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Awareness or Image

By

Alishba Shamshad

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“Awareness or Image?”

By Alishba Shamshad

The other day, Olivia came across a Facebook video where Dania was actively making people aware. And Olivia's heart deeply questioned, "Awareness or Image?"

She felt a sense of betrayal as she relived those past moments and remembered those last words: "Don't say anything bad about me anywhere."

"You know what? You think everyone's life centers around you."

"If she suffers any day, I will be blamed."

"But what about my image? Don't say anything about me."

"Me."

"Me."

"My image."

It was terrible and disgusting; she closed her phone. But Dania's voices couldn't escape her mind, and the ultimate realization gave her a deep insight into the world's hypocrisy. She knew it one hundred percent this time: all Dania cared about was her image and her ego, rather than their friendship or Olivia's own pain.

In Olivia's mind, the echoes kept coming, leaving her deeply restless. "You are abusive, harsh, impolite, mannerless! You should be thankful to me."

But she wasn't... she couldn't be thankful anymore. It had been a month. She was healing, glowing. Sometimes, these voices used to disturb her, but she would tell herself, "A friend to all is a friend to none."

"Till the end, she cared about her image, not me. How much better I feel after cutting her off."

Her silence protected Dania's reputation as well as everyone else's too. She knew this was reactive abuse. In psychology, when someone is forced to a point where she lashes out and shouts out of sheer exhaustion, the narcissist strategically uses that reactive anger. They keep a paper trail of the victim's worst moments to turn desperation into a blackmailing tool. "Don't say a word about me to anyone, or I will show everyone your outbursts and

ugly messages," becomes the unspoken threat. They deliberately provoke the reaction, strip away the months of psychological torture that caused it, and present the victim's anger out of context to mutual circles. The narcissist then safely stands back and says, "Oh look, she is harsh, she is crazy, unstable—she is the problem."

But this video gave her a clear insight into who the true problem was. It stated many points by Dania, and many people were praising her active initiative for this awareness campaign. It said: "Girls can do anonymous complaints; we have zero tolerance for this. They can go to psychotherapy centers for their healing. Many have reported suicidal tendencies. Young girls are often silenced by friends, abusers, and society's pressure. Many don't even report it or are scared of defamation. These are the laws of protection to handle things. Many cannot step out of their homes, are unable to focus on daily activities, and lose confidence. If you see someone going through this, at least speak against it."

It was said by Dania, but Olivia recalled most of them were Olivia's own thoughts—her stances on this, indirectly used, without consent, to build an awareness for others.

"Irony how people create awareness for their image," Olivia closed her eyes and thought. "When they create videos, that's active awareness; they are doing excellently. However, when a

young girl who herself experienced harassment says something, that's considered either reputation damage, gossip or imperfect language. It's forced to be deleted. Whenever I speak, it causes drama. Whenever they speak, it's either an awareness initiative or their public right. Also, we should take therapy? Maybe better, put the psycho harassers with persistence in these healing centers."

And so, the last few months replayed in Olivia's mind. She wasn't even distressed over how the things she was right about were deleted to protect others' reputations, but rather by the fact that the one she trusted the most—her own friend—actively cut her off after silencing and distancing herself from her.

Whenever Olivia tried to reclaim her narrative—whether it was putting up a factual post on a hostel community page or sharing a satirical, lighthearted reel about how men miserably handle rejection—the panic from the other side was instantaneous. Since she had blocked the harasser from her life, he went out of his way, maneuvering through a network of mutual friends to corner her, organizing a proxy campaign of pressure through them until she deleted the posts. He couldn't afford the mirror being held up to his face, and Dania became the primary agent enforcing that compliance.

"It's my right. I don't want to stay friends with a girl as rude as you, who entertains drama. I made you delete some things that

would have led you to a public scandal or serious damage. You should be thankful to me," Dania had said.

Olivia wanted to make her understand, as usual. "It's not about any of that. Whatever you did, it's okay. I said yes to everything you told me. But just give me a confirmation that this person will never bother me again. Or at least let him apologize for his behavior," Olivia answered.

"Look, I am not responsible for them," Dania was actively shutting her off.

"But what does that mean? Then why did you do all this?" Olivia couldn't remain calm this time; she became angry and started shouting.

"For your betterment," Dania gave a fake strategy to console her. Olivia, as usual, kept arguing, draining her own energy. "You have all the resources to help me, Dania, and you know these people. I don't know what satisfaction boys get from a minute of harassment—whether online or in real life—while a sensitive girl is left with trauma."

"Look, Olivia, it's not a big deal. Also, you are so harsh; that's the only reason I cannot help you anymore. I have borne a lot, and I choose not to talk to you. I don't feel like replying to all these things you keep on saying," Dania shouted.

And so, Olivia recalled the dismissive treatment of her own suffering, and now this video by Dania felt deeply hypocritical to her. She wanted to shout, to confront Dania, but she knew she would never understand or accept her behavior. It is deeply disturbing when victims are expected to be perfectly polite, as if only then do they deserve protection or help. Yet, the very same circles launch digital campaigns to show the world how much they care.

What was deeply unsettling for Olivia was that Dania made her delete her posts, but never in return gave any confirmation that further harassment would not happen. Olivia was even willing to forget the previous incidents without any apology, but she just wanted a confirmation that everything would be fine; she was dependent on her friend. Because her friend was active in the same circle of people, Olivia knew that if Dania gave a basic confirmation, the harassment would never happen again.

However, Dania always argued that she was not responsible for any further developments. This debate continued for weeks because Olivia was sensitive and couldn't shake off the lingering discomfort easily.

When Olivia thought she could simply go to the hostel warden and tell her, Dania again stopped her, saying this would only invite drama or gossip because the warden is a misogynist who would

blame Olivia, and "This little thing will spread everywhere," Dania pondered.

"Little thing?" Olivia was really upset. "He was actively stalking me, commented on my clothing, first sent discomfoting messages, then kept forcing his feelings on me, and even after a clear 'no', he continued disturbing me."

"Look, Olivia, this is not how this society works in general," Dania said, uttering words that stabbed Olivia to the heart. "In our society, often such legal complaints don't work. Because girls are blamed, and it is not considered harassment if the girl gave any form of consent at any point. And my question to you is, if you knew his intentions and you had that massive issue or discomfort, why were you talking with him and enjoying his flirting?"

"Okay, so you want to tell me that if a girl in this hostel talks to a guy for some minutes, she forfeits her rights, deserves to receive harassment, and cannot say no at any time—even if she cuts him off later—and she will be blamed? Also, her talking was one thing, but him behaving inappropriately was entirely his fault once the girl cut him off or said no. But you yourself have friendships with people. Does living in the same hostel mean that you are liable to receive harassment and forced, unwanted contact? Everything should be mutual at every single point, right? That's what real feminism is.

Also, I have seen in this hostel and everywhere in the world, people talk due to work or standard queries within shared spaces, but that does not mean—and is never—a right to receive harassment. The moment a girl says no, any previous interaction becomes irrelevant. Consent can be withdrawn at any time for anything.

First of all, I didn't know his intentions. Because, as you can see, I didn't know yours either—that you are not a real friend. And second, yes, in religion, it is advised to maintain a distance from opposite gender and observe modest clothing. However, that is everyone's personal choice and their own level of spirituality. If someone doesn't strictly adhere to this, it doesn't mean she is okay with receiving harassment.

Also, your own sister studies at the academy with Yasir. That means if someday he starts disturbing her through inappropriate messages without her consent, and when she cuts him off, he still forces meetings, stalks, and disturbs her—would you be okay with that? Would you not want a basic apology for him behaving this way? When a girl has already said no, would you not want a basic apology or a confirmation that such harassing, persistent behavior won't repeat? Would you just sit there in silence?" Olivia kept speaking and shouting, but nothing would change Dania's heart or make her understand simple empathy.

Dania still somehow pressurized her not to go to the warden to complain or say anything. Her stance, as usual, was claiming, "I am protecting you." But this time, Olivia had final confirmation that Dania did not care about her anyway. Perhaps Olivia also lacked the immediate courage to speak to the warden and temporarily believed that silence was best. If she spoke about the disgusting emojis, the digital harassment, the physical stalking, and the continuous victim-blaming behavior, the harasser would likely do the same—maybe show her previous messages or make everyone believe she herself was initiating it, or that it was something mutual.

So, she started trying to forget everything herself. She blocked all those people who had silenced her or done nothing to help. The entire social circle stood on one side, and she stood completely alone on the other.

"If you see a whole group against one person, claiming she is crazy, believe the person who is standing alone," she read on an Instagram post later.

What deeply upset her was the promotion of that same person within their shared hostel and social circle.

"Promotions happen not based on character, but from their leadership skills and what they are contributing," Dania had said.

It was because, as usual, Olivia had not cut her off yet. Olivia didn't know what it was—a trauma bond with Dania, or just the simple fact that she was entirely alone in the hostel and had no family support nearby.

"You know what? For you, these things are so normal," Olivia expressed. "Just an inappropriate emoji, just stalking, just persistent interest even after a 'no', just forced pressure to greet him, just psychological abuse to accept his chocolate, to meet him, or to not cut contact with him. But for me, because of my childhood traumas, it was harassment, it was deeply disturbing, and it will remain so. He didn't just display this behavior once; he kept doing it until I spoke up. Then I was made quiet, I was never offered an apology, and everyone cut me off. If it wasn't harassment, he wouldn't be sending inappropriate messages, and when I chose not to respond, he still continued his persistence. I will also tell the warden about you—that you silenced me." Olivia was very sensitive, so all of this left a deep scar on her.

And again, Dania said, "Look, Olivia. I don't feel like replying. Let's end this. Every time you start this debate, it drags on for weeks and months. Leave it now. However, if you want to go and tell anyone and invite drama, go ahead. But I won't protect you anymore if they do anything. Also, if you want to go legally against

me, go. Tell them that I silenced you, show the proofs. Let me go to jail."

This time, Olivia did not fall for Dania's manipulation. Olivia shouted, cried, and did whatever she could, reacting out of pure exhaustion. She was lashing out and roaring loudly, sending several disrespectful, angry messages to Dania in that state of reactive abuse.

Dania then called Olivia's family to the hostel, told them everything, and played the role of a caring sister in front of them, claiming she only wanted to protect Olivia from all this trouble. She also forwarded Olivia's reactive text messages to her family, claiming Olivia was inherently rude, abusive, and disrespectful toward her—citing that as the sole reason she stopped helping her.

The ultimate gaslighting manifested right there, safely away from the initial conflict, in front of authority figures and elders. With a clean face and practiced innocence, Dania weaponized Olivia's harsh defense mechanisms as her retrospective excuse. If Olivia's "harshness" was the true barrier to getting help, she was already pushed to that breaking point before being forced to delete her posts and being continuously blamed—so why wasn't her pain handled fairly back then? Why did Dania only feel uncomfortable with her behavior when it came to seeking justice, but was completely fine managing her "harsh" reactions when she was

forcing her into compliance and making her feel guilty during the post-deletion phase?

Furthermore, Dania altered facts in front of Olivia's family, shifting the goalposts masterfully by claiming, "I always encouraged her to take the official route and lodge a complaint with higher administration. I only stayed distanced because she thought I was also against her." It was a flawless rewrite of history. If Dania was active enough to orchestrate a proxy campaign to protect a reputation, why wasn't she equally active in helping her draft an official complaint or take strict measures for her safety? The ironic thing was that the content Olivia had originally posted didn't even reveal the harasser's name.

Every time Olivia used to shout in private, Dania would say, "I am not responsible." But in front of Olivia's family, she faked a willingness to take full responsibility.

Weeks of trauma and flashbacks flooded Olivia's mind as she recalled the past incidents after viewing Dania's awareness video. Ultimately, Dania had done her a favour: she finally received that definitive confirmation that it was a fake friendship built entirely on Dania's ego, narcissism, and public image, rather than actual support, empathy, or safety.

Even worse, while posting awareness videos, Dania remained safely within the very same circle of people who had misbehaved with Olivia.

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AWARENESS OR IMAGE BY ALISHBA SHAMSHAD

It is deeply ironic and hypocritical that the person who speaks up for basic rights, confronts wrongdoing, or simply points out misogyny is labeled "crazy," while the people devoid of basic empathy and human decency are celebrated as the righteous ones.

And she asked herself once more, "Awareness or Image?"

"I should have understood them in the starting, they cared of their images till the end, never helped me, perhaps I shouldn't have been blind. Someone who failed to offer empathy for the first time doesn't have the heart to offer it a hundredth time even if you keep begging."

She turned off her screen, closed her eyes, and slept comfortably, leaving the scales of justice entirely to God.

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Written by Alishba Shamshad

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