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Title: The Digital Activism and Social Media Audiences Engagement on Israel-Gaza War 2023-24

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Abstract

This study examines the engagement behavior of social media users on digital news content shared by Al Jazeera, TRT, Middle East Eye (MEE) social media platforms on the Israel-Gaza War (2023-2024). The research is grounded in the Social Media Engagement Theory and Public Sphere Theory. The research explores how users respond to conflict-related content emotionally, its perceived impact, peer influence, and the users' behavior on online emotional fatigue. The study adopts a quantitative approach employing a cross-sectional survey. The self-structured survey has 20 items. A sample of 151 social media users is used to quantify the results using Spearman's correlation and chi-square tests to assess the relationship between engagement frequency, emotional investment and real world activism. Findings indicate that the engagement significant increases when users believe that their engagement influences public awareness and shape media narratives. Furthermore, results demonstrate a strong relationship between active engagement and offline participation including donations, protests, and boycotts. In contrast, negative emotions, particularly anxiety and emotional burn out – reduce active engagement. The study highlights the dual role of social media platforms with social mobilization and emotional fatigue during a humanitarian crisis. Overall, the study gives an insight into how emotional dynamics and perceived efficacy influence user's behavior in conflict-driven digital settings.

Keywords: Social Media Engagement, Digital Activism, Emotional Response, Israel-Gaza Conflict, Alternative Media, Offline Activism, Emotional fatigue, Engagement Motivation.

Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Social Media has revolutionized communication and mass media. It was initially developed as a networking platform, a digital space to connect like-minded people to share, communicate, and generate ideas. However, in merely two decades, it has transformed social communication among the global audience, and access to information has become rapid and fast. The one-way communication mode of print and electronic mass media has been replaced by the two-way communication of social media. Social media has given the mic in the hands of the people. People who once listened, read, and watched now react, respond, and act through social media. Digital

activism has transformed passive audiences into activists and influencers in their own spaces.

Social Media is a platform that allows users to network and connect with like-minded people. With the advancement and accessibility of social media, which is convenient through phones, a story-telling tool has become a forefront in conflicts like the Arab Spring, Black Lives Matter, Me Too Movement, regime change operations in Pakistan, and the Israel–Gaza War. Social Media has been successfully employed in shaping narratives, changing perceptions, and public engagement on social media content.

The significance of social media multiplies during major events, conflicts, and wars. For instance, the horrors and war crimes of the Serbian armed forces against Bosnian Muslims remain unknown to the larger audience to date due to the inaccessibility of the international press to the war-affected areas and the agenda-setting of the mainstream media. In contrast, the Gaza-Israel War 2023-24 became the ‘most documented’ genocide and was live broadcasted to the world through social media. The camera and mobile phone became weapons, and social media platforms acted as battlegrounds for the journalists of Gaza.

Social media is a story-telling platform that journalists and influencers from Gaza have used intelligently to counter the dominant and favoured Israel narrative on social media.

Empathy plays a crucial role in fostering harmony among individuals and communities, helping to resolve conflicts and promote peace. The level of empathy of the global audience has increased towards the Palestinians following the present Israel-Gaza War. Empathy has caused increased moral support for the Palestinians and an understanding of the need for self-determination and freedom from the Israeli occupation (Buheji et al., 2024a).

Audiences on social media have witnessed the violation of human rights and international laws, which has drawn people to express their anger, empathy, and injustice on social media by engaging in the news content. The social media platforms have become a transformed the ability of the global citizens “to build coalition and networks” (Rheingold, 2004).

Al Jazeera is a Qatar-based international news network, TRT is a Turkish television network, and Middle East Eye is an independent News Network headquartered in London. These networks challenged the dominant Western narrative and emerged as an alternative voice for Middle Eastern countries, especially in the current Israel-Gaza War. In this study, we will examine the public's engagement with social media posts shared by news networks.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The primary source of news dissemination is profoundly relying on digital and social media networks in the conflict zones, particularly in the Middle East Countries. The ongoing Israel-Gaza War 2023 is extensively covered by the mainstream as well as alternative media. There is a critical gap in studies that explore the emotional response of the audiences to the news emerging from war affected zone by the counter-hegemonic news outlet such as Al Jazeera, TRT and Middle East Eye. It is a need to study how digital empathy, perception of the impact of audience engagement on the offline activism, emotional fatigue shapes the behavioral pattern such as commenting, sharing and liking the posts.

There is insufficient literature on theoretical understanding of the Social Media Engagement Models and its impact on the social mobilization on social mobilization. The study seeks to fill the empirical and theoretical void by studying the emotional response and peer influence on the social media engagement and its impact on the real world activism in response to Gaza conflict.

1.3 Scope of the Study

This study is limited to analyzing the engagement behaviors of social media users in Pakistan who interacted with conflict-related content published by Al Jazeera, TRT, and Middle East Eye during the 2023–24 Israel-Gaza War. The research employs a cross-sectional quantitative survey method to explore the associations between emotional responses (empathy, anxiety, burnout), perceived impact of engagement, peer influence, and subsequent participation in offline activism. The study specifically emphasis on behavioral benchmarks of online activism such as liking, sharing, and commenting, on the social media posts and participation in protests or donations. However, the study is not a platform-specific analysis, cross-cultural comparisons, or longitudinal study of online engagement behavior. The findings are semantically bound to the Israel-Gaza conflict and

may not be generalizable to other conflicts. Nonetheless, the findings contribute meaningfully to the new media studies, activism theory, and emotional response research in crisis communication.

1.4 Research Objectives

1. To analyse the nature and extent of audience engagement (likes, shares, comments) with social media content related to the Israel-Gaza War.
2. To investigate the role of emotional responses (e.g. empathy, anger, and sadness) in motivating users to engage with conflict-related content on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter/X.
3. To explore the factors influencing users' decisions to engage in or avoid participation in online discussions and digital activism about the conflict.
4. To assess the impact of social media engagement on users' offline behaviours, including protest participation, donations, and political discourse.

1.5 Research Questions

1. What are the various factors that influence social media users' decisions to engage (like, share, comment) with content related to the Israel-Gaza conflict?
2. How do reciprocity and social currency concepts shape individuals' motivations for sharing or advocating for specific narratives on the Israel-Gaza conflict on social media?
3. What are the emotional and social costs associated with engagement in online discussions about the Israel-Gaza conflict, and how do these affect the intensity and frequency of user engagement?
4. How do social media users navigate the risk of backlash or online hostility when engaging with polarizing content about the Israel-Gaza conflict?

Literature Review

The Israel-Palestine conflict is a long-standing issue responsible for shaping the politics of the Middle East and the world. The sanctity of Jerusalem for all three Abrahamic religions (Islam, Christianity, and Judaism) makes the nature of the conflict more complex and intertwined in the social, religious, and political fabric.

2.1 Social Media

Social media content includes images, blog posts, videos, direct and group messages, podcasts, newsletters, music, and links to external websites. (“Scholarly Articles on Social Media: History & Journal Articles”) Different social media apps are used for narrative building and changing perceptions. The apps include Twitter (now X), Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, Discord, Snapchat, LinkedIn, and Reddit. These apps are designed to cater to the distinctive needs and preferences of the audience by engaging technology and trends. (Odera Oguejiofor, 2024)

The rise in the use of digital media and social networking platforms to share and discuss news from conflict zones has transformed the way people engage with news content. The Israel-Gaza War of 2023 sparked global discourse on social media platforms. The online activism led to offline activism as the large-scale protests in the West, boycott, university students’ encampments demanding divestment from Israel, and Freedom flotillas to break the siege are some of the consequences of the online narrative shift due to social media.

The literature review explores users’ engagement with the digital news content of alternative media, in particular, Al Jazeera, TRT, and Middle East Eye (MEE). The theoretical framework is based on social media engagement and public sphere theories. The literature review focuses on the key concepts of emotional engagement, digital activism, and burnout.

2.2 Social Media and Conflict Reporting

2.2.1 Role of Social Media in Conflict Zones

Social Media has taken a central role in conflict zones and in natural and humanitarian crises. It offers conflict reporting, immediacy, and emotional engagement that mainstream media lack. Hermida, Lewis, & Zamith (2014) analyzed the role of Twitter in the Arab Spring. It serves as an information consumer as well as a citizen journalist. Twitter and Facebook played a vital role in the Arab Spring as they not only provided a safe public sphere forming opinions but also contributed to offline activism. Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2015) coined the term "diffused war" to describe how conflict narratives are shaped across multiple platforms and actors.

Youmans and York (2012) determined how activists use social media to bypass censorship and further their political struggles. In the context of the Israel-Gaza War, Western media is censoring the Palestinian context, and social media is also using algorithms to shadow ban and restrict Palestinian content from reaching the audience.

2.2.2 Israel-Gaza Digital Narrative

The Israel-Gaza conflict has attracted global media attention since the start of the war. Abu-Lughod (2021) argues that visual and emotional storytelling on social media influences global perceptions and humanitarian sympathies. Masullo Chen, G. and Pain, P. (2017) explored how emotional framing, particularly using images of children and civilians, generates empathy and engagement.

Palestinians are gaining global support by showcasing their struggles and resistance to the occupation. Following the war, 'empathetic engagement' is growing among Palestinians.

2.3 Emotional Response and Engagement

2.3.1 Empathy as a Driver of Engagement

Empathy is an emotional or cognitive response to understanding the pain or other situations as ours. Hodges and Myers identified three components of empathy. The first component is experiencing the same emotions as others. The second component is feeling distressed or upset when considering the pain of others. However, it is important to note that the feeling of distress may not be experienced by others. The third component is feeling compassion for others. (Lesley University, 2019).

Empathy is a healthy human emotion that ensures peace and harmony in society. The atrocious social media posts emerging from Gaza have caused audiences to empathise with the Palestinian people. The social, economic, medical, and human crises caused by the bombing, genocide, and aid blockage in Gaza have aligned people's emotions with Gazans (Lesley University, 2019). Papacharissi (2015) introduced the concept of "*affective publics*," where digital engagement is driven by shared emotional experiences. Emotion serves as a catalyst for digital activism because

users feel compelled to express solidarity, outrage, or empathy. Tandoc et al. (2020) emphasized that emotional arousal, especially during humanitarian crises, significantly predicts content sharing and commenting.

This is one of the reasons why people engaging in sharing, viewing, and engagement on posts has decreased. However, on the positive side, the sense of purpose, fulfilment, and solidarity of a cause keeps one going. (Krznaric, 2015)

Moeller (1999) argues "*compassion fatigue*," where prolonged exposure to the graphic content (images and video) exhausts you, causing emotional numbness. News stories containing videos and images of massacres bombarded the news daily. Despite this, the initial emotional trigger often plays a vital role in drawing users into conversations.

2.3.2 Empathy Fatigue and Burnout

Figley (1995) developed the Compassion Fatigue Model and explained how distressing stories and graphics cause psychological exhaustion. In the social media context, Tandoc and Maitra (2018) found that users who constantly interact with crisis content withdraw or reduce engagement after reaching an emotional threshold.

Chouliaraki, L. (2010) elaborates on the concept of "*distant suffering*," where users feel emotionally involved but helpless to act. This dynamic is relevant to Gaza, where people withdraw due to burnout from active participation but passively consume content due to emotional fatigue.

2.4. Digital Engagement and Offline Activism

2.4.1 Clicktivism vs. Real Activism

Whether it is effective or not, it is unclear and the sharing and commenting online is criticised as superficial activism Morozov (2009). However, Milan (2015) argues, online and offline activism intersect in a hybrid fashion in cyberspace.

Bennett and Segerberg (2012) suggested that their voices and influence can be brought about by offline activism by using digital platforms. For an organization like Al Jazeera who are digitally

engaging with users, and can motivate them to take action in the real world, such as protesting, petitioning and donating, this is a very relevant topic.

2.4.2 Peer Influence and Social Identity

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) is a theory used to explain the impacts of group norms on individuals' behaviors. Ross et al. (2009) validated that peers' behaviors were found to be a major factor when predicting online sharing and commenting.

The use of peers and their influence on protest behaviors in the digital environment was explored. These individuals are motivated to act in accord with the values of groups with which they identify and/or feel responsible. That is how the Israel-Gaza rhetoric can be used to engender a sense of community, leading to engagement and activism.

2.5 Alternative Journalism

Alternative Media challenge mainstream media narratives. (Fenton,2010). Seib (2005) described Al Jazeera as a counter-hegemonic force in the global media. El-Nawawy and Iskandar (2002) further assert that Al Jazeera becomes a platform to the underrepresented Arab voices in the western dominated media.

2.6 Theoretical Framework

2.6.1 The Social Media Engagement (SME) Model

The social media engagement model was developed and elaborated by Dessart, Veloutsou, and Morgan-Thomas in their seminal work published in 2015. It deals with multiple aspects of social media interaction. The SME model is based on emotional, behavioral, and cognitive aspects. People empathize and express happiness, sorrow, and anger by viewing and sharing social media content. Recent studies argue that emotional engagement is the key reason in mobilizing digital communities leading to collective action during political and humanitarian crisis (Zhang, 2026). The audience chose to share, comment, and engage through stickers and likes on the content in the behavioral dimension of the model. On the cognitive side, the audience reflects, researches, comprehends, and analyses the content. Audiences research the old interviews, books, policies,

and discuss the historical and future of the conflict.

The integration of all three dimensions of the SME model were explored by social media users and is consistent with the present study. The outcome of the study reveals the social engagement is shaped by the emotional responses, perceived impact and, social interaction.

2.6.2 The Public Sphere Theory

Herbermas et al., (1989) conceives a space where people come together and discuss the societal issues without the limitation of the state, to influence political action. Presently, social media has become a public space where audiences engage through social media posts, content, blogs, videos, and images, discussing their views and forming opinions. These social media platforms also serve as discourse and community mobilization (Chavadi et al., 2023; Shaholli, 2025).

These social media platforms also serve as discourse and community mobilization. They share events, causes, and conflicts that influence global perspectives. Dahlberg (2001) and Papacharissi (2015) argue that internet has created new public spheres like Twitter, Instagram, Facebook that accommodate disparate voices, enabling interactive discourse.

Freelon (2015) highlights how networked social media allows decentralised conversations, which may contradict the popular narrative. Al Jazeera, TRT, MEE, and digital media provide an alternative frame to the Western-dominated narrative. Users of social media platforms are participants in the extended public sphere, actively shaping public opinion.

2.7 Research Gap and Contribution

A substantial amount of research is undertaken to investigate the digital engagement behavior, emotional responses, media framing, and offline activism of the social media users. However, few studies are available that examine the impact of alternative media such as Al Jazeera, TRT, Middle East Eye (MEE) on the social media engagement during an ongoing conflict. Moreover, some studies are conducted on the emotional burnout and the reduction in digital engagement, the intersection between emotional fatigue and real-world activism remains unmapped.

This study aims to fill this gap by analyzing how emotional responses, perceived impact, and social influence shape engagement behavior. It also highlights how social media can act as both a motivator and barrier to activism, depending on the user's psychological state. By focusing on the Israel-Gaza conflict and using both Social Media Engagement Theory and Public Sphere Theory, this study provides a nuanced understanding of digital engagement in humanitarian crises.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a cross-sectional quantitative survey approach using a structured online-survey method to explore patterns of social media engagement with the Israel-Gaza War 2023 -24 and its relationship with emotional response and offline activism.

The study collected the data from individual social media users who engaged with the content of Israel-Gaza War 2023 on social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and Tik Tok.

3.2 Population and Sample

The target population for the study are the social media users aged 15 and above residing in Pakistan engaging with Israel- Gaza War 2023. A total of 151 respondents participated in this study.

A non-probability convenience sampling technique was employed. The data collection form was shared on the online social media platforms, where the Google Form link was posted for participation. The study is explanatory in nature, and the respondents are active social media users and engaged with the Israel-Gaza War content; therefore, this data collection approach is appropriate.

A sample size of 151 respondents is sufficient to conduct a deductive and correlation statistical analysis, including chi-square and Spearman's correlation tests. The participation was voluntary, and no personal information was collected to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the

participants.

3.3 Instrument

The instrument was developed on Google Forms and distributed through Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and other social media networks by sharing the links. The survey included closed-ended questions and a Likert scale (strongly disagree – Strongly Agree) and was divided into five sections:

1. Social media usage patterns
2. Emotional responses to content
3. Perceived impact of engagement
4. Social Media Engagement and Offline Actions
5. Negative Emotional Response and Engagement Frequency

3.4 Validity and Reliability

Literature and expert reviews in the media and communication studies are reviewed to establish the content validity. Moreover, the instrument was evaluated by the subject experts for the clarity, relevance and appropriateness to the study objectives. Furthermore, the reliability of the Likert-scale items was assessed using Cronbach's alpha test, which yielded an acceptable alpha coefficient for the four sections of the instrument, indicating good internal consistency across all scale items.

Table 1 Cronbach's Alpha Test

<i>Survey Sections</i>	<i>Cronbach's Alpha Test</i>
<i>Emotional responses to content</i>	0.78
<i>Perceived impact of engagement</i>	0.746
<i>Offline actions influenced by online engagement</i>	0.809
<i>Negative emotional consequences of digital engagement</i>	0.77

3.5 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using Jamovi and SPSS software packages. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the demographic data and engagement patterns. To test the hypotheses, chi-square tests of independence and Spearman's rank-order correlations were conducted, depending on the nature of the variables (categorical or ordinal). The level of significance was set at $p < .05$.

Data indicates that the respondents used more than one social media platform to view posts about the war. Instagram, Facebook, and X are the most popular platforms for viewing war-related contents. These platforms are used both individually and in combination, reflecting their significance in shaping narratives and promoting digital activism.

Results

In this section, we discuss the findings of the survey-type research model. Spearman's rank-order correlation and chi-square test of independence were used to analyze the data.

4.1 Emotional Response and Engagement (H_1)

Table 2: Engagement Frequency and Emotional Level

Items	Paired Variables	Spearman's ρ	p-value	Interpretation
Q2-Q4	Engagement frequency and Emotional Level	0.027	0.739	No significant correlation

Table 2 shows the Spearman's correlation conducted to determine the association between the frequency of engagement (Q2) with Israel-Gaza related content and the emotional response (empathy, sadness, anger) (q4). The p-value is 0.739 (>0.05), leading to the rejection of hypothesis H_1 and acceptance of the null hypothesis (H_0). There was no significant correlation between the frequency of engagement and emotional intensity.

4.2 Perceived Impact and Engagement Motivation (H₂)

Table 3 measures the relationship between users’ perception of the impact of engagement and their likelihood of sharing, commenting, and discussing the post. Spearman’s rank-order correlation was used to analyse the data to explore the association with Q9: Engagement with posts influences public awareness and media narrative. Q10 – Likelihood of sharing the post if the user believes that sharing posts could lead to raising awareness and changes in opinion; Q12 – active participation in discussions about the Gaza conflict on social media. Q11 - Engagement with the news content due to peer influence or a sense of social obligation.

Table 3: Perception of Impact of Engagement

Items	Paired Variables	Spearman’s ρ	p-value	Interpretation
Q9 and Q10	Perceived public impact and Likelihood to share	0.545	<.001	Strong Correlation Positive
Q9 and Q12	Perceived public impact and Actual engagement	0.382	<.001	Moderate Correlation Positive
Q11 and Q10	Peer/social pressure and Likelihood to share	0.213	0.009	Weak but significant Correlation

Table 3 displays a strong positive correlation between the belief that engagement influences narratives (Q9) and the likelihood of sharing news content to raise awareness among people. The Spearman’s rank-order correlation co-efficient was $p = 0.545$, with $p < .001$ indicates a statistically significant strong positive correlation. This result implies that users who believe in the effectiveness of social media in shaping narratives are significantly more inclined to share news content to educate people about the Israel-Gaza conflict.

Table 3 shows a moderate positive correlation. The correlation coefficient was $p = 0.382$ ($p < .001$), indicating a statistically significant moderate positive relationship. Users who perceive the impact of social media actively engage in discussions on Israel-Gaza related posts. This reinforces that users are involved in more debate and discussion when they view engagement as impactful on

social media.

Table 3 indicates a weak but statistically significant relationship between Q11 (peer influence) and Q10 (likelihood of sharing). The correlation coefficient was $r = 0.213$ ($p < 0.009$) demonstrates that peer and social behavior is secondary factor in motivating users to share the news content related to the Israel-Gaza War 2023-24.

Therefore, Hypothesis H_2 is accepted, and H_{0_2} is rejected.

4.3 Digital Engagement and Offline Action (H_3)

To test the relationship between the level of social media engagement and advocacy with Gaza War-related news content and offline actions (e.g. protests, donations, signing petitions, boycotts etc.), chi-square tests for independence were employed to explore the association between the variables.

The relationship between the impact of social media engagement and offline actions. Following Items from the survey is used

Q13: studies the active social media engagement impacts on participation in offline actions (protests, donations, boycott etc.)

Q14 likelihood of taking offline actions as a result of social media engagement.

Q15: The relationship between social media engagement drives offline actions.

Table 4: Active social media engagement on the news content Q9

Variables	χ^2	df	p value	Cramer's V	Strength of Association
Actual Offline Participation (Q13)	58.5	16	<.001	0.311	Strong
Likelihood of Offline Action (Q14)	28.9	16	0.025	0.219	Moderate
Influence on decision making (Q15)	60.7	16	<.001	0.317	Strong

Table 4 shows a strong association between the active social media engagement with the actual offline actions and the results, $\chi^2(16) = 58.5$, $p < .001$, describes that there is a statistically significant of association between the variables. Hence, the table suggests a strong positive relationship. The findings indicate that the increased social media engagement on the news content of Al Jazeera, TRT and MEE is related the greater real world activism.

The association between social media engagement and the likelihood of participation in offline actions was tested using a chi-square test of independence. Table 3 shows that $\chi^2(16) = 28.9$, $p = .025$. Cramer's V ranges from 0 to 1, where 0.1 = small, 0.3 = moderate).

Based on the results, users who actively participate in the discussion, sharing, and liking of the news content of Al Jazeera, TRT, and MEE are more likely to participate in donations, boycotting, protests, and other offline activism. The results are consistent with Milan's (2015) description of digital platforms as mobilizing tools that connect users with real-world activism.

Table 4 indicates a strong relationship between active social media engagement with the news content of the Gaza War 2023-24 and its influence on the decision to participate in offline activism. The chi-square test of independence suggested $\chi^2(16) = 60.7$, $p < .001$, indicating a statistically significant association. In addition, Cramér's V = 0.317, indicating a moderate strength of association between the two variables. The strength of the association supported by Cramer's V points out that moderate digital engagement is meaningful in influencing the decision-making process to participate in offline activism.

4.4 Emotional Exhaustion and Engagement Limitations (H₄)

Table 5 explores the association between experiencing negative responses, backlash, and overwhelming emotions and frequency of engagement.

Table 5: Negative Experiencing and emotional response

ItemsNo	Variable Pair	χ^2	df	p value	Cramer's V	Strength of Association
Q18– Q2	Stress and Engagement	20.7	16	0.192	0.185	Weak
Q19– Q12	Anxiety and Engagement	62.6	16	< .001	0.322	Strong
Q20– Q12	Emotional Burnout and Engagement	43.3	16	< .001	0.268	Moderate

The relationship between the negative emotions (stress, anxiety, and emotional burnout) that the users feel by watching the news content of Al Jazeera, TRT, and MEE social media accounts and the frequency of engagement was tested using chi-square tests of independence.

Table 5 indicates that no significant association was found between experiencing stress (Q18) and general engagement frequency (Q2), $\chi^2(16) = 20.7$, $p = .192$, Cramér's $V = 0.185$ (weak).

Table 5 suggests a strong, statistically significant association between the feeling that negative emotions reduce engagement (Q19) and active participation (Q12), $\chi^2(16) = 62.6$, $p < .001$, Cramér's $V = 0.322$.

Similarly, emotional overwhelm or burnout (Q20) was moderately and significantly associated with lower levels of active engagement ($\chi^2(16) = 43.3$, $p < .001$, Cramér's $V = 0.268$).

Therefore, H4 was partially accepted. Generally, stress alone does not substantially reduce social media users from consuming ongoing Gaza War-related news content. This indicates a weak association. The reasons could be humanitarian, religious, or personal commitment to the issue. However, the results suggest that emotional responses such as anxiety and emotional burnout (Q19 and Q20) significantly affect the frequency of engagement of social media users engaging with Gaza War content on Al Jazeera, TRT, and MEE. Users restrict their engagement by decreasing commenting, sharing, and liking new stories or posts.

Discussion

5.1 Emotional Response and Engagement (H₁)

This finding contrasts with several studies that underscore that emotions are the driving force behind engagement frequency. Papacharissi (2015) argued that affective publics—audiences mobilised by shared emotional experiences—are essential in online activism. The data reveals the public's emotional detachment. The results suggest that prolonged user engagement with the content, regardless of emotional reactions made the respondents desensitized with the Israel-Gaza war related content. This aligned with Tandoc et al. (2020) study, who suggested that repeated exposure to distressing news can reduce emotional responsiveness over time. The study is also consistent with the Social Media Engagement Theory, which suggests that emotional stimuli often drive sharing behavior, but the impact fades away over time when users' face *empathy fatigue*.

5.2 Perceived Impact and Engagement Motivation (H₂)

The results are consistent with the core principle of the Social Exchange Theory, which states that users engage more with content when they believe their actions have an effect. The results strongly support the hypothesis that belief in the impact of digital engagement influences users' likelihood of sharing, commenting, and liking content, which are aligned with Vraga and Tully (2021), who assert that users who believe in the efficacy of media engagement are more likely to participate and interact with the content. Participants in our study use social media as a space of public discourse raises awareness and opinion formation platforms, engaging in discussion that consistent with Habermas' Public Sphere Theory, that frames online public discourse is a place where collective intelligence and critical thinking cultivating opinion. Moreover, the influence of peer pressure (Q11) within the digital spaces aligns with Social Identity Theory, which states that individuals comply with perceived group norms, even in online settings.

These results affirm that social media users are not only passive consumers but also active participants driven by a combination of personal efficacy and social dynamics.

5.3 Digital Engagement and Offline Action (H₃)

The data findings accept hypothesis H3, as a strong positive relationship exists between the active social media engagement of the users and consequently it impacts the decision-making process,

likelihood, and actual participation in real-world activism, as aligned with the studies of Milan (2015). The digital sphere becomes the mobilizing structure and channels emotion and discourse (donations and protests, etc.).

Boulianne (2015) similarly found that digital engagement is a strong predictor of civic and political participation, particularly in times of crisis. The strength of these associations in the current study reinforces the conclusion that social media acts as a catalyst for activism among users who feel informed and empowered by the content.

5.4 Emotional Exhaustion and Engagement Limitations (H₄)

H4 yielded mixed results. While stress does not majorly affect engagement, anxiety (Q19), emotional burnout (Q20), and mental exhaustion from consuming war-related news that is often highly graphic and emotionally charged leads to limited social media engagement and serve as a barrier to deeper engagement. The results complement the idea of ‘empathy fatigue or compassion fatigue, where overexposure numbs the active response and users are likely to turn away from the visuals to remove their discomfort (Moeller, 1999; Sontag, 2003). Tandoc et al. (2020) assert that users showing emotional fatigue from crisis coverage are more likely to withdraw from deeper engagement. However, they remain passive consumers of news.

5.5 Limitations

1. Cross-sectional survey
2. Captures user perceptions at one point in time; cannot determine causality. Self-reported data
3. May include social desirability bias or underreporting of emotional distress. Sample limitations
4. If the sample is not geographically diverse, the findings may not be generalizable across all demographics. Platform variation not analysed Facebook vs. Twitter vs. Instagram engagement may behave differently — not disaggregated in your results.

Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

This research indicates that the users' belief in the impact and peer influence are the key motivators behind active digital engagement. The key driver is the effectiveness of the narrative shaping, raising awareness that leads to increased participation in real world activism such as fund raising, street protests, economic boycotts, and calling out government and elected members. Hence, the results of the study are consistent with the Social Media Engagement Theory and Public Sphere Theory. Based on the results, it may be concluded that digital activism during the war crisis is not merely a public outcry but a drive to tangible results in the real world.

Moreover, the study indicates that only stress does not deter social media audiences from online engagement. However, anxiety and emotional burnout reduce digital engagement, identifying a tension between emotional investment and the sustainability of the digital activism. The consequences of emotional burnout underscore the need for supportive communities in order to continue the social media engagement and activism.

In conclusion, the findings validate that digital engagement is both meaningful and consequential, influencing discourse, collective effort, and resulting in tangible actions. However, the emotional cost of the Israel-Gaza War is borne by the users. These insights contribute to refining how media, emotions, and offline actions interact on digital platforms during wars and humanitarian crises.

The study contributes to the practical advantage to media professionals and journalists. The news agencies should create a healthy balance between the emotional storytelling and responsible reporting while covering wars and humanitarian crisis to reduce the emotional burn out and fatigue. In addition to it, media agencies can devise the content strategy to encourage informed participation in activism considering the emotional wellbeing of the audiences.

6.2 Recommendations for Future Research

1. Longitudinal research should be conducted to track the emotional and behavioral engagement changes over time.
2. Explore platform-specific engagement patterns, as affordances (e.g. retweets vs. shares) affect behavior.
3. Focus Group studies or qualitative interviews should be conducted to study the in-depth analysis of the users' motivation and emotional coping in consuming war related content.
4. Investigate how visual content (videos/images) influences emotional responses differently from text.
5. Cultural and religious identity as moderators of engagement behavior with conflict-related content.

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