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Traumatizing Impressions of Indo-Pak Conflict on Young Social Media User in Azad Kashmir: The Mediating Role of Perceived Threat / War Phobia

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Abstract

Social media is an integral part of everyone's life today and for younger generations, it is the primary source of information and news. However, the sheer volume of content which is being shared on platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram with violent and/or conflict elements is having a profound effect on their users. In particular, Indo-Pak war related posts, videos and images can exacerbate distress, fear and insecurity among people residing in border areas like Azad Kashmir. Hence, the present study was conducted using qualitative focus group discussion design to explore the traumatizing effect of information related to the Indo-Pak war on the young social media users of Azad Kashmir. The focus group guide was designed with the help of previous literature and with the guidance of experts and three groups of participants were asked for their data (students at the matriculation level, intermediate level and university level). All discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed then analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The findings led us to the following themes: traumatizing impact (depression, difficulty with concentration, emotional distress), aggression and violence (anger, helplessness, hopelessness), perceived threat and war-phobia (fear for future war, insecurity, feeling unsafe), coping strategies (faith, social support, digital avoidance). The results reinforce that young people in Azad Kashmir have to deal with a unique "double exposure" of physical insecurity of being in the vicinity of the border, and the psychological burden of relentless war propaganda in the digital world. The findings of the study have several implications for educators, policy makers, and mental health professionals, and highlight the need for the promotion of media literacy campaigns, mental health support in schools, and awareness raising about the potentially traumatic effects of digital media usage. Although the study is small, it sets the stage for the future studies, and helps to build the knowledge about the role of digital conflict exposure in the development of fear and distress in conflict-affected societies.

Keywords: Indo Pakistan conflict, social media, Perceived threat, Traumatization, Youth mental health, Azad Kashmir

Introduction

The rivalries in South Asian countries are deep-rooted and also very sharp between India and Pakistan; they stem up from partition of 1947 and unresolved issue of Jammu and Kashmir. Wars, border violence, and political tensions over the past decades have inflicted psychological

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scars on the populations in the neighborhood of the conflicts in addition to the strategic, territorial, and economic effects of the conflicts. Now the conflict is not just on the battlefield or in the political arena, it has seeped into the daily lives of the people through social media such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok and Twitter. These platforms offer information and serve as hubs for misinformation, propaganda and violent material with no editorial or regulatory oversight (Asim, Shafique & Ahmad, 2019).

The impact is two-fold with regard to the people of Azad Kashmir. They live near the borderland areas where there are risks of physical harm and as well they are constantly being deluged with a flood tide of information about war through digital channels. This double exposure makes them more vulnerable psychologically, which puts them at greater risk of experiencing fear, anxiety, stress and insecurity (Jan & Basu, 2023).

Social Media Exposure to Indo-Pak War Content

Social media exposure is the time and engagements people have with social media platforms that share information about war (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). For the Indo-Pak conflict, this exposure can be the viewing of violent pictures, reading of news updates, or being forwarded videos, or actively participating in discussions about the war (Asim et al., 2019).

Types of Exposure

Passive Exposure. A chance encounter with a post, headline or watching war-related videos (Naseeb, 2024).

Active Exposure. Seeking out news reports, debating and commenting on war-related information (Yamin, 2020).

Some of the causes can be talking with other people in WhatsApp groups, being promoted high arousal content on platforms such as Instagram, or the absence of fact-checking tools (Naseeb, 2024).

Immediate responses of exposure include emotional arousal, like anxiety or fear, and long-term psychological effects, such as increased vigilance, ongoing insecurity and altered perceptions of reality (Gul, Shah, & Rehman, 2022; Shrum, 2017). Studies have found that exposure to repeated violent media can create a feeling of fear and hostility towards the ‘enemy', thus inducing war-phobia and aggression (Bhat, Dar, & Lone, 2021).

Perceived Threat / War-Phobia

Perceived threat, also called war-phobia, is the feeling of insecurity and vulnerability that people have when they perceive war-related digital content as a sign of threat. This includes concerns about personal safety, community health and safety and national security (Gul et al., 2022).

Types of Perceived Threat

Personal Threat. Personal or family fear for safety (Barclay & Jan, 2023).

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Community Threat. Belief that neighborhood/community is unsafe (Dar, Rashid, & Wani, 2023).

National Threat. The sense that the country is facing existential threats because of escalation of war (Naseeb, 2024).

Misinformation, fake news and psychological operations for creating fear and panic (Yamin, 2020), are factors that cause perceived threat. For instance, if a fabricated video or sensationalist headline is circulating, it may seem like war is being waged when it isn't.

Threat has a wide-ranging impact. This can result in anticipation of anxiety, sleep issues, intrusive thoughts, and concentration problems (Dar et al., 2023). Chronic insecurity, avoidance behaviors, depressive symptoms are possible long-term effects due to perception of dangers, leading to powerlessness (Barclay & Jan, 2023).

Psychological Impact

The dependent variable in this study is psychological effects of war-related social media exposure. The term ‘psychological impact' refers to the psychological, thinking and behavioral impact of this content.

Types of Psychological Impact

Emotional Impact. Sadness, anxiety, anger, depression and hopelessness (Kanwal & Yousaf, 2022).

Cognitive Impact. Intrusive thoughts, worry, distorted perception of safety, rumination (Bhat et al., 2021).

Behavioral Impact. Avoiding social media, reduced academic productivity, aggressiveness in academic discussions, and being withdrawn from routine activities (Jan & Basu, 2023).

Peers pressure to watch violent content, algorithmic learning of war content, and repetitive exposure to violent content are all factors that may be associated with psychological impact (Naseeb, 2024).

The psychological impact has deep repercussions. The youth report educational disruptions, trouble focusing, sleep problems, decreased motivation, and aggression towards out-groups (Dar et al., 2023). Sometimes, the effects can be similar to secondary trauma, where individuals who are not directly affected by the war feel distressed as if they had been affected by it (Kanwal & Yousaf, 2022).

Relationship Among Variables

Media creates long-lasting perception of reality. Heavy exposure on social media leads to perceptions of “alien” environment in the case of Indo-Pak war content. The psychological effects of perception, in turn, result in anxiety, depression and aggression (Gerbner & Gross, 1976).

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War exposure in the media has become a daily routine in Pakistan, which has affected the viewers to make them fearful and insecure about war (Gul et al. 2022). The conflict related alerts resulted in disruption of the school and emotional instability among the Kashmiri students (Bhat et al. 2021). The misinformation operations further increase the threat perception, thus aggravating the psychological damage. This way, a mediation process between social media exposure, trauma symptoms and dysfunction is created, in which the perceived threat acts as a link. Some exposures can be psychological without mediation, such as high graphic video and can cause immediate fear or aggression (Naseeb, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical approach used in this research is the Cultivation Theory first proposed by George Gerbner in the 1960s, that is based on the influence of media in long-term use that leads to the perception of reality. In other words, theory suggests that over time, viewing media material—particularly violent or conflict-related content—can affect the ideology of the viewer, thus increasing the sense of threat, fear, and insecurity. Heavy viewers of media over time may start to see the world as more dangerous and threatening than it actually is, what Gerbner and Gross (1976) termed as the "mean world syndrome."

Cultivation Theory was originally developed to describe the effects of television, but has now gained ground in the application of digital media, such as social networking sites as Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram. Social media differs from the traditional mass media as it offers a non-stop information flow.

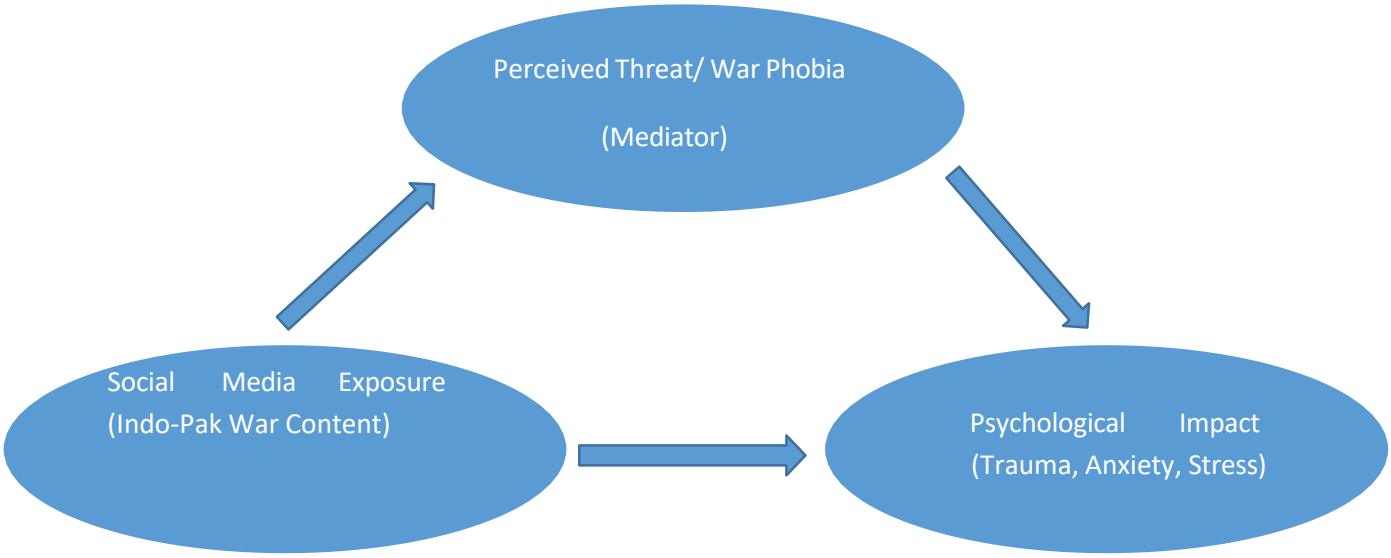
A stream of personal, unfiltered and emotional content, that further improves the cultivation process. Violent language, like posts or videos, or aggressive narratives may give a consistent sense of vulnerability and insecurity without the physical violence being present (Shrum, 2017).

The framework of Cultivation theory would be an appropriate tool to explain the impact of social media war content on the psyche of the Indian people in the context of India-Pak conflict. Over exposure to war propaganda on television and digital platforms led to the creation of "war-phobia" among the viewers of Pakistan and led to more fear and chronic stress among them. Similarly, Naseeb (2024) stated that the presence of misinformation and psychological operations on the internet caused paranoia and fear among citizens of Pakistan and that a constant exposure to the internet can alter the perception of a conflict. The findings are in line with Gerbner's original observation that exposure to high levels of violent images can produce distorted worldviews, resulting in people's perception of the world as being much more dangerous than it actually is (Gul et al. 2022).

Therefore, the Cultivation Theory is able to give an appropriate explanation system for this study. It contends that over-exposure to Indo-Pak war related content on social media can cause trauma and distorted perception of security amongst the students of Azad Kashmir. Social media is, here, a source of information and a psychological arena for sowing, tending and normalising fear and hostility, by repetition.

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Conceptual framework



Literature Review

This conflict between India and Pakistan is one of the oldest modern conflicts, with Jammu and Kashmir being the epicenter of the conflict. While armed clashes, Another facet of this conflict is becoming more apparent: its representation and consumption on digital platforms, as a result of military mobilizations, and political hostilities continue to dominate. In today's society, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok are the primary sources of information for millions of young people in South Asia (Asim et al., 2019). Unlike TV or newspapers, one can access war content in these platforms without filters or censorship, such as videos of war's violence, casualty reports, emotionally-charged memes, and misinformation campaigns (Gul et al., 2022). It is not difficult to come across it and is viral with valid concerns regarding its psychological impacts, particularly on vulnerable groups in Pakistan and Azad Kashmir who are constantly reminded of the conflict (Jan & Basu, 2023).

Psychological warfare has been a key issue in the Indo-Pak arena in the academic circles. Fears, confusion and insecurity are the intended outcomes of the weaponization of social media for psychological operations (PSYOP) against a targeted population. In 2010-2024, the Indian PSYOP tactics included spreading misinformation campaigns and narratives that were hostile towards the Pakistani public, thus creating fear and insecurity among the Pakistani populace. These operations regularly expose civilians to fake threats and fake news which results in growing paranoia and distrust (Naseeb, 2024).

This is in line with the Cultivation Theory that argues that exposure to media that depicts a threatening environment can create a "mean world syndrome" in which the viewer is more likely to think of the world as a more dangerous place than it actually is (Shrum, 2017). There is a correlation between false news and its usage as a weapon, digitally fabricated news has impacted the morale and anxiety of Pakistan (Yamin, 2020). Networks of hybrid warfare have

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also been found on digital platforms.

In Pakistan it has been observed that stress factor is associated with information warfare, which implies that information warfare can be as effective as physical warfare. The findings indicate that the Indo-Pak conflict is spreading beyond the battlefield and social media is gaining momentum as a forum of conflict in the civilian mind (Sahibzada & Jia, 2025).

Unlike traditional mass media, social media are interactive, personalized and omnipresent. This is particularly a potent avenue for trauma to be transmitted. Malicious propaganda on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, in Pakistan, played a significant role in raising public anxiety and insecurity in the country (Asim et al., 2019). Due to constant exposure to war content on television and social media, a "war-phobia" has been created, that is, people are fearful and vulnerable at all times (Gul et al., 2022).

It is not just the level of exposure that's the problem, it's also the very nature of social media, which benefits from sensational and emotionally-driven content. Engagement algorithms are more likely to surface graphic and fear-inducing content, which is likely to lead to the repetition of violent war stories (Gul et al., 2022). This is supported by international research. Fekih-Romdhane et al. (2024) showed that individuals who ate a lot of social media (SM) content about the Israel-Gaza conflict experienced significantly higher sleep disturbances and stress and depressive symptoms than those who consumed minimal SM content. Individuals who had followed the Bataclan terrorist attacks in Paris on social media were also more likely to experience insomnia than those who had not seen the attacks on social media, but had only watched TV news reports. The effects of digital platforms on severe traumatic reactions are also corroborated by research, which gives access to the images of conflict on digital platforms continuously and in an immersive manner (Généreux et al., 2019).

Children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable in conflict as their psychological resilience is not yet well developed. Children were negatively impacted on socio-emotional well-being due to exposure to conflict-related information in Jammu and Kashmir, such as affecting their emotional stability, educational capacities, and social interactions (Khan et al., 2021). Mobile phone alerts caused children in the border areas to be more anxious, to not go to school and to have less aspirations for their future (Bhat et al., 2021). Conflict exposure had resulted in fear, sleep disturbances, and academic issues among children residing along the Indo-Pak border (Hussain, 2025).

Further corroborated by international parallels. The exposure of violent conflict, in the context of Israel and Palestine, was found to have high levels of depression, aggression and distress among young social media users. The point of exposure and psychological effects were not applicable to the Indo-Pak context; however, the mechanism of exposure and psychological effects are easily transferable as the cultural and political context of both regions is similar (Khurshid et al., 2021).

The Universities are a big consumer of social media, placing them at a high risk of experiencing mental distress due to material they find on the social media about the war. When exposed to violent news and social media posts, a majority of the students from the universities in Karachi,

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45%, experienced moderate to high degree of Media induced secondary traumatic stress. Their symptoms included hyperarousal, avoidance and intrusive thoughts, which are common symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Kanwal & Yousaf, 2022).

In terms of impact, it is most worrying for the university students of Azad Kashmir who are directly exposed to the possibility of escalation at the border and at the same time are getting access to disturbing war content through the internet. People in the vicinity of the Line of Control had significantly higher scores on the PTSD measure.

The psychological impact can be particularly profound in areas that are geographically close to conflict, and where digital exposure is compounded (Batool et al., 2024).

The border population of Azad Kashmir is always under the threat of violence. Chronic stress, fear and disruption at school were experienced by the students residing in the areas of cross border shelling (Jan & Basu, 2023). Depressive symptoms, anxiety and social disintegration were observed to be more in Indo-Pak border villages compared to others (Bagchi et al., 2021). The children who were directly exposed to conflict had significantly higher scores of depression, anxiety and stress. These populations are also confronted with ‘double exposure' (Dar et al., 2023) from being exposed to war in real life, as well as to social media war content.

Social media has an interactive quality which helps to build fear, anger and aggression. Media coverage of Pulwama attack was like a war scene, which made the people of Pakistan fearful and fostered nationalism (Barclay & Jan, 2023). Internet after the Pulwama attack was mostly through anger and aggression with trauma related language, indicating that the online space could be an emotionally charged and contentious environment during conflict (Sreepada & Coman, 2024). The exposure to violent conflict has an internal expression in the form of higher aggression and emotional lability in young social media users, as well as an external expression. The outcomes of this study reveals that war related social media information can trigger anxiety and aggression that can amplify the psychological impacts of war off the battlefield (Khurshid et al., 2021).

However, the dangers of being exposed to the social media war are also illustrated by research outside of South Asian. Research has also been conducted in the United States where exposure to traumatic events within the media caused symptoms of PTSD in viewers (Comstock & Platania, 2017). The estimated rates of PTSD were greater among heavily exposed communities, compared to less exposed communities, to the social media news coverage of the Parkland school shooting. This study is in line with previous research indicating that trauma can be vicariously transmitted through digital platforms, even if there has not been a physical presence in the events or disasters (Pfefferbaum et al., 2019).

Rationale of the Study

Azad Kashmir has been one of the worst hit regions due to the psychological turmoil created for the population of the border regions in the wake of the conflict between the two countries. The power of this effect has been amplified in recent years with the use of social media, which provide unmediated information, information that never stops, and even, sometimes,

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information that is exaggerated, regarding war.

Content which makes people feel insecure and frightened (Asim et al., 2019). Unlike the conventional media, social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram offer instant access to violent images, rumours and propaganda about war that create perceptions of threatening environments (Naseeb, 2024). In the case of Pakistanis, it has been observed that repeated exposure to material is significantly related to war fear, anxiety and sleep disturbance in the study (Gul et al., 2022).

While there is significant research available on the effects of digital war exposure on the population of South Asian countries, the concerns are limited with the vulnerable population of Azad Kashmir who are simultaneously exposed to real war trauma as well as virtual exposure of social media contents, being in close proximity to the borders (Jan & Basu, 2023). Children, adolescent and youth are particularly vulnerable to stress and secondary trauma; therefore, it is important to explore their experiences, perceptions and coping with the psychological impact of war related media (WRM) (Bhat et al., 2021). The study is based on the Cultivation Theory framework, which is missing in the literature, in this regard, the effect of social media exposure on the feelings of insecurity and trauma-like symptoms among youth in Azad Kashmir (Hussain, 2025).

Scope of the Study

This study is aimed at examining the psychological impacts ofwar related contents on social media among youth of Azad Kashmir. In particular, the study focuses on educational level of matriculation (school), intermediate (college) and university. The emphasis is placed on active users of social media platforms (WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok) that are the primary sources of war related news and content in the region. The study is of a qualitative nature, and focuses on the use of a focus group.

Conduct group discussions to elicit detailed information about participants' experiences, perceptions and coping mechanisms.

Study is region specific but the results are valid in the context of digitally mediated conflict in South Asia. A lack of assessment of the long-term clinical diagnosis (PTSD) but rather of psychological impressions that occur in everyday life: fear, anxiety, aggression, coping, etc. caused by repeated exposure to online war content. The study also investigates the role of perceived threat or war-phobia as a mediator between digital exposure and trauma-like outcomes, which builds upon the Cultivation Theory (CT).Additionally, this study examines the role of perceived threat or war-phobia as a mediator between digital exposure and the resulting trauma-like experience, based on Cultivation Theory (CT). The knowledge generated can be applied by teachers, decision makers and mental health professionals to create a media literacy program and psychosocial interventions to address the specific needs of youth in communities with conflict.

Methods

Research Objectives

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In particular, this study aims to:

i. To gain insight into the perception and psychological processing of exposure to war content within different age and education-based groups (school, college and university students) on platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram.

ii. Examine the impact of exposure on emotional well-being including anxiety, fear and traumatic experiences.

iii. Identify common threads in participants' stories around the impact of Indo-Pak war media on the development of fear, insecurity or resilience.

Hypotheses

- H1: There is a correlation between the exposure of Indo-Pak war related content on social media and the increase in psychological distress among people which includes fear, anxiety and stress.
- H2: Younger participants (school and college students) are more vulnerable to symptomology of trauma than older participants (university students).
- H3: Perceived threat or "war-phobia" is correlated with the intensity of social media use.

Operational Definitions

Social Media Exposure

The social media exposure in this study is defined as the frequency and intensity of exposure of the participants to social media posts, videos, images or discussions about Indo-Pak war on social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Exposure is considered both active (sharing, commenting) and passive (viewing/scrolling) (Ellison et al., 2007).

Psychological Impact

Psychological impact-Reaction on the part of the participants as reported, after exposure to war content in social media, that is emotional and cognitive. This comprises fear, anxiousness, sadness, helplessness and trauma-related stress (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013).

Trauma-like Symptoms

Trauma-like symptoms are psychological responses (e.g., intrusive thoughts, avoidance) to indirect trauma through media that are similar to those that occur in direct trauma (Bride et al., 2004).

Perceived Threat / War-Phobia

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War-phobia or perceived threat is increased fear of war experienced by an individual, community and the nation after exposure to Indo-Pak war related content in social media. It implies a continuous feeling of risk, increased threat awareness, and a feeling of insecurity even if there is no actual risk. (Gul et al., 2022; Barclay & Jan, 2023).

Sample

Inclusive Criteria. . In the study of Azad Kashmir the purposive sampling technique was adopted for participants selection. Four focus groups of 15 participants were created to reflect a variety of ages and levels of education.

- Group 1: School students (Matriculation level, aged 15–17).
- Group 2: College students (Intermediate level, aged 17–19).
- Group 3: University students (Undergraduate, aged 20–24).

Are active social media users (WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, or Twitter/X).

There will be about 45 participants in the total sample.

Exclusive Criteria

- Are below 15 years of age or above 30 years of age.
- Are not regular users of social media.

Research Design

A qualitative, exploratory research design was used, based on focus group discussions (FGDs). This design was suitable as the participants will be able to share their experiences, express emotion, and make meaning together (Creswell & Poth, 2018). FGDs can be extremely helpful for:

Exploring issues that pose challenges, such as war trauma, due to the supportive environment for the participants to reflect and connect with each other's experience. The interpretation and impressions that occur in group sessions are frequently different than those that occur during individual sessions, especially when exploring topics related to trauma, such as war. In this study, three focus groups were performed: one with the school students (matriculation level), another with college students (intermediate level) and one with the students of the university. This enabled multiple voices from age and social group to be heard and enable comparison of experiences and commonalities and differences (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Instruments

Data was collected using:

Focus Group Guide

Semi-structured Guide with Open Ended Questions, well-designed to draw out participants thinking and feelings on exposure to Indo-Pak war related content in social media. In the guide,

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the frequency of exposure, emotional responses to exposure, coping responses to exposure, and perceived changes in worldview were discussed.

Audio Recorder and Field Notes

Data for this was audio-recorded at the focus group sessions with the participant's consent for accurate transcription. Notes taken to observe non-verbal information and group dynamics.

Procedure

Ethical Approval

Prior to obtaining data, the university ethics committee was contacted.

Conducting Focus Groups

1. Four focus groups were conducted in noncontroversial, quiet settings (classrooms, meeting rooms).
2. Each session lasted 60–90 minutes.
3. Establish and remind the group of guidelines (confidentiality, respect, no judgment) and conduct discussion by asking questions from the script.
4. The conversations transitioned from non-sensitive to sensitive (e.g. social media habits to emotional concerns, fears about the war).

Debriefing and Support

Participants were debriefed at the end of each session, resources for psychological support was provided and the participant were thanked for their participation.

Data Handling

Recordings were converted to text word for word. Participant codes were used to anonymize all transcripts. Data was kept in a secure manner with limited access.

Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis, one of the popular data analysis methods in the identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), was utilized in analyzing the data from the focus group discussions. This approach is especially appropriate for gaining insights into participant experiences and understanding common associations and understandings of social media exposure to war-related content.The process was based upon the six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Familiarization with the Data

All focus group audio were verbatim transcribed. Rereading a transcript and field notes to get a deeper understanding of the information, making initial observations and identifying any ideas

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that emerge over time.

Generating Initial Codes

Features of the data that are relevant were systematically coded on all transcripts. Coding was both deductive (based upon the theoretical approach used in the study: Cultivation Theory) and inductive (which is based on participants' responses).

Searching for Themes

Codes were summarized into larger themes that represent the main psychological impressions that participants reported. For instance, codes were grouped together under the theme Traumatizing Impact (Depressive Symptoms) with sadness after seeing videos, loss of concentration and low motivation all being grouped together. Similarly, the other responses in the category of Aggression and Violence (Anger, Helplessness, Hopelessness): “anger at India” and “helplessness about future” were combined. Other codes were amalgamated, such as ‘fear of another war’ and ‘feeling unsafe even at home’ and ‘panic after WhatsApp forwards', which were combined under the umbrella of Perceived Threat and War-Phobia. Last but not least, “Coping Strategies and Resilience” was the theme, with codes related to coping and resilience, including “praying to Allah”, “talking with friends” and “avoiding social media”.

Reviewing Themes

Themes were developed by validating them with the content of the data to ensure that they represent the participants' stories. Themes were combined, extended or eliminated if relevant for the event.

Defining and Naming Theme

It was clearly and concisely outlined for each theme and labeled, reflecting the psychological nature of the theme. The final themes were:

Traumatizing Impact. (Depressive Feelings, Concentration Problems, Emotional Distress)

Aggression and Violence. (Anger, Helplessness, Hopelessness)

Perceived Threat and War-Phobia. (Fear of Future War, Insecurity, Feeling Unsafe)

Coping Strategies and Resilience. (Faith-Based Coping, Peer Support, Digital Avoidance)

Producing the Report

The final activity was to tie the themes together in a story. The participants' quotes were a part of the report whereas was help to highlight the important findings and allow the voice of the participants.

The overview of the analysis process has described in Table 1.

Table 1 Overview of Steps involved in the analysis process

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Step	Description	Application in This Study
1. Familiarization with Data	Reading and re-reading	1. Familiarization with Data
2. Generating Initial Codes	Systematically coding interesting features across the dataset.	Responses such as "I can't sleep after seeing such videos" were coded as sleep disturbance, while "I feel angry at India" was coded as aggression.
3. Searching for Themes	Collating codes into potential themes.	Codes like sleep disturbance, intrusive thoughts, and sadness were clustered under Traumatizing Impact; anger and helplessness were grouped into Aggression and Violence.
4. Reviewing Themes	Checking if themes work in relation to coded extracts and the full dataset.	Overlapping codes (e.g., fear and war-phobia) were refined into the broader theme Perceived Threat and Insecurity.
5. Defining and Naming Themes	Refining specifics of each theme and naming them clearly.	Six themes were finalized: (1) Traumatizing Impact, (2) Aggression and Violence, (3) Perceived Threat and Insecurity, (4) Disruption of Daily and Academic Life, (5) Coping Mechanisms and Resilience, (6) Recommendations and Advice.
6. Producing the Report	Selecting vivid, compelling quotes to illustrate each theme.	Direct participant quotes were integrated in the Findings chapter to ensure participants' voices remained central.

Results

From the discussion of the focus group, the following themes emerged which were interconnected and emphasised the traumatising effect of the India Pakistan conflict on young social media users: The findings indicated that youth social media users are experiencing psychological effects due to this war.The results show that youth social media users are suffering from psychological impacts due to this war. The issues discussed in relation to the India-Pakistan conflict, where the content of the social media is traumatic, are highlighted in Table 2.

Table 2 Theme representing a traumatizing impression on young social media consumers

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Theme	Subthemes	Example Responses from Your Data
1. Traumatizing Impact of Social Media Exposure	Anxiety & Stress (e.g., "Yes, I have felt anxiety, stress, and even trouble sleeping.") - Sleep Disturbance ("Yes, it brings too much anxiety inside me.") - Depressive Feelings ("So heart broken when I see people suffering.") - Intrusive Thoughts ("Yes, after seeing this kind of content, I do find myself thinking about war more often.")	Participants reported stress, sadness, and rumination after war-related content.
2. Aggression and Violence	Anger & Aggression ("I feel angry when I see India killing people.") - Frustration/Helplessness ("Not much, but a little because as a normal human being I feel helpless.") - Hopelessness ("It makes me feel hopeless about peace in the future.")	Some participants expressed anger and hopelessness, others frustration over not being able to change events.
3. Perceived Threat and Insecurity (War-Phobia)	Loss of Safety ("Yes, this makes me feel unsafe.") Community Fear ("Yes sometimes, because people around me suffer.") - Exaggerated Threat ("I feel the threat of war is exaggerated.") - Real Threat ("Real. War is real and social media shows it clearly.")	Participants felt unsafe, some thought war is exaggerated, others believed threats were very real.
4. Disruption of Daily and Academic Life	Concentration Issues ("It affects my studies, I can't focus.") - Educational Disruption ("It makes it hard to study properly.") - Productivity Loss ("Time wasted scrolling disturbing content.") - Avoidance Behaviors ("I ignore it or scroll away.")	Students reported study/work disturbance, some coped by avoiding war content.
5. Coping Mechanisms and Resilience	Selective Avoidance ("I ignore disturbing content or scroll away.") - Peer/Family Support ("Talking to family helps reduce stress.") - Religious Coping ("Usually we pray when we see such content.") - Social Media Breaks ("Yes, I have intentionally taken a break from social media.")	Coping strategies included prayer, avoiding media, talking wi

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		th peers/family, a nd taking breaks.
6. Recommendations and Advice	Platform Regulation (“Ban harmful videos.” / “Add clear warnings before war content.”) - Awareness Raising (“I’ll spread awareness about mental health.”) - Advice to Peers (“Ignore such content and don’t spread it.” / “Verify information first.”)	Participants suggested media contr ol, awareness programs, and educating younger peers.

Traumatizing Impact of Social Media Exposure

One of the important findings of this study is that it is a traumatizing influence on many of the younger social media users if they are exposed to Indo-Pak war related content on social media. The majority of the school/college/universities said that they felt sad, depressed, stressed and unstable emotionally when they viewed violent images and read war-related posts.

This is when one of the intermediate students exclaimed, “So heart broken when I see people suffering” and another university student exclaimed, “Yes, it brings too much anxiety inside me.” Another commented on the effect on her mental health: “Yes, I feel that this kind of content has affected my mental health, I feel anxious and disturbed after it.”

Importantly, several of the participants reported about intrusive thinking patterns: Their thoughts became intrusive after reading posts on war. One student said, “Yes, I know this type of content and I do think of war more.” This means that with repeated exposures, emotional distress is immediate, as well as an ongoing cognitive preoccupation that is also traumagenic.

Aggression and Violence

Four participants experienced angry and aggressive responses, in addition to the depressive and anxious responses. Content of the war sometimes resulted in frustration and even negative feelings in some cases. “When I see Indians killing people, I get so angry,” said one of the participants.

There was an often accompanying sense of helplessness. Some people voiced a feeling of powerlessness that they had nothing they could do, one of the participants who had a BS degree said, “Not that much, but a little, because as a normal human being, I feel powerless.”

Among the younger respondents, hopelessness was another dimension that was hopeless. They mentioned their lack of trust in the peace or stability, one student saying, “I don't feel like there

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will be peace in the future." The results point to the ability of war content to evoke negative emotions of aggression and despair.

Perceived Threat and Insecurity (War-Phobia)

Several participants stated that they felt unsafe in the community, particularly when viewing war-related content, and expressed more fear and insecurity as a result of the experience. One of the students at the school level replied, "Yes, it makes me feel unsafe."

Interestingly, there were mixed perceptions of the reality of threat. Others felt that danger has been blown out of proportion in social media: "I think that the threat of war has been blown out of proportion on social media." Other people, however, saw the content as a reflection of reality: "Real. War is real and social media shows it clearly."

In every group, many participants mentioned misinformation and participants frequently commented that misinformation or exaggeration contributed to their fear. A student commented, "Most of the time news are fake." The other replied, "Yes, sometimes false and falsified information regarding war was spread on social media that adds to fear."

It shows how digital platforms can exacerbate war phobia by not only sharing real events but also via rumours and misinformation, thus creating a sense of insecurity.

Disruption of Daily and Academic Life

The second major theme was disruption of exposure on the participants functioning in their daily and school activities. A few pupils reported issues with focus and with work. "It interferes with my studies, I can't concentrate," said a university participant. Likewise, one intermediate student commented, "It is difficult to learn properly."

Others said that they were less productive or avoided responding to it, saying "I ignore it or scroll away" and "I just try not to see it."

Such disruptions indicate psychological distress is not a private affair, but rather has a direct impact on academic and occupational performance, particularly with students.

Coping Mechanisms and Resilience

While there was considerable reported fear and anxiety, participants reported a variety of coping strategies as well. One suggestion was to mute groups, or scroll away from content: "I mute groups, or scroll away from disturbing content."

Others relied on their social supports including one participant who said, "Yes, talking with my family helps to reduce stress." Likewise, peer discussions were reported as being helpful in normalizing their distress.

Another salient theme was religious coping. One of the respondents replied, "When I see this kind of content I pray usually."

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Lastly, some participants took more extreme measures, such as turning off their social media accounts by design, saying, “Yes, I deliberately have turned off the social media due to content of war.”

The strategies are based on resilience and proactive responses made by young people to manage digital exposure.

Recommendations and Advice

Participants suggested regulating harmful content and raising awareness as potential solutions when asked about possible solutions. The suggestions included banning videos, and warnings at the platform level: “I ban harmful or violated videos from these platforms” and “If I could I'd add clear warnings before war content.”

Others spoke about awareness raising: “I will raise awareness about mental health and help others to understand.”

The final thing participants shared with their peers were suggestions, and most of the time it was about not believing or talking about what they read on the web, especially with younger students. One said “don't get involved with it and never pass on anything without confirmation” and another one said “confirm before passing on information”.

This shows that participants understand not only their susceptibility but also the importance of digital literacy and digital responsible use that can help them to reduce psychological damage.

Implications

The present research study is helpful in the understanding of the psychological impact of the exposure of social media on Azad Kashmir's young generation in the context of Indo-Pak war. The results have a number of practical implications. They highlight the importance of mental health interventions with youth in conflict areas, especially those addressing secondary trauma, fear and aggression acquired through digital exposure. Second, results have shown the importance of education on media literacy in which students can manage and critically analyse information about war and exposure to information that can be harmful to them. Third, the study provides policy recommendations and suggestions for educators and teachers to build supporting systems in school and university setting such as counseling services, awareness sessions and safe discussion spaces. Finally, the research is relevant to the peace building process as it demonstrates the potential for digital narratives on war to affect collective emotions, intergroup hostility and insecurity of border populations.

Limitations

There are several things to note. First, this study is qualitative and carried out in three focus groups in Azad Kashmir which restricts its representativeness of other population. Second, the experiences the participants reported may have been affected by recall bias or participants' reluctance to report negative feelings openly in a group. Thirdly, the study is not longitudinal and so cannot capture the effect of prolonged exposure to war content over time. Fourth, they

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can provide a great deal of information but they can also produce a conformity effect, which means that the members of the group will modify their answers to fit in with what the rest of the group answered. Focus groups are not quantitative. It is therefore not possible to establish causal relationships between the exposure to social media and psychological outcomes in the study; only thematic.

The linkages and impacts. There are no quantitative measures or standardized psychological scales used that could provide additional information about the severity and prevalence of the symptoms in this study. Finally, there are time limits for the findings, in that they reflect perceptions at the time of data collection. The results may not be applicable in other time periods due to the dynamism of the posts in social media.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the psychological effects of indo-pak war related posts on social media platforms of young people of Azad Kashmir. The results indicated that subjects who were repeatedly exposed to digital images left with traumatising images, depressive emotions, aggressiveness, hopelessness and higher levels of threat perception, which the subjects sometimes referred to as a constant sense of war. Other coping strategies such as faith, social support and digital disengagement also suggest resilience in these groups. The study builds on the concept of Cultivation Theory and stresses the influence of media as a powerful instrument of creating the psychological reality of conflict in addition to its physical insecurity in the border communities. The study is limited in scope, but offers a good basis for further research and guidance for interventions to reduce digital trauma and improve mental health in conflict-affected communities.

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