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Research Paper

Investigating the Levels of Civic Engagement and Callous Traits Moderated by Coping Skills in Response to War-Related Media Exposure

Saral Handa[1]*

ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of war-related media exposure on civic engagement (CE) and callous traits (CT), with a focus on the moderating effects of coping strategies. Utilising a sample predominantly composed of university students and a sample of 132 individuals, the research employed validated scales to measure the key variables. While the hypotheses posited that higher exposure to war-related content would influence CE and CT, the findings were not statistically significant. The results suggest that factors such as media literacy, psychological resilience, and the type of media consumed may play critical roles in shaping these outcomes. Additionally, the study highlights the complexities of indirect media exposure and its limited impact on psychological traits in this demographic. Despite the non-significant findings, this research contributes to the understanding of media's psychological effects and underscores the importance of considering individual differences and contextual factors. Future research is recommended to explore these relationships in more diverse populations and through longitudinal designs.

Keywords: *War-related Media Exposure; Civic engagement; Media literacy; Callous traits; Empathy; War; News; Quantitative research*

In an era of unprecedented digital connectivity, 53% of adults in the United States rely on social media as a primary source of news content, despite the challenges posed by misinformation (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021). War-related news, disseminated across these platforms, has become a ubiquitous feature of daily life, bringing the harsh realities of global conflicts into the intimate spaces of individuals far removed from the front lines. This constant exposure is not without consequence; it has been linked to significant psychological distress, particularly as emotionally charged and often misleading content spreads rapidly across social media (Thompson et al., 2019; Mousoulidou et al., 2024).

The broader psychological impact of distressing media content can be seen in various contexts. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the widespread dissemination of misinformation through media channels significantly exacerbated public anxiety and stress (Rocha et al., 2021). Studies showed that excessive social media use during this period worsened mental health outcomes, highlighting how pervasive and distressing media content

[1]School of Psychology, University of Sussex.
*Corresponding Author

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can contribute to societal well-being decline (Zhao & Zhou, 2020). While this example stems from a health crisis, it illustrates a critical point relevant to the study of war-related media content: media consumption, particularly when involving distressing or fear-inducing information, can profoundly affect psychological well-being (Bendau et al., 2021).

This phenomenon is not limited to health crises. The mental health cost of conflict is well-documented, with research showing that exposure to war-related content can lead to long-term psychological effects, such as increased anxiety, depression, and the development of callous traits (Drožđek et al., 2020; Scharbert et al., 2024). These findings underscore the powerful impact of media consumption on psychological well-being, particularly when the content is negative or distressing. This aligns with Hirschberger's (2018) findings on how collective trauma shapes societal responses and the construction of meaning around large-scale violence, which further emphasises the psychological toll of war-related content exposure.

News content that specifically reports negative events has been found to induce negative behaviours among individuals, creating a strain on democracy, fostering negative interactions, and contributing to a general decline in health (VanderWeele & Brooks, 2023). On the other hand, positive behaviours stemming from media exposure, including social media, can foster prosocial actions, as shown in meta-analyses, which suggest such exposure reduces aggression (Coyne et al., 2020). This underscores the potential for media to positively influence individuals and collective actions, mitigating the negative effects of war-related news. Social media also influences people based on their emotions, as found in a study that examined how positive, neutral, and negative headlines influence individuals' emotions and brain activity. The study found that people exposed to negative headlines were more likely to be influenced by them, regardless of the credibility or accuracy of the source (Baum & Rahman, 2021). This suggests that news content can directly impact individuals' behaviours, influencing their well-being, opinions, and emotions in either negative or positive manners.

War in the Media

The presence of war in the media has been a persistent aspect of broadcast news since its inception, significantly affecting psychological well-being. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, for example, led to a notable decline in well-being across European countries that were not directly involved in the conflict. Research indicates that the invasion caused a significant drop in well-being among these populations, demonstrating the wide-reaching psychological impact of war, even on those not directly engaged in the conflict (Scharbert et al., 2024). These findings suggest that war impacts not only those directly involved but also those who witness it through media, often leading to a phenomenon known as demoralisation.

Additionally, social media platforms like Twitter and YouTube have played critical roles in conflicts such as the Syrian war, where the rapid dissemination of graphic content has both raised awareness and contributed to the escalation of violence and psychological distress among viewers (Zeitzoff, 2017). This offers a unique opportunity to investigate and document the characteristics of the human condition that emerge in such exceptional circumstances (Carpiniello, 2023).

The September 11 attacks further exemplify the psychological impact of war-related media coverage. A longitudinal study revealed that symptoms of posttraumatic stress and global distress were prevalent even among those not directly affected by the attacks. Specifically, 17% of the U.S. population outside New York City reported symptoms of posttraumatic stress related to September 11 two months after the attacks, with 5.8% still experiencing symptoms six months later (Silver et al., 2006). Similarly, exposure to violence in the Israel-Palestine conflict has been shown to increase psychological distress and create barriers to peace (Hirsch-Hoefler et al., 2016). War-related media exposure not only affects psychological well-being but also has significant implications for behaviours and traits, such as civic engagement and callousness. These responses can vary widely depending on how individuals cope with the stress of witnessing such content

War Content and Coping Skills

Coping strategies are essential in moderating the psychological impact of war-related content. According to the American Psychological Association (APA, 2018), these strategies involve conscious and unconscious efforts to manage emotions, behaviours, and thoughts in response to stress. Research on Ukrainian war refugees highlights emotion-focused coping mechanisms, like seeking social support, as particularly effective (Crisan et al., 2023). Oviedo et al. (2022) also underscore the significance of resilience strategies and psychological interventions in helping refugees cope with the stress of displacement and war-related trauma.

War Content and Civic Engagement

Civic engagement, defined by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2009) as individual or collective volunteerism or actions to address issues of public concern, is significantly impacted by domestic wars. However, the long-term effects of these wars on civic engagement are less well-understood (Barceló, 2021). While domestic wars may have short-term effects on social organisation and participation, it remains unclear whether these effects persist during internationalised conflicts and over extended periods (Bauer et al., 2014). Observing the phenomena of civic engagement during ongoing conflicts, such as those in Gaza, can provide valuable insights into how people not directly in the line of conflict respond socially. Social media has facilitated both the mobilisation of civic engagement and the spread of divisive narratives, leading to increased activism but also greater societal polarisation as illustrated by Lueders, Prentice, & Jonas (2019) who discuss selective exposure to media content, especially when it frustrates individuals' psychological needs, can exacerbate hostile intergroup attitudes and further entrench polarisation. This dynamic of media-driven polarisation not only deepens societal divisions but also shapes civic engagement, often steering individuals toward polarised activism or deterring their participation entirely.

War Content and Callous Traits

Callousness, defined as behaviours that lack empathy and are often cruel or malicious (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024), can be exacerbated by repeated exposure to war-related news. This desensitisation is not limited to direct exposure to violence but can also result from indirect experiences or "second-hand trauma," as individuals, especially children, absorb the emotional distress of others exposed to conflict-related media (Slone & Shoshani, 2017). Many social media platforms allow unrestricted portrayals of violence, increasing callous traits due to desensitisation (Latif et al., 2024). The media violence debate highlights real-world implications where long-term exposure to violent content reduces empathy and

fosters desensitisation to aggression (Ferguson & Beresin, 2017). Continued exposure to violent material has been shown to increase callous traits, with studies emphasising the role of social media in this desensitisation during modern conflicts like the Syrian war (Lynch et al., 2014; Holman et al., 2014).

Gaps in Research

Considering the current climate and the widespread availability of news content across all media platforms, examining how individuals behave and cope with war-related media exposure is critical. Understanding these behaviours is essential for informing policy, mental health services, and interventions aimed at mitigating the negative impacts and fostering a healthier environment. Existing studies often focus on short-term effects and specific populations, leaving significant gaps in understanding the long-term impacts and broader societal effects of war exposure (Bauer et al., 2016; Chan & Mak, 2020). Additionally, there is a need to explore how different types of media, such as social media versus traditional news outlets, differentially impact these outcomes, and how demographic factors, such as age and cultural background, moderate these effects.

Aims and Hypotheses

Understanding the psychological consequences of war-related media exposure is crucial for developing effective interventions and support systems. Addressing the mental health needs of individuals affected by war requires a multifaceted approach that encompasses immediate psychological care, long-term support, and community-based resilience-building strategies. Such approaches are vital for mitigating the enduring impacts of war-related trauma and for fostering adaptive coping mechanisms within affected populations.

Additionally, comprehending how war-related media content influences civic engagement and callous traits is essential for informing policies aimed at reducing the negative societal effects of prolonged exposure to such content.

This study aims to fill the gaps in the literature by examining the relationship between exposure to war-related news content and (1) civic engagement and (2) callous traits, focusing on the moderating role of coping strategies. Specifically, it tests the following hypotheses:

1. Increased exposure to war-related news content will be associated with a decrease in civic engagement (Hypothesis 1).
2. Increased exposure to war-related news content will be associated with an increase in callous traits (Hypothesis 2).
3. Coping strategies, particularly approach coping, will moderate the relationship between war-related news content and civic engagement, with higher approach coping being associated with a less steep decline in civic engagement (Hypothesis 3).
4. Coping strategies will also moderate the relationship between war-related news content and callous traits, with higher approach coping associated with a smaller increase in callous traits (Hypothesis 4)

METHODS

Participants

Participants were recruited using a combination of convenience and snowball sampling methods. These techniques were chosen for their effectiveness in reaching a broad yet accessible participant pool within the constraints of the study. Convenience sampling

allowed for the easy recruitment of participants from the university setting, while snowball sampling extended the study's reach by encouraging participants to share the study with their peers (Emerson, 2015). This approach ensured a diverse sample, capturing participants with varied media consumption habits and experiences of war-related news. The study targeted adults aged 18 to 99 years, which was selected to represent a broad spectrum of individuals who could be impacted by media content. This range captures individuals from different life stages, making the study more generalisable to the wider population. It was expected that, given the recruitment methods, the sample would consist predominantly of younger individuals (Fekih-Romdhane et al., 2024).

Individuals were included in the study if they were aged 18 to 99 years and regularly consumed media, such as newspapers, social media, radio, or television. Participants also provided informed consent, indicating their willingness to participate. Individuals under the age of 18 were excluded, as were individuals with severe mental health conditions that could impede their participation or be exacerbated by the study's content. Additionally, individuals who were unwilling to complete the questionnaires or might be distressed by the content of the study were excluded from participation.

Materials

All materials used in the study were administered electronically through the survey platform Qualtrics (Qualtrics, 2024), ensuring participants had easy access to the survey. Upon entering the study, participants were presented with an electronic consent sheet, followed by an information sheet that outlined the purpose of the study. Once consent was provided, participants completed the online questionnaire and were then provided with a debrief sheet. The questionnaire consisted of several sections.

The first section of the questionnaire collected demographic information, where participants were asked to provide their age, gender, and details about the frequency of their media consumption across different platforms, such as television, radio, and podcasts. This was followed by a series of questions designed to assess their exposure to war-related news content, using self-report measures. The Civic Engagement Scale (Doolittle & Faul, 2013) was then employed to assess participants' involvement in civic behaviours and attitudes. This 14-item scale captures engagement in activities such as volunteering, voting, and participation in community projects.

Following this, participants completed the Inventory of Callous-Unemotional Traits (ICU), developed by Frick et al. (2003), which is a 24-item measure designed to assess traits related to emotional detachment and a lack of empathy. The final section of the questionnaire assessed participants' coping strategies using the Brief COPE scale (Carver, 1997), a widely used instrument to measure how individuals respond to stress. This scale assesses various coping mechanisms, including emotional support, problem-solving, and avoidance behaviours.

Measures

The study utilised three validated scales to assess the key variables: civic engagement, callous traits, and coping skills. Civic engagement was measured using the Civic Engagement Scale (Doolittle & Faul, 2013), which assesses both civic behaviours and attitudes through a 7-point Likert scale. Higher scores on this scale indicate greater civic

engagement (See Appendix E for full questionnaire). The reliability of this measure has been well-documented, with a Cronbach's alpha of .85, ensuring consistency in responses.

Callous-unemotional traits were assessed using the Inventory of Callous-Unemotional Traits (ICU), a 24-item self-report measure. Participants rated each item on a 4-point scale (See Appendix E for full questionnaire), ranging from 0 ("not true at all") to 3 ("definitely true"). The ICU evaluates traits related to emotional detachment, uncaring, and unemotionality. The reliability of this measure has been confirmed in various studies, with a total internal consistency of .77. The subscales for callousness, uncaring, and unemotionality showed Cronbach's alpha values of .70, .73, and .64, respectively (Essau et al., 2006; Mohamad Khalil et al., 2023).

Coping strategies were assessed using the Brief COPE scale, developed by Carver (1997), which includes 28 items to measure different coping mechanisms (See Appendix E for full questionnaire). Participants were asked to rate their responses on a 4-point scale, from 1 ("I haven't been doing this at all") to 4 ("I've been doing this a lot"). The scale evaluates both avoidant coping and approach coping strategies. The reliability of the Brief COPE is strong, with Cronbach's alpha values of .81 for avoidant coping and .88 for approach coping, indicating a high level of internal consistency (Abdul Rahman et al., 2021).

Design

This study employs a correlational cross-sectional design to explore the relationships between exposure to war-related media content and the outcome variables of civic engagement and callous traits. The study also examines the potential moderating effect of coping strategies on these relationships. All variables were measured on continuous scales, and regression analyses were used to test the direct relationships, while moderation analyses were performed to assess the moderating role of coping strategies.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through multiple channels, including email invitations to university student groups, flyers with QR codes posted in common areas on campus, and direct invitations from the researcher. After providing informed consent, participants completed the online questionnaire hosted on Qualtrics. The survey took approximately 20 minutes to complete, and participants could skip demographic questions they found distressing or uncomfortable. The data collected included demographic information, measures of media consumption, and responses to the validated scales described above

Incentives

As an incentive, participants were offered the chance to enter a raffle to win a £25 Amazon Gift Voucher. Participants who volunteered the raffle provided their email addresses, which were stored separately from the questionnaire data to maintain confidentiality. After the prize was awarded, this information was deleted, and all records were kept in a password-protected document prior.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using R (R Core Team, 2024) and RStudio (RStudio Team, 2024). Descriptive statistics were calculated for all variables, followed by regression analyses to examine the relationships between exposure to war-related media content, civic engagement, callous traits, and coping skills. Moderation analyses was also conducted to

explore whether coping strategies moderated the relationships between war-related media exposure and the key outcome variables. All analyses were performed per the study's hypotheses and guided by the nature of the data collected.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Sussex Ethics Committee, under the code ER/SH2009/1. All participants provided informed consent before beginning the study, and they were informed that they could withdraw at any time without any consequences. The study adhered strictly to ethical guidelines, with measures in place to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of all participants. Subject-Generated Identification Codes (SGIC) were used to maintain participant anonymity while enabling the tracking of data across multiple survey responses (Yurek et al., 2008). To safeguard participants' mental well-being, the debriefing sheet provided resources for substance abuse and psychological support services, such as Sussex Nightline and the Samaritans. This ensured that participants who might have been affected by the study's content had access to appropriate support.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

The key variables in this study are *Civic Engagement Behaviour, Callous Traits,* exposure to *WarNews, Approach Coping, and Avoidant Coping* presented in Table 1. The mean scores, standard deviations, confidence intervals, interquartile ranges, and the range of each variable provide insights into the central tendency and variability.

Civic Engagement Behaviour:

The mean score is 4.56, suggesting that on average, participants report a moderate level of engagement in civic behaviours. The interquartile range (IQR) of 1.34 indicates some variability in responses but with most scores clustered around the mean. The confidence interval (95% CI: 4.33 - 4.79) is relatively narrow, suggesting that the true population mean is likely close to the sample mean.

Callous Traits:

The mean score for callous traits is 2.57, which is on the lower end of the scale. This indicates that participants generally report low levels of callous traits. The IQR of 0.75 suggests that most scores are tightly clustered around the mean, indicating little variability. The 95% CI (2.45 - 2.69) is similarly narrow, reinforcing the consistency of this finding across the sample.

WarNews:

The average exposure to war-related news is moderate, with a mean score of 2.72 on a 4-point scale. The IQR of 1.11 suggests a reasonable spread of responses, with some participants reporting minimal exposure while others report frequent exposure. The 95% CI (2.55 - 2.89) again suggests that the true mean is likely near the observed sample mean.

Approach Coping:

Participants reported an average approach coping score of 3.45 on a 5-point scale. The relatively higher IQR of 1.02 indicates more variability in how participants use approach coping strategies. The 95% CI (3.30 - 3.60) suggests a moderate level of confidence in this estimate.

Avoidant Coping:

The mean score of 2.81 indicates a moderate reliance on avoidant coping strategies among participants, with an IQR of 0.93, reflecting some variability in how participants cope with stressors. The 95% CI (2.67 - 2.95) suggests that the true mean is close to the sample mean, though with a slightly wider range of potential values.

Table 1 Summary Statistics For all Key Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	IQR	Min	Max
Civic Engagement Behaviour	4.82	1.09	4.63	5.00	1.52	2.21	6.86
Civic Engagement Attitude	4.24	1.35	4.01	4.48	1.67	1.00	7.00
Callous Traits	2.19	0.24	2.15	2.23	0.26	1.71	3.25
Approach Coping	2.09	0.52	2.00	2.18	0.66	1.00	3.64
Avoidant Coping	2.37	0.57	2.27	2.47	0.79	1.00	3.57
War News	3.42	0.77	3.28	3.55	1.00	1.00	4.00

Visualisation

Figure 1 below presents the scatterplot matrix of the selected variables, which include *War News, Civic Engagement Behaviour, Civic Engagement Attitude, Callous Traits, Avoidant Coping, and Approach Coping*. The matrix provides a visual insight into the distribution and correlations between these variables.

There is a strong positive correlation between *Civic Engagement Behaviour* and *Civic Engagement Attitude* ($r = 0.898$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that participants with more positive attitudes toward civic engagement are more likely to actively participate in civic activities. A weaker positive correlation ($r = 0.193$, $p < 0.05$) is observed between *Approach Coping* and *Callous Traits*, possibly indicating that participants who employ proactive coping strategies may display slightly higher levels of callousness. Additionally, *War News* and *Civic Engagement Behaviour* show a weak positive correlation ($r = 0.205$, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that individuals more informed about global conflicts may engage slightly more in civic activities, although this relationship is not robust.

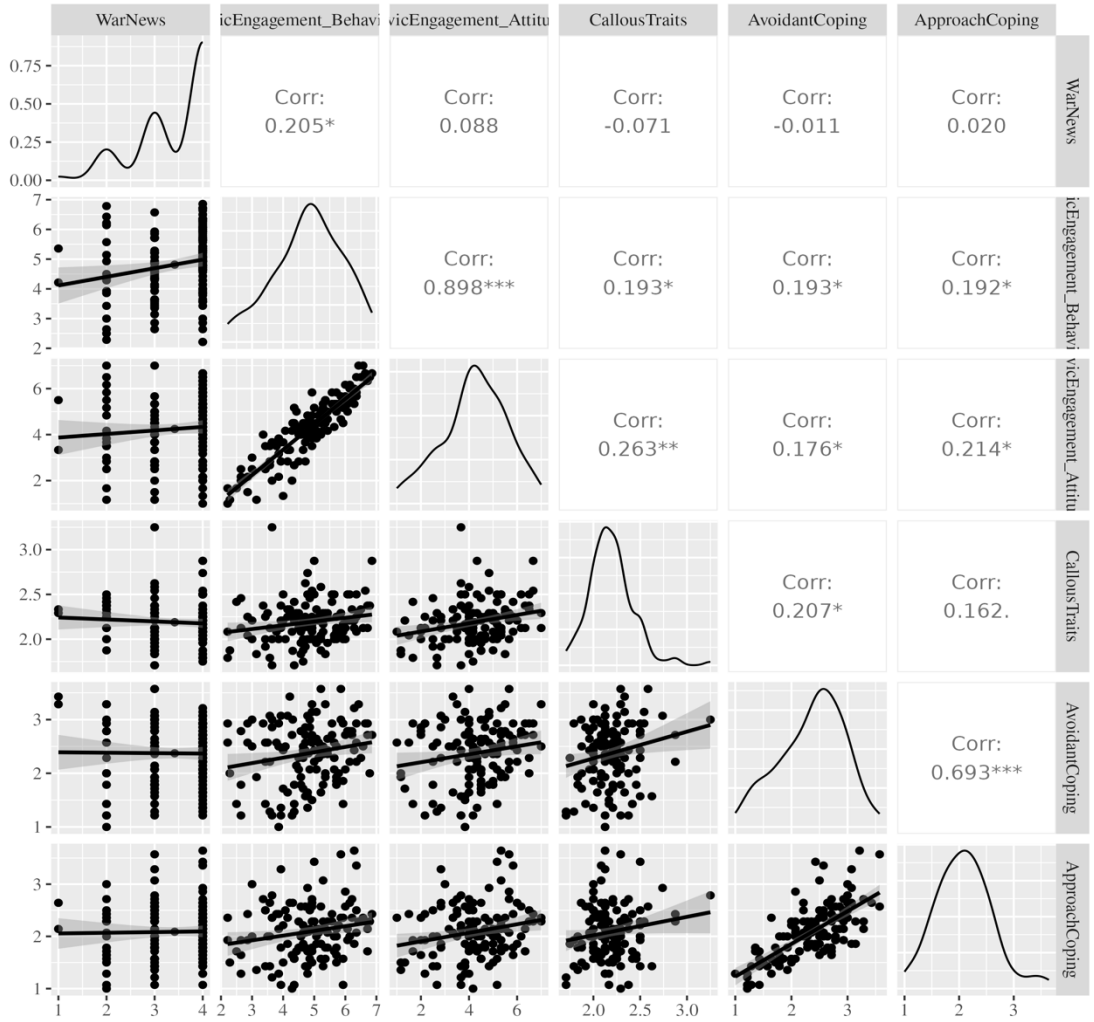

Figure 1 Correlation and Distribution of War News Exposure, Civic Engagement, Callous Traits, and Coping Strategies

Results: Model Fit & Hypothesis Testing

The linear model results beneath predict *Civic Engagement Behaviour* from *War News* and *Approach Coping*, along with their interaction, are presented below (see Table 2).

For ***Civic Engagement Behaviour*** (Model H3), the coefficient for *War News* ($\beta = 0.250$, $p = 0.621$) was positive, indicating that higher exposure to war-related news is associated with increased civic engagement. However, this effect was not statistically significant, meaning that while there may be a slight trend towards increased civic engagement with higher exposure to War News, this relationship is not strong enough to be considered reliable in this sample. This result does not support Hypothesis 1.

Similarly, the coefficient for *Approach Coping* ($\beta = 0.343$, $p = 0.668$) was positive, suggesting that higher levels of approach coping are associated with higher civic engagement. Again, this effect was not statistically significant, indicating that *Approach Coping* does not have a robust influence on *Civic Engagement*. This result does not support Hypothesis 3.

The interaction term between *War News* and *Approach Coping* (β = 0.017, p = 0.943) was also non-significant, suggesting that the relationship between *War News* and *Civic Engagement Behaviour* does not depend on the levels of approach coping. Therefore, exposure to *War News* and coping strategies appear to influence civic engagement independently of one another, and the interaction does not support Hypothesis 3.

For ***Callous Traits*** (Model H4), the coefficient for *War News* (β = -0.098, p = 0.383) was negative, suggesting that higher exposure to war-related news might be associated with lower callous traits. However, this effect was not statistically significant, meaning that the evidence is insufficient to suggest that exposure to *War News* substantially impacts *Callous Traits*. As such, this result does not support Hypothesis 2.

The coefficient for *Approach Copin*g (β = -0.044, p = 0.805) was also negative but non-significant, indicating that proactive coping strategies do not significantly influence Callous Traits. This implies that *Approach Coping* might not be effective in reducing callousness. This result does not support Hypothesis 4.

Finally, the interaction term between *War News* and *Approach Coping* (β = 0.036, p = 0.491) was non-significant, suggesting that the relationship between War News and Callous Traits is not moderated by *Approach Coping*. These results indicate that *War News* and coping strategies do not interact in a way that significantly influences *Callous Traits*, meaning this does not support Hypothesis 4.

Table 2 Model Summary for Civic Engagement Behaviour

Term	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	p value
(Intercept)	3.12	1.71	1.83	0.07
War News	0.25	0.51	0.50	0.62
Approach Coping	0.34	0.80	0.43	0.67
War News: Approach Coping	0.02	0.24	0.07	0.94

Table 3 Model Summary for Callous Traits

Term	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	p value
(Intercept)	2.36	0.38	6.21	0.00
War News	-0.10	0.11	-0.87	0.38
Approach Coping	-0.04	0.18	-0.25	0.80
War News: Approach Coping	0.04	0.05	0.69	0.49

Simple Slopes Analysis

Given the statistically non-significant interaction between War News and Approach Coping, we do not report the simple slopes analysis here. However, the full analysis and its visualisation can be accessed in Appendix G.

Diagnostic Plot

Assumptions of the linear model were assessed especially normality, homoscedasticity, multicollinearity, and linearity. These were evaluated through visual inspections of residual plots and the Shapiro-Wilk test for normality. Overall, the assumptions were mostly met; slight deviations were observed in the homoscedasticity for the *War News* variable.

However, these deviations were minor and did not necessitate any corrective actions. Detailed assumptions checks and their corresponding plots can be found in Appendix G.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Findings

This study explored how exposure to war-related content influences civic engagement (CE) and callous traits (CT), moderated by coping strategies. Although the hypotheses were not statistically supported, the findings provide valuable insights into the complex dynamics at play.

Interpretation of Summary Statistics

The moderate level of civic engagement (M = 4.56, CI [4.33, 4.79]) suggests that participants are generally active in civic behaviours, though variability (IQR = 1.34) highlights differences in engagement influenced by personal motivations or societal factors. This underscores the need to examine diverse pathways through which individuals engage civically, beyond media content alone.

Similarly, the low mean score for callous traits (M = 2.57, CI [2.45, 2.69]) suggests participants are generally empathetic, likely due to the demographic's educational background. The narrow IQR (0.75) indicates homogeneity, meaning the sample might be less prone to developing callous traits from war-related media exposure. This homogeneity could explain the absence of significant relationships between media exposure and CT, as baseline callousness was low.

Moderate exposure to war-related news (M = 2.72, CI [2.55, 2.89]), paired with a wide IQR (1.11), indicates varying levels of engagement with global conflicts. This variability could mean that the media's influence on CE and CT is complex, depending on how individuals interpret the content.

Interpretation of Visualisation Findings

The strong positive correlation between civic engagement behaviour and attitude ($r = 0.898$, $p < 0.001$) highlights the critical role of attitudes in driving civic actions, aligning with theories that positive attitudes toward civic responsibility increase participation. In a university setting, where critical thinking and social responsibility are emphasised, this strong relationship may reflect the participants' internalisation of these values.

The weaker correlation between callous traits and approach coping ($r = 0.193$, $p < 0.05$) suggests a nuanced relationship. Some may use proactive coping as a defence mechanism, leading to slight emotional detachment. However, this is not a dominant trend, indicating that approach coping alone does not significantly contribute to developing callous traits. Other factors, such as personal experiences or emotional resilience, may play a larger role.

The modest correlation between war-related news exposure and civic engagement ($r = 0.205$, $p < 0.05$) suggests greater exposure may increase civic activity, but the effect is small. This could mean that other factors, like the emotional impact of news or personal relevance, are more influential in driving engagement than exposure alone.

Model Fit and Hypothesis Testing Interpretation

The regression models did not yield significant findings, indicating that neither war-related news exposure nor coping strategies strongly predicted civic engagement or callous traits in this sample. The lack of significant interaction effects suggests these factors may operate independently. This challenges the notion that media exposure alone predicts psychological outcomes, pointing to a more complex interplay of influences.

Assumption Testing Consideration

Diagnostic checks revealed issues in the civic engagement model, including deviations from homoscedasticity and normality. These suggest the model may not fully capture the data's complexities, so results should be interpreted cautiously.

Interpretation of Findings

Civic Engagement and War-Related Media Exposure

The non-significant relationship between war-related news exposure and CE is intriguing, given the literature suggesting that media coverage of conflict mobilises civic actions (Zeitzoff, 2017) The moderate CE levels (M = 4.56) suggest consistent engagement, but this might not be directly influenced by media exposure alone. A possible explanation is that critical media literacy prevalent in university students mitigates emotional responses to such content, reducing its ability to spur civic action (Potter, 2022).

Callous Traits and War-Related Media Exposure

Contrary to research linking violent media to increased desensitisation (Bushman & Anderson, 2009), this study found no significant relationship between war-related media exposure and CT. The weak negative relationship suggests an awareness of global conflicts might reduce CT through increased empathy. However, the lack of significance indicates this effect is subtle, potentially moderated by unmeasured factors like personal experiences or empathy levels.

The Role of Coping Strategies

The absence of significant moderation effects from coping strategies challenges established theories that posit coping strategies moderate against negative outcomes (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). These findings suggest coping strategies may not significantly influence psychological responses to war-related media in this sample, highlighting the need for further research on coping mechanisms in different populations.

Alternative Explanation

The non-significant findings could be attributed to several factors. One possibility is that the type of media consumed plays a crucial role in influencing psychological outcomes. Research suggests that traditional news broadcasts tend to evoke stronger emotional responses and heighten civic engagement, whereas social media may lead to desensitisation due to constant exposure and the ability to curate content according to personal preferences (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). This curation effect may explain why some participants in this study did not experience significant changes in civic engagement or callous traits. Social media users may be more likely to engage with content that aligns with their views, reducing the emotional impact of war-related news.

Additionally, psychological resilience and emotional regulation, commonly observed in university students, could serve as buffers against the negative effects of war-related content.

Resilience is not only the ability to recover from adversity but also the capacity to maintain psychological well-being in the face of stressors (Kalisch et al., 2020; Denckla et al., 2020; Carpiniello, 2023). University students, accustomed to high-stress environments, might possess greater resilience, which could mitigate increases in callous traits or decreases in civic engagement.

Media literacy is another significant factor. University students with high media literacy are more likely to critically evaluate the content they consume, potentially preventing them from being heavily influenced by sensational or emotionally charged news (Potter, 2022). This critical thinking could explain the absence of significant effects in the current study, as participants may have been more resistant to the emotional manipulation often found in war-related news coverage.

Finally, the indirect nature of media exposure to war may not provoke the same psychological responses as direct exposure to conflict. Research indicates that individuals directly involved in or witnessing war are more likely to experience trauma-related symptoms such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or increased callousness (Carpiniello, 2023). In contrast, individuals who consume only media representations of war may experience a more diluted emotional impact, which might not be strong enough to significantly alter traits like callousness or civic engagement.

Strengths and Limitations

One notable strength of this study is its interdisciplinary approach, which incorporates research from civic engagement (Doolittle & Faul, 2013) and psychological resilience (Chan & Mak, 2020). By employing validated scales for civic engagement and callous traits (Essau et al., 2006), the study draws from established, reliable measurement tools. Furthermore, by addressing cognitive and emotional responses to media exposure (Baum & Abdel Rahman, 2021), the study offers a well-rounded perspective on the psychological impact of war-related news. In addition, research exploring the long-term psychological effects of war on social dynamics, such as in-group favouritism and egalitarian motivations (Bauer et al., 2014), aligns well with the current study's focus on civic engagement and callous traits, particularly in the context of the current media landscape where misinformation and desensitisation to violence are pressing issues, providing a broader context for the study's findings.

However, the study does have notable limitations. The predominantly university student sample may not reflect broader populations with varying degrees of media literacy, thereby limiting the generalisability of the results as mainly university students were sampled through methodology (Holman et al., 2014). Additionally, the complexity of war-related news consumption was not fully captured by the current design, potentially overlooking how different media types (e.g., sensationalised news or misinformation) shape psychological responses (Rocha et al., 2021). This gap could explain the non-significant results and indicate the need for a more nuanced approach in future studies. The cross-sectional design also limits the ability to assess changes over time, which longitudinal research could address. Lastly, the study did not account for the significant differences in emotional impact between indirect media exposure and direct war exposure, which can have more severe psychological effects, as prior research suggests (Drožđek et al., 2020). This might partly explain the absence of significant effects on callous traits and civic engagement.

Future Research Directions

Future studies should explore diverse populations and adopt longitudinal designs to understand better how war-related media impacts CE and CT over time. Additionally, a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data, could provide richer insights into how individuals interpret and respond to war-related news.

CONCLUSION

Although the study did not find significant relationships between war-related media exposure, coping strategies, civic engagement, and callous traits, the findings highlight the complexity of these interactions. Moderating factors such as media literacy and psychological resilience play critical roles in shaping responses to media content. These results underscore the need for continued research to better understand the intricate dynamics between media exposure and psychological outcomes, especially in a rapidly evolving digital media landscape.

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Conflict of Interest

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