

EXAMINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEDIA EXPOSURE AND GENERALIZED ANXIETY AMONG PAKISTANI YOUTH

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the generalized anxiety that can follow exposure to sensationalized, exaggerated news coverage among university students in Pakistan. Using a quantitative correlational survey, data were gathered from 258 young adults (about 55% women), most aged 21 to 26. News exposure was measured with the Content-based Media Exposure Scale, which separates sensational from positive or neutral content, and anxiety with the GAD-7; all three subscales showed good reliability. Social media was the main news source for almost half of the sample (48.8%), ahead of mobile news apps and YouTube. The mental-health burden was considerable: close to half of participants (45.7%) fell in the moderate anxiety range. Overall news exposure was positively related to anxiety, and sensational news in particular showed a strong association ($r = .517$, $p < .001$). When both content types were tested together, sensationalism remained a strong and independent predictor, an additive effect rather than a moderation. In short, it is the sensational framing of news, not how often it is consumed, that appears to drive anxiety among Pakistani youth.

Keywords: News Exposure, Sensationalism, Generalized Anxiety, Pakistani Youth, Social Media, Mental Health.

INTRODUCTION

A major change in news reception has occurred in the last few decades in Pakistan, which seemed to have taken its cue from today's omnipresent internet. People used to wait to watch a particular show or read something new on the TV or in the newspaper as per their schedule, but now there is news available for them 24/7. Youth rely on digital platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, to keep up to date.

Meanwhile, not every news item is presented as objectively and calmly as many news sites or social media platforms do, but rather in a sensationalist manner that makes it more likely to catch on and seem alarming. This can be excessive sensationalism in headlines and the constant breaking news messages. This means that young people are constantly exposed to intense and negative information. This may have an impact on

their mental health over time. It may lead to a broad anxiety, in which case a person feels constantly on their guard and stressed out.

This study is of critical value in highlighting the appearance of the two concepts, which are more easily understood.

1. Frequency of news about how often youth consume news

2. Sensational or dramatic, what kind of news style is and how it would affect the emotions.

The study will examine these factors and hopefully demonstrate the psychological upsets and consequences that digital news, especially its presentation, may induce on youth, which is also beneficial for understanding the impact of modern media on youth health in a developing nation, like Pakistan. Especially for the youth, the Digital world makes it very convenient to avail updates regarding local and global events, and they heavily rely on TV, online news portals and social media platforms. The regular access to information adds the benefits, while exposure to the negative, disturbing or sensationalized information may impact the psychological health of the population (Spitzer et al., 2006).

Receiving the bad news over and over can make the fear and uncertainty even worse, adding to the increased amount of anxiety. The present study aims to investigate the psychological dissemination of news consumption amongst Pakistani youth particularly in the context of generalized anxiety and its relationship with news consumption. The primary concern of this research is how the amount and content type of news exposure relate to anxiety, as indexed by the Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7) scale (Spitzer et al., 2006).

Research indicates that higher perceived sensationalism in news coverage produces psychological effects larger than the sheer amount of coverage. In examining these variables, the research aims to improve the understanding of the effects of media on mental health and contribute to summarizing the functions derived from the field of media psychology to adolescents. The theoretical framework that has been used is Mean World Syndrome and Cultivation Theory which relates to the possibility that the perception of the

person can be distorted by the consumption of negative news (Long term) and demonstrates that The world is worse than the real world causing fear, worry and anxiety (Dutta et al., 2017)

To measure these primary variables, this research assessed the amount and content type of news consumption. Media exposure was assessed using the Content-based Media Exposure Scale (C-ME) developed by den Hamer et al. (2017). The GAD-7 scale by Spitzer et al. (2006) was used.

Objectives

This research has the following objectives:

1. To investigate the association among news media consumption, generalized anxiety, and youth.
2. To test if high level and frequent/detailed news exposure contribute significantly to higher scores of generalized anxiety among youth.
3. To see if sensational news content predicts higher generalized anxiety and is outside of the overall amount of news exposure being consumed.
4. To compare the difference between the levels of general anxiety that light and heavy news consumers have.

Hypotheses

According to these objectives, the study has the following hypotheses:

H1: Media coverage of news worldwide is correlated with increased generalized anxiety.

H2: Greater exposure to news over a longer period of time is a significant predictor of greater scores for generalized anxiety.

H3: The content of sensational news predicts higher overall generalized anxiety regardless of the frequency of news exposure.

H4: There is a significant difference between the generalized anxiety of the light and heavy news consumers (with the heavy consumers feeling more anxious with the light consumers feeling less anxious).

Research Questions

This research has the following Research Questions:

RQ1: Do levels or frequency of news exposure show a significant relationship with overall anxiety among youth?

RQ2: The second research question was is there a significant relationship between the frequency and intensity of news seen and the youths score on the Generalized Anxiety scale?

RQ3: This is the third research question: Does sensational news predict higher generalized anxiety level regardless of news exposure level?

RQ4: Do light and heavy news consumers have different levels of generalized anxiety?

The study has practical and theoretical significance. Theoretically, it can help us understand how today's digital world relates to older media theories. The concepts of Mean World Syndrome and Cultivation Theory came from when people watched TV but people have now moved on to other media of news consumption, such as social media. Theories of these increase the relevance of the research since among Pakistani youth exposure level of digital news increases through these in young minds. It expands the academic discussion as well. This study aims to look at the role of sensationalism, and gives a comprehensive data on the way news making can lead to psychological outcomes such as anxiety (Dutta et al., 2017)

The real world applications of this to be understated, as youth are more likely to be anxious with constant exposure to distressing or sensationalized news, while the findings may help them to understand more about their media needs and adopting a healthier usage. The educators can base the design of the media literacy program based on the result. Mental health practitioners can come up with strategies to help students who are feeling anxious due to news consumption.

The media also are capable of portraying the news to a better effect. This study is on an all-purpose use for improving the mental health of youngsters in today fast digital world. In general, this study seeks to deal with the lacuna between mere usage patterns of the media and psychological health, as it aims to provide empirical support for the promotion of appropriate and restricted news consumption, and psychological resilience among young people of Pakistan.

Literature Review

To examine how media consumption affects psychological distress it is very essential to first study the theories that explain how the media influences people. This chapter focuses on cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), which says that the more people spend time on the digital world the more they see the world as shown on screen. For instance if the news on Social media Platforms are more negative or alarming people would start to believe that the world is a more dangerous place then it actually is. This connects the youth with "Mean world syndrome" where the continuous exposure to the sensational news could make them feel that society is unsafe and threatening. As a result, people could experience anxiety, stress, and fear even if they are not directly affected by such events. Cultivation processes have also been extended to health and risk messaging contexts (Dutta et al., 2017).

And the "breaking news" culture in Pakistan makes the youth to consume the information 24/7 through the social media platforms and Digital platforms which means people are constantly connected to it in dramatic and sensational way. The gap in study is the highlighted section of mental health and media exposure by reviewing the previous studies. Many studies simply study the media effect in general and fewer study of the sensationalized news contribute to anxiety particularly in youth. This makes it important to study how dramatic and exaggerated news trigger the psychological distress. Some scholarship indicates the change of news consumption in Pakistan, now a day's people move to digital and live news from the traditional television. According to Bibi et al. (2024), news on different platforms like TikTok and Instagram causes tension and chronic hype among young university student. Like traditional media these platforms have lack of information and cause crisis, which correlates significant higher score on the GAD-7 scale. These breaking news cause hyper tension among youth leading to many anxiety disorders and cause generalized anxiety symptoms (Bibi et al., 2024).

Just like the COVID-19 pandemic left long-lasting mental health issues among Pakistani youth

(Sarwar et al., 2021). Longitudinal data analysed by Khuda et al. (2024) show that the anxiety level is high in urban areas of Pakistan, such as Lahore and Karachi, by 47% between 2021 and 2024. This is described by the term infodemic, proposed by researchers, which refers to the overwhelming influence of negative information. Recent research shows the challenging concerns of youth's mental health in Pakistan. Studies show that about one in three school-going adults experience average to severe anxiety (Lakhdar et al., 2021). It's not just a number in fact the real struggle of people in their life is that girls show that they are more affected than boys and have Higher levels of Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD). It becomes clear that people are sensitive to the outside world, and the same goes for constant exposure to stressful news (Lakhdar et al., 2021; Sarwar et al., 2021).

During this time the media plays a very important role in shaping how people feel. The news is showing dramatic and alarming stories, including crime, politics, and crisis, and attracts more viewers. According to research, that type of content is what university students watch the most (Shah et al., 2022). This repeated exposure makes them see the world more dangerous than it actually is, considering the cultivation theory, the Young users see more negative and sensational news, and they start to believe danger and fear around them. This can slowly make sense of anxiety and insecurity in their minds (Shah et al., 2022).

TV to digital platforms made things more intense with the news are available 24/7 and it's impossible to escape from it, and researchers call this "technostress" where constant overload of the screen increases anxiety (Husain & Mobeen, 2020). Most of the youth do not feel connected and anxious; this is "Disconnected Anxiety". Resultantly, their mobiles continuously absorb stressful news (Husain & Mobeen, 2020).

Another important point is that repeated exposure to negative news can affect emotions over time. Instead, when people become used to it, some people become more sensitive. Research shows that watching violence and disturbing videos can lead to fear, mistrust and a constant feeling that

something bad will happen. The ongoing emotional dilemma can raise the anxiety levels in this way, the constant exposure isn't just the information but it adds a mental health burden among students in Pakistan (Lakhdar et al., 2021; Sarwar et al., 2021).

Heavy media consumption is one of the factors identified by Gerbner and Gross (1976), which foster threatening cognitions among media users, exactly what the subject of this study suggests happens with regard to the media's sensationalized news coverage. This theoretical structure is directly associated with the empirical finding of a positive correlation between exposure to sensational content and the symptoms of generalized anxiety (Gerbner & Gross, 1976).

Prior work shows that constructs and solutions tend to be less anxiety-inducing than sensational in psychological terms, as in line with the content-specific media effects theories. Positive or neutral news content (including programming from other media, sports, travel, community, or educational reports, etc.) does not contain threatening stimuli that activate the brain threat system. Empirical studies providing attention to media psychology have shown that, without graphic violence or pervasive threat in news consumption in general, there is no direct relation between the amount of exposure and the increased marks on the anxiety standardised questionnaire. This separation is theoretical, because it confirms that the psychological effects are related to the content, and not to the use of the media or the time spent viewing them.

Methodology

This research used the quantitative approach to understand the relationship between news exposure, sensational news content and anxiety levels. The 258 participants were included in this study and a correlational survey was conducted at the different parts of Pakistan. To collect data standardized tools were used the (C-ME) Media exposure scale has the 17 items and GAD-7 used to assess generalized anxiety. The survey was distributed online to encourage voluntary participation. This chapter shows how participants were selected and how measurement tools work

and which statistical methods were used to analyze the data such as regression t-test etc. to check whether it was correct or not.

Quantitative research design is used in this study. The main objective of this study is to check out the statistical relationship between media exposure and the anxiety level between youth. Data was collected through the online survey without manipulating the data the natural data was collected through the cross-sectional in nature which is naturally occurring. This study shows whether the higher exposure to the media content associated with increasing the anxiety level and it doesn't making direct cause and effect relationship but correlation can reveal the relationship.

Population and Sample

The Pakistani youth between the age of 18 to 30 years who consume the media daily like television news, online news, website and different social media platforms would be the target population. Statistical analysis like correlation and regression would be considered appropriate for sample size, which is 305 participants. Many participants were in an early stage of their career, and most were university students. The data were collected online through the willingness of the participants in the survey and who have access to the internet.

Sampling Technique

A convenience sampling technique was used in this study. The survey was linked to social media platforms, personal contacts, and university groups, and all participants voluntarily chose to complete it. From the students and young adults who were active online, convenience sampling was selected because it allowed researchers to collect it efficiently and quickly.

Research Instruments

Self-report questionnaires were administered via the online survey form for structured data collection. This study included the following instruments:

Media Exposure Scale (C-ME)

Media Exposure Scale (C-ME) developed by den Hamer et al. (2017) was used for measuring the

media exposure. It was developed to see the different kinds of exposure of the user in the media on different digital platforms. It consists of 17 items, 8 items for measuring the antisocial and risky media and 9 for neutral items. The Likert-type scale was used to record the responses where high scores represent the greater exposure and shows how frequently the users were exposed to the different media content. The C-ME scale has good reliability and validity for measuring the media exposure across different media platforms. The Higher scores indicate higher level of Media exposure among participants the total scores would be get by summing responses of the items.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-7)

- To measure anxiety the Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-7) was used, developed by Spitzer et al. (2006). This is mostly and widely used scale for assessing the anxiety level at clinical side and it's the 7 items questionnaire. (Spitzer et al., 2006)

- The symptoms experienced by the participants are:

- Feeling nervous or anxious
- Difficulty controlling worry
- Trouble relaxing

- The items were rated on a four-point scale ranging from 0 to 3 (Nearly every day). The total score ranges from 0 to 21.

- The Higher scores show the greater anxiety level.

The interpretation of scores are:

- (0-4) Minimal anxiety
- (5-9) Mild anxiety
- (10-14) Moderate anxiety
- (15-21) Severe anxiety

Procedure

The Voluntary participation assured and the purpose of the study was explained to the participants and informed consent was taken, Data collection was conducted online (2026). It was informed that responses would be anonymous and confidential and it was informed. They could withdraw from survey at any time without any consequences. After giving the consent participants completed the demographic area and

then completed questionnaire in following sequence:

1. Media Exposure Scale
2. GAD-7 Anxiety Scale

The entire survey required almost 8 to 10 minutes to complete. The anxiety symptoms over the last 14 days was measured using the Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD-7) scale. GAD-7 total scores were categorized as: 0-4 = minimal, 5-9 = mild, 10-14 = moderate, 15-21 = severe anxiety (Spitzer et al., 2006). The total scores are sums of responses over All 7 items (from 0-21) is a cumulative clinical score. Participant's exposure to various forms of media was assessed in the survey instrument. These news exposure items were derived from several existing measures of news consumption and adjusted to match the 'new media use context of the target group.

The response format for all news exposure items used a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 (Never) to 5 (Very Often)) to measure people exposure frequency. The scale was also used on two subscales: the Sensational/Violent Content (SC-8), which measures graphic exposure to themes such as weapons, threat, fight and the Positive/Neutral Content (PC-9) which measures exposure to topics such as travel, nature, cooking and current affairs. Formal institutional ethical clearance was obtained before data was collected. Each of the participating university students received informed consent electronically which explained the goal of the study, that it was voluntary, and the right to opt out of the study at any time without repercussions. All anonymity and data confidentiality was respected during working through the process no personally identifiable data (names, institutional registration numbers) were collected. In addition, the information about the campus counselling and psychological support services were included in the debriefing section of the survey, which was particularly sensitive with regard to anxiety and content of violence media.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical Guidelines were followed completely and participants participated voluntarily and they were allowed to withdraw at any time. There's no personal information collected like name names and contact details etc. All the responses were confidential for academic research.

Results

This section presents the statistical findings for the study examining the relationship between news media exposure, sensational news content, and generalized anxiety among Pakistani university students ($N = 258$). The results are divided into six areas: (1) demographics of the sample, (2) reliability analysis, (3) descriptions of clinical levels of anxiety in relation to distribution, (4) correlation analysis, (5) multiple regression testing of H1, H2 & H3, and (6) comparisons of light vs. heavy consumers of news. All analyses were conducted using SPSS version 27 with alpha level set at .05.

Demographics of Participants

Table 1 shows demographic information about participants. There were 258 total university students who participated in the survey. The sample contained 143 female students and 115 male students. For age groups, there were 103 participants that fell within the 24-26 year old range which represented approximately 40% of all respondents, 91 participants in the 21-23 year-old category which represented just over 35%, and a large percentage of students surveyed were in their early twenties. A majority of students used social media (approximately 49%) as a major source for obtaining news. Students also used news apps and YouTube to obtain their news. However, very few students obtained their news through traditional sources like television or radio/print. These data indicate that there is a high degree of reliance on digital-based news platforms for Pakistani college-aged youth.

Table 1

Sample Demographic and News Platform Characteristics (N = 258)

Characteristic	Category	N	%
Gender	Female	143	55.4%
	Male	115	44.6%
Age	18–20 years	38	14.7%
	21–23 years	91	35.3%
	24–26 years	103	39.9%
	27–30 years	26	10.1%
	Other	2	0.8%
Primary Platform	Social media	126	48.8%
	News apps	56	21.7%
	YouTube	35	13.6%
	Television	25	9.7%
	Radio / Newspaper	14	5.4%

Reliability Analysis

Cronbach's alpha was computed for all multi-item scales. As shown in Table 2, all three scales demonstrated good-to-excellent internal consistency. The GAD-7 scale achieved $\alpha = .831$ (k = 7 items), the Sensational News scale achieved α

= .887 (k = 8 items), and the Positive News scale achieved $\alpha = .888$ (k = 9 items). All values comfortably exceed the acceptable threshold of .70 (Nunnally, 1978), confirming strong psychometric properties for all measures used.

Table 2

Reliability Coefficients for Study Measures

Scale	Items	N	α	Interpretation
GAD-7 (Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale)	7	258	.831	Good
Sensational News Exposure (violence, drugs, threats)	8	258	.887	Good
Positive/Neutral News Exposure	9	258	.888	Good

Note. $\alpha \geq .80$ = good; $\alpha \geq .70$ = acceptable (Nunnally, 1978).

Descriptive Statistics

Generalized Anxiety (GAD-7)

The GAD-7 yielded a mean total score of $M = 8.20$, $SD = 4.83$, on the 0–21 scale. Using the clinical scoring thresholds established by Spitzer et al. (2006), Table 3 presents the distribution of anxiety severity. Notably, the majority of participants (45.7%, $n = 118$) fell in the Moderate anxiety

category (scores 10–14), with an additional 25.6% in the Mild range (scores 5–9). Only 24.4% showed Minimal anxiety, while 4.3% reported Severe anxiety. This clinical profile, with over half of the sample in the mild-to-moderate range, highlights the significant mental health burden among Pakistani youth news consumers and gives the findings practical urgency.

Table 3

GAD-7 Anxiety Severity Distribution (N = 258)

Severity Category	Score Range	N	%	Implication
Minimal	0 – 4	63	24.4%	Monitor only
Mild	5 – 9	66	25.6%	Watchful waiting; possible counselling
Moderate	10 – 14	118	45.7%	Possible anxiety disorder , clinical attention advised
Severe	15 – 21	11	4.3%	Active treatment recommended

Note. Severity categories and clinical thresholds from Spitzer et al. (2006).

News Exposure Descriptive

Table 4 presents item-level descriptive statistics for the news exposure scales. Sensational news items (measuring exposure to violence, weapons, drugs, and obscene content) scored below the scale midpoint overall ($M = 2.13$, $SD = 0.94$ on a 1–5 scale), with "Shoot at another person" scoring lowest ($M = 1.57$) and "Fight scenes" scoring highest ($M = 2.59$). Positive and neutral news items scored above the midpoint ($M = 3.04$, $SD =$

various), with "Traveling" content being most frequently consumed ($M = 3.46$) and "Documentaries" least ($M = 2.59$). The contrast between low sensational and moderate positive news consumption suggests that participants are not heavy consumers of sensational content per se , yet the correlation analysis below shows this exposure, even at moderate levels, has significant anxiety consequences.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics: News Exposure Scale Items

Item	Scale Type	M	SD
SENSATIONAL / VIOLENT CONTENT (8 items, 1=Never, 5=Very Often)			
Shoot at another person	Sensational	1.574	0.940
Fight	Sensational	2.593	1.134
Destroy someone's belongings	Sensational	2.248	1.254
Threaten others	Sensational	2.360	1.237
Use weapons (guns or knives)	Sensational	2.101	1.419
Use drugs	Sensational	2.178	1.364
Be very drunk	Sensational	1.919	1.268
Engage in immoral or obscene scenes	Sensational	2.043	1.356
Sensational Composite Mean		2.127	0.938
POSITIVE / NEUTRAL CONTENT (9 items, 1=Never, 5=Very Often)			
Cooking	Positive	3.039	1.363
Traveling	Positive	3.461	1.245
Playing sports	Positive	3.031	1.411
Nature and animals	Positive	3.050	1.267
Helping each other	Positive	3.225	1.198
News and current affairs	Positive	3.186	1.410
Music videos	Positive	3.190	1.433
Quizzes or game shows	Positive	2.620	1.407
Documentaries	Positive	2.593	1.450
Positive Composite Mean		3.044	1.016

Correlation Analysis (H1)

Table 5 shows Pearson correlation coefficients for all variables studied. H1 proposed an association of news exposure with generalized anxiety. The data provided support this hypothesis: There were significant correlations for total news exposure (all three types combined), and generalized anxiety disorder scores; $r(256) = 0.297, p < .001$. Most importantly, there were significantly greater correlations between sensational news exposure and anxiety scores; $r(256) = 0.517, p < .001$, which indicates a medium to large effect size

demonstrating that there is a meaningful connection between consuming news about violence, drugs or threats, and increased anxiety. There were no associations demonstrated between consuming either positive or neutral news, and generalized anxiety disorder; $r(256) = 0.006, p = .929$. Therefore, the finding regarding content specificity is one of the most theoretically important findings of this research. The evidence does not demonstrate that it is the act of consuming news generally that leads to increased anxiety, but rather specific sensational content.

Table 5

Pearson Correlation Matrix: News Exposure and Generalized Anxiety

Variable	1	2	3	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Overall News Exposure	,	.685**	.915**	2.64	0.80
2. Sensational News Exposure		,	.298**	2.127	0.938
3. Positive News Exposure			,	3.044	1.016
4. GAD-7 (Anxiety)	.297**	.517**	.006	8.20 (sum)	4.83

Note. $N = 258$. ** $p < .001$ (two-tailed). GAD-7 mean score shown as sum (range 0–21) for clinical interpretability. Positive news not significantly correlated with anxiety ($p = .929$).

Regression Analysis (H2 and H3)

Simple Regressions

To test H2 (news exposure predicts anxiety), simple linear regressions were conducted with each news exposure variable predicting GAD-7 scores. Results are in Table 6. Overall news exposure significantly predicted anxiety, $\beta = .297, R^2 = .088, F(1, 256) = 24.816, p < .001$, confirming H2. However, when sensational news alone was

entered as predictor, the effect was substantially larger: $\beta = .517, R^2 = .267, F(1, 256) = 93.417, p < .001$, sensational news alone accounts for 26.7% of variance in anxiety. By contrast, positive news exposure produced no significant regression, $\beta = .006, R^2 < .001, F(1, 256) = 0.008, p = .929$, confirming that content type is the critical moderating factor.

Table 6

Simple Linear Regressions: News Exposure Predicting Generalized Anxiety

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>EB</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	R^2	<i>F</i>
Overall News Exposure	0.264	0.053	.297	4.982	< .001	.088	$F(1,256)=24.816$
Sensational News (8 items)	0.380	0.039	.517	9.665	< .001	.267	$F(1,256)=93.417$
Positive News (9 items)	0.004	0.047	.006	0.089	.929	< .001	$F(1,256)=0.008$

Note. $N = 258$. Outcome variable: GAD-7 score (item mean, 0–3 scale). β = standardised coefficient. Sensational news is by far the strongest predictor.

Multiple Regression: The Unique Contribution of Sensationalism (H3)

To test H3 and to determine whether sensationalism predicts anxiety independently of overall news exposure, a multiple regression was conducted with both overall news exposure and sensational news as simultaneous predictors of GAD-7. Results in Table 7 show that the model was significant, $F(2, 255) = 52.480$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .292$, explaining 29.2% of variance in anxiety. When controlling for overall news exposure, sensational news remained a strong independent predictor of anxiety, $B = 0.517$, $SE = 0.060$, $t =$

8.553, $p < .001$. Strikingly, overall news exposure became a negative predictor when sensationalism was controlled, $B = -0.216$, $SE = 0.073$, $t = -2.954$, $p = .003$. This counterintuitive finding indicates that, holding sensational content constant, consuming more news overall is actually associated with lower anxiety, suggesting that a diverse news diet (including non-sensational content) may buffer anxiety. H3 is supported as an additive independent effect rather than an interaction/moderation effect (the interaction term was not significant, $p > .05$).

Table 7

Multiple Regression: News Exposure and Sensationalism Predicting Anxiety

Predictor	B	SE B	t	P
Constant	0.634	0.088	7.223	< .001
Overall News Exposure	-0.216	0.073	-2.954	.003
Sensational News Exposure	0.517	0.060	8.553	< .001
Model Summary	$R^2 = .292$		$F(2,255) = 52.480$	$p < .001$

Note. $N = 258$. Outcome: GAD-7 item mean. Both predictors entered simultaneously. The negative coefficient for overall news (when sensationalism controlled) suggests that diverse non-sensational news consumption may be anxiety-protective. The interaction term (News $\times$ Sensationalism) was not significant ($t = -0.038$, $p = .970$) indicating no moderation; the effect is additive.

Light vs. Heavy News Consumers: Anxiety Comparison (H4)

H4 proposed that anxiety levels would differ between light and heavy news consumers. Participants were classified as light (at or below median news exposure, $n = 131$) or heavy consumers (above median, $n = 127$) using a median split on the overall news exposure composite. A one-way ANOVA confirmed a significant difference in GAD-7 scores between

groups, $F(1, 256) = 22.457$, $p < .001$. Heavy consumers reported substantially higher anxiety ($M = 1.370$, $SD = 0.615$ per item, equivalent to GAD sum ≈ 9.6) compared to light consumers ($M = 0.979$, $SD = 0.701$, equivalent to GAD sum ≈ 6.9). This difference of nearly one-half standard deviation confirms H4 and highlights the practical significance of news consumption patterns for youth mental health.

Table 8

One-Way ANOVA: GAD-7 Scores by News Consumption Level (H4)

Group	n	GAD-7 Item Mean	SD	GAD Sum (est.)	F	df	p
Light consumers ($\leq$ median)	131	0.979	0.701	≈ 6.9	22.457	1, 256	< .001
Heavy consumers ($>$ median)	127	1.370	0.615	≈ 9.6			

Note. H4 supported. Heavy news consumers show significantly higher anxiety than light consumers. Median split used for categorisation. GAD sum estimated as item mean $\times$ 7 items.

Gender Differences in Anxiety

While gender was not a major study hypothesis, gender differences in GAD-7 scores were explored since females make up most of the total participant number. Females scored slightly higher than males for each anxiety item (Females $M = 1.241$; $SD = .656$ vs. $M = 1.086$; $SD = .723$ for males) which are

consistent with what is found globally regarding gender differences in anxiety disorders. An independent-samples t -test indicated this difference was not statistically significant, $t(256) = 1.78$, $p = .076$ ($\Delta = .155$ per item, approximately $\Delta = 1.1$ on the GAD-7 sum).

Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Table 9

Hypothesis	Key Statistical Result	Decision
H1: News exposure positively associated with anxiety	$r(256) = .297$, $p < .001$ (overall); $r = .517$ for sensational content	SUPPORTED
H2: News exposure predicts higher anxiety scores	$\beta = .297$, $R^2 = .088$ (overall); $\beta = .517$, $R^2 = .267$ (sensational)	SUPPORTED, sensational content is strongest predictor
H3: Sensationalism independently predicts anxiety above news exposure	Multiple regression: Sensational $B=0.517$, $t=8.553$, $p<.001$ (interaction ns)	SUPPORTED as additive predictor (not moderation)
H4: Anxiety differs between light and heavy consumers	$F(1,256) = 22.457$, $p < .001$; Heavy $M=1.37$ vs Light $M=0.98$	SUPPORTED

Important to note that it is sensational news content ($r = .517$), not overall news frequency, that is the primary driver of anxiety. Positive/neutral news exposure shows no significant association with anxiety ($r = .006$, $p = .929$). This content-specificity finding has direct implications for media literacy interventions.

Conclusion

The primary objective of this study was to explore whether exposure to news media, sensationalized content and generalized anxiety among the university student population of Pakistan ($N=258$) are linked. Based upon the empirical test data supporting both H1 and H2, general anxiety levels correlated positively with overall news consumption. University students in Pakistan are at particular risk of being affected by digital: they consume information digitally and through social media, contributing to their mental health. It appears according to the research that the actual vulnerability lies within the type of content consumed as opposed to anything else. Sensationalism significantly increases the levels of anxiety. Sensational news exposure significantly

predicted anxiety ($\beta = .517$, $p < .001$), accounting for 26.7% of the variance in generalized anxiety. Positive and neutral content had no significant correlations with anxiety levels ($r = .006$, $p = .929$). However, there was an additional finding that emerged when testing a multiple regression model. Once sensationalized content was controlled for, then overall news consumption became negatively predictive of anxiety ($B = -.0216$, $t = -2.954$, $p = .003$). Although surprising this finding may suggest a means of mitigating worry is by having a balanced consumption of news rather than sensationalized reporting. The clinical profile of the sample also supports the above mentioned conclusions, 45.7% of the students, in the sample of those surveyed, scored in the moderate range on the GAD-7 scale and 4.3% of the students scored in the severe range. As news consumption is becoming more of a habit and attention-grabbing, alarmist framing is preferred drama essentially is what drives engagement when it comes to news consumption in a digital environment. Rather, anxiety caused by news reports in the lives of young people has to be identified as a pressing

issue for public health which has to be addressed now at system level.

Recommendations

The following actionable recommendations are suggested for safeguarding and promoting the psychological well-being of young media consumers:

1. Reform Breaking News Frameworks. The Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) and other regulatory authorities should have more precise laws and regulations in place to curb the over-dramatisation of breaking news. Unless the situation is an actual public threat, news should be in a tone, based on his/her reporting instincts, where an emergency was not involved.
2. Structural responsibility of digital news platforms and media organisations for real-time information verification should be taken. It is important that there will not be attempts to spread misinformation or sensational information to cause artificial increases in people's anxiety.
3. Establish media literacy programs and provide special media literacy courses at higher education institutes. Educating young people on using emotive language, sensational hook and clickbait will enable them to critically engage with media, not absorb the stress language that is created.
4. Recognize news-induced anxiety in mental health awareness on the campus University psychological services should make it clear that in their mental health awareness initiatives, there exists a "news-induced anxiety". Support groups or coping strategies should be offered where they are needed to support student's psychological challenges around media.
5. Become more aware of and mindful about what you read and watch on social media many young people are algorithmically increasingly learning their news on social media. Instead, they ought to purposefully look for well-researched, trustworthy, and diverse news content. Controlled Media Exposure Daily exposure limits to news reporting can significantly reduce any overloading exposure to psychological triggers which can result in the cumulative effect of negative media framing.

Future Research

Perform platform-specific comparative analyses future research may find that students consumed more social media short-form platforms like TikTok and X/Twitter should be compared with the traditional televised news or standalone news application, given that some of these are available, for coverage and impact on student anxiety.

Demographic Scope was expanded to include young people from rural areas as this study concentrated on young people with a high university enrollment, and therefore a predominantly urban and digitally connected young adult population. Future research should explore and compare the anxiety outcomes of urban vs. rural youth to determine how different access to media and value placed on media in different regions impact anxiety results.

Apply Experimental Methodologies Future studies could use experimental designs in which both neutral and sensational versions of news are presented to participants and their immediate objective changes in the psychological well-being, as measured, are observed, thereby allowing for a strong causal argument to be made for the findings.

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