

*Chapter 2*

**LANGUAGE USE IN CRISIS SITUATIONS:  
A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF ONLINE REACTIONS  
TO DIGITAL NEWS REPORTS OF THE *WASHINGTON  
NAVY YARD SHOOTING AND THE NAIROBI  
WESTGATE ATTACK***

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**ABSTRACT**

This study applies critical discourse analysis and the appraisal framework to examine the evaluative structures of feedback comments on news reports of the mass shooting that occurred at a *Navy Yard in Washington D.C.* and the attack on *Nairobi Westgate shopping mall* in September, 2013 referred to as ‘crisis situations.’ The study shows that language use in crisis situations is highly ideological and exhibit features of affect involving the use of flaming, labelling, and some forms of rhetoric that reflect negative evaluation of some perceived social enemies. Negative representations of the attackers are understandably influenced by the emotions of people who are directly or indirectly affected by the crises. The expressions of anger, fear, shock and frustrations in language use occur frequently in the data. Rhetorical elements or tropes like exaggeration, metaphor and irony are also noticeable in the evaluations of the mass shooter and the Somali terrorist group. However, some forms of labelling and negative constructions of *Al Shabaab* are actually misleading and tend to divert attention to some serious aspects of the crisis in question.

**Keywords:** Crisis situations, language use, mass shooting, terrorism, attacks, online news, feedback comments, Washington D.C., Nairobi

## INTRODUCTION

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *crisis* as ‘a vitally important or decisive stage in the progress of anything; a turning-point; also, a state of affairs in which a decisive change for better or worse is imminent; now applied especially to times of difficulty, insecurity, and suspense in politics or commerce.’ It also refers to a critical decisive moment when things are usually uncertain, difficult or painful; a time when something very important for the future happens and when actions must be taken to avoid complete disaster or breakdown (see Chilwa 2011). In the context of this paper, ‘crisis’ will include all forms of social disorder, extremism or lawlessness such as terrorist attacks, mass shootings, ethnic conflicts or religious violence. The *Washington Navy Yard* mass shooting and the *Nairobi Westgate Shopping Mall* attacks of September, 2013 are our focus. The two attacks resulted in several deaths with many injured and attracted public responses around the world; most of the responders condemned the attacks in strong terms. The two incidents were chosen for this study because of the global attention they attracted and the fact that they happened almost at the same time (less than a week apart). The attacks and their consequences, as well as the responses they generated are referred to as ‘crisis situations.’

Language as a form of social behaviour is prone to respond to social events and situations in some particular definite ways. Hence, language use (or discourse in this study) is defined in terms of the social context that produces it. In other words, individual and social groups use language forms and patterns that are the most relevant and appropriate to their experiences as well as their sociopolitical and cultural situations. In times of crises, language reflects not only the physical social realities and events, but also the language users’ affect and personal judgements in responding to the situations. Thus, speakers and writers express evaluative and affective stances when they communicate their intentions or make propositions in texts.

## LANGUAGE USE IN CRISIS SITUATIONS

‘Language use in crisis situations’ (LUCS) in the context of this paper, is different from language use by social actors in a crisis or in a war situation such as speeches by Presidents, army generals or soldiers in a civil/transnational war. It is also different from language use in public speeches and statements by warring parties. LUCS here stands for language use or discourse produced by people affected by social crises or terrorist attacks and others who, though not directly affected by the crises, respond to the news about the crises by posting comments and responding to posted comments on the Internet; (and some of the comments are highly emotional). This way, the commenters identify with the direct victims of the attacks; thus, they form an online community of victims.

Just as war is associated with some particular non-neutral features and characteristic of language use (Gay 1999), conflicts and social crises also do indeed place some constraints on language use (i.e., discourse). Individuals under some severe social crises are arguably most likely to use some flaming words consciously or unconsciously to express themselves in the kind of discourse they produce. They are also susceptible to representing certain persons, social groups or governments negatively by the use of labels, coinages or others forms of evaluative (negative) constructions. In the data for this study, evaluative language forms

reflect anger, anxiety, shock, fear, grief and uncertainty. Moreover, speakers/writers use ‘strong’ language in the form of flaming or offensive words against those blamed for the crises. According to Hart (2011), strong language use is sometimes a direct response to some particular evaluative structures in news texts about the crises in question.

Language use in a crisis situation is highly ideological. However, unlike in war situations, LUCS on the Internet – the Internet being a ‘market place of ideas,’ (see Ifukor 2011) is more flexible, raw and unrestrained. Although liable to some subjective constructions of certain identities, this kind of discourse most likely reflects the views and representations of ‘ordinary people’ who are often directly or indirectly affected by some types of crises. Language therefore tends to become a medium for challenging and denouncing violence, sometimes by exposing the evils of violence and the perpetrators of violence. But they can also subtly function to encourage violence by directly publicizing the atrocities of terrorizing groups. Some terrorist activities have actually been motivated by the reason to attract media attention.

In this paper we argue that the expressions of affective stance, which according to Ochs (1990) is a socially recognized feeling, attitude, mood or degree of emotional intensity, can be so overwhelming (in crisis situations) to the detriment of objectivity and common-sense. Evaluations of some perceived social enemies or those labelled as ‘social miscreants’ or ‘terrorists’ by members of the public are always liable to ideological negative representations. We apply the appraisal framework from the Systemic functional model and critical discourse analysis to attempt to answer the following questions:

- (i) What are the general features of language use in crisis situations?
- (ii) What evaluative strategies are used to construct terrorists and other enemy groups in the data?
- (iii) What are some possible dangers of consistent emotional negative representation of some social actors?

## WASHINGTON D.C. NAVY YARD SHOOTING

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of September, 2013, a young man identified as *Aaron Alexis* of Fort Worth shot and killed thirteen people at a Washington Navy Yard in the United States. Several other people were injured in the attack. The man’s motives for the attack were unknown but according to newspaper reports, Mr. Alexis was discharged from the Navy reserve in 2011, ‘a designation that usually signals a problem in his record. He was arrested but not charged in a gun incident in Seattle in 2004 but still had a security clearance with a military contractor that allowed him access to the Navy Yard,’ (Halsey, Hermann & Clarence 2013:1). Mr. Alexis was later killed during a gun exchange with the police. According to *Washington Post* (16<sup>th</sup> September, 2013), this incident, ‘in which the death toll rose almost hourly, represents the single worst loss of life in the District since an airliner plunged into the Potomac River in 1982, killing 78.’

## NAIROBI WESTGATE SHOPPING MALL ATTACK

On Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> of September, 2013, some armed members of the Somalia's rebel group, *Al Shabaab* invaded the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi and shot over seventy people dead, wounding over 150 others and taking some shoppers hostage. The attack, which the group later claimed was targeted at non-Muslims, was in retaliation for Kenyan military intervention in Somalia. The attack took the form of a guerrilla war, where about fifteen masked members of the Islamic radicals surrounded the four-storey shopping mall, shooting unsuspecting people and throwing grenades (see *Mail & Guardian*, 23<sup>rd</sup> September, 2013). The attack lasted for two days and was finally controlled by the Kenyan forces with the assistance of some Israeli agents after series of gun battle and the rescue of the hostages held in some parts of the mall. Among the dead was the seventy-eight year-old renowned Ghanaian poet, Kofi Awoonor. Citizens and diplomats from other countries including France, Canada and Britain also lost their lives. According to the Kenyan president, (Uhuru Kenyatta), seventy-two people were killed, including six security personnel and five militants. Eleven suspects were arrested in connection with the attack (see also *BBC News Africa*, 25<sup>th</sup> September, 2013).

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

While literature in the use of language in war or crisis situations is not too widespread, discourse studies of language in response to violence or crisis situations in Africa on the Internet is almost non-existent. William Gay in his 'language of war and peace' (1999) observes that 'language can be used to demean differences and inflict violence or to affirm diversity and achieve recognition' (p. 303). He further argues that language and communication in a war situation, is fraught with euphemisms and misrepresentations, used by the authorities to mask the extents of violence that take place as well as disguise official corruption and terrorist atrocities. Galtung (1986) also argues that there is a link between language and war and that it is almost obvious to identify what words stand for at the semantic level, even though some remain masked in euphemisms. However, at a deeper level, when internal structures of texts are examined, there is usually a hidden message of peace or war. During war, non-palatable truths are distorted and suppressed through language in order to protect the sensibilities of the war, or rationalise and justify acts of war such as pride, hatred, self-esteem or contempt for others.

Elgin (1995) argues that often, violence exerted by individuals or nations, is preceded by some form of violent language. Therefore, in negotiating a more peaceful human relationships, Taylor and Hardman (2004), recommend a conscious attention to language use; for instance, through the use of alterative metaphors in everyday discourse, because 'our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical,' (Lakoff & Johnson 2003: 3). Also, the connotative effects of paradoxes, naming and labelling, passivisation, among other discourse structures are key agents in the linguistic construction of violence and war. Thus, language, carefully chosen, can mask violence, and when it does not, is an active part of violence.

Watt & McCarthy (2003) and Shanker (2003) recounting the Gulf war, identify specific features of 'jargons of war' or 'words of war.' For instance, language of war is characterized by creativity and is replete with coinages, idioms and rhetorical devices; and common words and expressions assume new contextual meanings. For example, the word 'embedding' meant something else during the Gulf war and was used 'to correct Iraqi media deceptions and show US forces are abiding by the laws of war.' Expressions such as 'hot contact point,' refer to the frontline, where 'our soldiers were easily shot at,' and 'rapid dominance,' is what follows after a successful 'shock and awe.' 'Rapid dominance' and 'shock and awe' were coined by Harlan Ullman, a military strategist in a 1996 National Defence University book and 'the idea is to hit the Iraqi military and political structure at all the critical nodes and links with unbelievable intensity and unbelievable force and simultaneity...that induce paralysis, desperation and a sense of extreme vulnerability; in essence, you change their will and they surrender' (Watt & McCarthy 2003:2). The general meanings of these expressions were not given but the contextual meanings were understood by the soldiers. Like Gay (1999) observed, 'chilling' euphemisms were also used to cover up military violence against civilians during the Iraqi war. The phrase 'collateral damage' for instance, was used to describe the killing of innocent people. Expectedly, wars are also fought with words, often reflecting instances of ideological value judgements and negative evaluations of the enemy/enemies. For instance, Saddam Hussein was quoted as describing George Bush and Tony Blair as the 'evil ones' who were not better than 'lowlifes and enemies of humanity.'

Moreover, Silberstein (2002) examining public rhetoric on the aftermath of the events of 9/11, observes that through the carefully chosen discursive options, an act of terror became an act of 'war,' showing that there is an interaction between media representation, discourse choices and political decisions in times of crisis. For instance, the former American president, George W. Bush, through public rhetoric, was properly ratified as America's military commander-in-chief and his political actions in waging the war were clearly justified through specific language choices and discursive constructions. For example, 'our very way of life' was threatened (p. 6, 19); the enemy's acts were 'cowardly acts' and the attack itself was 'a crime against democracy, and decency' (p. 5, 136). On the other hand, the 'innocent victims' became models of courage (p. 95). In addition, through effective framing and pictorial eye-witness accounts or narratives, the media helped to construct a generally accepted seemingly altruistic ideology in the minds of Americans, portraying the 'intolerant other' as the enemy which they (the Americans) were determined to fight. Because the 'enemy' is already regarded as 'evil', all forms of 'collateral damage' would pass as justifiable and popularised acts. This is closely similar to Gay's (1999) argument that war language is strategically chosen to mask the reality of an ongoing violence. When official discourse about war makes extensive use of euphemisms and misrepresentation, the war becomes legitimate (p. 303). In essence, 'language has consequences, that through the use of language, we create and recreate particular worlds of understanding,' (Silberstein 2002: 1).

## **ONLINE REACTIONS/FEEDBACK COMMENTS**

'Feedback comments' refers to popular reactions often generated by online newspapers and other digital news sources that are of interest to the public. This serves as a platform for

public interactivity, which is comparable to the traditional media's 'letter to the editor' but different in the sense that they are usually unedited. Editors however, may remove comments considered to violate editorial guidelines (Unuabona 2012). Feedback comments are purposive and generally relate to news stories reported and may include some intertextual references to other reported news stories and other readers' posted comments; this makes them a part of the communicative process, since they essentially serve as feedback (You et al., 2011). Feedback and response platforms have since become discussion sites for readers; thus, enhancing reader-reader communication. It also enables online news outlets gather popular views, opinions and reactions from readers as active members of the public, especially during crises (Ajiboye 2013).

Not only do readers utilize online comment platforms for civic engagements, they also use them to educate one another and receive information or clarifications on pertinent issues in the news. Responders also partake in public deliberation as they share their individual experiences and feelings on events and issues being discussed with other citizens (Carpini et al., 2004). However, the topicality and nature of the news has considerable impact on the volume and nature of the readers' comments. For instance, Tenenboim and Cohen (2013) report that political or social topics as well as controversial stories in the news usually generate more comments than other forms of news. Similarly, when sensitive issues are discussed, comments sometimes tend to be offensive and unrelated to the story (Ajiboye 2013). Thus, these platforms have often witnessed heated arguments among contributors and some commenters have used the platforms to attack one another especially where two sides of an argument reveal different opinions or represent different group allegiances. Some comments in the present study for example, reveal their writers' position about social security; some even defend terrorism, while some generally assert their loyalty and support for or against national governments and institutions.

## **LANGUAGE USE IN FEEDBACK COMMENTS**

Although the discourses of some online news comments are objectively constructed, there are others that are sometimes perceived as offensive and radical in nature, and could exclude specific marginalized groups through strategies such as hate speech (Diakopoulos & Naaman 2011; Erjavec 2014). Studies such as Erjavec and Kovačič (2012) report that hate speech, which is characterized by abusive, intimidating and harassing language use, and or, expressions intended to incite hatred, discrimination or violence, is prominent in the language of feedback comments. In some cases, readers rearticulate news items to convey certain dangerous implicit meanings in them that reveal exclusion or certain negative representations of identities.

Commenters generally assume an authoritarian as well as a libertarian personality as they engage in the thrill of public discourse on news feedback platforms especially when the news is on some form of social injustice. Interestingly, these new platforms for discourse offer participants enough room to have shielded identities, mostly concealed beneath pseudonyms and avatars. This offers them considerable freedom to express their opinions on issues raised in the news, and even amplify views that are considered socially regressive as they assume roles of citizen journalists (Loke 2013). In addition to this, participants in feedback platforms

may act as independent watchdogs who challenge professional journalists on effective discursive engagement with the news and move beyond merely avoiding “politically incorrect” terms to uninhibited democratic engagement as they are usually not confined to the gate-keeping processes that professional journalists engage in (Borton 2013; Loke 2013).

As highlighted above, the attacks in Washington and Nairobi, attracted world-wide attention and varied reactions, especially on the Internet. And as also highlighted above, digital communication and social networks have enabled people express their concerns about social and political events and developments in their countries and are beginning to think and act alike (Smith 2010). Rejection of repressive regimes and popular responses against institutional crimes, terrorist attacks, protests and the demand for sociopolitical change around the world, are the various ways people are taking the advantage of the flexibility of social media platforms to respond. Besides, the online freedom of speech, linguistic freedom and creativity are among the signs of social empowerment afforded by the Internet. Thus, language in this platform is also used as a form of retaliatory instrument against some identified social enemies.

## THE APPRAISAL FRAMEWORK

Appraisal is a framework for the systematic analysis of evaluation and stance as they operate in texts or group of texts (Martin 2000; White 2011). It focuses on the social function of language use expressed in texts, not only as a means through which speaker/writer express their feelings and take stances, but also ‘engage with socially-determined value positions and thereby align or dis-align themselves with the social subjects who hold to these positions’ (White 2011:14). This framework stems from the systemic functional linguistics (SFL), which views language in terms of its social functions. These functions are of three types namely; the ideational (represents the world of experience), interpersonal (constructs social roles, relationships and identities) and interpersonal roles (constructs language as coherent texts in relation to their social contexts) (see Halliday 1994). SFL offers a comprehensive view of evaluative resources, including instances of attitude, and positioning and the sources of these evaluative stances in discourse (Pascual & Unger 2010). Within the interpersonal function, the appraisal framework shows how writers construct for themselves particular identities in relation to other members of the society or social groups. Hence, appraisal is defined as ‘...the semantic resources used to negotiate emotions, judgement and valuations, alongside resources for amplifying and engaging with these evaluations (Martin 2000:145). Ochs (1990) stresses that writers generally reflect in their works some different levels of emotional involvement, showing some recognizable social feelings, mood, attitude or emotional intensity. These emotions can be positive or negative such as sympathy or sadness, love or hate. Affective stance falls within Bednarek’s (2008) category of *attitudinal* stance, which includes all positive/negative attitudes or feelings. *Nouns/noun phrases* (from the data) such as ‘liberal domestic enemy’, ‘stupid liberal,’ ‘bunch of weasels’ all referring to the NRA (National Rifle Association of America) for example, express negative emotions such as anger, hatred, frustration and rejection. Sometime, paralinguistic signals like tone of voice, pauses, or stress patterns may also indicate some forms of affect such as uncertainty, betrayal or hope.

The appraisal framework proposes three systems – *Attitude*; *Engagement* and *Graduation*. Attitude refers to feelings, including emotional reactions, judgments of behaviour and evaluation of things (Martin & White 2005). This system is also divided into three categories namely: *Affect*, *Judgement* and *Appreciation*. Affect is the ‘resources for expressing feelings,’ while judgement is the ‘resources for judging character.’ Appreciation refers to ‘resources for valuing the worth of things’ (Martin & Rose 2003: 24). The system of *Attitude* constitutes the main resource for evaluating, adopting stances, constructing textual personas and managing interpersonal positioning and relationships. The system of *Graduation* includes the resources that either strengthen or weaken attitude. The system of *Engagement* is concerned with the sourcing of attitudes and the play of voices around opinions in discourse. This system covers all the resources that the language offers for speakers to express their interpersonal positionings in the texts they produce (White 2011; Pascual & Unger 2010). In the present study, we focus on the systems of affect and judgement and how they reflect ideology in the constructions of some social actors in the crises under study.

## CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a type of discourse analysis that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted in written or spoken discourse in the sociopolitical contexts (van Dijk 2001). In other words, it ‘aims to contribute to addressing the social “wrongs” of the day (in a broad sense – injustice, inequality, lack of freedom etc.) by analysing their sources and causes, resistance to them and possibilities of overcoming them’ (Fairclough 2009:163). Some of the arguments of CDA theorists relevant to this paper, like other critical theorists/analysts that are influenced by the neo-Marxist thoughts of the Frankfurt School, the poststructuralist and postmodernist traditions are that ‘facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from some form of ideological inscription... and ‘that language is central to the formation of subjectivity (conscious and unconscious unawareness)... (Locke 2004:39-40). Hence, a critical discourse analyst will examine how certain level of discourse (e.g., language use in online reactions to the attacks in this study) reveals value judgements and ideological perspectives, where ideology includes the ways in which individuals or groups/identities represent themselves or are represented by others. Following their discourse-historical approach to CDA, Reisigl and Wodak (2009) argue that ideology and power are indispensable to CDA where power is viewed as having one’s own will within a social relationship against the will or interests of others through physical force or violence, threat or promises, attachment to authority and technical control through objects such as means of production, transportation, or weapons.

## METHODOLOGY

Data for this study are mainly online feedback comments of the reports of the two incidents described above. Comments are obtained from feedbacks and responses to reports



by the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *the Guardian*, *Los Angeles Times*, *BBC World News*, *Reuters*, *Mail Online*, *The Telegraph*, *Associated Press* and *Time World*. Out of the 5,000 online feedback comments following the news of the attacks by the above online media networks, we selected 1,000 posts (500 comments on the Navy Yard Shooting and 500 on the Watergate Shopping Mall Shooting). Responders and commenters comprise heterogeneous members of the international community whose comments and reactions to the crises appear similar. For availability of space, only a few of the comments in the data are reproduced in the analysis. ‘CM’ in the analysis refers to ‘comment.’

The analysis is essentially qualitative, where we examine patterns of appraisal/evaluations of readers’ response comments to the news of the attacks. We focus on the *attitude* component of appraisal and examine affect and judgement. Applying CDA, we identify and analyse ideological features of language use in the crises with their emotional and ideological properties. *Ideology* in this context is the belief systems socially and collectively espoused by some social actors, and consists of social representations that define group identity of members, as well as control their attitude towards ‘others’ (van Dijk 2006). Hence, ideology with its cognitive components determines how the ‘others’ are constructed, either positively or negatively. An ideological construction of individuals or groups in a newspaper (or online news response comments) will likely influence how the reading public will perceive and evaluate them and their actions.

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The data display what we refer to as ‘language use in crisis situations’ (i.e., LUCS). The analysis involves the identification from the data some discursive and framing strategies such as labelling, blaming and rhetoric (e.g., parallelism, hyperbole, metaphor and irony) that contribute to some general negative evaluative constructions of the attackers, terrorist groups, governments and security agencies; some other forms of strong language or flaming that are characteristic of language in crisis situations are also identified and analyzed. Because of the limited space of this paper, we reproduce only a few relevant texts in the analysis.

### Framing the Crises

The feedback comments on the news about the Washington shooting are framed (or constructed) not only as a direct responsibility of the American *National Rifle Association* (NRA) but also as a failure of the American security system. In other words, rather than blame the mass shooter for his crime, the responders surprisingly utilized the opportunity to advance their arguments on the U.S. gun control debate. This debate had begun much earlier and became heated up after a mass shooter attacked an elementary school at *Newtown* in Connecticut in December, 2012 killing twenty-six people including twenty children. This attack sparked off a fresh anger, protests and mass rallies against the American age-long constitutional freedom to bear fire arms. Many of the protesters demanded stricter gun control laws or a total ban on arm possession. Similar reactions had followed two other mass killings in 2012. One was a July attack on a movie theatre in *Aurora* (Colorado), in which a mass

shooter killed twelve people and wounded fifty-eight others; another attack in August on a Sikh temple in *Milwaukee* also saw the death of six worshippers and three more wounded. Gun rights lobbyists had argued that a restriction of people's rights to possess guns would violate Americans' constitutional right to bear arms. They also insisted that citizens needed weaponry to defend themselves against criminals and the possibility of future government tyranny. (See CM4 below for a typical argument). Especially for those that advocate gun control, the attack was yet another evidence of an insecure America with an '*insane traffic* in weaponry that *puts the power of death* into the hands of anybody with a few dollars in his pocket' (CM5); hence, 'some *sane gun* legislation' (CM1) was desperately needed. Most of the comments frame the attack explicitly and implicitly as the responsibility of the NRA. Like some more examples in the data, CM3 and CM5 below are examples of noun and verb phrases that function as evaluative stances revealing highly emotional critical judgements of the attack in Washington D.C., the NRA and the American arms rights law. 'He' in CM3 refers to the mass shooter.

CM3. He was *arrested twice* that we know of for *gun violence* and yet he was *able to go to Virginia and purchase a weapon and kill 12 people*. And the NRA, the *titular head* of the republican party had said that it deny people like him the right to bear arms without a background check violates his Second Amendment rights. The *blood of these 12 victims* is on the hand s of the NRA. (Dottie Sinkler, N.J.)

CM5. AIDS seems *far more an easy problem to solve*, when compared to *the insane traffic* in weaponry that *puts the power of death* into the hands of anybody with a few dollars in his pocket. The corporations that *make these weapons and the NRA*, which *makes sure* that as many weapons as possible are sold, are both *worse than corrupt*. They *are downright evil*. What is better about the south of France, or Scotland, or New Zealand? They have fewer guns and assault weapons, and cultures which do not glorify the myth of an individual's "right" *to threaten the rest of humanity with weaponry*. (Donald Dal Maso, N.Y.)

The above attacks on the NRA and the arms possession rights represent many others in the data that call for direct legislation against arms rights. However, this merely represents the opinion of only a section of the American people, which is also one side of the argument. Supporters of arms rights on the other hand argue that 'guns don't kill people; rather 'people kill people.' (See CM2 below). Some commenters from Nigeria also argue that armed robbery and political assassinations are frequent in Nigeria because, robbers and hired assassins are aware that their victims are not armed. The critics believe that once arms rights are legalized in Nigeria, hired assassins will 'think twice' before carrying out their illegal operation (see Chiluya 2011).

CM2. Chicago has *very strict gun laws* yet *shootings happen daily* in our city. The newspapers have a *daily headline of injured and killed victims*. *Concealed carry* is not allowed in Chicago. Legally, that is. (Kalidan, N.Y.)

CM4. ...In 1929, the Soviet Union *established gun control*. From 1929 to 1953, about 20 million dissidents, *unable to defend themselves, were rounded up and exterminated*. In 1911, Turkey *established gun control*. From 1915 to 1917, 1.5 million Armenians, *unable to defend themselves, were rounded up and exterminated*. Germany

*established gun control* in 1938 and from 1939 to 1945, a total of 13 million Jews and others who *were unable to defend themselves were rounded up and exterminated*. China *established gun control* in 1935. From 1948 to 1952, 20 million political dissidents, *unable to defend themselves, were rounded up and exterminated*. Guatemala *established gun control* in 1964. From 1964 to 1981, 100,000 Mayan Indians, *unable to defend themselves, were rounded up and exterminated*. Uganda *established gun control* in 1970. From 1971 to 1979, 300,000 Christians, *unable to defend themselves, were rounded up and exterminated*. Cambodia *established gun control* in 1956. From 1975 to 1977, one million educated people, *unable to defend themselves, were rounded up and exterminated*. *Defenseless people rounded up and exterminated* in the 20th Century because of gun control: 56 million. You won't see this data on the US evening news, or hear politicians disseminating this information. Guns in the *hands of honest citizens save lives and property* and, yes, gun-control laws *adversely affect only the law-abiding citizens*. Take note my fellow Americans, before it's too late! The next time someone talks in favor of gun control, please *remind them* of this history lesson. *With guns, we are citizens. Without them, we are subjects*. During WW II the Japanese decided not to invade America because they *knew most Americans were ARMED!*

The writer of the above argument (i.e., CM4) in defence of arms rights legislation applies both rhetoric and affect to argue his/her point; the writer attributes the process of 'established gun control,' to a situation where people were 'rounded up and exterminated.' He/she established his/her position in favour of arms rights; and while supporting the argument with this supposed objective survey of history, he/she concludes that 'with guns, we are citizens, without them, we are subjects.'

Many of the comments in the data also construct the Washington attack simply as 'terrorism.' Some describe it as *atrocities* and *horror* (CM1), *aggressive gun use* (CM7), *massacre* (CM8), *complete disregard for human life; illogical behaviour* (CM10), and *senseless act* (CM11) (see the appendix). These constructions not only signify negative value judgments about the situation but also reveal individual judgements of the attacks and peoples' expectations of a normal civilized society. Some more highly critical appraisals of the attacks in Washington D.C and Nairobi are realised through *labelling* and *rhetorical devices*. Rhetorical devices such as exaggeration, irony, metaphor and parallelism function as critical evaluation, as well as ideological negative representations of the NRA, the mass shooter, Islam and Al Shabaab. These are briefly discussed below:

## **Exaggerations and Comparisons**

Both the supporters and non-supporters of the American gun rights in the above samples display a great deal of affect and evaluative judgements in their stances and arguments. The choice of words clearly reflects anger, fear and frustration. They also tend to choose words that they think may cause physical pain on those that are blamed for the crises. Some forms of exaggeration and negative judgement equate the American arms right to 'insane traffic weaponry,' which is also compared with HIV/AIDS. AIDS was said to be little of a problem compared with the freedom to bear arms. Individual rights to weapon is said to 'threaten the entire human race.' The United States is compared with France, Scotland and New Zealand

where legislation allows fewer guns and are by far better than the U.S. Unfortunately however, mass shootings have also occurred in France with its ‘fewer guns and assault weapons.’ The Match 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> 2012 shootings in Toulouse and Montauban respectively are good examples. The representation of NRA ‘downright evil’ is a lot more exaggerated. Also constructing the Washington shooting as ‘terrorism’ is also exaggerated; the writer probably attempts to mould other responders’ perception of the attack.

## Metaphor

Few metaphors are used for Islam and the Islamists in the Nairobi attack. For instance Islam is called ‘cancer’, ‘death cult’ (CM47); and ‘black race’ (CM48).

These are of course very grave misrepresentations of Islam as a religion. Describing Islam as a ‘death cult’ will no doubt be unfair to moderate and peace-loving Muslims who dissociate themselves from violence and argue that Islam is a religion of peace (See Chiluya & Adetunji 2013). The highly negative evaluations of Islam are attributable to the manner of the attacks on the Nairobi shopping mall; however, this is one of the instances where emotions threaten common sense.

CM47. Islam isn't a religion, it's a *death cult*.

CM48. Just odumbos countrymen and members of his faith doing what they do. Take the *black race* off the earth there would be 90% fewer murders, violent crimes and babies born out of wedlock.

## Irony

Irony is a discursive strategy most frequently used by the commenters in framing the Westgate Mall attack. Statements in the samples below such as ‘the religion of peace strikes again,’ ‘the religion of peace did pretty well...’ or ‘Islam is peace and so tolerant of other religions after murdering non-Muslims’ are powerful ironical rhetoric that makes further emotional appeal to the reader.

CM23. The followers of *the religion of peace strike again*. I wouldn't blame Assad if he is gassing *this scum*.

CM24 Gassing is too good for these *bastards*

CM25. Uh, guys, *Islam, the religion of peace, did pretty well* during the Crusades.

CM34. "The al-Qaida-linked gunmen *asked the victims they had cornered if they were Muslim: Those who answered yes were free to go*, several witnesses said. *The non-Muslims were not.*" Oh, but, but, but. . . "*Islam is peace*" and so tolerant of other religions. Muslims ONLY kill others in self defense! (*Cyber Nick*)

It is this ironical situation that forms the basis for the negative construction of Islam as a ‘dangerous religion’ since it will be unreasonable to argue that a ‘religion of peace’ is frequently involved in terrorist activities. However, a unilateral construction of a particular

religion as ‘evil’ irrespective of individual beliefs and practices of the practitioners is gross misrepresentation.

## Parallelism

Some of the comments (e.g., CM1 below) apply stylistic parallelism in a political speech-like oration to present their argument. This of course, has the potential to persuade the reader. The writer of CM4 above also applies this style in the repetition of ‘established gun control,’ ‘unable to defend themselves were rounded up and exterminated.’ This is also both a persuasive strategy and an emotional appeal to the reader. CM1 began with ‘I fear...’ and went on to express not only her personal fear but also what appears to be a presentiment about an impending doom for America if nothing is done quickly by way of legislation to control gun possession. Like many of the comments the ‘speech’ represents the totality of negative evaluation of the shooting and the institution that ‘empowered’ him namely the NRA. The writer’s affect is clearly reflected when he/she singles out ‘males’ as the ‘deranged,’ ‘disaffected,’ ‘insanely angry’ people responsible for the attacks. He/she is perhaps correct about the attacks in the U.S. but reports of the Nairobi attacks suggested that the females too were involved. The use parallelism (i.e., *I fear we ...*) in the text below makes the sentences rhythmic and expresses the writer’s emotional intensity. The ideas in the text also appear highly persuasive and capable of emotional appeal to the reader.

CM1. *I fear we* are being de-sensitized by these atrocities by deranged, disaffected, or insanely angry (largely) males. *I fear when we* turn on our TVs, we see an unfolding horror, and say to ourselves, oh Lord, another one, then yawn and flip the channel.

*I fear our* resignation that yes, the NRA will have its way again, gun-rightests will out-shout any pocket of outrage that again calls for some sane gun legislation, that they know has a scintilla of passage.

*I fear we* will learn nothing more from this terrorism gripping our own nation, a terrorism not of Jihadists but of our own people, armed to the teeth and unhinged;

*I fear that* the terms "shelter in place," "unidentified gunman," "first responders," and the like are becoming more common than the daily weather report.

*I fear that* all the flags at half mast for 3 days, 4 days, 7 days whatever, will not prompt anyone to say, "why are those flags at half mast?"

*I fear for* tomorrow's generation facing a future where *over-armed US* citizens (Chris McMorrow, Waltham, Mass)

Some of the comments (e.g., CM6, CM9) implicitly highlight the much debated concerns about the past American domestic security failures. Specifically referring to the *Boston Marathon* explosion of April, 2013, an American lawyer and critique had argued that since 9/11, America had spent over \$7 billion on national security and the Boston incident showed that ‘the money went to nothing.’ (See <http://rt.com/op-edge>). Corroborating this, a *New York Times* report, admitted that the US security had been variously marred by ‘failures, near failures and a-minus’ (see Marsh 2006). The use of ‘mere mortals’ in CM6 implies that the US security is mainly targeted at innocent citizens. Citizens here are ideologically referred to as ‘mere mortals,’ on whom security operatives prove to be ‘effective,’ whereas they fail

woefully, when the real issue of security management comes to play. In other words, terrorists and mass shooters are not ‘mere mortals’ since they perfectly understand how to deal with the U.S. security systems. Again, this is a highly negative judgement of the ineffective and lopsided approaches to security management, typical of securities agencies not only in the America but also around the world. The Nairobi security operatives were also blamed for the attack on the Westgate Shopping Mall.

CM6. How does a *guy with a general discharge*, and two incidents of *aggressive gun use*, get a job with a security clearance, at a Federal facility, when the rest of us *mere mortals* can't even board a plane without a virtual strip search? (Deemakur, N.Y)

Commenters on the Nairobi attack generally describe it (and rightly so) as a terrorist attack. This was obvious after *Al Shabaab* claimed responsibility for the attack. Again, the commenters’ affects and judgement are revealed in the choice of verbs/verbs phrases; noun/phrases and adjectives in the comments. Some of the examples in the data below express fear, hate, disgust, disbelief and despondency. A few of them still view Islam as a ‘dangerous religion.’

CM12. I was just in South Africa. This is *so tragic* and *so wrong*. (Juli James)

CM13. *Don't believe* this (R Smyrna)

CM15. Well God said He's the Christian God so then I believe none of *you terrorists* ever found Him!

CM28. What a *horrible tragedy*, but also a *reminder not to do commerce on the Sabbath...*

CM36. And to deny that “*Islamic extremist*” are anything but *religious haters* is also turning a blind eye to the fact that *Islam is a dangerous religion advocating the killing of those who “don't believe”* in some fanatical leader.

CM39. All this ... *in the name of Islam* ... moderate Muslims must be as *horrified as the civilised world is horrified...*

## ATTRIBUTING THE NAIROBI ATTACK TO RELIGION

Many of the responders attribute the Nairobi attack to mere religious reasons. But much more than religion, *Al Shabaab*’s insurgency is political. Explaining their reason for the attack on Wategate Mall, a *Twitter* accounts (‘HSM Press Office’) hosted by the group (before it was shut down), blamed the attack on Kenya’s ‘flagrant massacre of Muslims in Somalia.’ And an *Al Shabaab* spokesperson advised the Kenyan government to stay out of Somalia or face more violence. The government was further told to ‘withdraw from our country’ if they wanted ‘to live peacefully and safely,’ and must ‘stop meddling in our affairs, set our captives free and denounce all forms of fighting our religion.’ (*New York Daily News*, 24<sup>th</sup> September, 2013). Hence, it is clear that *Al Shabaab* seeks political independence similar to that declared by the Tuaregs of Northern Mali in April 2012 before it was overthrown by French forces. *Al Shabaab* had attacked and took over most of southern Somalia in 2006 but was defeated by the Somali government with the help of Ethiopian forces; yet the group has continued its insurgency ever since. The Islamists have also exerted temporary and sometimes sustained

control of some strategic locations in southern and central Somalia and have often withstood the government of Somalia and its allies, including the African Union Peacekeeping mission in Somalia (see: [http://www.nctc.gov/site/groups/al\\_shabaab.html](http://www.nctc.gov/site/groups/al_shabaab.html)).

Religion however remains a major factor in the conflicts. As pointed out above, many of the comments identified the ironical case of Islam as a ‘religion of peace,’ which is also associated with frequent violence and killings around the world. While some non-Muslim commenters find this irreconcilable, some ‘moderate’ Muslims attribute violence to non-compliance to the commandment of Allah (e.g., CM26). Some Muslim commenters however, dissociate themselves from the practice of violence and killing and argue that violent acts of some few people who claim to be Muslims should not be taken to judge the good attributes of Islam.

CM26. If more people *would take Allah into their hearts*, this sort of thing could be avoided. The choice is yours. (The Soul man)

CM27. Because we cannot deny religious freedom in this country. So long as they follow the rules, they have *done nothing wrong* (Adam West 1313)

CM28. *Judging Islam* by the acts of a few *is typical thinking* in America. This same thought process *gave birth to racism. Embrace diversity!* (Dr. Terrence Harding)

### **(Mis) Representing the Actors and Their Actions**

A few comments that criticize the mass shooting, suggest that the shooter was not really to blame. The NRA is rather to blame. The mass killer was simply ‘crazy’ and should not have been allowed to carrying weapons ‘among normal people’ (e.g., CM7 below). Hence, his action was ‘insane.’ This evaluation implies therefore, that the shooter was not in his right senses, and since he is not in control of his mind, he should be absolved of guilt.

CM14. Just more *scum* causing misery in the world...as if we all don’t have enough of that without *their disgusting behavior*.

CM7. I just don’t understand why we let *crazies like this shooter* buy weapons and carry the around among normal people. For that matter, I don’t understand why people in civilized societies need to carry guns with them. We should just ban guns, and run the NRA out of town on a rail. Period (Rajs, CA).

CM29. The *entire planet has gone insane* and as the population increases so *will the insanity*

CM30. In Kenya, *attackers are called Islamists*.  
In the US, they are *simply whack-jobs*. In all cases,  
they are *mental cases* with guns.

Interestingly, the legality of the word ‘kill’ or ‘killing’ with which the crises were constructed was questioned by some commenters. The commenters (e.g., in CM40 below)

point out the ideological implication of the term ‘kill’ or ‘execute’ used in describing the death of the Nairobi victims in the reports. They argue that the right word should be ‘murder,’ not ‘kill’ or ‘execute.’ While the two terms (i.e., kill and execute) accurately capture the act of exterminating a life, their legal implications are not always visible. Someone may be killed mistakenly, and another may be executed according to law. But the word ‘murder’ overtly reveals the criminal implication of the killing that takes place. So, a subtle way of concealing the criminality of deliberate killing is by the simple act of understatement or the choice of a ‘synonym’ that explains away the real sense of the particular word in question.

As highlighted above, the Washington attack for instance was framed by many of the comments as ‘a mental case’ or with a description like ‘a fool with a gun,’ (CM43). We argue in this paper that this type of representation is misleading because the two attacks were deliberate killings carried out by people in their right senses. It was this type of evaluative judgment that could have contributed to the exoneration of a young man who murdered seventy-seven teenagers at a youth camp in Norway in 2012. The ideological work of the media (or online comments) is often revealed in the choice of certain vocabulary or grammatical structures in news reports that undermine accuracy of facts; they may be done knowingly or unknowing but these choices are significant because of their power to mould perceptions (Baker 2006; Chiluya 2011). This is clearly explained by CM40 and CM41 below:

CM40. @RandyBrass: Why is it “*killed*” and not *murdered*? Because that is the way your Saudi overlords want it, besides, it’s easier for the *proglodytes* to excuse it. *Behold ISLAM* in all its glory.

CM41. "...before *executing* some of their victims.’ They weren't *executed*, they were *murdered*. Spot on, 'executing' seems to give what is clearly an act of murder a certain *clinical legitimacy*, it was *murder, cold calculated barbaric murder*.

CM43. Guns don't cause *violence* but *a fool with a gun does*. It is too damn easy to get guns *plain an simple*. You can get a gun *quicker* than you can get a job in this country. They do background checks and drug test for a job but nothing for a person to *purchase a gun*.

More of the misrepresentations of the actors and their actions in the data can be seen from the kind of labelling used for the attackers in both incidents. This is discussed in detail below:

## Labelling

Labels are ‘names’ or ‘tags’ that tend to create a new and different identity for the item being labelled. Labels are also expressive of the language user’s affect and ideological perspective. According to van Dijk (1998) cognitive structures and mental models act as the mediating interface between discourse and society. Labels for example, appear first as the conventional lexical presentation of mental models that are used to form personal opinion and then expressed in texts by either news writers or responders to news items (Chiluya 2011). Like evaluative judgements, labelling can be positive or negative. But in most ideological discourses like the discourse of crisis, the label for ‘them’ is generally negative. Expectedly,



labels for the Washington Navy Yard shooter, the Nairobi Westgate attackers and the NRA are hyperbolically negative in most cases. Unfortunately a label has the tendency to affect the labelled psychologically, especially, not only in the public perception of the individual, but also about the individual's perception of himself. In other words anyone labelled 'terrorist' is most likely to behave like one (Barris 2007). A reconstruction of an individual's identity through labelling is the same as assigning a new social role to him or her.

In the online comments the Washington shooter is labelled simply as a 'mental case', 'human animal,' 'psycho,' or 'a crazy person.' The legal danger with this kind of negative labelling is that the killer (if he were alive) could simply hide under this erroneous public assumption and simulate madness. His lawyers could indeed capitalize on the argument that his client was mentally sick at the time of the attack. Psychological tests may not matter and the accused person can escape justice. This is probably what happened in the Norway case.

The American National Rifle Association (NRA) are labelled *idiots*, *goons*, ('incapable of sound judgment'), *liberal domestic enemy*, *stupid liberal*, *bunch of weasels* etc. In CM5 above they are described as 'worse than corrupt' and 'downright evil.' Again, these negative value judgments tend to be subjective, which of course is reflective of the anger of the writers about the crisis in question. It is also arguable that the strong (offensive) language with which NRA is constructed is highly ideological and unfair. If the case of corruption and being 'downright evil' has been established against the NRA, some legal procedures should have been followed to bring them to book. Why wait until a crisis happens before holding certain people and institutions accountable?

Labelling, like in the above case, is merely expressive of negative value judgement of the Nairobi attackers, which predicts how the public should view them and their activities. The attackers are labeled *killers*, *scum*, *savages*, *pig cowards*, (*or twisted evil cowards*), *barbarians*, *terrorists*, or (*vile terrorists*), *maniacs*, *extremists*, *militants* (*or Islamic militants*), *gun men*, *Islamic murderers*, (*or mindless brainless murderers*), *rebels*, *animals*, *atheists*, *bastards* etc.

Factual as some of the labels may appear (considering the methods applied by the attackers), it is quite clear that some of the labels do not rightly capture the character and motives of *Al Shabaab*. For instance, in many of the comments, the Jihadists are referred to as 'scum.' Many dictionaries define the word *scum* as 'a layer of dirt, froth, or foam on the surface of a liquid.'

An online *Urban Dictionary* explains that 'scum' is the worst word anyone can have his name associated with because it is used 'to describe someone so disgraceful that they are seen as the lowest form of life; worthlessness, waster of skin, dirt, nothing.' The commenters who describe *Al Shabaab* as scum probably forget that this group is among the most sophisticated human beings, who have utilized some of the most sophisticated weapons of attacks witnessed in the history of modern warfare. These Islamists manufacture bombs (including liquid bombs), improvised explosive devices, and grenades; and their members are among the most intelligent young radicalized Americans, Britons, etc. If the technical sense of *scum* as explained above is anything to go by, then it is obvious that *Al Shabaab* members are not scums; they are dangerous and should be recognized as such. Unless, a proper understanding of this group is articulated in the media, the general public is likely to underrate their potentials.

All the other labels contribute to the general negative evaluation of the 'other,' which in this context is understandable and constitute part of the features of language in crisis

situations. Like other discursive strategies earlier identified, the labels and name callings in the data reflect the general mood of the moment. Crisis situations very often elicit from people some forms of linguistic violence against those perceived as ‘the enemy.’ Unarmed members of the public who lack control of the situations, and who often find themselves at the receiving end, merely rely on verbal violence (or war) to ‘retaliate’ and they actually believe that they are hurting those negatively constructed.

## CONCLUSION

This study shows that language use in a crisis situation is identifiable with features such as ideological negative construction of the ‘other.’ These negative evaluations are generally influenced by the emotional condition of people whose reactions are not only linguistic but also emotional. In expressing affect and judgement in their comments, the commenters in the data have reflected the sense of anger, fear, frustration, and hopelessness. Some forms of rhetorical strategies that reflect van Dijk’s (1998) ideological square are also noticeable in the evaluations. Rhetorical devices such as metaphor and exaggerations are used to maximize the negative evaluations of the mass shooter, the terrorist group and the NRA. Some forms of labelling and negative constructions of the ‘other’ are however misleading and tend to divert attention to some serious nature of the mass shooting and terrorist attack. This follows our argument that extreme expressions of affect and certain negative evaluations of the ‘other’ threaten common sense and as such ideological representations may be incorrect, a distortion of fact and misleading. The danger with deliberate misrepresentations of terrorist groups or other perceived ‘social enemies’ is that their abilities and potentials may be underrated, thus causing more harm to the society.

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## APPENDIX

**CM6.** How does a guy with a General Discharge, and two incidents of aggressive gun use, get a job with a security clearance, at a Federal facility, when the rest of us mere mortals can't even board a plane without a virtual strip search? (Deemakur, N.Y).

**CM8.** I'm glad guns don't kill people. Think of how bad each of the *massacres*, which we keep having, would be if they did. Remember: "Guns don't kill people. People kill people." (Carol Ring Chicago).

**CM9.** How did he have 'secret clearance' and how did he get the weapons inside? 2 seemingly important questions. Can't wait to see the surveillance videos of the incident...assuming the cameras were turned on. (Barry Dingles, OH).

**CM10.** Agreed, *complete disregard for human life* over the mild inconvenience of safe and common sense measures. But this attitude wouldn't stand a chance if the majority stood up to this *illogical behavior*. It is not that the NRA is powerful, it is that not enough of the overwhelming majority are willing to stand up and be half as vocal as the gun supporters. No organization can beat the significant majority if they mobilize. (A147, Melbourne).

**CM11.** My heart goes out to the victims of this *senseless act*. (Tom Philpott, Montreal).

**CM60.** So no relationship between American gun laws and the worse Murder rate in the developed world. You couldn't make This Stuff up; i mean just *how dumb can you get!* You are the problem!

**CM61.** I am nowhere near dumb thank you. Nor am I naive to the fact this country is going to hell in a hand basket. Simple fact is this. Even if ALL guns are outlawed...you really think these psychos will say Oh well its against the law guess I won't go get a gun and start shooting. WRONG. Stop pointing the finger. Because I guarantee you when everything hits the fan yall anti gun people will be running to us for help.

**CM62.** Don Garriott, WE don't use 'em for hunting in the Northeast. Not legal to do here. And I wouldn't use them if they were. One shot, one kill. Good for snipers, good for hunters.

**CM63.** Hayley Marie Fail again, Hayley. No one's talking about "outlawing ALL guns." Do people like you deliberately live in a vacuum, or do you just prefer your own paranoid reality to the truth?

**CM64.** Sean Devos, More typical gun-nut sophistry and semantic games. YES, I hate to tell you, but there ARE such things as an "assault weapon." What we know as an AR15 or a Bushmaster--ya know, all these guns with their big, phallic magazines hanging out underneath like some affirmation of manhood--yeah, we KNOW, Sean...THAT'S what's known in contemporary nomenclature as an "Assault Weapon." Knock it off with the silly word games, boy.

**CM65.** Hayley Marie „If these souls that were killed without cause had been able to arm themselves, I can guarantee you there would be only one person dead...the psycho who started it."--lol, more NRA spoofed mythology. I laugh at your naiveté and simplicity.

**CM66.** Marlene Hessler So you're saying, the LESS guns, the better off we'd be, right?

**CM67.** Thats ok Zazz... I have a feeling youre a *simple minded minor* who thinks they're roght ALL the time. It is okay you will grow up one day. ...poor thing.

**CM68.** Shooter confirmed by FBI didn't use an AR/ assault rifle. Stop reporting false info...

**CM69.** They don't care.

**CM70.** Haters gonna hate.

**CM71.** Let's also confirm that "AR" does not stand for "Assault Rifle," and an AR-15 is not an assault rifle.)