

# Indirect Digital Exposure to War and Armed Conflict and Mental Health Outcomes in Children and Adolescents: A Systematic Review

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## BACKGROUND

Children and adolescents are increasingly exposed to war and armed conflict through social-media platforms disseminating real-time graphic content. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and X/Twitter frequently circulate videos depicting violence, injured civilians, and destruction.

While the psychiatric effects of direct exposure to war are well established, the mental-health consequences of indirect digital exposure remain poorly defined.

As adolescents increasingly encounter global conflicts through algorithm-driven media feeds, understanding the potential psychological impact is critical.

## OBJECTIVE

To examine whether digital exposure to war-related content is associated with mental-health outcomes in youth.

## METHODS

Exploratory systematic review conducted according to PRISMA guidelines.

**DATABASES SEARCHED:** PubMed, Embase, CINAHL, Google Scholar

**TIMEFRAME:** 2015–2025

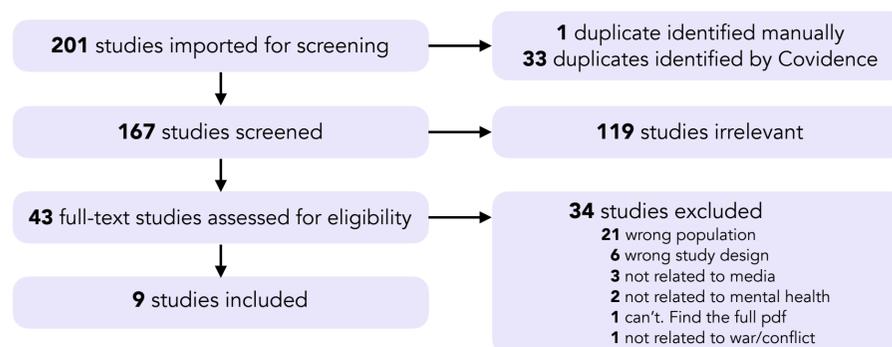
**ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA:**

- **Population:** Children and adolescents ≤18 years
- **Exposure:** Digital or social-media exposure to war, armed conflict, or mass violence
- Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods studies were eligible.
- **Outcomes:**



Due to substantial methodological heterogeneity, no pooled meta-analysis was performed.

## PRISMA FLOW DIAGRAM

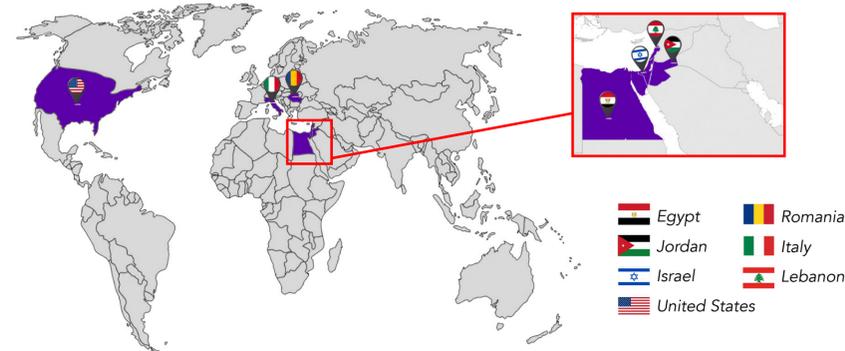


## RESULTS

### Study Characteristics

Nine studies published between 2021 and 2025 met inclusion criteria, with sample sizes ranging from 13 to 758 participants aged 11–19 years.

Countries represented included:



Exposure occurred primarily on:



Several studies reported repeated or unavoidable exposure to graphic content, including images of injured civilians, destruction, and death.

### Key Findings

Across studies, greater exposure to war-related digital media was consistently associated with worse mental-health outcomes.

#### STRESS

Stress-related symptoms were the most frequently reported outcome.

In a Jordanian sample, stress levels increased significantly with greater time spent viewing Gaza war footage ( $p = 0.0196$ ).

More than 60% of adolescents reported 4–7 hours of daily exposure, while 25% reported more than 7 hours per day.

#### ANXIETY



Qualitative findings described fear, nervousness, and sleep disruption following repeated viewing of graphic content.

#### DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS

A Lebanese cohort demonstrated significant associations between exposure and depression scores ( $\beta = -0.05, p < 0.001$ ).

#### TRAUMA-RELATED REACTIONS

Romanian adolescents showed significant associations between social-media exposure and peritraumatic dissociation ( $r = 0.29, p = 0.006$ ).

Israeli samples reported post-traumatic symptoms, including intrusive imagery and hyperarousal ( $\beta = 0.18, p < 0.05$ ).

### Qualitative Findings

Adolescents frequently described:

- intrusive imagery
- emotional overload
- anger and fear
- sleep disturbance
- sadness and helplessness

Many reported that conflict-related media appeared pervasive and difficult to avoid.

Some adolescents avoided discussing distress with adults due to fear of parental phone restrictions.

These findings suggest that digital media may function as a pathway for indirect trauma exposure.

### Gender Differences

Across studies reporting sex differences, female adolescents consistently demonstrated greater symptom severity.

Examples include:

#### JORDANIAN ADOLESCENTS

Females reported higher stress and anxiety ( $p = 0.0126$ )

#### ROMANIAN ADOLESCENTS

Higher anxiety ( $p = 0.05$ )  
Higher perceived threat ( $p = 0.03$ )

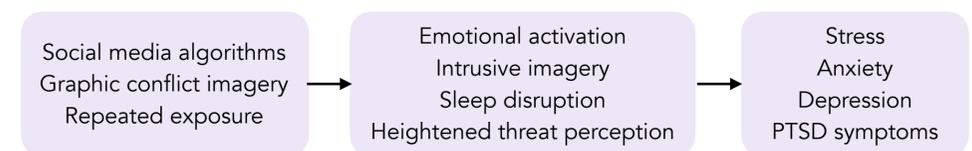
#### ISRAELI ADOLESCENTS

Higher psychological distress ( $p = 0.01$ )  
Higher post-traumatic symptoms ( $p = 0.002$ )

This pattern was observed across multiple countries and conflict contexts.

## CONCEPTUAL MODEL

### Digital War Exposure and Youth Mental Health



## CONCLUSIONS

Indirect digital exposure to war is associated with clinically relevant psychiatric symptoms in adolescents. These findings support the importance of screening for digital trauma exposure during periods of global conflict.

## LIMITATIONS

- Self-reported exposure measures
- Limited longitudinal evidence
- Heterogeneous outcome assessments

## CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

Clinicians should consider asking adolescents about social-media exposure to violent or war-related content when evaluating anxiety, stress, or trauma symptoms.

Media-literacy and digital coping strategies may help mitigate potential psychological harm.



REFERENCES