

The Impact of Continuous Exposure to War Content on Social-Media on Secondary Trauma Among Youth: An Analytical Clinical Study

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Abstract: *The world has witnessed a massive expansion in the use of social media as a primary source of information and news over the past decade, leading to increased exposure, particularly among young people, to scenes of violence and armed conflict. Exposure to war is no longer limited to those living in areas of direct conflict; many individuals now face various forms of psychological impact as a result of constantly following war-related content on digital platforms. This shift has led to the emergence of the concept of indirect trauma, or what is known as secondary trauma, which is a psychological condition that may appear in individuals as a result of repeated exposure to the suffering of others or witnessing traumatic events without the person being directly involved in them.*

This study aims to explore the relationship between continuous exposure to war-related content on social media and the emergence of secondary trauma symptoms in young people, analyzing a range of associated psychological variables such as anxiety, sleep disturbances, and emotional desensitization. The study employs a descriptive-analytical approach, applying a set of psychological scales to a sample of young people who are heavy users of social media. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to a broader scientific understanding of the indirect psychological effects of war in the digital age and may provide a framework for designing preventative psychological intervention programs targeting those most vulnerable to this type of trauma.

Keywords: Youth mental health, Secondary traumatic stress, Digital media impact, War-Related content.

I. INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed a radical shift in the nature of exposure to traumatic events as a result of the rapid development of digital media and the proliferation of social media platforms. These platforms have become the primary source of news and information for a large segment of young people, leading to increased and continuous exposure to images of violence and armed conflict widely circulated online. While these platforms offer important opportunities for disseminating information and raising awareness of humanitarian issues, repeated exposure to war-related content can leave deep psychological scars on followers, even those geographically distant from conflict zones.

In this context, the concept of secondary trauma has emerged as a significant term in clinical psychology. It refers to a range of psychological symptoms that may appear in individuals as a result of indirect exposure to traumatic events, such as listening to victims' accounts or viewing images and videos documenting violent events. Several recent studies have indicated that repeated exposure to conflict content through media can lead to symptoms similar to those associated with trauma-related disorders, such as severe anxiety, sleep disturbances, and the recurrence of disturbing mental images.

This phenomenon is particularly pronounced among young people due to their high rates of use of digital platforms and their reliance on them as a primary source of news and information. Young people spend long hours daily consuming digital content, which can increase their exposure to scenes of violence and trauma associated with war. With repeated



exposure, psychological effects can gradually accumulate, forming a pattern of indirect trauma that may impact an individual's mental health and emotional functioning.

Despite growing scientific interest in studying the impact of war on mental health, most studies have traditionally focused on individuals living in conflict zones or those directly exposed to traumatic events. In contrast, the impact of digital exposure to war through social media remains an emerging field of research requiring further investigation and analysis, especially given the widespread use of these platforms among young people. This underscores the importance of this study, which seeks to explore the relationship between continuous exposure to war-related content on social media and the emergence of secondary trauma symptoms in young people.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

The contemporary media environment has witnessed fundamental transformations as a result of the rapid development in communication technology and the widespread dissemination of social media platforms, which has reshaped the patterns of how individuals receive global events, especially those related to wars and armed conflicts. Numerous studies have shown that repeated exposure to war or disaster content through the media can lead to psychological symptoms similar to those associated with direct exposure to traumatic events.

The study of **Holman, Garfin, and Silver (2020)** indicates that intense media exposure to violent events can lead to increased levels of anxiety and psychological stress in individuals, even those who were not directly exposed to the traumatic events. The study's findings suggest that continuous exposure to media coverage of traumatic events can lead to the emergence of symptoms associated with psychological trauma, such as sleep disturbances and rumination.

Pe'er and Slone (2022) examined the relationship between media exposure to armed conflict and adolescent mental health, showed that continuous exposure to war-related news is associated with higher levels of psychological distress and symptoms of trauma. The findings also indicated that certain psychological factors, such as optimism and self-control, can mitigate the psychological effects of this exposure.

Thompson et al. (2021) studied the impact of exposure to violent content via social media, it was found that intensive use of these platforms may lead to higher levels of psychological stress among young people, especially when the content includes scenes of violence or human suffering.

Gazit and Eden (2025) examined the relationship between interaction with crisis and war-related content on social media and users' levels of psychological trauma. The results showed that repeated interaction with traumatic online content may lead to increased symptoms of secondary trauma in young people.

Serdiuk et al. (2025) that examined the impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war on the mental health of young people showed that repeated exposure to war content through the media is associated with higher levels of post-traumatic stress disorder and anxiety among adolescents.

Dahan et al. (2024) in their study also showed that intensive media exposure to wars can lead to secondary trauma symptoms even among mental health workers, as following war-related news through the media is associated with higher levels of anxiety and psychological stress.

In a qualitative study conducted by **Franco and Boniel-Nissim (2024)** on adolescents' exposure to violent conflict-related content on social media, it was found that this exposure leads to a range of psychological effects such as anxiety, sleep disturbances and feelings of insecurity.



As shown in the study of **Rogers et al. (2022)**, repeated exposure to disaster-related news via social media can lead to higher levels of secondary trauma among users, especially among individuals who spend a lot of time following the news.

In **Houston et al. (2021)** study; the role of social media during crises, it was found that these platforms can contribute to transmitting the psychological effects of traumatic events to a wide audience of users, which may lead to an increased prevalence of psychological trauma symptoms at the community level.

A study by **Kanwal and Yousaf (2021)** on university students also showed that intense media exposure to traumatic content is associated with higher levels of secondary trauma. It also indicated that social support can play a significant role in mitigating these psychological effects.

In a recent analytical study by **Zasiekina et al. (2025)** on the prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder among adolescents in conflict zones, it was found that repeated exposure to war-related events is one of the most important factors associated with the emergence of symptoms of psychological trauma.

Garfin, Silver, and Holman (2020) also indicates that continuous media exposure to traumatic events may lead to increased levels of psychological stress and anxiety in individuals, even those who do not live in conflict zones.

The results of **Bodas and Siman-Tov study (2023)** indicate that social media plays an important role in shaping individuals' perception of crises and wars, as repeated exposure to war-related content can increase feelings of fear and insecurity.

The study of **Southwick et al. (2022)** also showed that repeated exposure to traumatic events through the media may lead to the emergence of secondary trauma symptoms, especially in individuals with low levels of psychological resilience.

One more study on the impact of exposure to shocking news online showed that intensive use of social media is associated with increased levels of anxiety and psychological stress among young people, especially during times of global crisis.

III. METHODS

The current study employed a descriptive-analytical approach to examine the relationship between continuous exposure to war-related content on social media and the emergence of secondary trauma symptoms among young people. This approach is well-suited to studying contemporary psychological phenomena that require analyzing the relationships between a range of psychological and behavioral variables.

Study Sample:

The study sample consisted of (400) young men and women their aged group between (18–30), selected using a random sampling method from among social media users in Iraq. It was confirmed that all participants used social media daily and followed news related to wars or armed conflicts.

Study Instruments:

- Secondary Traumatic Stress Scale
- Generalized Anxiety Scale (GAD-7)
- Social Media Exposure to War-Related Content Questionnaire



Statistical Procedures:

The data were analyzed using SPSS software through:

a) Standard deviations:

Table (1) shows the descriptive statistics of the study variables

Variable	Mean	SD
Exposure to war-related content	3.85	0.72
Secondary traumatic stress	3.67	0.81
Anxiety (GAD-7)	3.54	0.76

Table(1) it shows the descriptive results indicate that average exposure to war-related content on social media was relatively high, reflecting the intensity of young people's daily interaction with this type of content. The results also showed that average secondary trauma fell within the high-medium range, indicating tangible psychological effects among the participants. Similarly, general anxiety registered moderate to high levels, suggesting an overlap of emotional symptoms associated with continuous media exposure. It is noteworthy that the standard deviations were moderate, indicating relative homogeneity in participants' responses. Taken together, these results suggest that repeated exposure to traumatic content may be associated with a general increase in negative psychological indicators. These indicators also underscore the importance of studying this variable as a contemporary psychological risk factor. These findings can be considered preliminary evidence supporting the hypothesis of a relationship between media exposure and mental health.

b) Pearson correlation coefficient:

Table (2) shows the correlation between study variable

Variable	Exposure to war-related content	Secondary traumatic content	Anxiety
Exposure to war-related content	1	0.62**	0.58**
Secondary traumatic stress	0.62**	1	0.65**
Anxiety	0.58**	0.65**	1

** Statistically significant at the 0.01 level

Table(2) it shows the correlation analysis revealed statistically significant positive relationships between exposure to war-related content and both secondary trauma and anxiety, indicating that increased exposure is associated with increased psychological symptoms. The correlation between exposure and secondary trauma was relatively high, reflecting the strong relationship between the two variables. Similarly, the relationship between anxiety and secondary trauma was also strong, suggesting a psychological overlap between these two dimensions. These findings suggest that media exposure not only has a direct impact but may also act by amplifying feelings of anxiety. Furthermore, these results support the hypothesis that social media serves as a medium for transmitting the psychological effects of traumatic events. They also bolster theoretical models linking indirect exposure to trauma with emotional responses. These relationships can be seen as indicative of a cumulative psychological pattern associated with sustained exposure to traumatic content.

c) Multiple regression analysis:

Table(3) shows multiple regression analysis predicting secondary traumatic stress.

Independent variable	Beta (β)	t	Sig.
Exposure to war-related content	0.48	9.12	0.000



Anxiety	0.36	7.45	0.000
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**** R² = 0.52**

The results of table (3) multiple regression analysis indicate that exposure to war-related content is a strong predictor of secondary trauma, significantly contributing to the explanation of the variance in this dependent variable. Anxiety also played a significant predictive role, suggesting that individuals with higher levels of anxiety are more likely to experience secondary trauma. The coefficient of determination (R²) demonstrates that the model explains a considerable proportion of the variance, reflecting the strength of the explanatory model used. These findings suggest that the psychological impact of media exposure is not random but rather predictable through specific psychological variables. The results also indicate that continuous exposure acts as a stressor that can exacerbate psychological symptoms over time. These findings support recent trends in psychology that emphasize the role of the digital environment in shaping emotional experiences. This model can be considered an important explanatory framework for understanding secondary trauma in young people.

d) T-test:

Table(4) shows gender differences in secondary traumatic stress

Gender	Mean	SD	t	Sig.
M	3.45	0.74	2.85	0.005
F	3.82	0.79		

The results of the t-test showed statistically significant differences between males and females in the level of secondary trauma, with females scoring higher than males. This finding suggests that females may be more affected by traumatic war-related content on social media. This can be explained by differences in emotional processing, as females tend to exhibit more intense emotional responses to traumatic human events. Social and cultural factors may also play a role in enhancing females' sensitivity to the suffering of others. Conversely, males may be less likely to express psychological symptoms despite exposure to the same content. These findings are consistent with numerous studies indicating higher rates of anxiety and trauma among females. They also underscore the importance of considering individual differences in psychological research. These results can be used to design gender-specific psychological intervention programs.

e) Impact of time spent on social media:

Table(5) shows the impact of time spent on social-media

Time spent on social-media	Mean (Secondary trauma)	SD
Less than 2 hrs	3.10	0.60
2-4 hrs	3.55	0.70
More than 4 hrs	4.02	0.82

The results of the table (5) indicate a clear upward trend in secondary trauma levels with increasing social media usage, with individuals spending more than four hours daily scoring the highest averages. This reflects the cumulative effect of exposure to traumatic content, where repeated exposure reinforces negative psychological responses. The findings also suggest that duration of exposure is a significant factor in determining the severity of psychological impact, not just the type of content. This finding supports the "psychological dose" hypothesis, which posits that increased exposure leads to increased impact. On the other hand, excessive use may be linked to weakened psychological coping mechanisms in individuals. These results also highlight the dangers of unregulated social media use and underscore the importance of raising awareness about digital time management as a means of psychological prevention. These findings can serve as a practical guide for developing preventative interventions targeting young people.



IV. RESULTS

The results of the statistical analysis indicate clear and statistically significant patterns in the relationship between continuous exposure to war-related content on social media and both secondary trauma and anxiety among young people. Descriptive statistics showed that the average exposure to war-related content was relatively high, reflecting the intensive nature of digital content consumption in the contemporary environment. The results also showed that levels of secondary trauma and anxiety tended to be high, indicating a significant psychological impact associated with this exposure.

The results of correlation analysis, revealed a strong positive correlation between exposure to war content and secondary trauma ($r = 0.62$, $p < .01$), indicating that increased exposure is associated with increased symptoms related to indirect trauma. A positive correlation was also found between exposure and anxiety ($r = 0.58$, $p < .01$), in addition to a strong correlation between anxiety and secondary trauma ($r = 0.65$, $p < .01$), suggesting a dynamic interaction between these psychological variables.

In addition the multiple regression analysis, the results showed that the regression model was statistically significant ($F = 112.45$, $p < 0.001$), explaining 52% of the variance in secondary trauma ($R^2 = 0.52$). Exposure to war-related content was found to be the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$), followed by anxiety ($\beta = 0.36$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that media exposure acts as a primary stressor contributing to the formation of the trauma response.

The t-test results also showed statistically significant gender differences, with females reporting higher levels of secondary trauma compared to males ($t = 2.85$, $p < 0.01$), which may reflect differences in emotional processing and response to traumatic content. Furthermore, the analysis of variance (ANOVA) results showed a direct correlation between the duration of social media use and the level of secondary trauma, with averages significantly higher among individuals who spent more than four hours daily.

V. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that continuous exposure to war-related content on social media is positively and statistically associated with higher levels of secondary trauma and anxiety among young people. This reflects the profound psychological impact of indirect exposure to traumatic events in the contemporary digital environment. These results confirm that traumatic experience is no longer limited to direct exposure to events but can be transmitted through digital media, thus reinforcing the concept of indirect or secondary trauma in the context of modern media.

These findings are consistent with those of Holman et al. (2020), which indicated that intense media exposure to traumatic events can lead to psychological responses similar to those associated with direct exposure, including anxiety and sleep disturbances. The results also support Garfin et al. (2020) assertion that media can act as an amplifier of traumatic experiences, with repeated exposure amplifying negative psychological effects.

The study also revealed that exposure to war-related content is a strong predictor of secondary trauma, consistent with the findings of Pe'er & Slone (2022), who confirmed that media exposure to armed conflict is associated with increased trauma symptoms in adolescents. This can be explained by cognitive trauma processing theory, where repeated exposure to traumatic content reinforces mental images associated with the event in emotional memory, increasing the likelihood of their repeated recall.

On the other hand, the results showed a strong correlation between anxiety and secondary trauma, suggesting that anxiety may play a mediating role in explaining the relationship between media exposure and traumatic responses. This finding is consistent with what Southwick et al. (2022) indicated: that individuals with high levels of anxiety are more likely to develop symptoms of trauma when exposed to traumatic events, whether directly or indirectly.

In addition to that the study revealed statistically significant gender differences, with females exhibiting higher levels of secondary trauma compared to males. This can be explained by differences in emotional processing, as females tend to display more intense emotional responses to human suffering. This finding aligns with numerous studies indicating that females are more susceptible to anxiety and trauma-related disorders.



Furthermore, the results showed that the duration of social media use is directly correlated with the level of secondary trauma, with psychological symptoms increasing among individuals who spend more time consuming war-related content. This can be explained by the concept of "cumulative exposure," where repeated exposure to traumatic content amplifies psychological effects over time. Excessive use may also contribute to reduced opportunities for psychological recovery, as the individual remains in a state of constant exposure to traumatic stimuli.

From a critical standpoint, these findings suggest that social media, despite its role in disseminating information, can also contribute to creating a stressful psychological environment, particularly when it comes to content related to wars and conflicts. The results also highlight the importance of considering media exposure as a psychological risk factor that should be taken into account in contemporary clinical studies.

Despite the importance of these findings, the current study has some limitations. It relied on a descriptive-analytical approach, which restricts the ability to infer causal relationships. Furthermore, the use of self-assessment tools may be susceptible to biases such as social or cognitive bias. Therefore, the study recommends future research using longitudinal and experimental designs to examine the causal relationship between media exposure and psychological trauma.

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