

REVIEW ARTICLE

Victimological Silence and Editorial Gatekeeping in Crime News: Representation, Framing and Public Perception

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ABSTRACT

The work, *Victimological Silence in Newsrooms: Editorial Gatekeeping and the Marginalisation of Victims' Voices in Crime Narratives*, examined the systemic exclusion of victims in Nigerian crime reporting, with the aim of investigating how victim voices are represented, the editorial gatekeeping practices that shape narratives, and the impact of this silence on public perception. Anchored on Gatekeeping Theory and Framing Theory, the study employed a desk research design with content analysis as the primary method. The population comprised crime news articles from four leading Nigerian newspapers: The Punch, Vanguard, Premium Times, and *The Guardian*, with two purposively selected reports from each outlet, published over a two-year period (2023–2024). Guided by expert opinion, selection ensured diversity across crime typologies (homicide, sexual violence, robbery, domestic abuse, terrorism) and victim demographics. Articles were retrieved from media archives and digital repositories using targeted keywords such as victim, survivor, crime, police, justice, and murder. Findings revealed that victims are completely absent in reporting, editorial practices overwhelmingly prioritise law enforcement perspectives, and victimological silence shapes public understanding by emphasising procedural and institutional outcomes over human suffering. The study concluded that victimological silence is a structural and ethical failing, producing depersonalised crime narratives that undermine empathy, justice, and societal accountability. The verdict is that media institutions must consciously centre victim experiences to ensure reporting serves both public information and social justice. Accordingly, the study recommended that editorial boards and the Nigerian Press Council mandate the inclusion of victim voices in crime reporting, that editorial committees and journalism associations diversify sources beyond law enforcement, and that the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and university communication departments promote media literacy programmes to sensitise the public on victim-centred reporting.

Keywords: Editorial Gatekeeping; Marginalisation of Victims; Victimology; Voices in Crime

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary societies, crime reporting wields significant power in shaping public understanding, moral panic, policy responses, and the cultural construction of victimhood. Journalism and mass communication do not merely record crime; they narrate it. Through selection,

emphasis, exclusion, and framing, media organisations influence what becomes socially visible as crime, who is recognised as a victim, whose suffering is considered worthy of empathy, and which voices are heard in the public sphere. Editorial decisions concerning what is newsworthy, what fits newsroom norms, and whose voice counts therefore constitute important gatekeeping

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mechanisms through which experiences of victimisation are filtered before they reach audiences^[1].

Victimology, the study of victims and victimisation, has traditionally concentrated on the psychological, legal, social, and institutional dimensions of harm. Yet the study of media and crime has increasingly demonstrated that victimisation also possesses an important communicative dimension. Media practices may contribute to the marginalisation of victims by determining how they are represented, whose stories are told, and whose experiences are subordinated to official or institutional narratives^[2]. Such marginalisation is not simply a matter of inadequate coverage. It also concerns the quality and structure of representation: how victims are portrayed, whether their testimony is treated as credible, whether their suffering is personalised or obscured, and whether newsroom conventions suppress, simplify, or distort their experiences.

One of the most useful conceptual tools for understanding unequal recognition of victims is the idea of the “ideal victim.” Christie’s influential formulation demonstrates that society does not automatically confer equal legitimacy, sympathy, or moral recognition on all victims^[3]. Certain characteristics associated with vulnerability, innocence, respectability, and the absence of blame make some victims more readily accepted as deserving of sympathy than others. This insight is particularly relevant to media representation, where news values and cultural assumptions may create implicit hierarchies of victimhood. Victims whose identities and circumstances fit dominant expectations of innocence and respectability may receive greater visibility and empathy, while those associated with marginality, stigma, deviance, poverty, gendered stereotypes, or socially disapproved lifestyles may be ignored, blamed, or represented as less deserving of public concern^[3].

Editorial gatekeeping is central to the production of these discrepancies. News does not emerge as a neutral reflection of reality; it is shaped by routines, professional norms, organisational structures, institutional relationships, and decisions about sources and relevance^[1]. Choices concerning which sources to use, which quotations to include, whose perspectives to foreground, and which victims to personalise can privilege some voices while marginalising others. Recent research on news coverage of sexual abuse and femicide, for example, has demonstrated the dominance of official sources and the influence of institutional and cultural forces on the representation of victims^[4]. Such findings are particularly significant because victims and their families may possess direct knowledge of lived harm, yet their voices can be displaced by police officers, politicians, legal representatives, and other institutional actors.

Historical research on crime news further demonstrates the importance of narrative and emotional selectivity in the representation of victims. Crime reporting frequently depends on drama, conflict, visual appeal, personalisation, and emotional resonance. Consequently, victims whose stories can be easily individualised and transformed into compelling narratives may receive greater media attention than victims whose experiences are less visually dramatic, more complex, or less compatible with established news conventions^[5]. While personalisation can humanise victims and make suffering visible, it can also create selective patterns of recognition in which only certain forms of pain become communicatively valuable. Victims who lack access to journalists, compelling images, social legitimacy, or influential advocates may therefore remain peripheral to public narratives.

Institutional, cultural, and economic conditions can further contribute to the marginalisation of victim voices. Newsroom routines operate under constraints of time, space, resources, competition, and professional dependence on accessible and authoritative sources. Cultural norms may also shape the treatment of victims, particularly in cases involving sexual violence, where victim-blaming, gender stereotypes, and patriarchal assumptions can influence news narratives. Research on Kenyan coverage of sexual abuse and femicide illustrates how official source dominance, patriarchal cultural norms, and institutional pressures can affect the ways victims and their experiences are represented^[4]. Editorial hierarchies and power relations within news organisations also matter because those with agenda-setting authority may determine whether a victim’s perspective is included, minimised, or excluded altogether.

The theoretical significance of these silences is profound. When victims’ voices are marginalised, public understanding of crime can become distorted. Attention may shift disproportionately towards offenders, institutional responses, legal processes, and official definitions of events, while the lived experience of harm becomes secondary. Such exclusions can influence public perceptions of crime, justice, social order, and legitimate victimhood. Cohen’s analysis of systems of social control demonstrates the importance of classification and institutional power in determining how social problems are understood and managed^[6]. Similarly, Garland’s examination of contemporary crime control shows how broader political and cultural processes shape public responses to crime and social disorder^[7]. Within such frameworks, the public recognition or marginalisation of victims is not merely a journalistic matter; it has implications for belonging, empathy, justice, and the distribution of public concern.

Thus, the landscape of media-crime representation suggests that victimological silence is not always incidental. It may be embedded within journalistic norms, editorial

gatekeeping, source practices, news values, and wider institutional pressures. For research in Mass Communication and Criminology, systematic analysis of how victims are represented, marginalised, or silenced in crime narratives is therefore important. Content analysis and discourse analysis can help reveal whose voices dominate crime reporting, whose experiences are personalised, whose perspectives are omitted, and what structural conditions produce these patterns. Such inquiry is necessary not only for understanding media power but also for identifying possibilities for giving greater communicative space to those whose suffering tends to be rendered invisible in public discourse.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Crime is one of the most heavily reported beats in journalism, yet paradoxically, the people most directly affected by crime, the victims, may remain marginal within the narratives that reach the public. Crime news frequently relies on official sources such as police officers, court officials, government representatives, and other institutional actors, thereby creating conditions in which the voices of victims and their families may receive less prominence^[1,4]. The problem is therefore not simply the quantity of crime reporting but the distribution of communicative authority within such reporting: who defines the event, whose interpretation is treated as credible, and whose experience is considered sufficiently important to enter the public narrative.

This pattern can contribute to what may be understood as victimological silence—the marginalisation, exclusion, or distortion of victims' experiences within public representations of crime. The concept of the ideal victim demonstrates that social recognition of victimhood is uneven and shaped by assumptions about innocence, vulnerability, respectability, and blame^[3]. Media representations may reproduce these hierarchies by according visibility and sympathy to some victims while treating others as peripheral, ambiguous, blameworthy, or insufficiently newsworthy. Such selectivity has consequences beyond individual news stories because media narratives contribute to broader understandings of crime, social identity, justice, and public responsibility^[2].

The problem is intensified by editorial gatekeeping and institutional news routines. Research has shown that official sources can dominate crime coverage and that wider cultural and organisational pressures influence the representation of victims, particularly in cases involving sexual abuse and gender-based violence^[4]. At the same time, crime news is shaped by conventions of drama, conflict, personalisation, and narrative appeal, which may privilege victims whose stories fit established media expectations^[5]. Consequently, some victims become

highly visible symbols of suffering, while others experience symbolic exclusion from the public sphere.

Such editorial selectivity can distort social understanding of crime and victimisation. When victims' lived experiences are subordinated to official narratives, public discussion may focus more heavily on offenders, institutions, legal procedures, and crime-control responses than on the actual consequences of victimisation. Broader systems of social control and cultural responses to crime may further shape which forms of suffering receive recognition and which remain marginal^[6,7]. The resulting silence can affect public empathy, reinforce stereotypes, and weaken attention to the diverse needs and experiences of victims.

The central problem, therefore, is not merely the absence of victim voices in crime news but the editorial and structural mechanisms through which some voices become audible while others are muted. Without systematic empirical investigation, the nature and extent of this marginalisation remain insufficiently understood within specific media contexts. A content-analytic examination of crime narratives is therefore necessary to determine how victims are represented, whose voices dominate reporting, the patterns through which victim perspectives are excluded or subordinated, and the extent to which editorial gatekeeping contributes to victimological silence. Such inquiry is important for advancing knowledge in Mass Communication and Criminology and for interrogating the relationship between journalism's public responsibility and the broader concern for justice and recognition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies on victim representation, editorial gatekeeping, and the consequences of unequal media visibility present a coherent, though still incomplete, picture of the relationship between crime reporting and public perception. Existing scholarship consistently demonstrates that media representations of crime are selective and that the visibility, prominence, and framing of victims are influenced by characteristics associated with newsworthiness. Pollak and Kubrin's comparative study of crime reporting in newspapers and local television found that media portrayals of crimes, offenders, and victims often diverge considerably from patterns reflected in official crime statistics, with atypical and dramatic cases receiving disproportionate attention^[8]. Similarly, Bouchard, Wong, and Gushue's content analysis of homicide reporting demonstrated a significant relationship between victim characteristics and the structural prominence accorded to crime stories, including front-page placement, the use of photographs, and article length^[9]. Together, these studies indicate that media attention is not distrib-

uted evenly among victims and that some forms of victimhood are more likely than others to receive prominent public recognition.

Research on editorial decision-making further demonstrates the importance of newsworthiness and cultural assumptions in determining which victim stories become visible. Gruenewald, Pizarro, and Chermak found that race, gender, and the characteristics of homicide incidents can influence media decisions about whether particular homicides receive coverage^[10]. Their findings suggest that news organisations do not evaluate crime events solely according to objective measures of seriousness but may also respond to culturally constructed assumptions concerning victims and offenders. In a related study, Gruenewald, Chermak, and Pizarro showed that victim vulnerability, offence seriousness, race, gender, and other characteristics could influence the likelihood that homicides involving minority victims received media attention and prominence^[11]. These studies are particularly important to the present research because they demonstrate how editorial selection may produce unequal patterns of visibility, thereby privileging some victims while rendering others comparatively marginal.

The literature also suggests that media framing can shape how audiences interpret victims and the wider meaning of crime. Gushue and Wong's examination of gang-related homicide reporting showed how journalists differentiated among victims and employed selective sourcing and language in constructing particular problem frames^[12]. Such framing practices may influence public judgements about innocence, responsibility, fear, and the degree to which particular victims deserve sympathy. Consequently, victim marginalisation is not confined to complete exclusion from news coverage; it can also occur through narrative distinctions that separate victims considered sympathetic from those represented as blameworthy, deviant, dangerous, or less worthy of public concern.

Complementing these international perspectives, Nigerian and African studies provide useful insight into the operation of media selection and framing within regional contexts. Onwuemene and Obasi's study of newspaper coverage of crime in Nigeria found that political affiliation and ethnic or socio-political inclination could contribute to imbalances in crime reporting, thereby affecting the attention given to particular crimes and events^[13]. Their findings reinforce the argument that crime reporting is influenced by institutional and ideological factors rather than functioning as a completely neutral reflection of criminal reality. The study is especially relevant because selective attention to crime may also affect whose experiences become visible within the resulting narratives.

Research on the representation of gender-based crime in Nigerian newspapers further reveals the importance of

discourse in shaping public understanding of victims and perpetrators. Falohun and Muhyideen examined discourse constructions of gender-based crimes in Nigerian newspaper reports through a socio-semantic analysis of how social actors were represented^[14]. Their study demonstrates that linguistic choices and representational strategies can shape the positioning of victims, offenders, and other actors within crime narratives. Such findings are relevant to victimological silence because the marginalisation of victims may occur not only through omission but also through the linguistic and discursive structures through which their experiences are narrated.

Taken together, the reviewed literature establishes several important patterns. First, crime reporting is selective, and media visibility does not correspond automatically to the actual distribution of victimisation within society^[8]. Second, characteristics associated with victims and crime incidents can influence the prominence and framing of news stories^[9–11]. Third, editorial and discursive choices can produce differentiated forms of victimhood in which some victims are personalised and sympathetically represented while others are marginalised or positioned within less favourable interpretive frames^[9,12]. Finally, Nigerian research confirms that political, ethnic, institutional, and linguistic factors can influence the reporting and representation of crime^[13–14].

However, a significant gap remains. Much of the existing literature focuses either on the newsworthiness of homicide, the representation of particular categories of victims, or the general patterns of crime reporting. Comparatively less attention has been directed towards the broader phenomenon of victimological silence as an outcome of editorial gatekeeping in crime narratives. There is therefore a need for systematic investigation of how editorial choices concerning source selection, prominence, narrative framing, and victim representation contribute to the marginalisation or exclusion of victims' voices. This gap is particularly important within the Nigerian media environment, where the interaction between institutional sourcing, newsroom routines, political interests, cultural assumptions, and crime reporting requires closer empirical examination. A focused content-analytic study can therefore contribute to existing scholarship by identifying not merely whether victims appear in crime news, but how they are represented, whose voices are privileged, whose experiences are subordinated, and the editorial mechanisms through which victimological silence is produced.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Empirical studies provide more specific evidence of how victims are selected, represented, marginalised, and, in some cases, silenced within crime narratives. Unlike the

broader literature reviewed in the preceding section, the studies considered here are examined in terms of their research focus, data, method, principal findings, and relevance to the present investigation. Collectively, they demonstrate that victim visibility is shaped by identifiable journalistic and institutional processes rather than by the mere occurrence or seriousness of crime.

Greer's empirical and historically informed examination of news media, victims and crime provides an important foundation for understanding the selective construction of victimhood. Drawing together evidence on media representations of victims across different social divisions, Greer demonstrates that news institutions do not accord equal visibility to all forms of suffering. Class, gender, race, social respectability, vulnerability, and the perceived news value of an incident can influence whether a victim becomes publicly recognisable. The study shows that the media frequently reproduce distinctions between victims considered legitimate or compelling and those whose experiences remain peripheral to public narratives. Its relevance to the present study lies in the recognition that absence itself can be analytically significant: when victims are repeatedly excluded from accounts of crime, the resulting silence may reveal the operation of institutional news values and editorial selection^[15].

Pollak and Kubrin investigated how crimes, offenders, and victims were portrayed across newspapers and local television through a comparative analysis of 71 matched pairs of crime stories. Their study compared media representations of the same or closely matched crime events and assessed the extent to which news portrayals corresponded with official patterns of crime and victimisation. The findings showed that media accounts often privileged unusual, dramatic, and exceptional cases, producing what the authors described as a pattern in which news representations could diverge substantially from the realities reflected in official statistics. Victims associated with atypical or sensational events received disproportionate visibility, whereas more ordinary forms of victimisation attracted comparatively less attention. The study is relevant because it demonstrates empirically that crime news is constructed through selection and emphasis, with important consequences for whose experiences become visible within the public sphere^[8].

Bouchard, Wong and Gushue examined the differential portrayal of "sympathetic" homicide victims through a large-scale content analysis of 3,998 newspaper articles published in the Vancouver Sun. The researchers investigated whether victim characteristics influenced the prominence given to homicide coverage, using indicators such as front-page placement, article length, and the inclusion of photographs. Their findings showed that victims regarded as more socially sympathetic received greater prominence, providing empirical support for the

proposition that media visibility can reflect hierarchies of victim worthiness. The significance of this study for the present research is that it demonstrates that victim marginalisation may occur through unequal degrees of prominence as well as through outright omission. Editorial decisions can therefore determine not simply whether a victim appears in the news, but how much narrative space, symbolic dignity, and public attention that victim receives^[9].

Gruenewald, Pizarro and Chermak investigated the relationship between race, gender, and the newsworthiness of homicide incidents through a quantitative analysis of homicide coverage. Their study assessed whether the social characteristics of victims and offenders, together with features of the homicide event, influenced the likelihood that incidents would receive news attention. The findings provided evidence that race, gender, and culturally recognisable characteristics of homicide cases could affect newsworthiness. The study therefore challenged the assumption that media selection rests solely on the objective seriousness of crime. For the present study, its importance lies in demonstrating that editorial gatekeeping can be empirically observed through patterned inequalities in the selection and prominence of particular victims and incidents^[10].

A related study by Gruenewald, Chermak and Pizarro examined the factors that make minority homicide victims newsworthy. Using systematic analysis of homicide incidents and their media coverage, the study explored how victim vulnerability, offence seriousness, race, gender, and other incident characteristics shaped the probability of receiving news attention. The findings showed that media visibility among minority homicide victims was itself uneven and dependent upon a combination of victim and incident characteristics. This evidence is important because it moves the discussion beyond the simple question of whether minorities appear in the news and directs attention to the conditions under which particular victims become sufficiently newsworthy to enter public discourse. Such findings support the present study's concern with the structural conditions through which some victims are granted voice while others remain marginal^[11].

Gushue and Wong provided another empirical perspective by examining victim dichotomisation and problem framing in gang-related homicide narratives. Their analysis showed that journalistic language and framing could divide victims into contrasting moral categories, thereby influencing perceptions of innocence, blame, danger, fear, and deservingness. The study demonstrates that victimological marginalisation does not always require physical absence from a story. A victim may be present in the narrative yet be represented through language and frames that reduce sympathy, minimise humanity, or

shift interpretive attention away from the harm suffered. This finding is directly relevant to the present study because it supports the analysis of both visible and invisible forms of victimological silence: exclusion from voice, depersonalisation within narrative, and symbolic reduction through framing^[12].

De Gregorio, Mongai and Tiberio examined media representations of crimes occurring in close relationships through qualitative analysis of narratives in a television broadcast. The study focused on how individuals involved in intimate and familial crimes were narratively profiled and how relational roles shaped the interpretation of victims and perpetrators. The findings highlighted the importance of narrative construction in determining whether victims were represented as autonomous persons with experiences of their own or primarily through their relationships to others. The study is relevant to the present investigation because it reinforces the need to distinguish mere mention from meaningful representation. A victim may appear in a crime story while still being denied narrative agency, personal voice, or an interpretive position from which the experience of harm can be understood^[16].

The empirical evidence reviewed above reveals a consistent pattern: victim representation is mediated by news values, source preferences, social characteristics, narrative frames, and editorial judgments. However, much of the available research concentrates on homicide, domestic or relational violence, particular demographic categories, or Western media systems. Even where unequal visibility is demonstrated, fewer studies examine victimological silence as a broader editorial outcome across different categories of crime reporting. The Nigerian media context remains especially underexplored in relation to the systematic absence of victim voice, the dominance of institutional sources, and the interaction between editorial gatekeeping and narrative framing. The present study addresses this gap by examining crime reports from selected Nigerian newspapers to determine how victims are represented, whether their voices and agency are included, which sources dominate the narratives, and how editorial practices contribute to the production of victimological silence. This progression from empirical evidence to explanatory concepts provides the basis for the theoretical framework that follows.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was anchored on Gatekeeping Theory and Framing Theory, two complementary theoretical perspectives within communication studies that explain how media institutions shape social reality through processes of selection, exclusion, emphasis, and interpretation. Gatekeeping Theory provides a useful framework

for understanding how information moves through successive points of selection before reaching the public. White's pioneering study of the gatekeeping process demonstrated that news selection is influenced by individual judgement and editorial decision-making^[17]. Subsequent developments of the theory have extended this understanding by demonstrating that gatekeeping operates at multiple levels, including individual, routine, organisational, institutional, and social-systemic levels^[18].

Applied to crime reporting, Gatekeeping Theory illuminates how victims' narratives may be marginalised through editorial routines, professional news values, source preferences, organisational pressures, and institutional relationships. Decisions concerning which crime events deserve coverage, whose accounts are considered credible, which quotations are included, and which perspectives are given prominence may determine whether victims become visible participants in the news narrative or remain peripheral to it. The theory is therefore particularly relevant to the present study because it provides a framework for examining the structural processes through which some voices are amplified while others are filtered, subordinated, or excluded.

Framing Theory complements this structural perspective by explaining how media not only select aspects of reality but also organise and interpret those aspects in meaningful ways. Goffman's foundational work conceptualised frames as interpretive structures through which individuals organise and make sense of experience^[19]. Within communication research, Entman further explained framing as the selection of certain aspects of perceived reality and their increased salience in a communicating text in ways that promote particular definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and treatment recommendations^[20].

Applied to crime reporting, Framing Theory makes it possible to examine how victims are symbolically constructed within news narratives. The same victimisation event may be framed in ways that humanise the victim, emphasise vulnerability and suffering, question credibility, imply responsibility, obscure identity, or remove the victim almost entirely from the narrative. Framing therefore directs attention beyond whether victims are merely mentioned in a news story to how they are represented, contextualised, and assigned meaning.

Together, Gatekeeping Theory and Framing Theory provide complementary lenses for interrogating victimological silence. Gatekeeping Theory explains the structural processes through which victim voices may be selected, filtered, or excluded, while Framing Theory explains the symbolic processes through which those voices and experiences are subsequently represented. The combined application of the two theories therefore

Table 1: Victim representation in crime news (Research Question 1)

Article ID	Newspaper	Headline	Victim Voice	Voice Inclusion	Victim Agency	Empathy Frame
P1	The Punch	Murder, rape top Abia August crime chart – PPRO	Absent	None	None	No
P2	The Punch	Police make 1950 arrests, EFCC secures 588 convictions in August	Absent	None	None	No
P3	The Punch	Four arrested as police smash Rivers robbery syndicate	Absent	None	None	No
V1	Vanguard	Police in Delta arrest 80 armed robbery, other suspects in August	Absent	None	None	No
V2	Vanguard	Police bust criminal gangs in Enugu, arrest six suspects	Absent	None	None	No
PT1	Premium Times	Police arrest 131 crime suspects, rescue kidnap victims	Absent	None	None	No
PT2	Premium Times	Police arrest officer, three civilians for alleged extortion, robbery	Absent	None	None	No
G1	The Guardian	Police arrest 5,176 suspected criminals in six months in Enugu	Absent	None	None	No
G2	The Guardian	Police arrest 80 suspects in Delta, recover arms, drugs, stolen items	Absent	None	None	No

Note: EFCC = *Economic and Financial Crimes Commission*; PPRO = *Police Public Relations Officer*.

enables the study to examine both the structural filters that regulate the visibility of victims and the symbolic frames that shape the meaning attached to victimhood within crime narratives.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a cross-sectional, descriptive qualitative content analysis design to systematically interrogate the symbolic construction and representation of victims within crime-related reportage. Qualitative content analysis was considered appropriate because it facilitates the systematic examination of manifest and latent meanings in communication texts, enabling the researcher to identify patterns in source selection, narrative construction, representation, omission, and symbolic framing.

The population of the study comprised crime-related news reports published by four mainstream Nigerian news organisations: The Punch, Vanguard, Premium Times, and The Guardian. A total of eight news reports were purposively selected from the four outlets. The reports were published within the two-year period from 2023 to 2024. Guided by expert opinion and the objectives of the study, selection was designed to ensure diversity across major crime typologies, including homicide, sexual violence, robbery, domestic abuse, and terrorism, as well as diversity in the demographic characteristics of victims represented in the reports.

The selected articles were retrieved from the digital archives and searchable repositories of the respective media organisations using targeted keywords, including victim, survivor, crime, police, justice, and murder. Each news story constituted the unit of analysis. The stories

were systematically examined to determine the presence or absence of victim voices, the nature and prominence of sources cited, the discursive framing of victims, and the degree of agency, marginalisation, or silencing encoded within the narrative.

A detailed coding framework was developed to guide the analysis. The coding categories included source prominence, classified according to whether the dominant or represented sources were victims, offenders, police, government officials, or other actors; narrative framing of victims, categorised as humanised, stigmatised, anonymised, or omitted; levels of voice inclusion, including direct quotation, paraphrase, and exclusion; and gate-keeping indicators, including editorial focus, headline salience, source selection, and textual or visual placement.

Coding was conducted independently by two trained coders using a detailed codebook developed and refined during preliminary training and familiarisation sessions. Inter-coder reliability was assessed using Krippendorff’s alpha, a coefficient suitable for evaluating agreement among coders across nominal variables and for accommodating missing data and different numbers of observers^[21]. A randomly selected subsample of the news reports was independently coded for the reliability assessment. Following established guidelines, variables with alpha values below .67 were treated as unreliable for drawing definitive conclusions and were reviewed, clarified, and recoded where methodological improvement was possible^[21]. Final coding decisions, coder reconciliation procedures, and reliability records were documented and archived to enhance the transparency and dependability of the analytical process.

Table 2: Editorial gatekeeping practices (Research Question 2)

Article ID	Newspaper	Headline	Source Prominence	Narrative Framing	Placement	Gatekeeping Index
P1	The Punch	Murder, rape top Abia August crime chart – PPRO	Police	Omitted	Front Page	100
P2	The Punch	Police make 1950 arrests, EFCC secures 588 convictions in August	Police	Omitted	Front Page	100
V1	Vanguard	Police in Delta arrest 80 armed robbery, other suspects in August	Police	Omitted	Front Page	100
V2	Vanguard	Police bust criminal gangs in Enugu, arrest six suspects	Police	Omitted	Front Page	100
PT1	Premium Times	Police arrest 131 crime suspects, rescue kidnapping victims	Police	Omitted	Front Page	100
PT2	Premium Times	Police arrest officer, three civilians for alleged extortion, robbery	Police	Omitted	Front Page	100
G1	The Guardian	Police arrest 5,176 suspected criminals in six months in Enugu	Police	Omitted	Front Page	100
G2	The Guardian	Police arrest 80 suspects in Delta, recover arms, drugs, stolen items	Police	Omitted	Front Page	100

Table 3: Impact of victimological silence on public perception (Research Question 3)

Article ID	Newspaper	Victim Voice	Empathy Frame	Victim Blame	Public Perception Implication
P1	The Punch	Absent	No	No	Public sees crime through law enforcement lens, not victims
P2	The Punch	Absent	No	No	Public awareness of victim suffering minimised
V1	Vanguard	Absent	No	No	Crime perceived as statistic rather than human impact
V2	Vanguard	Absent	No	No	Marginalises victim concerns in public discourse
PT1	Premium Times	Absent	No	No	Public sympathy towards victims underrepresented
PT2	Premium Times	Absent	No	No	Focus shifts to police action over justice for victims
G1	The Guardian	Absent	No	No	Crime perceived as law enforcement problem, not human tragedy
G2	The Guardian	Absent	No	No	Reinforces victimological silence, reducing empathy

The analysis combined systematic categorisation with qualitative interpretation. Attention was paid not only to the frequency with which victims appeared in crime narratives but also to the manner in which they were represented, the authority accorded to their voices, the relationship between victim perspectives and official sources, and the editorial patterns through which victims were rendered visible, marginal, or silent. The findings were subsequently interpreted through the complementary perspectives of Gatekeeping Theory and Framing Theory.

PRESENTATION AND DESCRIPTION OF DATA

Table 1 Victim representation in crime news (Research Question 1)

Victim voices are consistently absent in all analysed articles. There is no direct or paraphrased representation, and victim agency is non-existent, highlighting systemic exclusion in crime reporting. (Table 2)

Editorial gatekeeping practices emphasise law enforcement perspectives, omit victim perspectives, and prioritise

police-sourced narratives. Headlines and article placements reinforce victim marginalisation. (Table 3)

ANALYSIS OF DATA

Across the dataset, the analysis of victim representation in crime news reveals a pronounced marginalisation of those directly affected by criminal acts, as presented in Table 1. Examining the eight articles sampled from The Punch, Vanguard, Premium Times, and The Guardian, the data indicate a total absence of victim voice, with 100% of the articles lacking direct quotations, paraphrases, or any other form of narrative inclusion of victims. Victim agency was similarly absent in all the reports, demonstrating that the sampled press reports constructed victims primarily as passive objects rather than active participants in narratives concerning events that directly affected them. Empathetic framing was also absent, reinforcing a depersonalised representation of crime in which human suffering remained largely invisible.

Headlines such as “Police make 1,950 arrests, EFCC secures 588 convictions in August” and “Police arrest 5,176 suspected criminals in six months in Enugu” em-

phasised statistical outcomes and law-enforcement action, thereby presenting crime primarily as an institutional and operational challenge rather than as a human, social, or moral experience. Quantitatively, the pattern implies that 100% of the sampled reports failed to provide readers with direct experiential access to victims' perspectives. The result was a largely abstract representation of crime in which institutional activity displaced personal suffering. Such a pattern reflects a strong form of victimological silence and underscores the role of news construction in shaping a depersonalised understanding of criminal events.

Editorial gatekeeping practices further amplified this marginalisation and reinforced institutional dominance in crime reporting, as shown in Table 2. All eight articles relied primarily or exclusively on police and other official sources, demonstrating a strong dependence on institutional authority and a corresponding absence of alternative perspectives. Narrative framing across the sample systematically omitted victims' experiences, while the prominence given to institutional narratives enhanced the visibility of law-enforcement activity rather than that of the human subjects directly affected by crime.

Using the study's Gatekeeping Index as a quantitative indicator of editorial control over source inclusion and exclusion, seven of the eight articles recorded the maximum score of 100. Headlines consistently focused on arrests, recoveries, convictions, and operational successes, with little or no attention to victims' experiences or perspectives. For example, reports concerning 1,950 arrests and 588 convictions, as well as the apprehension of 5,176 suspects, foregrounded police efficiency while leaving the lived realities of victims largely invisible.

This pattern demonstrates that editorial processes actively constructed the narrative framework of crime by privileging institutional sources and marginalising victim perspectives. The dominance of police sources across the entire sample illustrates the structural mechanisms through which media gatekeeping may sustain a depersonalised portrayal of crime. Rather than presenting criminal events primarily through the experiences of those harmed, the sampled reports largely defined crime through the language and activities of law-enforcement institutions.

The potential societal implications of this victimological silence are significant. Across the sampled articles, readers were guided to interpret crime primarily through the lens of police action and institutional response, with little insight into the experiences, suffering, needs, or perspectives of victims. Reports such as "Police arrest officer, three civilians for alleged extortion, robbery" and "Police arrest 131 crime suspects, rescue kidnab victims"

prioritised procedural developments and operational milestones over the emotional, moral, and social dimensions of criminal victimisation.

The exclusion of victim perspectives across all eight sampled reports limited opportunities for readers to encounter crime as a lived human experience. This may weaken the narrative conditions through which empathy, civic engagement, and social advocacy develop. The findings therefore suggest that the sampled media narratives did not merely describe criminal events but also structured the interpretive framework through which those events could be understood. By repeatedly privileging institutional authority and operational outcomes, the reports constructed crime primarily as a problem of policing and administration rather than as an experience involving human suffering and social consequences.

The dataset demonstrates a consistent pattern of victimological silence within the sampled reports. The exclusion of victims was reinforced through source selection, narrative emphasis, and editorial framing, producing crime narratives in which institutional actors possessed communicative authority while the people directly affected by crime remained largely unheard. Within the limits of the sample, this pattern suggests that victim marginalisation is not simply an accidental omission but may be connected to recurring journalistic routines and editorial priorities.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings from this study, derived from a purposive sample of eight articles across *The Punch*, *Vanguard*, *Premium Times*, and *The Guardian*, present a consistent pattern of victim marginalisation that both resonates with and extends existing scholarship on crime news. Across the sampled reports, there was a complete absence of victim voice, agency, and empathetic framing, suggesting that the victims represented in the dataset were constructed primarily as abstract subjects of criminal events rather than as human actors with lived experiences. This pattern is consistent with Christie's concept of the "ideal victim," which demonstrates that public recognition and legitimacy are not distributed equally among all victims^[3]. The findings suggest that, within the sampled reports, the problem extended beyond selective recognition: victim perspectives were largely absent from the news narratives altogether.

The findings also correspond with research demonstrating that media portrayals of crime, offenders, and victims often diverge from the actual distribution and nature of crime. Pollak and Kubrin showed that crime reporting frequently privileges unusual, dramatic, and newsworthy events, thereby creating selective patterns of visibility and

public attention^[8]. The present study resonates with this observation, although the dominant pattern within the Nigerian sample was not simply selective amplification of particular victims. Rather, institutional actors, particularly the police, dominated the narratives to such an extent that victims themselves were almost entirely absent from the communicative structure of the reports.

Similarly, Bouchard, Wong, and Gushue demonstrated that media prominence may be associated with characteristics that make some homicide victims appear more sympathetic or newsworthy than others^[9]. Their findings show that victim representation can be shaped by social and narrative evaluations of worthiness. The present study extends this discussion by revealing a different pattern within the sampled Nigerian reports. Rather than identifying differentiated prominence among categories of victims, the analysis found a near-uniform absence of victim agency and empathetic representation. This suggests that the dominant editorial priority in the sample was not the comparative evaluation of victims but the privileging of institutional and operational narratives over the human consequences of crime.

The findings on editorial gatekeeping provide further evidence of the structural processes underlying this pattern. The strong dependence on police sources and the high Gatekeeping Index scores demonstrate how decisions concerning source selection can determine which perspectives enter the public narrative. This finding is consistent with research showing that media coverage of crime may be shaped by source routines, institutional access, and characteristics associated with the newsworthiness of particular incidents^[10]. The dominance of official sources in the present study suggests that gatekeeping operated not merely through selective visibility among victims but through the broader prioritisation of institutional authority over experiential testimony.

The present findings also converge with studies showing that victim characteristics and incident features can influence the level of attention accorded to particular crimes. Gruenewald, Pizarro, and Chermak found that race, gender, and other characteristics of homicide incidents could influence their newsworthiness^[10]. Related research similarly demonstrated that minority homicide victims did not always receive equal levels of news attention and prominence^[11]. The Nigerian evidence differs in an important respect: while these studies reveal differentiated visibility among categories of victims, the present sample suggests a more fundamental exclusion of victim perspectives. In the sampled reports, editorial attention was directed predominantly towards police action, arrests, and institutional performance rather than towards the characteristics, voices, or experiences of those harmed by crime.

The implications of this pattern for public perception are substantial. Research on media and crime demonstrates that news narratives play an important role in shaping public understanding of criminality, risk, social order, and victimhood^[2]. When crime is repeatedly framed through official action and institutional response, audiences may be encouraged to understand criminal events primarily as matters of policing, arrest, prosecution, and administrative control. The absence of victims' voices can therefore narrow the interpretive space available for understanding the emotional, social, and moral consequences of crime.

The findings are also consistent with broader scholarship demonstrating that framing influences how audiences understand social problems by making some aspects of reality more salient than others^[18]. In the present study, the repeated emphasis on law-enforcement activity functioned as a dominant interpretive frame. Arrests, recoveries, rescues, and convictions became the central markers through which crime was narrated, while the experiences of those directly affected remained peripheral or invisible. This framing pattern is theoretically significant because it illustrates the combined relevance of Gatekeeping and Framing perspectives: gatekeeping determines whose perspectives are included in the news narrative, while framing shapes the meaning attached to those perspectives and the wider event.

Globally, studies of victim representation suggest that exclusion is often patterned, with certain victims receiving greater visibility than others because of social characteristics, perceived innocence, vulnerability, or news value^[3,9-11]. The present findings suggest a somewhat different pattern within the limited Nigerian sample examined: a near-uniform marginalisation of victims across different reports and crime categories. This divergence may be associated with the strong dependence on official sources, institutionalised crime-reporting routines, limited newsroom resources, and the priority given to procedural milestones and measurable law-enforcement outcomes.

Methodologically, the convergence between the present findings and broader content-analytic research strengthens the relevance of examining source selection, narrative prominence, and victim representation as interconnected dimensions of crime reporting. At the same time, the limited purposive sample of eight reports requires caution in generalising the findings to the entire Nigerian press. The study nevertheless provides evidence of a recurring pattern within the selected material and highlights the need for broader research involving larger samples, additional media platforms, longitudinal designs, and comparative analyses of official and victim-centred sources. Such research would help determine whether the

victimological silence observed in this study represents a broader structural characteristic of Nigerian crime reporting or a pattern associated with particular news organisations, crime categories, or editorial conditions.

CONCLUSION

Victimological silence in newsrooms constitutes a structural and ethical failing that systematically marginalises those most affected by crime, allowing institutional and editorial imperatives to overshadow human experience. By privileging law enforcement narratives and enforcing selective visibility, media organisations not only distort public perception but also perpetuate social and moral inequities, rendering victims invisible within the public sphere. The verdict is clear: until editorial practices consciously centre victim voices and experiences, crime reporting will remain an instrument of institutional authority rather than a medium for justice, empathy, and societal accountability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Media organisations should include victim voices and experiences in all crime reporting.
2. Newsrooms should diversify sources beyond law enforcement to include victims and community perspectives.
3. The Nigerian Broadcasting Commission, NGOs, and university communication departments should develop media literacy programmes to sensitise the public on victim-centred reporting.

DECLARATION

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