Beyond Borders: How the Palestine-Israel Conflict Fuels Vicarious Trauma in Young Adults of Pakistan

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Abstract: The rise of digital media has increased exposure to global conflicts, often leading to emotional distress. This study explores vicarious trauma among young adults exposed to conflict-related content on social media, focusing on the Israel-Palestinian crisis. Using reflexive thematic analysis of semi-structured focus groups, the research identifies four key themes. Participants expressed feelings of helplessness, guilt, and sadness, yet demonstrated emotional resourcefulness. Faith in divine justice provided strength, while social support through communal discussions offered validation. Resilience was evident in refraining from distressing content and regulating emotions to stay engaged without burnout. These findings highlight how digital media shapes emotional responses and coping mechanisms, emphasizing the need for psychological tools to support well-being while maintaining moral engagement. This study contributes to the understanding of indirect trauma in the digital age, with implications for mental health support in increasingly connected societies.

1. Background

The October 7, 2023, attack on Palestinians by Israeli militants reignited attention on the long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict [1]. With complete control over Gaza's air, sea, and land access, Israel's blockade has deepened Palestinian suffering. While the recent escalation has intensified violence, it remains rooted in historical power imbalances, making the conflict highly complex and inflexible [2].

Vicarious traumatization (VT) occurs when individuals experience second-hand trauma through exposure to others' suffering, sharing similarities with PTSD, such as depression, avoidance, and emotional distress [2]. Professionals in fields like healthcare, content moderation, and research are particularly vulnerable due to repeated exposure to traumatic material [3].

Factors like age, gender, social support, and past trauma can influence the severity of VT, with symptoms ranging from sadness to withdrawal and distorted worldviews (Busch, 2014). The rise of social media has intensified this issue by making graphic and violent content more accessible, amplifying psychological distress [3]. Unlike traditional media, social media lacks editorial oversight, blending factual and opinion-based content [4]. Prolonged exposure to traumatic content, such as the Israel-Palestine conflict, can trigger PTSD symptoms, particularly in younger audiences (Holman et al., 2014). The lack of content warnings on platforms like TikTok and Instagram can exacerbate emotional distress [5].

The Constructivist Self-Development Theory [6] underpins vicarious traumatization, suggesting trauma can disrupt core cognitive schemas related to esteem, safety, trust, control, and intimacy [6]. Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Stress and Coping Theory explains how individuals respond to stressors like vicarious trauma, leading to either maladaptive (e.g., avoidance) or adaptive (e.g., resilience) coping.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957) highlights the psychological discomfort arising when traumatic content clashes with personal beliefs about justice or safety, often leading to guilt or self-blame. For instance,

witnessing atrocities online may cause internal conflict when empathy is met with helplessness. Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory adds that individuals form behavioral responses by observing others. On social media, people often mirror how others react to conflict, shaping their emotional and cognitive engagement accordingly. The Israeli Palestinian conflict remains one of the most pressing and emotionally charged global issues. With increased exposure to such crises via digital platforms, young adults face rising risks of emotional distress, anxiety, and vicarious trauma [7].

While professionals like journalists and aid workers have extensively studied trauma, there is limited research on how young adults process indirect exposure to conflict through social media [8]. In Pakistan, where cultural and religious ties to Palestine are strong, this exposure often results in heightened emotional responses. Understanding this connection is vital for addressing the psychological and socio-political impact on Pakistani youth and highlights the urgent need for targeted mental health interventions.

This study investigates the vicarious trauma experienced by young adults amid the ongoing Palestine-Israel conflict and examines its psychological impact on their mental health. It also explores how exposure to distressing events—often disseminated via social media—affects their emotional well-being, alongside the coping mechanisms they employ to manage such overwhelming content.

 The fundamental research questions guiding this inquiry are: How do young adults experience vicarious trauma? In what ways does the Palestine-Israel conflict affect their mental health? And how do they cope with distressing content on social media? Addressing these questions aims to deepen understanding of the complex interplay between conflict-driven trauma, media exposure, and mental health resilience in this population.

2. Method
2.1 Research Design
Qualitative research is appropriate for this study as it explores complex phenomena through individuals' thoughts, emotions, and experiences [9]. A phenomenological approach was adopted to understand participants lived experiences, focusing on the subjective meanings they assign to them [10]. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to identify and interpret patterns within the data, an accessible and flexible method well-suited for analyzing qualitative data [11]. The resulting codes reflect the researcher's interpretation of these patterns.

2.2 Reflexivity
As researchers, we acknowledge our role in actively participating in the research process. Moreover, our cultural backgrounds and perspectives regarding the Palestine-Israel conflict influenced our interpretations of the data. We critically examined how our presumptions and values influenced the overall analysis by engaging in ongoing self-reflection [12].

 By being part of the same social and cultural framework, we were able to interpret meanings, emotions, and lived experiences with an increased level of understanding. We collectively adopted the Insider perspective, reflecting on our positionality and how it shaped our interactions with the participants and data. This reflexive approach allowed us to navigate the balance between insider familiarity and thorough analysis, enriching the depth and authenticity of our findings.

2.3 Participants

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Focus Group Participants (N=21)

Variable	Group 1 (N=6)	Group 2 (N=8)	Group 3 (N=7)
Age Range	20-25	20-25	20-25
Gender			

Female	5	7	7
Male	1	1	0
Education Level			
Undergraduate	4	8	7
Postgraduate	2	0	0

Note: N = total number of participants

This study involved 21 participants who were young adults aged between 20-25 years. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling, leading to snowball sampling. Initially, we reached out to people who fit the inclusion criteria through social media posts and posters around the university [13].

Those who were easy to access and closer in proximity were selected to participate in the focus group discussions; this was convenient sampling [14]. These participants then referred to others from their network who were eligible to participate, which led to snowball sampling [15]. The inclusion criteria required participants to have interacted with graphic content related to the Palestine-Israel conflict on social media platforms, hence having the knowledge and exposure to the ongoing conflict.

3. Data Collection
Qualitative data were gathered through three in-person semi-structured focus group discussions over three weeks, each comprising 6–8 participants aged 20–25. Participants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling. Discussions were held at the Wellbeing Centre, Bahria University Islamabad, using a bilingual (English and Urdu) focus group guide developed from prior literature on vicarious trauma.

This guide included open-ended questions related to the Palestine-Israel conflict on social media [16]. One researcher facilitated the session, while the other acted as a moderator and took observational notes. Participants were assigned numerical identifiers, and all sessions were audio recorded with informed consent. Recordings were transcribed verbatim by both researchers to ensure accuracy and preserve the nuance of participants' responses.

3.1 Data Analysis
Data was analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis. Researchers familiarized themselves with the transcripts and accompanying notes, highlighting key data segments [17]. Manual coding combined both inductive and deductive approaches, identifying semantic elements (e.g., emotional responses) and latent meanings (e.g., faith as a coping tool).

Codes were then grouped and color-coded into preliminary themes. A total of 52 codes were extracted, clustered, and refined into four overarching themes: trauma exposure response, role of social media, empathetic involvement in advocacy/social justice, and coping mechanisms [18]. Twelve sub-themes were also identified (see Table 2). Researcher reflexivity and collaborative memo writing ensured rigor and trustworthiness throughout the analysis process.

3.2 Ethical Considerations
This study followed ethical guidelines by obtaining signed informed consent and ensuring participant confidentiality (APA, 2017). Participants were briefed on the study's purpose, informed of its sensitive nature, and given the option to withdraw at any time [19]. Consent included agreement to audio recording, with assurance that data would be securely stored and used solely for research purposes. Those experiencing distress were offered a referral to the Wellbeing Centre at Bahria University, Islamabad, for free counseling [20].

4. Results

The results of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of how individuals experience and cope with vicarious trauma when exposed to conflict-related graphic content on social media. After thoroughly following the six steps of reflexive thematic analysis by [21]. four key themes emerged as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: The table presents themes, sub-themes, and relevant codes derived from the primary data.

Theme	Subtheme	Relevant Codes
Trauma Exposure Response	Emotional Dysregulation	Anger Guilt Helplessness Sadness Anxiety
	Compassion Fatigue	Feeling trapped in a cycle of witnessing suffering with no solution Imagining the self in conflict Picturing the graphic content even after avoiding it Transition in emotions
	Cognitive Overload	Experiencing disorganized thoughts Feeling useless Trying to empathize with oppressors Unsure about feelings
	Somatic Responses	Crying Feeling heavy-hearted Feeling palpitations Goosebumps Loss of appetite Shivering
The Role of social media	Empathetic Engagement	Graphic content aids better understanding of the conflict Empathy Increase in knowledge due to social media. Role of social media in activism Role of social media in awareness and education social media is emotionally charged but effective in the correct portrayal.
	Social Media Burnout	Bias in portrayal of information, Recalling past traumas Censorship Hypocrisy in media portrayal
Theme	Subtheme	Relevant Codes
	Conscious Avoidance	Avoiding graphic content Becoming numb Changing the mindset to cope Vicarious trauma: escape response Mindful media consumption

Coping Mechanisms		Boundary setting Indifference
	Religious Coping	Belief in ultimate justice Faith-based measures to cope
	Social Support	Feeling comfortable talking to others Venting out
	Resilience	Balancing engagement and emotional health Consciously switching emotions as a coping mechanism. Interacting to prevent indifference Picking positives from negatives to cope up Trying to assess the conflict and mentalities of people despite the mental toll Acceptance of death over miserable living
Empathy Leading to Activism	Forms of Activism	Boycotting brands Digital Activism Donations Humane Endorsement
	Challenges to Activism	Challenges due to misinformation Normalization

4.1 Theme One: Trauma Exposure Response

This theme includes the psychological and emotional impact experienced by the participants as they engaged with the Palestine-Israel conflict through social media and interpersonal discussions [22].

The participants revealed a widespread feeling of vicarious trauma, which showed itself as emotional tiredness, irregular sleeping habits and trouble focusing on everyday duties. This theme has four sub-themes, which are emotional reaction, compassion fatigue, cognitive distortions, and somatic symptoms [23].

4.2 Emotional Dysregulation

The main emotional reactions are anger and frustration, especially toward the public's lack of concern, the perceived inaction of world leaders, and the insensitive reactions to awareness initiatives [24]. This changes over time, starting with emotional discomfort and shifting to anger towards the deep-rooted flaws of society. Participant 4 (FGD2) narrated:

"I feel sad watching Palestinian content, but when I watch the leaders speak about it like so ruthlessly and so brutally.
"مطلب، انہیں اس بات سے کوئی فرق نہیں پڑتا، تو مجھے بہت غصہ آتا ہے، لیکن مجھے اسرائیلیوں پر غصہ نہیں آتا۔"
Like I have more angry feelings towards the leaders who are promoting and supporting a genocide.
Explaining the anger experienced towards inaction by the global leaders [25]. Many participants experienced sadness over the conflict, especially for the children and animals suffering because of the conflict in Palestine.

Participant 3 (FGD2) reported her grief in the following words:

"When you see the kids crying, asking for their parents, and the parents aren't there, and if it's not humans towards whom I feel much too, it's animals, it is the animals I see

"ان کے ساتھ بہت کچھ ہو رہا ہوتا ہے، یعنی اچھے گھر میں پلے ہوئے(animals) جانوروں کے ساتھ ظلم ہو رہا ہوتا ہے۔"
And they're confused too, they don't know what's happening either, humans or animals, they're all getting tortured."

In addition to this, feelings of helplessness were reported by various participants as narrated by participant 1 (FGD1):

"You cannot physically be there and help.
کسی بھی طریقے سے
You just feel helpless."

Lastly, a feeling of guilt was one of the repetitive patterns seen among the participants, as participant 7 (FGD3) stated:

"I start feeling guilty like how can I enjoy when such things are going on like on the day of my engagement when I came back home at night I turned my phone on the first couple of posts were the day someone got burned and then i was just like how could I have such a huge celebration, it's just feelings of guilt mostly"

4.3 Compassion Fatigue

As a result of being exposed to graphic material and stories of suffering regularly, participants report feeling caught in a never-ending loop of empathy and misery [26]. This cycle starts with a strong emotional reaction, such as sadness or rage, but as their ability to think and react effectively declines, it gradually transforms into emotions of frustration and helplessness. As the cycle continues, participants experience moral confusion and emotional exhaustion. Participant 3 (FGD2) narrated:

"Now it's Palestine, it's Lebanon, it's just this loop we're all stuck in
لوگ اب آہستہ آہستہ بے حس (numb) ہو رہے ہیں۔"

Participant 2 (FGD1) shared how this leads to imagining themselves in the conflict:

ان کے لیے تو جو بھی ہوتا تھا"
but even for us imagining کہ وہ جو emotional state change
ہوتے ہوئے دکھاتے ہیں.
It's very hard to watch"

4.4 Cognitive Overload

A typical reaction seen in the data is to have disordered thoughts, in which the continuous bombardment of upsetting information impairs participants' capacity for clear cognition, resulting in uncertainty and mental exhaustion. Participants report feeling useless, in the face of widespread suffering, their efforts, such as contributing or spreading awareness, are not enough [27]. Participant 5 (FGD3) explained the feelings of being useless:

دیکھ کر جو بے بسی کی فیلنگ تھی اور پھر اس کے بعد غصہ بھی بہت زیادہ اتا ہے کہ لوگ یہ کیسے ہونے دے سکتے ہیں یہ اس طرح ہو رہا ہے
ہیں کہ ہم ان کی مدد نہیں کر سکتے useless اور اپنی بے بسی پہ بھی غصہ اتا ہے کہ ہم اتنے "

Participant 8 (FGD2) shared how the mentality of empathizing with the oppressors emerges in individuals after viewing the content:

اچھا نہیں feel ہوتا اور obviously ا اس کے ساتھ empathize کرنے کی بندہ کوشش کرتا ہے لیکن میں کہتا ہوں کہ ا دوسرے کے "
perspective سے بھی اگر ہم دیکھیں تو ہم تھوڑا سمجھ سکتے ہیں کہ
We are actually on the same boat."

Many participants experienced disorganized thoughts, as stated by participant 4 (FGD2):

میری "
thoughts
disorganize بہت
ہو جاتی ہیں مجھے لگتا ہے کہ جیسے
"The world is ending, and everything is ending, and I can't do anything about it.

4.5 Somatic Responses

Crying is a common way for people to express their grief and helplessness, as narrated by the participants. This emotional turmoil frequently results in physiological reactions [28]. The degree of emotional involvement individuals has while processing the suffering of others is reflected in this external response. As narrated by participant 1 (FGD2):

"It was really difficult, and I used to cry a lot."

Goosebumps often appear as a reaction to emotionally charged situations, including hearing of someone's resilience or extreme pain. Participant 2 (FGD3) narrated:

" شروع میں جب kind of نیا تھا یہ سب تب بہت ہوتا تھا رونا آتا تھا body انسان کی shiver کرتی ہے ایسے feel ہوتا تھا goosebumps یہ سب کوئی شروع میں ہوتا تھا "

Participant 6 (FGD1) explained how feelings of heavy-heartedness and shivering emerge occasionally:

"I get very heavy-hearted, and I get emotional, and sometimes there's shivering."

The significant effect on participants' general well-being, where emotional discomfort impairs fundamental physiological processes, is further highlighted by loss of appetite, as said by participant 5 (FGD1):

"I experience a decrease in my appetite, loss of appetite."

Participant 3 (FGD2) further narrated the emergence of palpitations because of being emotionally involved with such content:

"I feel palpitations uhh کیوں کہ already have had an issue with that

تو

palpitations کا issue ہے آتا

4.6 Theme Two: The Role of Social Media

This theme explores how digital platforms influence participants' interactions with the Palestine-Israel conflict in two ways [29]. The main source of real-time information, intimate stories, and graphic material that heightens empathy and awareness is on social media. Participants recognize its vital role in bringing human rights abuses to the attention of audiences around the world and supporting advocacy initiatives through campaigns, donations, and activism [30].

However, participants frequently feel overloaded by the continuous exposure to upsetting material, which leads to emotional exhaustion or burnout. This theme further has two sub-themes, which are empathetic engagement and social media burnout [31].

4.7 Empathetic Engagement

A deeper understanding of the humanitarian crisis is made possible by participant's recognition of the effectiveness of graphic content in illustrating the seriousness of the conflict [32]. Empathy is prompted by visual evidence, which makes people more sympathetic to the suffering of those impacted. Participant 7 (FGD2) explained how the graphic content aided in making individuals aware of the conflict and the reality of it: When it started"

"اتر limbs سے ان کی جو bombs آسان نہیں تھا دیکھنا کہ ہر وقت لوگوں کو دیکھاeven though تھا، continuously میں نے تو aware کرنا رہے ہیں، بچوں کے چھوٹے چھوٹے ہاتھ کتنے متاثر ہو رہے ہیں۔ میں نے اپنے فرینڈز کے ساتھ شروع کیا تھا لوگوں کو اس بارے میں، تو مجھے دیکھنا پڑ رہا تھا سب کچھ آگے پوسٹ کرنے کے لیے بھی۔"

Participant 5 (FGD3) narrated how social media helped in staying aware of the conflict:

" الجزیرہ کا جو واٹس ایپ گروپ ہے وہاں اور گوگل پہ خود بھی search کر کے دیکھ رہے ہوتے ہیں اور میں نے instagram پے ایک account بنایا ہے اس سب کو track کرنے کے لیے صرف۔"

According to participant 1 (FGD2), social media's uncensored nature is a strength since it enables people to express their thoughts, feelings, and stories, which promotes authenticity and awareness, as narrated:

"I feel like

کہ سوشل میڈیا ایک ایسا platform ہے جہاں

Where everyone is allowed to say what they want to say, so I don't think.
کرنا چاہیے ہے change کہ اس کو کسی بھی طریقے سے
I think it's fine the way it is."

Participant 1 (FGD2) also shares:
"So, it is more emotionally charged, but it's more personalized.
"اور اپ ایک بندے کا perspective بہت اچھے سے دیکھ سکتے ہو اس میں

4.8 Social Media Burnout
This sub-theme illustrates how extended use of various platforms can exhaust viewers. This includes the bias in the portrayal of content as shared by participant 3 (FGD1):

"Some channels are not.
جیسے BBC ہو گیا
Because insider information showed us that they're biased against Palestine, and they technically stand with Israel
تو وہ جس طرح نیوز کو portray کرتے ہیں
They try to diminish the criminality of Israel; however, there are channels like Al-Jazeera.
وغیرہ وہ unbiased ہو کر ہمیں بتاتے ہیں
That's why I follow them and yeah"

Participant 2 (FGD1) shared the concern over censorship of content:

"The journalists, whenever they share something, it gets taken down. There should be age restrictions and trigger warnings but let them share.

Moreover, participants experienced their past traumas being triggered by the exposure of the conflict online, as narrated by participant 5 (FGD2):
" میرے father کی death میرے لیے ایک بہت بڑا trauma تھی"
I wasn't ready for it, no one was ready for it, anything like that, but
جب میں ان کو دیکھتی ہوں تو
"I feel the pain

4.9 Theme Three: Empathy Leading to Activism
This theme illustrates how the participants are involved into activism regarding Palestine and how trauma desensitization is taking place [33]. Empathetic involvement is a result of vicarious traumatization due to the graphic content on social media platforms. This theme has two sub-themes which are forms of activism and challenges to activism.

4.10 Forms of Activism
Boycotting brands was the most common form of activism. Participants claimed it is effective and has resulted in significant losses for the companies boycotted. Most participants report continuously engaging with graphic content on social media platforms to spread awareness as a form of digital activism. Participant 2 (FGD3) explained their reason for boycotting:
"جیسے کوئی brand ہے like we have seen پیپیسی کی بٹلز ائی ڈی ایف کہ pictures ہیں ان کے ساتھ soldiers نے پکڑی ہوئی ہیں۔ یا جب میں مک ڈاؤن اس کا ایم دیکھتی ہوں مجھے اب اس نفرت ہوگی ایسی ہے کہ مجھے ایسا ہوتا ہے کہ میرے purchase کے روپے یا جو بھی ہیں وہ کہاں سے جا کے revenue کس کے پاس جا رہے اور revenue کو وہ کیا کر رہیں ہو گے وہ ایک جو گولی کسی بچے کو لگے گی تو ہو سکتا ہے وہ میرے revenue نے وہاں جا کے contribute کیا ہوا تو وہ guilt بہت زیادہ ہوتا ہے اس وجہ سے boycott ہے."
Participant 1 (FGD3) shared how they stay aware:
"مجھے لگتا ہے کہ اگر میں وہ کروں گی تو break آئے گا اور میں اس چیز سے desensitize ہوں گی جو میں نہیں ہونا چاہتی مجھے لگتا ہے وہ اتنا experience کر رہے ہیں تو at least تھوڑا بہت feel کرنا اور aware رہنا اتنا تو میں کر ہی سکتی ہوں."

4.11 Challenges to Activism
Participants report facing challenges in activism due to the widespread misinformation and general lack of information, especially in Pakistan. They fear that normalization and shadow-banning on social media

platforms have led to people becoming inactive regarding the conflict. Participant 2 (FGD3), living in a village in Pakistan, explained that no one boycotts:

"I live in a village.
تو وہاں پہ *social media* ہے سب کے پاس سب کچھ *misinformation* ہے اردگرد کے لوگ ہیں
Especially about the boycott, they are like
کیا فرق پڑے گا"

Participant 6 (FGD3) spoke briefly about how normalization has resulted in trauma sensitivity, which has led to less participation in activism:

"اب یہ اس لیے کم ہو رہا ہے کیونکہ لوگوں نے اس کو *accept* کرنا شروع کر لیا ہے کہ ہم کوئی *difference* لا نہیں سکتے ہیں ,تو وہ *acceptance* کی وجہ سے بھی کم ہو گیا ہے"

4.12 Theme Four: Coping Mechanisms

This theme highlights coping strategies used by participants to cope with the mental toll of such exposure. The immediate updates and explicit content have resulted in participants finding ways to keep their mental health regulated [34]. This theme has four sub-themes; each sub-theme shows us what the coping mechanisms are. Sub-themes included are:

4.13 Conscious Avoidance

This was a very frequent coping mechanism among the participants of all focus groups. Participants reported consciously avoiding interaction by skipping posts and reels as they believed it took a toll on their mental health.

Participant 3 (FGD3) said:

"جب وہ زیادہ *graphic* ہو جاتا ہے تو میں *skip* کر دیتی ہوں."

Participant 5 (FGD2) mentioned:

"میرے سے دیکھا نہیں جاتا ٹائم اپنی دوست کی سٹوری دیکھوں یا کوئی ایسی پوسٹ شیئر ہوئی ہو تو میں اس کو سکپ کر دیتی ہوں میں نہیں دیکھ پاتی."

In addition, participants also avoided content as they are sensitive to it, as reported by participant 4 (FGD1):

"میں تھوڑی *sensitive* ہوں میں شروع سے ہی نہیں دیکھ سکتی."

4.14 Religious Coping

A few participants said that they resort to religion (Islam) to cope. They mentioned having firm beliefs about Palestine's victory and how it has also been mentioned in the Quran [36]. This belief in ultimate justice strengthens their faith and allows them to effectively manage their emotions regarding the whole conflict. They resort to praying for the Palestinian people if they feel helpless.

Participant 4 (FGD3) claimed that her firm belief helps her cope:

"In the longer run,
کیونکہ *of course* ہم ساروں کا یہی *believe* ہے کہ اب یہ *temporarily* جو بھی چل رہا ہے,
It's going to end, and it's going to end in the favor of Palestine
تو ایک *kind of* وہ ہے *for the longer run* کہ *hope* ہے *and* وہ ہے کہ قرآن میں وعدہ ہے کہ اسرائیل کا خاتمہ ہونا ہے."

Participant 1 (FGD1) disclosed:

"I just pray because I'm like
اس سے زیادہ اور میں کیا ہی کر سکتی ہوں
That helps me feel a little better."

4.15 Social Support

Discussing the conflict with people within the community has been reported as a source of comfort, making it easier to cope with the burden of content consumed. Talking to friends and family helps the participants release their inhibitions and prevent disruptions in everyday life.

Participant 2 (FGD1) shared:

> "I talk to my roommates. Because it's very burdensome. Especially when it happens suddenly. Like the Lebanon thing. So, we started talking about it. How is this not stopping? And how they are continuing to do so. I think talking about it helps a bit."

4.16 Resilience

For participants, staying resilient has revolved around consciously switching emotions when viewing the content, keeping in mind the positive impact of consuming graphic content. Participant 4 (FGD2) explained that:

> "Like I try to post as many stories as I can so I can aware awareness about it because I feel like the people I'm following.
> اس میں سے کوئی چار پانچ ہی ہوں گے جو لائنک *daily post* کرتے ہوں گے اس کے بارے میں
> Or they would be just posting their lives.
> تو مجھے لگتا ہے کہ میں اس طرح کوپ کرتی ہوں کہ
> I just post too many stories about it."

Participants have stated that making peace with the reality of the situation in Palestine has helped them cope. Participant 2 (FGD3) said that:

> "Every time I see that someone passes away, I feel as though they have been freed.
> اور وہ میری اپنی وہ چیز *reinforce* کرتی ہے کہ *death is freedom* خود کشی نہ کریں
> martyrdom is a free thing
> یہ میری چیز جو ہے *coping mechanism* ہے میرا.
> I see death as a solution."

5. Discussion

This study aimed to examine the effects of the consumption of graphic content related to the Palestine-Israel conflict. Our goal was to see how this type of content leads to vicarious traumatization among young adults. The themes extracted help us understand how vicarious traumatization was manifested in participants. Through our sub-themes, we were able to realize the intensity of the impact of consuming such graphic content that our participants experienced [38].

As social media was the source of information about the conflict, interaction with graphic content caused emotional distress, prompting participants to talk about adopting coping mechanisms aligned with their experiences, addressing this aided our understanding of the coping mechanisms employed by our participants.
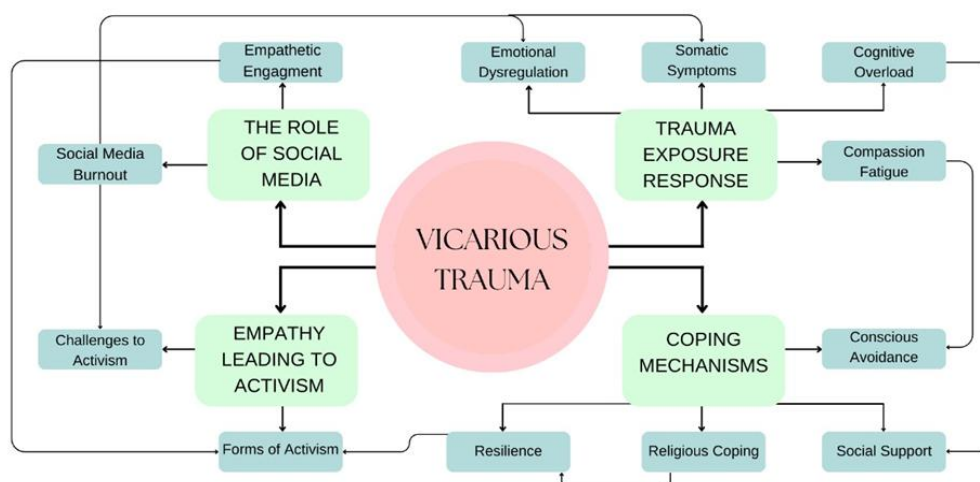

Figure 1: The Thematic Map of the Results

Vicarious trauma led to trauma exposure response, which consisted of emotional dysregulation, somatic symptoms, cognitive overload, and compassion fatigue. This led to participants using coping mechanisms like conscious avoidance when they experienced compassion fatigue, seeking social support when they felt cognitive overload, religious coping, and resilience [39].

Some sense of resilience was instilled through religious coping. Resilience made participants more confident in their decision to participate in activism for the Palestinian people. Vicarious traumatization created a feeling of empathy in participants, which led to activism; however, they acknowledged that there are challenges to activism due to a lack of information. Social media played a significant role in encouraging activism, like boycotting brands and making donations [40]. While social media was a key source of information about the conflict, the exposure to graphic content caused social media burn out resulting in emotional dysregulation and various somatic symptoms.

5.1 Theme One: Trauma Exposure Response
This theme explores the emotional responses of participants experiencing vicarious trauma from viewing graphic content online. Emotional dysregulation, marked by frustration, anxiety, anger, sadness, guilt, and helplessness, was common [41].

Participants reported a shift from living normal lives to constant worry, reflecting compassion fatigue (Figley, 2002) due to deep empathy for those suffering in Palestine. Stress and cognitive overload were linked to emotional disruption, with participants experiencing disorganized thoughts [42]. As young adults, they struggled with regulating emotions, often feeling stuck in a cycle of distress.
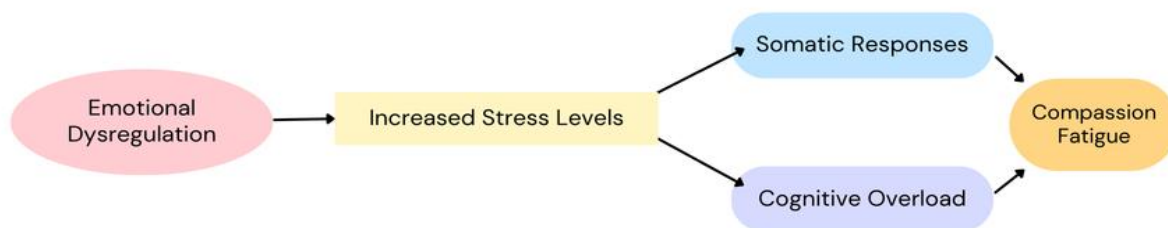

Figure 2. How Emotional Dysregulation Leads to Compassion Fatigue.

When it comes to somatic responses, a variety of bodily manifestations appeared because of the conflict's content. As explored by Malesu (2024), somatic symptoms were noticeably more prevalent in individuals who have had a history of experiencing man-imposed traumatic events like terrorist attacks in the past. The participants highlighted bodily responses like crying, palpitations, and shivering, among others, in response to the Palestine-Israel conflict, specifically the online graphic content.

Picturing such content was mainly what led to these bodily responses in them since viewing such bizarre pictures of children, women, and men getting burned alive, etc., isn't a normal watch; it requires great emotional strength to even view it, let alone think about it. All these components lead to witnessing suffering without being able to do anything about it.

5.2 Theme Two: The Role of Social Media
This theme explains the actual role of social media platforms in providing people with information or content about the conflict. Many participants viewed it as a positive component and empathetically engaged with the content whereas, a few had concerns with social media being biased in portraying the conflict, which includes censorship concerns and shadow-banning.
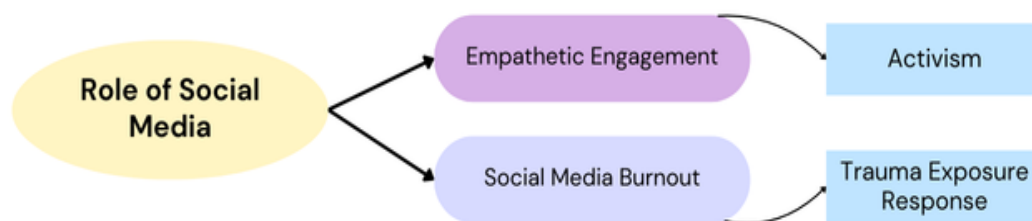
Figure 3. The Effects of Social Media.

Participants engage with graphic content online to stay informed, spread awareness, and better understand the conflict in Palestine. They view social media as a platform for free expression, though concerns were raised about content being removed or shadow-banned, especially regarding Palestine-related posts.

As studied by Chen & Zaman (2024), to influence public opinion in a particular direction, the authors discovered that shadow-banning can alter the degree to which people hold beliefs, hence widening or narrowing the gap between various groups, ultimately proving that platforms use shadow-banning on various content to manipulate opinions. This is termed as social media burnout because these concerns leave the individuals feeling exhausted and irritable eventually.

Additionally, viewing explicit content can trigger past traumas in some participants, highlighting how exposure to distressing material impacts memory processing [43]. Social media also serves as a tool for observational learning, where individuals are influenced by emotionally charged content and strong opinions, aligning with Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory. Participants were motivated to donate and share posts because of this learned behavior.

5.3 Theme Three: Empathy Leading to Activism
This theme emphasized participants' sense of moral responsibility after encountering distressing content about the conflict on social media. Driven by empathy, they felt compelled to advocate for those suffering in Palestine. Their activism included sharing content, donating, and promoting boycotts of products funding the conflict. Despite emotional struggles from constant exposure, participants remained committed to activism, reinforcing their moral identity and sense of social responsibility in response to the suffering they witnessed online.
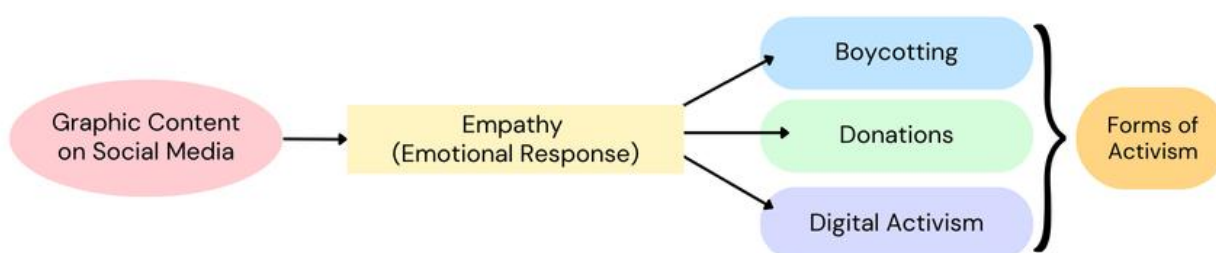

Figure 4. How Empathy Leads to Activism

Empathy drives prosocial behavior, as seen in Batson's Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis (1991), where emotional connections to others' suffering led to a desire to help. National solidarity with Palestine also enhanced emotional engagement through politicized and religious identity, motivating activism. Participants in our study demonstrated empathy through actions like sharing posts, donating, or boycotting products. Digital advocacy was highlighted as an impactful, low-effort way to raise awareness globally [44].

However, participants identified barriers such as normalization and misinformation, which hinder activism. Repeated exposure to graphic content can desensitize individuals, leading to learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975) and reduced motivation to act, ultimately limiting the effectiveness of campaigns.
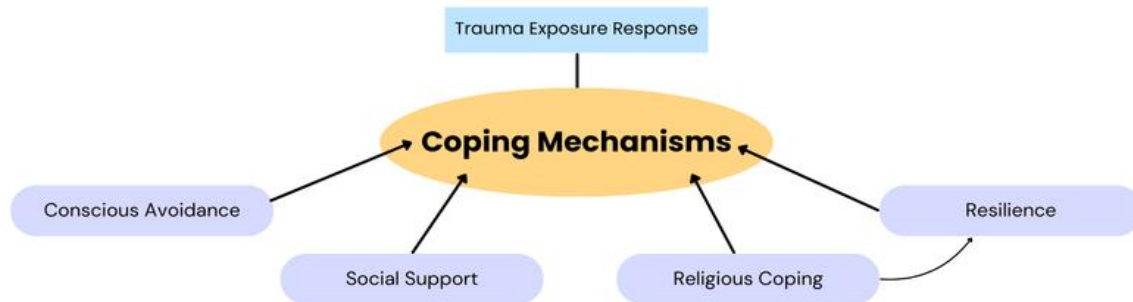
5.4 Theme Four: Coping Mechanisms

Figure 5. The Coping Mechanisms Employed by Participants.

Participants reported several coping mechanisms to manage the emotional toll of witnessing conflict on social media. The most common was conscious avoidance, where participants intentionally skipped triggering content or limited social media use to reduce exposure. While conscious avoidance is an effective short-term coping mechanism, it is an unhealthy coping mechanism in the long term as it interferes with emotional processing, which, left unprocessed, can lead to numbness.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) emphasized that individuals manage emotional responses to stress rather than addressing the stressor itself. Religious coping was another strategy, with participants turning to prayer and belief in divine justice for emotional strength. This encouraged perseverance and patience, helping individuals to cope more positively. This type of coping is linked to increased resilience and psychological well-being.

Social support through discussions with friends or family also helped participants process their emotions. Pakistani culture is collectivist; individuals rely on members of society in distressing situations, which leads to coping by emphasizing familial and social networks. Engaging in these conversations allowed them to connect with others and mitigate feelings of isolation [45].

Participants described shifting their emotions on purpose to cope with the distressing content and remain firm in their empathetic engagement. This process of resilience aligns with the concept of cognitive appraisal. Resilience is often associated with the ability to effectively regulate emotions. Gross and Thompson (2007) describe cognitive appraisal as a strategy where individuals consciously reframe their emotions to maintain psychological balance and reduce the emotional impact of a stressor.

Interacting to prevent indifference can be considered as prosocial resilience, which is termed as when individuals balance emotional regulation with their moral responsibility [46].

Participants mentioned engaging with content despite the mental toll it took on them. Participants' ability to identify positive aspects within distressing situations reflects a meaning-focused coping strategy. Meaning-focused coping is central to resilience, as it helps individuals find purpose and emotional balance in the face of adversity. According to Folkman (1997), this strategy is particularly effective when stressors are beyond one's control, as it allows individuals to reinterpret their experiences in a way that fosters emotional growth.

5.5 Limitations
This study focused exclusively on young adults, limiting the applicability of findings across age groups, as coping strategies and media engagement may vary with age. The emphasis on social media excludes

individuals with minimal digital presence, whose experiences of vicarious trauma may differ. Additionally, emotionally charged content on social platforms may have shaped participants' responses in unique ways. Time, geographic, and resource limitations inherent to undergraduate research further constrained the depth and scope of data collection.

6.   Recommendations
Future research should examine vicarious trauma across varied age groups to explore developmental differences in emotional processing and resilience. Studies targeting underserved or rural populations are also essential to capture diverse socio-cultural experiences, particularly in communities with limited mental health resources. Longitudinal and in-depth investigations, unconstrained by time or geography, would allow a more comprehensive understanding of the long-term psychological impacts of indirect trauma exposure.

6.1 Practical Implications
Increasing awareness of the psychological effects of conflict-related media is critical. Many individuals remain unaware of the emotional toll that repeated exposure to distressing content can cause. Early recognition of vicarious trauma symptoms can promote help-seeking behaviors and inform mental health interventions [47]. For professionals, understanding their trauma responses enhances their capacity to support others. These insights also inform the development of digital wellness strategies designed to foster emotional resilience in highly connected environments [48].

7.   Conclusion
In a digitally interconnected world, vicarious trauma has emerged as a significant mental health concern, particularly among individuals engaged with global conflicts online. This study explored the emotional and psychological impact of social media exposure to the Palestine-Israel crisis, revealing both distress and adaptive coping mechanisms among participants. Despite challenges, participants displayed resilience through faith, social support, avoidance, and emotional regulation.

These findings underscore the need to equip individuals with tools to manage vicarious trauma while maintaining meaningful engagement with social justice issues. Highlighting the importance of emotional sustainability in the face of global crises.

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Data availability
The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Ethics approval and consent
Not applicable. This study uses publicly available, de-identified secondary data and does not involve human participants or personal information.

Competing interests
The authors declare no competing interests.

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