

THE IMPACT OF MEDIA EXPOSURE TO GAZA GENOCIDE ON BELIEFS, EMOTIONS AND INTENDED ACTIONS OF YOUNG ADULTS OF PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

The study aimed to explore the relationship among media exposure to Gaza genocide and beliefs, emotions and intended actions of young adults of Pakistan. Cross-sectional survey design was selected. The present study was conducted online over five months from September 2025 to January 2026. A total of 365 students (108 male, 257 female) enrolled in different universities of Pakistan were included through purposive sampling. Data were collected through Demographic questionnaire, War Related Media Exposure Scale, Belief in Just World Scale, Affective Empathy Scale and Activism-Radicalism Intention. Data were analysed using the statistical software SPSS 27. Significant positive association was found between media exposure to Gaza genocide and activism and radicalism intentions. Personal as well as general belief in just world reported to be negatively related to empathy. Activism intention showed meaningful positive association with empathy. On the contrary, radicalism intention exhibited negative relation with empathy. Hierarchical regression analyses demonstrated that media exposure to Gaza genocide, belief in just world and affective empathy are significant predictors of activism and radicalism intentions. Media exposure to war related content such as that of Gaza genocide is related to intended actions such as protest and boycott among young adults. The findings also highlight the significant role of empathy in shaping intentions for actions toward international humanitarian crises. These findings can be used in developing psychological support and structured activism programs (fundraising, awareness drives, humanitarian aid) to help young individuals regulate their media exposure and to provide safe outlets for empathy and outrage and manage emotional distress.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict dates to more than a hundred years ago with the recent escalation following the events of October 7, 2023, triggering a large-scale Israeli invasion of the Gaza Strip. This has, since, resulted in a massive human toll, mass displacements and a major humanitarian crisis (Khatib et al., 2024). Following October 7th, war-related media content of Gaza conflict including graphic images, videos and eyewitness recordings of sufferers has been circulating across various media platforms (Fekih-Romdhane et al., 2025). The concept of mediatization of war collapses the temporal and spatial distance, making global population the distant viewer of war atrocities as

they occur (Lev-On & Gozansky, 2026). This closely resembles the phenomenon characterized as the distant suffering which refers to witnessing of a mediated far away suffering by a distant observer (Åhs et al., 2023). Continuous exposure to distant suffering in armed conflicts can influence people's perspective on the suffering since they have little direct experience with it (Doboš, 2017). Thus, war-related media exposure represents a potentially important psychological context through which distant suffering may become linked with moral and psychological consequences. Understanding the degree of individual's exposure to media's portrayal of war is fundamental to examining its outcomes. Considering this need, Fekih-Romdhane et al. (2025) developed the War-related Media Exposure Scale (WarMES) which gauges the frequency and intensity of exposure to war-related media content across various platforms. Scholarly work has attempted to unfold the moral, psychological, and political implications of media exposure to distant suffering (Fekih-Romdhane et al, 2025; Orgeret, 2016). Numerous studies have identified some of the predominant effects of media exposure to graphic images which include emotional reactions, belief and attitude change, mobilization and prosocial actions (Wald et al., 2021; Scharrer & Blackburn, 2015; Deprez and Raeymaeckers 2011). One of important the psychological mechanism that may be particularly relevant to exposure to distant suffering is the belief in a just world (BJW) which refers to the conviction that the world is a just place. It serves as a cognitive schema that helps people make sense of injustice, misfortune, and suffering (Dalbert & Donat, 2015).

Boltanski (1999) suggested that media exposure of distant suffering put audience in the position to actively interpret and respond to the suffering they witness. BJW influences how this moral interpretation unfolds. Beyond the belief processes, war media such as images also facilitates affective engagement with sufferers by visually framing intensity and chaos of the situation. (Cheng et al., 2025). In this context, affective empathy becomes especially salient as it refers to the capacity to emotionally resonate with the feelings of others, particularly in response to their suffering or distress (Dalbert & Donat, 2015). Some studies have established the direct links between the exposure to conflict related violence and empathy among observers without direct conflict experience (Borinca, 2026; Weikmann and Powell, 2019). Alongside emotional responses, behavioral intentions provide another important dimension for understanding individuals' responses to war-related media exposure. Moskalenko and McCauley (2009) introduced the concept of activism and radicalism intention which capture this dimension by investigating how individuals translate their response to suffering into willingness to act or intervene. Numerous studies have found an association between the media's depiction of suffering and the viewer's prosocial reactions, such as behavioral support and donation intentions (Dumitrescu and Bucy, 2021; Wald et al., 2021; Iyer et al., 2014). These perspectives highlight that war-related media exposure may impact a range of psychological outcomes. Nevertheless, few studies have integrated these outcomes into a unified model, particularly among population like that of Pakistan that feel emotionally and religiously connected to a distant conflict without being geographically or politically part of it. The present study addresses this gap by examining the relationships between war-related media exposure to the Gaza genocide and beliefs (belief in a just world, both personal and general), emotions (affective empathy), and intended actions (activism and radicalism intention) among young adults in Pakistan.

II. METHOD

Participants

The study used a cross-sectional survey design with a non-probability purposive sampling. 365 university students of Pakistan (aged 18-28) were sampled who have had an exposure to media portrayed graphically violent content related to the Gaza conflict (e.g., news, social media posts, videos, or documentaries) in the past three months. They were surveyed via Google form. Raosoft, Inc.'s Sample size Calculator was used to calculate the sample size with a 5% margin error and 95% confidence interval (Raosoft, 2004).

Measures

Data collection was done via an online questionnaire comprising an informed consent, a demographic information portion, and four standardized measures assessing the study variables. War-Related Media Exposure Scale (WarMES) was used to gauge the intensity of exposure to war-related media portrayal of Gaza genocide across various platforms. It is developed by Fekih-Romdhane et al. in 2025. It uses a 5-point Likert scale to assess how frequently individuals have encountered specific types of war-related content such as victims under rubble or displaced families on media platforms including TV, newspapers, magazines, and the internet (e.g., YouTube, Instagram, Facebook,

TikTok). The scale's Cronbach's alpha has been reported to be .96. (Fekih-Romdhane et al., 2025). The Belief in a Just World Scale was employed to assess the degree of people's conviction in a just world at both personal and general level. Dalbert, Montada, and Schmitt developed it in 1987. This scale consists of 13 items and 2 subscales: Personal Belief in a Just World (7 items) and General Belief in a Just World (6 items). Both subscales have a high reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of .81 and .87 respectively (Dalbert et al., 1987). The Affective Empathy Scale was derived from the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) developed by Davis in 1980. It uses a 5-point Likert scale, giving us a total affective empathy score and two subscale scores: (i) empathic concern and (ii) personal distress. The internal consistency coefficients reported for Empathic Concern and Personal Distress subscales are reported to be .72 and .78 respectively (Davis, 1980). Activism-Radicalism Intention Scale (ARIS) was also utilized to measure the intentions to engage in legal and nonviolent political actions (e.g., signing petitions, attending lawful protests), and in illegal or violent actions in support of a cause or group (e.g., damaging property, using force). It uses a 7-point Likert scale, giving us two subscale scores (i) activism intention scale and (ii) radicalism intention scale. Activism and radicalism subscale has a Cronbach's alpha of .87 and .84 respectively (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2009).

Procedure

The current study was conducted between September 2025 and January 2026 after ethical approval was received from the Institutional Review Board of King Edward Medical University, Lahore, Pakistan (Ref. No. 621/RC/KEMU; dated: 28th August 2025). The cross-sectional survey approached 365 male and female university students through Google Forms. Informed consent was taken from the participants prior to study. Anonymity and confidentiality of all research data were ensured. Statistical software SPSS 27 was used to compute descriptive analysis of mean, standard deviation, Cronbach's alpha, frequencies, and percentages; and inferential statistics of correlation, hierarchical regression and independent sample t-test.

III. RESULTS

The study sampled 365 participants from different universities of Pakistan, aged between 18 to 28 years. Among 365 participants, there was substantially a higher proportion of female (70%) as compared to male participants (30%). The mean age was found to be 22.26 ± 2.23 . Majority of participants were undergraduate students (87%) while fewer were graduate and postgraduate students (13%). Moreover, there was significantly higher proportion of single participants (93%) as compared to married participants (7%). 73% of participants belonged to nuclear families while 27% were from joint families.

Table I: Psychometric Properties for WRMES, BJWS, AES, AIS, RIS and their Subscales

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	Cronbach's α
War Related Media Exposure	17.1	8.9	3-36	.93
Belief in Just World	7.5	1.5	2-12	.81
Personal Belief in Just world	3.9	.82	1-6	.78
General Belief in Just World	3.6	0.96	1-6	.75
Affective Empathy	34.3	7.2	8-56	.68
Empathic Concern	19.4	4.7	3-28	.65
Personal Distress	14.8	4.3	5-28	.57
Activism Intention	4.9	1.32	1-7	.85
Radicalism Intention	3.7	1.34	1-7	.80

Note. M=mean, SD=standard deviation, α = Cronbach's alpha.

The psychometric properties of were assessed in table 1. All measures exhibited satisfactory internal consistency.

Table II: Correlation among Demographics, War-Related Media Exposure, Belief in Just World, Affective Empathy, Activism Intention and Radicalism Intention

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Gender	-										
2. No. of Siblings	-0.36	-									
3. Residence	.15**	-.13*	-								
4. Living condition	.21**	-.10	.25**	-							
5. Family status	-.20**	.13*	-.15**	-.02	-						
6. War-related media exposure	.11*	.04	.02	.05	-.06	-					
7. Personal belief in just world	-.00	-.02	.02	.05	-.07	.03	-				
8. General belief in just world	.05	.12*	-.09	.00	.06	-.04	.38**	-			
9. Affective empathy	.28**	-.09	.15**	.15**	-.09	.02	-.12*	-.14**	-		
10. Activism intention	.13*	-.01	.12**	.01	-.20**	.147**	.15**	.02	.27**	-	
11. Radicalism intention	.01	-.09	-.10	-.02	.02	.125*	-.00	.166**	-.12*	.25**	-

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Correlational analysis was performed among demographics, war-related media exposure, belief in just world, affective empathy, and activism intention and radicalism intention. Gender was significantly and positively associated with war-related media exposure, affective empathy and activism intention. War-related media exposure to the Gaza genocide was significantly correlated with activism and radicalism intentions. Both personal and general belief in just world had a significant negative association with affective empathy suggesting that participants who strongly endorsed just-world beliefs reported lower empathy. The results also indicated that affective empathy is positively related to activism intention while negatively related to radicalism intention.

Table III: Hierarchical Regression Results for Activism Intention

Variable	B	95% CI for B		SE B	β	R^2	ΔR^2
		LL	UL				
Step 1						.02	.02**
Constant	4.53***	4.23	4.83	.15			
War-related Media Exposure	.02***	.01	.04	.01	.15**		
Step 2						.04	.02*
Constant	3.72***	2.96	4.48	.38			
War-related Media Exposure	.02**	.01	.04	.01	.14**		
Personal Belief in Just World	.26**	.08	.44	.09	.15**		
General Belief in Just World	-.05	-.20	.10	.08	-.04		
Step 3						.12	.07***
Constant	1.77***	.76	2.78	.51			
War-related Media Exposure	.02*	.00	.032	.01	.12*		
Personal Belief in Just World	.30***	.12	.47	.09	.18***		
General Belief in Just World	-.01	-.16	.13	.08	-.01		
Affective empathy	.05***	.03	.07	.01	.28***		

Note. CI=Confidence Interval; UL=Upper limit, LL=Lower limit; SE=Standard error; N=365, * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$.

Table IV: Hierarchical Regression Results for Radicalism Intention

Variable	<i>B</i>	95% CI for B		<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>R</i> ²	ΔR^2
		<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>				
Step 1						.02	.02*
Constant	3.35***	3.05	3.647	.15			
War-related Media Exposure	.019*	.00	.034	.01	.13*		
Step 2						.05	.03**
Constant	2.85***	2.08	3.613	.39			
War-related Media Exposure	.02**	.01	.035	.01	.14**		
Personal Belief in Just World	-.14	-.32	.045	.09	-.08		
General Belief in Just World	.28***	.13	.437	.08	.20***		
Step 3						.07	.02*
Constant	3.74***	2.68	4.79	.54			
War-related Media Exposure	.02**	.01	.04	.01	.15**		
Personal Belief in Just World	-.15	-.33	.03	.09	-.09		
General Belief in Just World	.27***	.11	.42	.08	.19***		
Affective empathy	-.02*	-.04	-.01	.01	-.12*		

Note. CI=Confidence Interval; UL=Upper limit, LL=Lower limit; SE=Standard error; N=365

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$.

Hierarchical multiple regression analysis was performed to identify predictors of intended actions i.e. activism and radicalism intention. Activism intention was positively predicted by war-related media exposure, personal belief in just world and affective empathy with predictor variables accounting for 12% of variance (see table 3). However, radicalism intention is positively predicted by war-related media exposure, general belief in just world and affective empathy. Predictor variables with an R² value of .07 explained 7% variance in radicalism intention (see table 4).

IV.DISCUSSION

The study provided valuable insight into the impact of war-related media exposure to Gaza genocide on psychological processes. Specifically, the effect on beliefs in just world, affective empathy and intended actions was highlighted. Our findings indicated that the war-related media exposure to Gaza genocide was significantly associated with both activism and radicalism intentions, suggesting that greater exposure to war-related media content corresponds with a stronger inclination toward both non-violent and violent forms of political engagement. This pattern is also reinforced by hierarchical regression model where media exposure emerged as a significant predictor of activism-radicalism intention. This aligns with prior literature showing that media exposure led to a modest increase in prosocial action intentions (e.g., donation intentions) (Altenmüller & Gollwitzer, 2023) and to radicalization outcomes (Elzen et al., 2026). Other studies have similarly reported associations between war-related media exposure and individuals' intentions to engage in collective and solidarity-based action (Borinca et al., 2026; Abudheir et al., 2025).

Notably, as opposed to our hypothesis, war-related media exposure exhibited no direct relationship with belief in just world. This finding is consistent with a recent study specifically investigating the media consumption related to the Gaza conflict. Iqbal et al. (2025) reported no significant differences in either personal or general belief in a just world in relation to the media consumption of graphic content on Gaza conflict. Ludwig et al. (2023) provides a possible theoretical explanation by highlighting the stability of primal world beliefs, general beliefs about whether the world is generally safe, meaningful and just, etc. In hypothesis, primal beliefs are susceptible to change after adverse events but the study underscored that these beliefs are relatively stable frameworks and are resistant to change even after the personal encounter with unfavorable events. Although previous studies have linked exposure to distant suffering through media with empathy (Borinca et al., 2026), our findings revealed no significant association between the two variables indicating that individuals did not show significant elevation in the levels of affective empathy following exposure to Gaza conflict. This could be attributed to the role of compassion fatigue as Aldamen (2023) proposed that the repeated encounter of distant suffering on social media may contribute to

compassion fatigue, which potentially buffers the impact of media exposure on empathy. Åhs et al. (2024) also identified indifference, cynicism, and compassion fatigue as some of the possible responses to mediated exposure to distant suffering, suggesting that exposure alone may not necessarily produce change in empathy.

The present study also illustrated the negative relationship between beliefs in just world and affective empathy. This finding contributes to a more nuanced understanding of theoretical model of belief in just world. BJW serves an adaptive function as they help individuals live life with confidence that they will not encounter injustice since they believe that the world is a just place. However, when witnessing evidences of injustices or innocent suffering, these BJWs are threatened. In order to preserve their belief in justice, individuals with stronger BJW tend to blame or derogate the victim or in case of in-group identification with the victim, psychologically distance them from the victim (Twardawski et al., 2025; Correia et al., 2012), potentially reducing empathic responses towards the sufferers. Jiang et al. (2022) reported an indirect relation between personal and general just-world beliefs and prosocial behavior. Our study yielded the comparable pattern in the regression model with personal belief specifically predicting activism intention and general belief specifically predicting radicalism intention. This lends support to Guo et al. (2022) assertion that belief in just world can also have positive social functions such as donation intention.

Lastly, affective empathy exhibited a dual effect on behavioral intentions as it elevated activism intention while diminishing radicalism intention. Regression results also reinforced our finding by demonstrating affective empathy as the significant predictor of activism-radicalism intentions. This finding is consistent with the broader literature (Wald et al. 2021) establishing the direct association of affective empathy with prosocial intentions such as intentions to donate. Similarly, some other studies have also established the link between emotional responses to suffering such as compassion and prosocial actions (Iyer et al., 2014). A concurrent negative association with radical intentions was also noted (Waterschoot et al., 2025) suggesting that empathic concern tend to mitigate violent extremism. The finding underscores the role of empathy in promoting lawful behavior while also dampening the willingness to engage in violent and unlawful behavior. Overall, the findings suggest that exposure to war-related media is associated with individuals' willingness to engage in prosocial and radical actions in order to help. Importantly, media exposure reported to have no relation with just-world beliefs and empathy. Nonetheless, affective empathy operated as significant emotional correlate and predictor of willingness to help. Personal and general just-world beliefs were negatively associated with empathy while also predicting the willingness to help. These findings are broadly consistent with contemporary work indicating that responses to mediated distant suffering involve interacting emotional, cognitive, and behavioral processes.

V. CONCLUSION

The present study contributes to understanding the impact of media exposure to distant suffering by establishing that exposure to media coverage of the Gaza genocide is significantly associated with activism–radicalism intention among Pakistani young adults. War-related media exposure, belief in a just world, and affective empathy collectively predict action tendencies among young population. Overall, the findings suggest that media representation of distant suffering is not merely information; rather it is consequential with moral and psychological challenges. It shapes audiences' beliefs, evoke emotional responses, and influence intended actions. Understanding the impact of exposure on these processes is essential, particularly, for a population that feels emotionally and religiously connected to Gaza conflict while being geographically distant. The study also provides insight into how moral and political development of future generations could be influenced in an era of digital media which continuously exposes young populations to global conflict.

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