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Adolescents' Exposure to War News: Emotional, Psychological, And Behavioural Responses

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ABSTRACT

Background: Adolescents may encounter war repeatedly through television, mobile devices, and social media. Aim: This study describes war-news exposure and adolescents reported emotional, psychological, behavioral, and perceptual responses in Jalalabad, Afghanistan. Methods: A 15-item descriptive questionnaire was completed by 50 adolescents aged 10–18 years; responses were summarized using frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. Results: Social-media images and videos (M = 3.46) and television/mobile news (M = 3.40) were common exposure channels. Sadness at seeing people affected by war was the strongest reported response (M = 4.62); 78% selected "always." Worry (M = 3.70) and unwanted thoughts about war (M = 3.48) were also reported, while 58% said they always talked to someone when upset. Conclusion: Responses combined distress, perceived safety, and help-seeking. The study contributes to interdisciplinary discussion across media studies, adolescent development, education, and psychosocial well-being. Its small descriptive sample cannot establish causation or population-wide prevalence.

KEYWORDS: *Adolescents, Emotional Responses, Psychological Well-Being, Social Media, War-News Exposure.*

Introduction

Armed conflict threatens children's and adolescents' physical safety and can disrupt emotional security, family relationships, education, and social support. Research on conflict-affected young people documents risks that include anxiety, fear, stress, and other psychosocial difficulties (Bürgin et al., 2022; Ferrara et al., 2025). Yet young people do not encounter war only through direct violence or residence in an active conflict zone. Television, mobile phones, online news, and social media can make reports and images of violence, injury, displacement, and destruction repeatedly available.

This mediated exposure matters because the frequency, graphic intensity, and interpretation of news may shape how young people perceive danger. Research on children's responses to war coverage identifies media exposure as a distinct experience whose effects may vary with developmental stage, prior experience, content, and parental involvement (Pfefferbaum et al., 2020). Studies of adolescents have also reported associations between conflict-related media exposure and psychological distress, although such associations do not by themselves establish causation (Pe'er & Slone, 2022).

The present study examines this issue in Jalalabad city, Nangarhar Province, Afghanistan. It describes adolescents' reported exposure to war news and their emotional reactions, anxiety- and

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stress-related experiences, coping behaviors, and perceptions of safety and understanding. The study is descriptive: it does not diagnose psychological disorders or test a causal relationship. The study aims to describe how adolescents encounter war-related information and how they report responding to it. It addresses three questions of how frequently participants encounter war news through media and interpersonal communication and what emotional and anxiety or stress-related responses they reported. Also, what coping behaviors and perceptions of safety, proximity, comprehension, and confusion they reported.

Literature Review

Research on war and forced displacement demonstrates that children's well-being is shaped by interacting individual, family, community, and environmental conditions. Reviews identify anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress symptoms, and developmental disruption among possible outcomes of direct conflict exposure and displacement (Bürgin et al., 2022; Aloka et al., 2025). These findings establish the importance of young people's psychological well-being, but direct exposure to violence is not equivalent to encountering conflict through news.

Research on mediated exposure provides a more specific foundation for this study. Comer and Kendall (2007) discussed how extensive coverage of terrorism can create a sense of threat among young people who are not directly exposed to an event. In an experimental study, Comer et al. (2008) found that children's responses to terrorism-related news could be influenced by threat perceptions and parental coping and media-literacy strategies. Pfefferbaum et al. (2020) reviewed children's reactions to media coverage of war and emphasized the roles of age, content, prior exposure, distance, and parental involvement.

Digital media may be particularly relevant because it delivers repeated, visual, and sometimes unsolicited material. Pe'er and Slone (2022) reported associations between media exposure to armed conflict and psychological distress and post-traumatic symptoms among adolescents. Research on graphic images similarly suggests that repeated exposure to distressing visual coverage may be associated with psychological distress (Holman et al., 2024). Findings from other emergencies also indicate that media exposure may be associated with stress-related symptoms among young people, although contexts and outcomes differ (Pfefferbaum et al., 2005; Kessler et al., 2021).

The literature also cautions against treating all exposure as uniformly harmful. Adolescents' responses may differ according to developmental stage, previous experiences, coping resources, and the social context in which they interpret information. Family communication, peer relationships, school stability, and psychosocial support may help young people manage distress (Comer et al., 2008; Alzaghoul et al., 2022). Thus, exposure, distress, perceived safety, and coping should be examined together rather than assuming a simple, inevitable effect.

A contextual gap remains: evidence from other countries cannot automatically describe adolescents' experiences in Jalalabad. The present study offers a local descriptive account of media exposure and reported responses. Given the questionnaire and sample, it does not test whether exposure predicts psychological outcomes or whether responses differ statistically by age or gender.

Methodology

Research design and setting

The study used a descriptive questionnaire design to document adolescents' reported exposure to war-related news and their responses. It was conducted in Jalalabad city, Nangarhar Province, Afghanistan.

Participants

The sample comprised 50 adolescents: 17 participants (34%) aged 10–14 years and 33 (66%) aged 15–18 years. There were 29 male participants (58%) and 21 female participants (42%). The manuscript supplied for revision does not specify the sampling strategy, recruitment sites, data-collection dates, or inclusion and exclusion criteria; these details should be added by the authors before submission.

Participant characteristic	n	%
Age 10–14 years	17	34.0
Age 15–18 years	33	66.0
Male	29	58.0
Female	21	42.0
Total	50	100.0

Instrument

Data were collected using a 15-item descriptive questionnaire organized into four domains: exposure to war news (3 items), emotional reactions (3 items), anxiety and stress (3 items), and behavior and perception (6 items). Items asked about television/mobile news, social-media videos or images, war-related conversations, fear, worry, sadness, unwanted thoughts, sleep difficulty, nervousness, news avoidance, talking to someone when upset, perceived safety, perceived proximity of war, understanding, and confusion. Response options were Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, and Always, scored from 1 to 5 for the reported descriptive means.

The manuscript does not report evidence of pilot testing, reliability, validity, translation procedures, or the language(s) in which the questionnaire was administered. These details should be reported if available; they should not be inferred from the descriptive results.

Data Collection and Analysis

The available manuscript states that questionnaire responses were collected from 50 participants. The analysis reported frequencies, percentages, item means, and standard deviations. No inferential tests are reported, and the data presented do not permit conclusions about causal effects. The original manuscript also mentions interviews with psychiatrists in its conclusion, but provides no interview method, participant details, quotations, or systematic analysis. Those interviews are therefore not treated as a formal qualitative data source in this revised version.

Ethical Considerations

Because participants included minors and the questionnaire concerned potentially distressing material, the manuscript should state the relevant ethics approval or institutional permission, parental/guardian consent and adolescent assent procedures, confidentiality protections, and any support/referral procedure offered to participants. These details were not available in the supplied manuscript and must be completed by the authors before submission. No approval or consent procedure is assumed here.

Results

Results are presented descriptively. The five response categories are reported in the original dataset; the item means and standard deviations below reproduce the supplied figures.

Exposure to war news

Item	Mean	SD	Key response pattern
TV or mobile war news	3.40	0.99	66% sometimes; 22% always
War discussed at home or school	2.64	1.24	44% sometimes; 26% never
War videos/images on social media	3.46	1.40	36% sometimes; 34% always

Participants reported exposure through television/mobile devices and social media more often than through conversations at home or school. Social-media videos and images had the highest mean among the three exposure items (M = 3.46), closely followed by television/mobile news (M = 3.40).

Emotional reactions

Item	Mean	SD	Key response pattern
Feeling scared when hearing about war	3.12	1.69	36% always; 30% never
Worry that something bad might happen	3.70	0.99	28% always; 24% often
Sadness when seeing people affected by war	4.62	0.75	78% always

Sadness was the strongest reported emotional response: 39 of 50 participants (78%) selected "always." Worry also received a relatively high mean (M = 3.70). Responses to fear were more dispersed, with 36% selecting "always" and 30% selecting "never," indicating considerable variation within this sample.

Anxiety- and stress-related responses

Item	Mean	SD	Key response pattern
Thinking about war when not wanting to	3.48	0.84	50% sometimes; 32% often
Trouble sleeping after war news	2.76	1.39	36% sometimes; 28% never
Nervousness after watching/hearing news	3.22	1.33	36% sometimes; 24% always

Half the participants reported unwanted thoughts about war sometimes, and a further 32% reported this often. Sleep difficulties had a lower mean (M = 2.76), although 16% selected "always." Nervousness responses varied, with "sometimes" the most common response (36%).

Behavior and perceptions

Item	Mean	SD	Key response pattern
Avoiding war news	2.56	1.46	38% never; 34% sometimes
Talking to someone when upset	4.12	1.15	58% always
Feeling safe at home and school	4.00	1.16	52% always
Thinking war could happen nearby	3.58	1.18	28% always; 24% often
Understanding what is seen in the news	4.34	0.96	64% always
Feeling confused about war news	3.62	1.19	34% always; 42% sometimes

Social-support seeking was prominent: 58% said they always talked to someone when upset. More than half (52%) always felt safe at home and school, while 28% always thought war could happen near them. These responses show that perceived safety and perceived vulnerability coexisted. Most participants reported understanding what they saw in the news, yet confusion was also common.

Summary of Principal findings

Across the 15 items, the highest mean was for sadness at seeing people affected by war (M = 4.62), followed by understanding news content (M = 4.34) and talking to someone when upset (M = 4.12). The lowest mean was for avoiding war news (M = 2.56), followed by war-related conversations at home or school (M = 2.64) and sleep difficulty (M = 2.76). These descriptive comparisons do not demonstrate statistical differences or causal relationships.

Discussion

The findings portray war news as a regular feature of participants' information environment, particularly through social media and television/mobile devices. This pattern is consistent with scholarship emphasizing the growing significance of mediated exposure to conflict and the accessibility of visual material on digital platforms (Pfefferbaum et al., 2020; Pe'er & Slone, 2022). However, the questionnaire did not measure exposure duration, graphic intensity, or the specific conflicts viewed; the relative contribution of these factors cannot therefore be determined.

The clearest emotional result was sadness in response to people affected by war. With 78% selecting "always," this response was more pronounced than fear or nervousness. The result is consistent with an empathetic response to human suffering, but empathy was not measured independently and should not be presented as a proven explanation. Worry was also relatively high, while fear responses were polarized. This variation supports a differentiated account of adolescents' responses rather than the assumption that every young person reacts in the same way.

Unwanted thoughts about war and nervousness were reported by some participants, whereas sleep difficulty was less prominent. These are self-reported questionnaire responses, not clinical measures; they cannot establish the presence of anxiety disorders, trauma-related disorders, or clinically significant stress. Prior research has reported associations between media exposure to conflict and distress, but the present descriptive design does not test those associations statistically (Pe'er & Slone, 2022; Holman et al., 2024).

The coexistence of perceived safety and perceived threat is an important finding. Many participants reported feeling safe at home and school, yet some also believed war could occur nearby. These responses are not necessarily contradictory: an adolescent may feel secure in immediate surroundings while remaining concerned about wider instability. Similarly, high self-reported comprehension coexisted with confusion. Participants may understand the basic content of a report while finding its causes, implications, or humanitarian consequences difficult to interpret; the questionnaire, however, did not distinguish among these forms of understanding.

Social-support seeking was common, with 58% reporting that they always talked to someone when upset. This finding suggests that interpersonal communication is a relevant topic for families and educators, although the study did not measure the quality or effectiveness of support. Previous work highlights parental mediation and media literacy as potentially useful ways of helping children interpret distressing news (Comer et al., 2008). Schools and families may therefore consider age-appropriate discussion, access to trusted adults, and guidance on managing repeated exposure, without assuming that all news consumption is harmful.

Limitations

The study has several limitations. First, the sample was small (N = 50), and the sampling method is not documented; findings cannot be generalized to all adolescents in Jalalabad or Afghanistan. Second, the questionnaire relies on self-report and includes no clinical assessment. Third, the analysis is descriptive and does not test associations between exposure and outcomes, compare subgroups, or establish temporal order. Fourth, details about instrument validation, data-collection procedures, and ethics are absent from the supplied manuscript. Finally, the reference list includes incomplete bibliographic entries that require verification. These limitations should be addressed transparently in the final submission.

Conclusion

This study described war-news exposure and reported responses among 50 adolescents in Jalalabad, Nangarhar. Participants commonly encountered war-related information through social media and television/mobile devices. Sadness at seeing people affected by war was the strongest reported emotional response, while worry and unwanted thoughts were also notable. At the same time, many participants reported seeking social support and feeling safe at home and school, even as some perceived war as a possible nearby threat.

The findings support attention to adolescents' experiences of war-related media, but they do not show that exposure caused the reported responses. Families, teachers, and other adults can help by discussing difficult news in developmentally appropriate ways, encouraging critical media literacy, and ensuring that adolescents who experience persistent distress can access suitable support. Future research should use larger and more clearly sampled groups, validated measures, and longitudinal or mixed-methods designs. It should examine exposure frequency and duration, types of content, age and gender differences, prior direct exposure, and the roles of family support and coping.

Interdisciplinary relevance: By bringing together media exposure, adolescent development, educational practice, and psychosocial well-being, this study offers a local descriptive foundation for research and support strategies in Afghanistan.

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