

Research Paper

## Disconnected Minds: Exploring the Profound Impact of Internet Shutdowns on Psychological Wellbeing

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### ABSTRACT

As internet shutdowns and their consequences remain poorly understood, this study intends to investigate the adverse effects of internet shutdowns on psychological well-being. Employing a qualitative research approach, the data collection method includes structured interviews (both open-ended and closed-ended questions). A sample of 20 internet users from diverse backgrounds in Bihar Sharif City participates in the study. The selection process does not consider participants' age or gender. The interviews take place through phone calls and in-person interactions. Thematic analysis shows that while some view internet shutdowns as necessary to prevent the spread of rumors during conflicts, they significantly harm users' psychological well-being. A significant number of participants report feelings of deprivation, helplessness, isolation, frustration, anxiety, stress, worthlessness, depression, sadness, restlessness, emotional distress, and aggression. On the other hand, a handful of people report shutdown periods as a moment of personal growth and self-awareness. Specific groups, such as students and competitive exam aspirants experience heightened psychological distress due to disrupted access to educational resources and study materials. Similarly, professionals face challenges in fulfilling work commitments, and job seekers experience difficulties accessing critical opportunities. While most participants acknowledge the importance of internet access in daily life and emphasize its role in maintaining connectivity, a strong consensus emerges against using internet shutdowns as a conflict management tool. The findings highlight the need for alternative strategies to address conflict-related issues without causing widespread psychological distress or disrupting the lives of Internet users. This study contributes to the growing conversation on the psychological consequences of internet shutdowns and underscores the importance of balancing security measures with individual well-being.

**Keywords:** *Internet Shutdowns, Psychological Well-Being, Internet Users*

"The more we think about technology, the more we realize that we are not only using it but that it is also using us."—Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology* (1977)

**I**n our increasingly interconnected world, technology's influence is more than just making tasks easier (convenience) or introducing new tools and methods (innovation). In fact, it also deeply affects how we act (behaviors), how we think (thoughts), and how we feel or

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maintain mental health (psychological well-being). Essentially, technology is not just a tool we use—it actively shapes many aspects of our lives and who we are. Martin Heidegger's insight highlights the profound impact technology has on our lives. With the rise of technology, the internet has revolutionized communication, education, and access to information which provides unprecedented opportunities for connection and learning. This is the easiest and most convenient source for accessing up-to-date information, which might take months to become available in print (Singh & Pant, 2013, p.193). So, it has also introduced new challenges, particularly when disruptions occur. Internet shutdowns can cut important social connections and access to resources which leads to significant psychological distress.

Internet shutdowns, also known as digital blackouts or curfews have become pervasive worldwide. They involve the intentional deprivation of internet access to a group of people within a specific area, typically ordered by a government. The handbook *Living in Digital Darkness* defines an internet shutdown as "a government-imposed disablement of access to the internet as a whole within one or more localities for any duration of time" (SFLC.in, 2018, p.4). They are not unique to India but have been experienced in various countries, including Pakistan, Bangladesh, Syria, Sudan, Iraq, Myanmar, and more (SFLC.in, 2018, p.1). India, in particular, has witnessed a significant rise in internet shutdowns, with states like West Bengal, Jammu and Kashmir, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, and Rajasthan to maintain law and order (Saikia, 2018). With 805 government-imposed instances recorded between January 2012 and February 2024 which highlights the severity of this issue (Basuroy, 2024). Excluding this, counting the exact number of internet shutdowns in India is difficult because governments do not report all the records. While intended to limit rumors and control conflicts, evidence suggests that these measures may not always achieve their desired outcomes. Research from Stanford University indicates that rumors often persist despite the absence of internet access, and mass mobilization continues even when social networking platforms are inaccessible (Flamini, 2019). There is no empirical evidence that says that internet disruptions stop rumors and completely control conflicts and violent agitations (Kumar, Singh, & Chandra, 2021).

Regardless of how effective internet shutdowns may be in achieving their intended goals, they can deeply affect people's mental health and emotional well-being. Studies in Kashmir, for instance, expose heightened anxiety and depression during communication blackouts (Qazi et al., 2020). Similarly, research on internet use highlights its crucial role in nurturing emotional support, reducing loneliness and depression, especially among vulnerable populations such as older adults (Wang et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2022). This illustrates that while digital connectivity, such as internet and social media access, can greatly support mental well-being by providing emotional support, promoting communication, and building social networks, it must be used thoughtfully because overuse or excessive reliance on these platforms can lead to negative effects too.

Bihar has not been immune to internet shutdowns, though documentation on these incidents is lacking. Internet shutdowns during communal clashes at Ram Navami in Bihar Sharif and Sasaram further emphasize the pervasive nature of this issue in Bihar. The disruptions in Nalanda and Rohtas districts lasted from April 1st to April 8th, 2023. Such measures are often taken to prevent violence. However, they also disconnect individuals from essential support systems. This isolation can significantly increase their psychological distress. This study explores the multifaceted impact of internet shutdowns on psychological well-being,

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particularly in contexts where digital connectivity is integral to daily functioning. The internet helps people stay connected and access vital resources. Disrupting this connectivity impacts individuals' lives and can harm societal stability and well-being.

### METHODOLOGY

#### *Purpose of the study*

The study aims to investigate the adverse effects of internet shutdowns on the psychological well-being of internet users living in Bihar Sharif (Nalanda District), irrespective of their age and gender.

#### *Research approach and method*

To achieve this research objective, a qualitative research approach was selected and the primary data collection method includes structured interviews. This approach allowed to explore and understand complex phenomena in-depth, making them ideal for examining the psychological effects of internet shutdowns from the perspective of those directly affected.

#### *Sample*

The study involved a sample of 20 participants from diverse backgrounds, including housewives, students, professionals, and educators living in Bihar Sharif. The selection process did not consider the participants' age or gender and the participants were selected purposively to capture a wide range of experiences and opinions related to internet shutdowns.

#### *Data collection tool*

The data collection tool employed in this study was a structured interview. The researcher designed a set of open-ended and closed-ended questions to guide the data collection process effectively. These questions were designed to align with the study's objectives which covered various aspects related to internet usage, experiences during shutdowns, and the psychological effects of such disruptions.

- **Open-ended Interview Questions:** These questions were designed to capture qualitative insights into participants' experiences. They included inquiries about the importance of internet access in daily life, opinions on the effectiveness of internet shutdowns in controlling conflicts and rumors, personal losses and benefits during shutdowns, the experience of regaining internet access, overall psychological effects, and opinions on potential future shutdowns.
- **Closed-ended Interview Questions:** These questions were designed to measure specific psychological effects experienced by participants during internet shutdowns. These effects encompassed feelings of deprivation, suppression, helplessness, disconnectedness, worthlessness, isolation, irritation, boredom, stress, frustration, verbal aggression, anger, restlessness, loneliness, sadness, anxiety, and depression.

#### *Data collection*

The interviews took place through phone calls and in-person interactions, ensuring ethical considerations throughout. Participants were fully informed of the study's purpose, and informed consent was obtained before participation from each participant. During these sessions, every participant's response was meticulously recorded, and subsequently, the recorded data was transcribed for analysis.

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### *Data analysis*

A thematic analysis was conducted to uncover recurring patterns and key themes in the participants' responses. This method was chosen for its flexibility in analyzing qualitative data and its ability to capture diverse perspectives. The process involved the following steps:

- **Familiarization with the Data:** Firstly, the interview content was transcribed and the researcher immersed herself in the interview content by repeatedly reading the transcripts to gain a deep understanding of participants' perspectives.
- **Open Coding:** Meaningful segments of text were identified and labeled as codes without predefined categories.
- **Theme Generation:** The codes were grouped into potential themes based on recurring patterns and conceptual similarities.
- **Review and Refinement:** The preliminary themes were critically reviewed for coherence, consistency, and relevance to the research objective. Overlapping or redundant themes were merged, and ambiguous themes were refined.
- **Interpretation and Reporting:** Final themes were interpreted and reported to summarize the diverse perspectives on internet shutdowns during conflicts.

### *Responses of the Participants*

The data from the interviews with 20 participants show varying perspectives on the impact of internet shutdowns during conflict situations. While some similarities were seen differences were also noted. Here is a summary of the data:

**Participant 1 (Housewife):** Participant 1 primarily uses the Internet for studying, financial transactions, social media, and communication. She viewed the shutdown as having both good and bad sides. She felt it did not effectively address the root cause of the situation. Despite the shutdown, rumors persisted even after the internet was restored. The shutdown impacted her ability to recharge her phone and pay bills, which created communication barriers. Though she did not experience severe psychological distress, the inconvenience was notable. She strongly expressed that future internet shutdowns should be avoided, citing personal and practical losses.

**Participant 2 (Research Scholar):** Participant 2 depends on the Internet for academic research, online learning, and social media. While uncertain about the shutdown's role in controlling the situation, she observed that rumors decreased after the Internet was restored. The disruption affected her daily life, but she did not report significant psychological distress. She was relieved when the Internet was restored. She conveyed a strong desire to avoid future shutdowns.

**Participant 3 (Postgraduate Student):** Participant 3 uses the internet primarily for online classes and entertainment. He considered the shutdown a necessary action to control the spread of rumors. However, the shutdown disrupted his ability to attend virtual classes and webinars, which caused noticeable psychological distress and frustration. Once the internet was restored, he felt immense relief and firmly stated that such a shutdown should not happen again.

**Participant 4 (Postgraduate Student):** Participant 4 depends on the internet to quickly access information. She believed the shutdown effectively controlled rumors, allowing people to escape the incident. However, it led to missing job notifications, which caused

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significant psychological discomfort. Upon the restoration of internet access, she experienced happiness and expressed strong opposition to future shutdowns, citing the disruption it caused to her personal and educational life.

**Participant 5 (Postgraduate Student):** For Participant 5, the internet is integral to her online studies and entertainment. She believed the government's actions were appropriate in decreasing rumors and preventing further unrest. However, the shutdown disrupted her ability to do online studies and engage in entertainment which resulted in psychological distress. The restoration of internet access brought her considerable relief, and she expressed a strong desire to avoid future shutdowns.

**Participant 6 (Housewife):** Participant 6 uses the Internet for communication, news consumption, and financial transactions. While she supported the shutdown as a measure to control riots and rumors, she encountered practical issues. Such as being unable to recharge her phone or pay bills. This led to mild psychological disturbance. However, she noted that she could adjust by engaging in offline activities, expressing a preference for short-term internet shutdowns if necessary. Despite her understanding of its necessity, she still felt the inconvenience.

**Participant 7 (Job Seeker):** Participant 7 uses the internet for academic purposes, job applications, and social media. She saw the shutdown as beneficial in controlling viral rumors during the period of heightened tensions. However, the disruption to her studies caused feelings of sadness and frustration. Upon the restoration of the internet, she expressed happiness and firmly stated that another shutdown would be deeply upsetting.

**Participant 8 (Student):** Participant 8 uses the internet for both study and entertainment. She felt that the shutdown helped limit the spread of rumors during the crisis. While the shutdown disrupted her studies and daily activities, she did not experience significant psychological distress. After the internet was restored, she felt relief and stressed that she would prefer to avoid future shutdowns due to the personal inconvenience it caused.

**Participant 9 (Competitive Exam Aspirant):** Participant 9 uses the internet for studying, entertainment, and staying informed. She disagreed with the shutdown, believing that it worsened the spread of rumors rather than controlling them. The shutdown severely impacted her preparation for an upcoming exam, as she struggled to maintain communication and access critical study materials. The psychological distress was considerable, and she expressed frustration and anger, particularly in light of the disruption to her exam preparations. She strongly opposed future internet shutdowns.

**Participant 10 (Student from a Rural Area):** Participant 10 primarily uses the internet for entertainment. He supported the shutdown as a necessary action to control violence and rumors. Despite not experiencing major inconveniences, he found the shutdown mildly inconvenient. He spent his time with friends and family during the internet outage and did not report significant psychological distress. He would accept a short-term shutdown in the future but would find it frustrating if prolonged.

**Participant 11 (Schoolteacher and Lifelong Learner):** Participant 11 relies on the Internet for online education, learning resources, and daily tasks. She supported the shutdown for controlling rumors but found it disruptive to her routine, including online studies and baby

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care. Her brother's online job was also severely affected. She experienced mild psychological distress and frustration during the outage but felt relieved when access was restored. She strongly opposes future shutdowns, emphasizing their negative impact on essential activities.

**Participant 12 (Competitive Exam Aspirant):** Participant 12 uses the internet extensively for studying, attending classes, and staying informed through social media. He supported the internet shutdown for controlling rumors, but he found it personally disruptive. Because it affected his education and access to important information. He spent time revising lessons and meeting friends during the outage and did not experience significant psychological distress. However, he noted that a prolonged or uncertain shutdown would be deeply upsetting, and he would consider relocating if it lasted too long. He felt excited when internet access was restored, likening it to reuniting with someone close after a long period.

**Participant 13 (Research Scholar and Clinical Psychologist):** Participant 13 uses the Internet for studying, shopping, financial transactions, and social media. While she supported the shutdown for controlling riots and rumors, she felt it was not fully effective. Initially, the disruption to her studies caused some anxiety, but she quickly shifted to more productive activities like reading books. She did not experience significant psychological distress and felt happy when internet access was restored. She expressed no concerns about future shutdowns, believing that everything has a solution.

**Participant 14 (Company Security Aspirant):** Participant 14 uses the internet for online study, staying updated on news, and social media for entertainment. He supported the internet shutdown, recognizing it as a necessary step to control riots and rumors. Because it limited the spread of videos and comments on social media. The shutdown disrupted his studies, preventing online payments, updates on his coursework, and communication with teachers. It all led to irritation and mild psychological distress. He spent time with his family during the outage and was extremely happy when the internet was restored. He would support future internet shutdowns if needed.

**Participant 15 (Competitive Exam Aspirant):** Participant 15 uses the internet for studying and social media. He found the internet beneficial but also acknowledged it as a way to pass the time. He supported the internet shutdown, recognizing it as effective in controlling riots and rumors by limiting viral videos. However, he experienced personal losses due to the disruption of his studies and routine, with about 10% psychological disturbance. Despite this, he viewed the shutdown as a socially responsible decision. He spent time offline attempting to study. Upon the restoration of the internet, he was excited to resume his work. He would support future shutdowns if necessary but would feel a personal loss.

**Participant 16 (College Lecturer):** Participant 16 uses the internet to stay updated with news, research, online newspapers, and association groups. She acknowledged the internet shutdown as an immediate response to control viral videos and rumors, noting its necessity in an emergency where the full extent of the issue was unclear. Although she supported the decision, the shutdown caused a personal disturbance, limiting her access to news and online education. It led to psychological distress and some behavioral changes. She spent her time learning new dishes in the kitchen. Despite the initial impact, she felt that the experience had made her more resilient. She suggested that if a similar shutdown occurred in the future, she would adapt by finding alternative ways to cope or relocating.

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**Participant 17 (English Language Teacher):** Participant 17 relies on the Internet for work, self-improvement, and staying connected with others. His job is impossible without internet access. He uses Google, YouTube, and smart TVs, all of which depend on the internet. Internet is a means of earning a living for him. While he understood the reasoning behind the internet shutdown, he disagreed with it, believing it unfairly punished the entire population. He felt the shutdown did not stop rumors, as phones continued to spread them. The outage left him unable to work or entertain himself, causing frustration and depression. He spent time playing Ludo with his family. When the internet was restored, he felt relieved and immediately caught up on the news. He would not protest a future shutdown but would not personally support it due to the significant disruption it causes in his life.

**Participant 18 (Bank Employee):** Participant 18 uses the internet for updating news, social media, share market activities, and money transactions. While he acknowledged that living without the internet is challenging, he supported the shutdown, believing it was an appropriate step to control rumors and unauthentic viral content. Although the shutdown caused some inconvenience, such as difficulty in communicating via WhatsApp groups and facing online payment issues, he did not experience significant distress. He spent his time meeting friends in person, strengthening his emotional bonds with them. Upon the restoration of the internet, he felt neutral, relieved that everyone could use it again but not overly affected. He believes that everything has an alternative, and a future internet shutdown would not affect him much. He views society as more important than the internet and believes that if the government makes such decisions for a genuine reason, it should be accepted. Additionally, he suggested that periodic internet shutdowns could enhance mental peace and improve willpower.

**Participant 19 (13-Year-Old School Student):** Participant 19 uses the internet for online education, gaming, entertainment, and watching TV on her smart TV. She initially found it hard to understand why normal people should suffer due to the internet shutdown but eventually realized it was a necessary measure to control rumors. While the shutdown impacted her studies and entertainment, she learned to operate without the internet, experiencing a sense of mental freedom. During the outage, she spent time feeling bored and doing nothing. It affected her mentally. When the internet was restored, she felt excited and quickly returned to her routine, starting with YouTube and resuming her studies. If a future internet shutdown occurs, she would find it unfair but believes she would handle it better, given her previous experience.

**Participant 20 (Insurance Company Employee):** Participant 20 uses the internet minimally for office work and social media. He finds it beneficial for tasks such as job hunting, checking train schedules, and staying informed about meetings. He supported the internet shutdown, believing it was a necessary measure to control rumors, which could have spread widely due to people's heightened anger at the time. While he did not experience significant losses or psychological distress during the outage, he noted that he would have preferred internet access for entertainment. During the shutdown, he spent time offering Nawaz and playing Carrom Board. He felt positive when the internet was restored, as the situation was under control. He is open to future internet shutdowns, as long as they are brief, and he would find alternatives if needed.

## RESULTS

The data analysis revealed a range of psychological effects of internet shutdowns on people in Bihar Sharif, Nalanda. A thematic analysis identified several key themes reflecting the impact of the disruption on the mental health and daily lives of participants. These themes provide valuable insights into the psychological consequences of internet loss during such shutdowns.

### Theme 1: Psychological Deprivation and Isolation

The lack of internet found a recurring theme among participants which is the sense of psychological deprivation and isolation. Participants described feeling cut off from the outside world, particularly in terms of communication and access to information. Many noted that they felt disconnected from their social networks—both personal and professional—leading to feelings of loneliness. The inability to maintain communication with family, friends, and colleagues during these periods was especially distressing for those who relied heavily on the Internet for social interaction. This can be described by the direct quote derived from the interview.

**Example quote:** *"Being without the internet made me feel completely disconnected. I couldn't talk to anyone, and it felt like the whole world had stopped."* (Female, Student)

### Theme 2: Frustration and Helplessness

Participants reported experiencing high levels of frustration and helplessness during the shutdowns. Many expressed feelings of powerlessness, as they had no control over the situation. This frustration was compounded by their inability to engage in activities that typically helped them relax or be productive. Such as watching videos, reading the news, or working from home. The loss of internet access often led to irritability and restlessness, negatively impacting participants' emotional states. This can be also described by a direct quote given by one of the participants.

**Example quote:** *"I couldn't do anything I usually do—work, study, or even entertain myself. It was like being stuck in a limbo, unable to move forward."* (Male, Professional)

### Theme 3: Increased Anxiety and Stress

Anxiety and stress were prevalent themes, particularly for those dependent on the Internet for work or education. Students faced disruption to their studies which led to anxiety over missed classes and assignments. Similarly, professionals expressed concern about falling behind on work-related tasks due to the inability to stay connected. Many participants also reported a general sense of unease and anxiety about the uncertainty of the shutdown's duration.

**Example quote:** *"I was constantly checking my phone, hoping to see the internet come back on. It was stressful, not knowing when it would end and how much I would miss."* (Female, Educator)

### Theme 4: Feelings of Worthlessness and Emotional Distress

Several participants, particularly those in remote areas or without access to alternative means of communication, expressed feelings of worthlessness. Without the internet, they felt disconnected from the digital world and opportunities for self-improvement or professional growth. This led to emotional distress and diminished self-worth, as participants struggled with the limitations imposed by the shutdown.

**Example quote:** *"I felt like everything in my life stopped. I couldn't keep up with the world around me. It made me feel like I wasn't important anymore."* (Male, Student)

### **Theme 5: Impact on Mental Health: Depression and Sadness**

Many participants described symptoms associated with depression, such as sadness, lack of motivation, and emotional exhaustion. The inability to access online entertainment, social media, or news left many feeling bored and dissatisfied with their lives. This sense of hopelessness was especially evident among those who spent a significant amount of time online for work or leisure and struggled to cope with the loss of this resource.

**Example quote:** *"I lacked any motivation to engage in activities. I felt bored and sad all the time. It was hard to focus on anything, and everything seemed pointless."* (Female, Housewife)

### **Theme 6: Aggressive Behavior and Restlessness**

Shutdowns also led to an increase in aggressive behaviors and heightened frustration, particularly when participants could not engage in their usual online activities. Some participants reported feeling irritable and short-tempered, attributing this to the disruption of their daily routines. This emotional volatility often manifests in conflicts within households.

**Example quote:** *"I became angry more easily. My family could sense it, and we all ended up arguing more than usual. It was as if we were all just waiting for the internet to come back."* (Male, Professional)

### **Theme 7: Coping Mechanisms and Adaptation**

Despite the negative psychological effects, several participants described strategies they used to cope with the disruption. Some engaged in offline activities, such as reading, walking, or spending time with family members. Others used the time to reflect on their lives, leading to moments of personal growth and self-awareness. However, these coping strategies were not universally effective, and many participants expressed a continued desire for the Internet to return to restore a sense of normalcy.

**Example quote:** *"I tried to read books and go for walks, but nothing felt as fulfilling as being able to connect with others online."* (Female, Student)

### **Limitations**

- **Subjectivity in Qualitative Approach:** The qualitative methodology used in this study inherently introduces an element of subjectivity to the analysis.
- **Small and Homogeneous Sample:** The research is based on a limited sample of 20 respondents, primarily from a specific geographic region. It may affect the generalizability of the findings.
- **Time-Pressured Development of Research Tools:** The structured interview questions were developed by the researcher based on the study's objectives. While these tools effectively guided data collection, they were not standardized. It may limit their reliability and generalizability.
- **Recall Bias Due to Time Constraints:** The study's short timeframe may have affected respondents' ability to accurately recall their experiences during the internet shutdown.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study investigates the psychological effects of internet shutdowns on residents of Bihar Sharif, Nalanda District. Internet shutdowns negatively affect users' mental health and psychological well-being, leading to feelings of deprivation, isolation, and anxiety. Participants experience frustration, helplessness, worthlessness, and emotional distress due

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to the disruption of communication, education, and work. Students and professionals face significant challenges, with many expressing heightened psychological distress. Some individuals manage to adapt by engaging in offline activities, but most continue to feel disconnected and stressed. While most participants acknowledge the importance of internet access in daily life and emphasize its role in maintaining connectivity, a strong consensus emerges against using internet shutdowns as a conflict management tool. The study emphasizes the need for alternative conflict management strategies that do not involve internet shutdowns. Such measures can be more effective in addressing conflicts without causing widespread harm to individuals' psychological well-being. Implementing strategies that protect mental health while maintaining security is crucial. This study contributes to the growing conversation on the psychological consequences of internet shutdowns and underscores the importance of balancing security efforts with the well-being of affected individuals.

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### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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