted non-Muslim civilians (Ong'onda, 2016). The Westgate attack significantly raised Al-Shabaab's global profile as a terrorist organisation. As Tunman (2003) observes, terrorists seek

global media attention; by targeting victims from various parts of the world, the Westgate attack attracted widespread publicity from multiple international media houses.

Within this context, the Kenyan media has played a central role in reporting acts of terrorism. However, various organisations have raised concerns about how the print media has covered and presented such heinous acts. In 2014, the Media Council of Kenya expressed serious concern about coverage of the Westgate Mall attack, noting that some media outlets failed to adhere to established codes of conduct for journalism in Kenya. According to the Council's report, the Kenyan media "emphasised the dramatic, most violent, and conflicting accounts of the war against terror and ignored historical, cultural, and social explanations for terrorism acts and the war against terrorism" (Kadhi, 2014, p. 4).

Several studies have similarly questioned how mainstream print media in Kenya report terrorism. The Daily Nation and The Standard are the country's leading print newspapers, with the Daily Nation circulating approximately 170,000 copies daily and reaching an average readership of about 4,379,400 per day, while The Standard circulates over 100,000 copies with an average readership of 2,223,500 (Kiptinness & Kiwanuka-Tondo, 2019). Given their wide reach, their framing of terrorism-related events carries significant influence. Kiarie and Mogambi (2017), in examining how Kenyan print media report terrorism, found that news stories on terrorism were given unusual prominence by both newspapers. Similarly, Maina (2014) observed that exaggerated terrorism stories were often placed on the front pages to attract audiences. According to Kiarie and Mogambi (2017), terrorism stories were frequently accorded prominence by being placed as page leads, reducing their role to mere information provision while undermining the broader journalistic responsibility to provide detailed, contextualised information necessary for fostering an informed Kenyan society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Role of Visual Frames

Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011) define visual framing as the process through which visual elements are used to determine, evaluate, and assess problems from a moral standpoint in order to offer solutions. Scholars of visual framing hold different views on its definition. Similarly, a number of scholars have defined visual framing as thematic messages (Patridge, 2005; Borah & Bulla,

2006), while others have explained visual frames as ideological representations of visual images (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011; Griffin, 2004).

Visual framing is a powerful tool for capturing readers' attention and presenting a direct depiction of reality. Images are easily comprehensible and memorable, enhancing the audience's understanding of events (Showkat, 2020). Photojournalists strategically employ vivid visuals to facilitate comprehension and evoke emotional responses, often surpassing the efficacy of textual information (Schifferstein et al., 2021; Kujur & Singh, 2020). Beyond their literal content, images carry symbolic meanings influenced by readers' cultural backgrounds, shaping their interpretation and potentially eliciting secondary connotations (Bornberg, 2022; D'Angelo et al., 2019). However, socio-political biases can distort the visual framing of crime, undermining the accurate portrayal of violence (Shahin, 2016). Nonetheless, visual framing remains a potent tool for promoting specific viewpoints and embedding thematic elements that aid in understanding events within political, religious, social, or cultural contexts (Grabe & Bucy, 2009). Therefore, in addition to shaping public perception, visual framing simultaneously creates denotative, connotative, and ideological representations within the images published by the media, thereby shaping narratives surrounding the incident. In a similar way, this study explored how visual framing influences the audience's understanding and emotional response to the Westgate terrorist attack. However, the researcher analysed how photojournalists use images to convey not just literal content but also symbolic meanings.

To understand how visual frames in newspapers influence readers, Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011) conducted a study examining the role of visual framing. In their findings, Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011) identified and explained four specific types of visual frames: denotative, connotative, stylistic-semiotic, and ideological representation. Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011) argued that the denotative level concerns how visuals are framed to advance a particular theme or agenda. Stylistic-semiotic, on the other hand, is framing caused by the influence of photographic techniques such as angle of view, depth of field, distance, focus, colour, and shading to convey various meanings. Connotative frames refer to the use of visual symbols to convey meaning in a specific social and cultural context. For example, the use of the Kenyan flag to symbolise patriotism for one's country. Lastly, ideological frames

were defined as visual frames that emphasise a specific viewpoint to propagate an agenda, whether political, religious, or ethical (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). The Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011) study provides a proper framework for analysing the extent to which visuals in newspapers influence readers' perceptions. This framework, as proposed by Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011), can be applied when one intends to analyse any type of visual communication with respect to audience perceptions of a specific genre. This study also examined the role of visual frames in influencing audience perceptions. However, the main focus was on the analysis of specific types of visual frames, such as denotative, connotative, stylistic-semiotic, and ideological representation, and this was done within the context of the Westgate terrorist attack.

Kwon et al. (2017) explored how X presented the Boston Marathon bombing on April 15, 2013, and the Brussels Airport terror attack on March 22, 2016. These scholars examined the role of news proximity in relation to terrorism and audience frames. Their study's findings revealed that both terrorist incidents involved similar frames. The similarities in frame patterns were attributed to a global tendency for media audiences to stereotype information as they receive it from the mass media. Kwon et al. (2017) shed further light on the media framing of terrorism, particularly by including audience frames. However, this research specifically focused on the visual framing used by the *Daily Nation*, *The Standard*, and *The New York Times* newspapers in their photographic coverage of the Westgate Mall terrorist attack. Emphasis was on the compositional elements of these images and how they framed themes such as heroism, pain and misery, combat prowess, and survivor grief. Additionally, this study sought to provide a qualitative analysis of the frames used in print media, with a specific focus on how these visual elements influenced public perception of the attack.

Hajo and Boomgaarden (2016) conducted a quantitative content analysis to determine how news coverage, including both text and photographic images, would influence a political candidate's election success. The study found that photographs do not play a significant role in assessing a rational, argument-based candidate. The findings revealed that photographic superiority is strongly dependent on the type of information provided to the reader. Newman et al. (2019) highlight the dilemma the print media faces in balancing its act in the current reality, where the mainstream media is competing

with unregulated social media. The print media is constrained by self-censorship when reporting terror incidents. The print media uses all visual framing techniques, including sizing and placement, camera angle, selective focus, and proximity, to cut out the graphic, the explicit, the macabre, the sensational, and the politically divisive from the pictures it presents to the public. In this manner, they fulfil their gatekeeping obligation in the public and national interest. The studies examined offer important insights into how images influence media reporting. However, this research focused on the visual framing techniques employed by the *Daily Nation*, *The Standard*, and *The New York Times* during their coverage of the Westgate Mall terrorist attack. Unlike the political context in Hajo and Boomgaarden's (2016) study, this research examined how these newspapers visually framed the attack through themes of heroism, vulnerability, grief, and combat prowess, balancing the need to inform the public with ethical considerations regarding graphic content. The study sought to bridge the gap between the technical aspects of visual framing and its emotional and psychological impact on the audience during times of crisis.

During the German Revolution at the end of World War I, most photojournalists seemed neutral and independent, but when political actors recognised the immense power of pictures over public opinion, they enlisted photojournalists to enhance political propaganda (Below, 2010). Despite the resultant framing practices, the reputation and influence of photography as a picture of reality remain unshaken, because people spontaneously believe what they see and overlook internal as well as external influences that shape and define the photos they see (Below, 2010). This tendency of the photographic audience to believe what is presented to them provides latitude for photojournalists to frame images as they please during the composition stage. Below (2010) further asserts that one role of framing among war correspondents is to push the anti-war, pacifist agenda. Photographs depict war as a process that creates victims. Soldiers are depicted as victims by concentrating on images that show negative facial expressions. These include anxiety, exhaustion, anguish, and hopelessness. Photos also show dead bodies and injured soldiers. Many pictures are framed to exclude soldiers. Instead, they show tanks, spent shells, and rifles. Victimhood among civilians is shown by the destruction of their homes depicted in published photographs (Below, 2010). The author clearly shows how photojournalists can frame

various subjects in a conflict to promote a specific point of view to the audience, and therefore, influence their perception. However, this research focused specifically on the photographic framing of the Westgate Mall terrorist attack. Therefore, it examined how various types of frames, such as those depicting heroism, suffering, and resilience, were constructed in the published images. While previous research, like that of Below (2010), has highlighted the general influence of photojournalism on public perception, this study will delve deeper into the compositional elements of these images and their specific roles in shaping narratives surrounding terrorism.

Another motivation behind visual framing is the arousal of patriotic feelings among the readers to enhance their national identities. Pyka (2010) cites a high incidence of cover pictures that are framed to stimulate nationalistic feelings. Pyka highlights how editions framed coverage of major national events, including the construction of the Berlin Wall, Germany's reunification, the introduction of the Euro, and the 2006 World Cup. Pyka (2010) claims that framing was preserved by incorporating four symbols: political figures, the German flag, German national figures, and the coat of arms. According to Pyka (2010), symbols of national unity can be used by photojournalists to shape how audiences interpret photographs. This idea is worth exploring further. In contrast, this study focused on the types of frames utilised in the photographic coverage of the Westgate Mall terrorist attack, rather than exploring national events. While Pyka (2010) examined the arousal of patriotic feelings through symbols associated with national identity, this research delved into diverse framing strategies, such as victimisation, heroism, and vulnerability, which were employed in the context of the terrorist attack.

Douai (2014) conducted a study that sought to investigate the visual framing of the G20 Toronto summit. Douai studied the visual framing of the policing images of the anti-globalisation protests during the 2010 Toronto summit by analysing 852 images that were published in both print and online media houses in Canada. Douai's findings revealed that pictures from the same incident could be framed to reinforce different themes. Douai isolated two framing themes: the law and order frame, in which the emphasis focused on police officers controlling protesters, and the civil rights frame, which emphasised placard-carrying protestors. The Douai (2014) study was based on a deductive and quantitative approach that relies on numerical statistics. In contrast to

Douai's (2014) study, this research adopted a qualitative approach to provide a more in-depth understanding of the frames used in photographic coverage of the Westgate Mall terrorist attack.

In Africa, Khalel (2017) analysed visual frames that were used by three online newspapers to portray the June 30, 2013, Egyptian Revolution against President Mohamed Morsi. The research analysed photographic and video images from three online news sources, namely *Alyawm Alssabie* (an Egyptian newspaper), *The Guardian*, and *The New York Times*. The study established that numerous visual frames emerged from both the Western and Egyptian online newspapers analysed. Khalel grouped the five major frames discovered as sympathetic, support of the status quo, diagnostic, social change, and mixed frames. Khalel's (2017) study employed a mixed method of inquiry comprising quantitative and qualitative approaches. Similar to Khalel's (2017) research, this study used a qualitative approach for data analysis. Additionally, while Khalel (2017) analysed online newspapers, this study investigated mainstream print newspapers.

In Kenya, Omanga (2016) conducted a study to investigate the manner in which *The Standard* and the *Daily Nation* framed the 9/11 terrorist attack. Omanga was concerned with the ideological leaning of the dominant frame and whether the frame oscillated towards or away from legitimising or delegitimising terrorism. The study adopted a theoretical approach based on semiotics to examine the dominant frame in nine cartoons published by the two newspapers. The study established that frames in the published images reveal tensions and ambiguities in the way the event was interpreted by Kenyans. The Omanga (2016) study demonstrated that the cartoons published immediately after the attack portrayed Osama bin Laden as a villain and demonised the attackers, thus denying them the legitimacy and recognition worthy of combatants. Cartoons published in later days depicted frames that questioned U.S. foreign policy and cast the terrorists as possible heroes. While most studies of visual framing concentrate on photographs, the use of cartoons for the study of framing makes Omanga's (2016) contribution of particular significance to this study because, whereas framing in photos is subtle and indirect, it can also be obvious and direct in cartoons.

In this study, visual framing refers to how images are used to convey meaning and influence audience

perceptions of the Westgate Mall terrorist attack. Visual framing is not just about the literal depiction of events but also the symbolic and ideological messages embedded in the images. In this case, visual framing served to highlight particular themes, such as heroism, grief, suffering, humanitarianism, and combat prowess, among others, through compositional techniques such as camera angles, shot proximity, or symbolic imagery. The images used in media outlets, like those from the *Daily Nation*, *The Standard*, and *The New York Times*, not only presented factual coverage but also conveyed deeper cultural and ideological messages, shaping how the readers interpreted the Westgate attack. This study assessed how these visual frames influenced readers' perceptions, emotional responses, and overall understanding of terrorism through the analysis of denotative, connotative, semiotic-stylistic, and ideological frames.

Terrorism Photography in the Daily Nation, The Standard, and The New York Times

The Daily Nation is among Kenya's leading newspapers. The newspaper usually uses photography to highlight the human side of terrorism. Therefore, the Daily's photojournalists and editors focus on victims and rescue efforts when publishing images covering incidents. In the *Daily Nation's* coverage of events such as terror attacks like the Westgate Mall attack and the DusitD2 siege, the editors tended to prioritise clearly visible shots of victims and emergency responders. Usually, the editors ensure the front pages of the newspaper editions focus on the critical event of the day (Mwaura, 2022). In addition to informing, the images aim to evoke empathy and a personal connection to the tragedies. The journalists seek to humanise the victims and show the heroism of responders in such incidents. However, the paper's heavy use of emotionally charged images is criticised for risking sensationalising the event rather than informing readers in a balanced way. The *Daily Nation's* editorial decisions are designed to evoke public outrage and unity. The goal is attained by using imagery that places the viewer emotionally in the scene of the tragedy.

On the other hand, *The Standard* newspaper, another major Kenyan publication, approaches terrorism photography with a slightly more restrained and contextual approach. In its reporting of the Westgate and DusitD2 attacks, the newspaper often used wider-angle shots, capturing the broader context of the locations and the security operations. The approach aligns with the newspaper's strategy of ensuring the published

photographs are iconic in nature, though it is criticised as a tactic that benefits terrorists (Ndavula & Mwangi, 2022). However, *The Standard's* preference for iconic images provides readers with a more detached view. The strategy allows the public to comprehend the scale and logistical aspects of the events without being overwhelmed by the immediate emotional impact. The newspaper's strategy is often perceived as focusing more on the overall narrative of terrorism and its socio-political implications rather than individual stories.

Finally, *The New York Times* usually covers incidents in Kenya, particularly terror attacks. The newspaper's approach usually sparks controversy for publishing graphic images of victims. The paper faced criticism in Kenya for its use of explicit, close-up images of bodies, which many saw as disrespectful and insensitive to the victims and their families (Takenaga, 2019). While the *Times* defended its editorial choices by arguing the images served a journalistic purpose of showing the brutal reality of terrorism, critics argued that these images crossed ethical boundaries, prioritising shock value over respectful reporting. *The New York Times* tends to use a more globalised perspective. The imagery used captures immediate emotional impact through close-ups and the broader geopolitical implications with wider shots.

METHODOLOGY

This research utilised a qualitative descriptive approach, combining descriptive content analysis with semiology to examine the visual representations of the Westgate terrorist attack. Descriptive content analysis systematically categorised visual and textual data to identify recurring patterns, themes, and meanings related to violence, while semiology dissected photographs to uncover deeper connotative and denotative layers of meaning often overlooked by other approaches (Chandler, 2007). Data collection focused on published photographs and accompanying captions from three newspapers. Kenya's *Daily Nation* and *The Standard* were selected as the oldest, most widely read, and most trusted outlets (Obiero, 2016), while *The New York Times* was included for its prestige and extensive international coverage. The sample was restricted to images and captions appearing on the first three pages of editions covering the Westgate attack, yielding a total of 21 newspaper pages. From these, 50 photographs were analysed: 21 from *Daily Nation*, 19 from *The Standard*, and 10 from *The New York Times*. The unit of analysis

was a "figure," defined as a single newspaper page containing one or more relevant images (sub-figures).

Additionally, purposive sampling was used to select nine key informants, professional journalists and photojournalists, for in-depth interviews, providing insider perspectives on image selection and framing. A pilot study tested the data collection procedures and coding instrument, identifying and resolving potential technical issues prior to full implementation. Data analysis followed the four-level visual framing framework proposed by Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011): (1) denotative schemes (literal content), (2) stylistic-semiotic systems, (3) connotative systems (implied meanings), and (4) ideological representations. Ethical protocols involved securing informed consent from all participants to guarantee their autonomy and comprehension of the study's objectives. Approval was secured from Laikipia University's Graduate School and the National Council for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI). Strict data safeguards were maintained to prevent retraumatization of victims and the public, given the sensitive nature of terrorism in Kenya.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Role of Visual Framing in the West Gate Terrorist Attack

The objective of this study was to assess the role that framing played in the photographs published after the Westgate Mall terrorist attack. Twelve photographs were purposively selected: four published by the *Daily Nation*, four by *The Standard*, and the last four published by *The New York Times*. The research adopted Rodriguez and Dimitrova's (2011) fourth method of analysing visual images. At this level, the research analysed photographs as ideological representations by examining data drawn from the in-depth interview. Then, the research drew the denotative and connotative meanings derived from the first and second objectives to determine the overall frames that the photojournalists intended overtly and inadvertently. Finally, the research identified the major symbols denoted by an exemplar photograph to draw meaning connoted from that particular photograph.

Nine interviews targeting mass media professionals and photojournalists were conducted. All the informants identified had vast experience in the print media industry, either as local or international correspondents or informants. The informants were shown the 12 samples of photographs that were captured in the aftermath of the Westgate Mall attack and asked to respond to questions

based on their professional experiences. Data drawn from the in-depth interviews were analysed qualitatively using descriptive and interpretative approaches. DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) indicated that relevant information about an issue under investigation is obtained through an assessment of expert opinions and interpretations. The study explored informant views, feelings, and beliefs to obtain rich, open-ended data, explain phenomena, and eventually draw conclusions. The in-depth interviews aimed to explore the informants' perspectives on the role that framing played in the photographs published in the wake of the Westgate Mall terrorist attack.

Insights into Visual Framing's Role in the West Gate Terrorist Attack

Based on the responses pertaining to the role of visual framing, it was established that visual framing extended beyond shaping public perception. These representations include denotative aspects, which directly convey the depicted events or scenes. These assertions are supported by ID05, who stated, "*The few humanitarian photos didn't make as much noise because the graphic ones dominated the narrative.*" Additionally, connotative elements, which imply underlying meanings or associations, were also noted. For instance, ID03 said, "*The images published during the Westgate attack felt curated to provoke fear and sympathy, not hope.*" Moreover, visual framing involved ideological representations that reflect the values, beliefs, or agendas of the framers. Therefore, visual framing shaped denotative, connotative, and ideological dimensions by constructing narratives that influence how audiences interpret and understand the events depicted, such as the Westgate Mall terrorist attack. Therefore, visual framing not only shapes immediate perceptions but also constructs broader narratives that impact societal understanding and memory of such events.

Construction of Denotative Representations

Based on the responses, the photographs published during the Westgate Mall terrorist attack captured the real happenings. For instance, ID02 said, "*The photos provided a clear view of the location, layout, and immediate surroundings, allowing newspaper readers to visualise the context in which the Westgate Mall terrorist attack incident occurred.*" Other informants, such as ID05 and ID07, shared similar notions. This confirmed that viewers constructed denotative representations based on the images. The reason for this is that the photographs captured the physical scene, the people involved, and the immediate aftermath of the Westgate Mall attack. The

findings concur with the role of framing, as noted by Parveen and Showkat (2020), in that it invites the readers to pay attention and view the directly portrayed reality. Visuals are easily understood and retained in a reader's memory because they show events as they happen.

The images published during the Westgate Mall attack were a result of a combination of photography and photojournalism. It should be noted that while unedited images were supposed to be used to tell a story, a little manipulation may have been necessary to meet certain requirements (Chinedu-Okeke, 2015; Maillot, 2019; *The New York Times* Company, 2022). As noted by Adobe (2023), the fast publication of images by the newspapers emphasises the role of media in informing the public. The reason is that the pictures taken by photojournalists must be shared through the media. At times, photojournalists and editors have no option but to publish gruesome images that portray violent injustices amid complaints from the public because they need to tell the story as it is. In the Westgate Mall attack case, the images were carefully framed to present the happenings of the time and create.

Visual framing in the Westgate Mall attack incident evoked a stronger comprehension of the happenings because the images were vivid. The reason for this is that through photographs, the viewer is immersed in the scene while the images convey information that words alone cannot capture, not only in journalism but also in general communication (Schifferstein et al., 2021). In agreement with this assertion, ID03 had said:

I would rate the effectiveness of the images depicting the physical scene of the Westgate Mall attack as highly effective. The clarity of the view of the location, layout, and immediate surroundings made me visualise the context in which the incident occurred.

The essence of news is to share factual information appropriately (The News Manual, 2022). It is the role of the newspaper editors to ensure that the information to be published is accurate, reliable, meaningful, and factual (American Press Institute, 2019; McKillop Library, 2023). Therefore, it was confirmed that through visual framing, photojournalism informs society about the day-to-day happenings in the world. The findings affirm the observation of Ingram and Henshall (2008) that, without appropriately framed images, many people would not read a newspaper because it would be dull and

challenging to read. Visual framing played an important role in making viewers understand the incident and gain a sense of the environment in which the tragic event took place.

Visual framing in news photography influences how readers understand an event. In this case, the images depicting the happenings and immediate aftermath of the Westgate Mall attack had a profound effect on shaping readers' understanding of the terrorist attack. ID01 said, *"In my opinion, images featuring individuals involved in the Westgate Mall attack significantly contributed to a comprehensive understanding of the event."* These photos conveyed the factual consequences and aftermath in a stark and poignant manner. The reason for this is that the photos captured the involved people's actions and conveyed their emotions, as well as highlighting their roles within the incident. Research shows that images evoke emotional reactions in viewers, making the items portray information more efficiently than text (Kujur & Singh, 2020). Seeing the expressions and reactions of those present added a human dimension to the tragedy, making it easier to empathise with and comprehend the impact on individuals. According to the Bonn Institute (2023), photojournalists crop parts of the image or publish the entire photograph to communicate specific issues. Therefore, when the whole scene is captured through visual framing, the readers get to know the whole picture of the event. In this case, the visual evidence of the destruction, injuries, rescue efforts, and chaos that ensued provided a powerful narrative of the incident's aftermath, leaving a lasting impression on readers' understanding of the tragic event.

Infusion of Connotative Meanings

As per the informants' responses, the images related to the Westgate Mall attack evoked emotions, symbols, and cultural references. For instance, an informant said that the images created emotions among readers. The assertions concur with Alegria (2020), who indicates that photojournalism is "raw" because the photographs are never edited. Instead, the images are presented the way they are captured to preserve the authenticity of the moments. In such a case, events are captured as they happen and are aimed at invoking emotions among the viewers (Mortensen & Gade, 2018). Therefore, the visual framing of the photographs covering the Westgate Mall attack provided an insight into the human aspect of the incident. ID04 said, *"Given the fear, anguish, and resilience portrayed in the photos, I pitied the affected individuals."* Generally, as much as the visual framing

may have focused on presenting factual information about the incident, readers decoded a sense of fear and the courage displayed by those confronted with adversity. Similarly, Bornberg (2022) had shown that framing in photography is associated with symbolic meanings in addition to its content-based communication. The reason for this is that the readers' culture influences how they interpret images (D'Angelo et al., 2019). Therefore, based on the visual framing adopted, readers can create a suggestive secondary meaning of the images, depending on the attitudes, religious, political, or philosophical persuasions of a nation or group of people at the time of the publication. However, according to Shahin (2016), the visual framing of crime may be affected by socio-political biases. Therefore, the realities of violence can be distorted by readers' perspectives.

It was established that the images featuring the Westgate Mall were visually framed to deepen the emotional impact and cultural resonance of the incident. For instance, ID05 stated, *"I was disheartened by the sight of damaged property exhibited in the photographs."* Therefore, images that showed injured people and damaged buildings and other property symbolised an attack on the nation's unity and resilience. The images heightened the emotional connection to the event, making it more than just an isolated incident but a reflection of the broader destruction of unity, peace, cultural values, and identity.

Visual framing entails the presentation of certain concepts through pictures to highlight or promote a desired interpretation of issues (Parveen & Showkat, 2020). The main focus of photojournalists is to cover an issue visually in a way that provokes cognitive responses from the target audience. It entails the presentation of images through camera angles, viewpoints, and image sizes to tell a specific story. Sizing influences visual framing significantly because large-sized images create a sense of more prominence for the readers. Proximity and angles of view also determine the connotative meanings that readers form. For instance, a close-up shot of a violent occurrence makes the issue appear more serious than when the same event is covered by a long shot. Therefore, visual framing influences the readers' perceptions and creation of connotative meanings of the situation being covered.

Visual framing can be used to filter crime ideas for the public. For instance, the images covering the Westgate Mall attack were visually framed to communicate and

shape discourses of fear, crime, and justice in society. For instance, ID03 said, "*The images published during the Westgate attack felt curated to provoke fear and sympathy, not hope.*" This way, the images facilitated the representation of the dominant cultural and political issues affecting the victims, the affected, and the perpetrators. Generally, the photojournalists' aim is to document reality (Rafiee et al., 2021). However, in some cases, the images can be framed in a way that can be interpreted by some readers as stereotyping crime.

Embedding of Ideological Representations

Visual framing of the Westgate Mall attack images was used to highlight themes, communicate political or social contexts, or promote particular viewpoints. Therefore, the images were framed to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the event. According to the informants, the images were visually framed to show resilience, unity, and societal vulnerabilities. ID06 stated, "*Some of the images showed desperate victims, while others depicted committed rescuers and security forces agents responding to the attack accordingly to save lives and restore order.*" Therefore, based on the responses, photographs published during the Westgate Mall attack showcased the strength of the community in the face of adversity. It was also noted that other images highlighted the nation's vulnerability to extremists' violence. The findings concur with previous research that images are essential in assessing the socio-political ideas and experiences surrounding an issue (Parveen & Showkat, 2020). In the Westgate Mall terrorist attack case, the published images were visually framed to communicate the impact of the variations in political beliefs and social values.

It was established that the images effectively highlighted political and social contexts related to the event by portraying the impact on diverse communities and capturing the emotions of those affected. Some images prominently promoted themes of solidarity and emphasised the need for change. For instance, the images of victims of the Westgate Mall attack coming together as a community to rescue others emphasised the need to address a common challenge and strongly conveyed the perspective that unity is crucial for societal progress. ID04 highlighted the importance of unity in the face of adversity, stating, "*The coming together of the Westgate Mall attack victims, as demonstrated by the images, showed a sense of community and cooperation to address a common challenge.*" Visual framing can be used to promote particular viewpoints, and this aids in

understanding the event by embedding particular themes (Grabe & Bucy, 2009). The visuals published during the Westgate Mall attack influenced people's perceptions of political and social dynamics by shedding light on the injustices and challenges that civilians face. Therefore, the photos could be used to advocate social change.

Visual framing entails the framing of events as they occurred without altering any aspects, because they also want to sell news. This is the reason a few photographs published by print media may display the dead victims, especially if the news is covering a violent attack event such as terrorism (Fishman, 2018). However, Perlmutter (2013) suggests that despite individual biases, many photojournalists strive to adhere to a code of ethics that demands impartiality. The issue with a section of readers is that they usually want photos to be altered before they are published. However, when such is done, some critics still say the news events are not presented as they occurred. For example, a photojournalist took and published a photo of a naked girl fleeing an attack during the Vietnam War (Harris, 2015). As much as the photograph was emotional, the photojournalist was not biased. However, the readers believed it was subjective to show the naked girl, whereas the photojournalist's aim was to expose the horrors of war. As an unbiased witness, the photojournalist was supposed to report what transpired through imagery. This way, the photojournalist engaged in truth-telling, which is one of the tenets of ethical journalism.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: It was established that the visual framing of photographs from the Westgate Mall terrorist attack extended beyond narrative creation and influenced the readers' perceptions by enabling them to derive connotative and denotative meanings, as well as infuse ideological representations related to political issues and religious affiliations with terrorism. While the photographs depicted distress and heroism, they also highlighted ethical issues regarding the sensationalised use of human suffering. Other images depicted death and chaos, prompting debates about objectivity in photojournalism. Some portrayed despair, leading viewers to question Kenya's preparedness for terrorism. Some images conveyed explicit messages of fear, desperation, and vulnerability, prompting viewers to reflect on broader societal narratives of resilience and survival.

Recommendations: Understanding the role of visual components and their impact on news photography would lead to a more responsible approach for editors. It is expected that when photojournalists are well-versed about the implications of framing, they will present images in a manner that does not overly sensationalise an incident such as terrorism. This would align with established journalism standards and guidelines, particularly when dealing with sensitive topics such as terror attacks. However, it is important to acknowledge that framing images related to terror attacks is a complex issue, as it requires striking a delicate balance between the freedom of the press and responsible reporting. There is a fine line between respecting journalistic freedom and safeguarding the public interest, making it an important ethical consideration. Photojournalists should undergo regular training on the ethical challenges and implications of visual framing, especially in the context of sensitive issues like terrorism. These programs should emphasise not only technical skills but also the psychological and societal effects of the images they produce. By integrating continuous professional development, journalists can remain updated on best practices, ensuring that their work aligns with ethical standards and minimises harm while still fulfilling their responsibility to inform the public.

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