

The Relationship between Media Literacy and Stress, Anxiety, and Depression among Adults in the Aftermath of the 2025 Iran–Israel War

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Background and Objectives: During crises such as war, individuals' mental health can be negatively affected. Media literacy may help people better interpret and manage information, thereby supporting their psychological well-being. This study aimed to examine the relationship between media literacy and mental health outcomes, including stress, anxiety, and depression among adults.

Materials and Methods: This Cross-sectional study was conducted among adults selected using a multistage sampling method. Participants completed questionnaires on demographic characteristics, media literacy, and mental health based on the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21). Data were analyzed using Pearson correlation and Multivariate Linear Regression.

Results: The findings showed that media literacy was significantly associated with lower levels of stress ($\beta = -0.06$, $p < 0.01$) and anxiety ($\beta = -0.13$, $p < 0.01$). However, no significant association was found with depression ($\beta = -0.01$, $p = 0.75$). Women reported higher levels of stress ($\beta = 2.63$, $p < 0.01$) and depression ($\beta = 2.14$, $p < 0.05$) than men. Single individuals reported higher anxiety ($\beta = 2.43$, $p < 0.05$) and depression ($\beta = 4.13$, $p < 0.01$) compared with married participants, and divorced or widowed individuals also reported higher levels of stress ($\beta = 7.45$, $p < 0.01$), anxiety ($\beta = 4.44$, $p < 0.05$), and depression ($\beta = 6.00$, $p < 0.01$). In addition, university education was associated with lower stress ($\beta = -3.77$, $p < 0.05$), while poorer economic status was associated with higher stress ($\beta = 1.47$, $p < 0.05$).

Conclusion: Given the association between media literacy and reduced stress and anxiety, developing and implementing educational programs to enhance media literacy in the community may serve as an effective strategy to support mental health, particularly in crisis situations such as war.

Keywords: Media literacy, Mental health, Stress, Anxiety, Depression, Adults, War

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Introduction

In the era of communication and the rapid expansion of mass media and social networks, media literacy has emerged as one of the essential skills for living in an information-based society. Media literacy refers to the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and critically interpret media messages, enabling individuals to understand media content in a conscious and critical manner (1, 2). Individuals with higher levels of media literacy are better able to assess information sources, identify misleading or exaggerated information, and respond to media messages in a more rational and controlled way (3). In a context where the volume of information disseminated through media platforms is rapidly increasing, possessing such skills can play a significant role in reducing the negative impact of media messages on individuals' attitudes and psychological well-being (4).

The importance of media literacy becomes even more evident during times of crises and wars, as media outlets play a central role in disseminating information, images, and narratives related to such events. Extensive media coverage of conflicts and wars can increase public awareness; however, it may simultaneously contribute to feelings of threat, concern, and insecurity among audiences (5, 6). Studies have shown that repeated exposure to violent or threatening news in the media can lead to increased psychological distress, stress, and anxiety among members of society (7). Thompson et al. reported that extensive exposure to media coverage of violent events may create a cycle of psychological distress, contributing to elevated levels of anxiety and stress among individuals (8).

In recent years, with the rapid expansion of digital media and social networking platforms, individuals have become more frequently exposed to news and images related to wars and global crises. This widespread exposure can have significant implications for mental health. For instance, Castro et al., in a study examining the impact of media exposure to the Russia–Ukraine war, found that continuous monitoring of war-related news was associated with higher levels of anxiety and stress among the public (9). Similarly, Abd El Fatah et al. reported that individuals who are more frequently exposed to war-related news tend to experience higher levels of stress and worry (10). Furthermore, Fekih Romdhane and colleagues

demonstrated that extensive exposure to media coverage of war may also be associated with increased psychological distress and sleep disturbances(11). Under such circumstances, media literacy can serve as a protective factor against the negative consequences of media exposure. Individuals who possess media literacy skills are better equipped to critically analyze media messages, identify misinformation, and regulate their media consumption. These competencies can help mitigate the emotional impact of exposure to threatening news content (12). In this regard, Zareipour emphasized that media literacy, by enhancing individuals' ability to analyze and evaluate media messages, can prevent the adverse effects of cognitive and media-based warfare on mental health (13).

The relevance of these issues has become particularly evident in the context of the 2025 Iran–Israel war. Data collection for the present study was conducted during the three months following the 12-day war, from July 4 to October 4, 2025 (4 Tir to 4 Mehr 1404). Although the city of Khoy was not directly affected by military operations, residents were continuously exposed to war-related information through television broadcasts, online news outlets, social media platforms, and public discussions. During the period of data collection, which took place in the three months following the cessation of hostilities, extensive media coverage of military attacks, missile exchanges, security threats, and political developments related to the conflict created a climate of uncertainty and psychological concern among the general population. Consequently, exposure to war in the present study refers primarily to indirect exposure through media content and the broader psychosocial environment associated with the Iran–Israel conflict, rather than direct exposure to armed combat. Given the central role of media in shaping public perceptions and emotional responses during such crises, examining the potential protective role of media literacy in this context is particularly important.

On the other hand, large-scale wars and crises can have profound implications for the psychological well-being of communities. Research has indicated that exposure to war conditions or war-related news may be associated with heightened psychological problems such as stress, anxiety, and depression (12, 14). However, these outcomes are shaped by multiple factors, including social and economic conditions and the level of social support available to individuals. As a result, the psychological consequences of war-related media

exposure may vary across different groups (15, 16). Therefore, identifying factors that can help reduce the negative effects of exposure to war-related media content is of considerable importance.

Despite the increasing role of media in disseminating war-related information and the recognized importance of media literacy in managing media exposure, few studies have specifically examined the relationship between media literacy and mental health indicators following wartime. In particular, investigating how media literacy relates to psychological outcomes such as stress, anxiety, and depression among adults can contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of this skill in promoting mental well-being during crises. Accordingly, the present study was conducted to examine the relationship between media literacy and levels of stress, anxiety, and depression among adults in Khoy in the aftermath of the 2025 Iran–Israel war (July 4 to October 4, 2025; 4 Tir to 4 Mehr 1404). Given that residents were primarily exposed to the conflict through media coverage and the resulting psychological and social atmosphere after the end of the war, this study specifically focused on the role of media literacy in shaping mental health outcomes under conditions of indirect war exposure.

Materials and Methods

Study Design and Setting

This cross-sectional study was conducted in 2025 in Khoy city, located in West Azerbaijan Province in the northwest of Iran. Khoy is one of the major cities of the province and is located near the Turkish border. Primary health care services in the city are provided through a network of urban health bases, and residents' health information is recorded in the Integrated Health System.

The study was conducted during the three months following the 12-day Iran–Israel war, from July 4 to October 4, 2025 (4 Tir to 4 Mehr 1404). Although Khoy was not directly exposed to military operations or armed conflict, residents were continuously exposed to war-related information through television broadcasts, online news outlets, social media platforms, and public discussions. During the study period, which took place in the three months following the cessation of hostilities, extensive media coverage of military attacks, missile exchanges,

security threats, and political developments related to the Iran–Israel conflict created a climate of uncertainty and psychological concern among the general population. Therefore, the context of the present study refers primarily to indirect exposure to war through media coverage and the broader psychosocial environment in the aftermath of the conflict rather than direct exposure to combat activities.

Study Population and Sample Size

The study population consisted of adults registered in the Integrated Health System (SIB) who were covered by urban health bases in Khoy city. The sample size was calculated using the formula for estimating the correlation coefficient:

$$\left[\frac{Z_{1-\frac{\alpha}{2}} + Z_{1-\beta}}{0.5 \log \frac{1+r}{1-r}} \right]^2$$

In this formula, r represents the expected correlation coefficient between media literacy and psychological outcomes, $Z_{1-\alpha/2}$ corresponds to the confidence level (1.96 for a 95% confidence level), and $Z_{1-\beta}$ represents the statistical power (0.84 for 80% power).

Based on similar previous studies(17), the expected correlation coefficient was considered 0.20. With a 95% confidence level and 80% statistical power, the initial sample size was calculated. Considering the use of cluster sampling, the sample size was adjusted using a design effect of 1.5, resulting in a final sample size of 472 participants.

Sampling Procedure

Participants were selected using a two-stage sampling method (simple random – convenience). In the first stage, 10 health bases were selected from among the 25 urban health bases in Khoy city using simple random sampling with a random number table.

In the second stage, the required sample size was distributed approximately equally among the selected health bases (about 47–48 participants per base). Eligible participants were then recruited from individuals visiting the selected health bases using convenience sampling.

A combination of random and convenience sampling methods was used to ensure representation from different urban health bases while maintaining the feasibility of participant recruitment during the study period. The first stage of sampling reduced the likelihood of systematic selection of health centers, whereas convenience sampling at the participant level facilitated access to eligible adults attending the selected centers. Nevertheless, this sampling strategy may have introduced selection bias and may limit the generalizability of the findings to the wider adult population of Khoy.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria were: age 18 years or older, having an active health record in the SIB system, residence in Khoy city, and willingness to participate in the study. Questionnaires with more than 15% missing responses were excluded from the final analysis.

Data Collection Procedure

After obtaining approval from the university ethics committee, the researchers coordinated with the selected health bases. The objectives and procedures of the study were explained to the health care providers working in these centers.

Before data collection, health care providers received training regarding the study objectives, inclusion criteria, and the correct method of distributing and collecting the questionnaires. During the data collection period, eligible individuals visiting the selected health bases were invited to participate in the study. A total of 520 eligible individuals were invited to participate in the study. Of these, 472 completed the questionnaires and were included in the final analysis, yielding a response rate of 90.8%. After explaining the purpose of the research, written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and anonymous, and that the collected information would be used only for research purposes. The questionnaires were completed using a self-report method. Participants were asked to read each question carefully and select the appropriate response. If any item was unclear, additional explanations were provided by the trained health care providers, and when necessary, the questionnaire was completed through a face-to-face interview.

Of the 472 participants, 441 (93.4%) completed the questionnaires independently using the self-report format, whereas 31 participants (6.6%) required interviewer-assisted completion through face-to-face interviews because of difficulties in reading or understanding some questionnaire items. Participants were also informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

Data Collection Instruments

Media Literacy

Media literacy was measured using the Media Literacy Questionnaire developed by Samimi, et al.(18) This questionnaire consists of 20 items assessing individuals' ability to critically analyze media messages. Responses are rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The total score ranges from 20 to 100, with higher scores indicating higher levels of media literacy. In the present study, the reliability of the instrument was confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.90.

The questionnaire measures general media literacy, including individuals' ability to access media information, critically analyze media content, evaluate the credibility of information sources, interpret media messages, and make informed judgments regarding media content. Although this instrument was not specifically developed or validated to assess war-related media literacy, these competencies are directly relevant to understanding and processing information disseminated during the 12-day Iran–Israel war in June 2025 (23 Khordad to 3 Tir 1404). Therefore, in the present study, media literacy refers to the general capacity of individuals to critically engage with media messages and information related to the 2025 Iran–Israel war. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as reflecting the relationship between general media literacy and psychological outcomes under wartime conditions, rather than measuring a specific construct of war-related media literacy.

Depression, Anxiety, and Stress

Psychological outcomes were assessed using the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21) developed by Lovibond and Lovibond (1995). The scale includes 21 items, with 7 items for each subscale: depression, anxiety, and stress. Each item is rated on a four-point Likert scale from 0 (did not apply to me at all) to 3 (applied to me very much or most of the time).

According to the scoring guidelines, the sum of scores for each subscale is multiplied by two to make it comparable with the full DASS-42 scale. The score range for each subscale is 0–42, with higher scores indicating greater psychological distress. The validity and reliability of this questionnaire were examined in Iran by Samani et al. (2007). They reported test–retest reliability coefficients of 0.80, 0.76, and 0.77 for the depression, anxiety, and stress subscales, respectively, and Cronbach’s alpha values of 0.81, 0.74, and 0.78 for the same subscales (19). In the present study, the Cronbach’s alpha coefficients were 0.84 for depression, 0.85 for anxiety, and 0.83 for stress.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS software version 18. Descriptive statistics including mean and standard deviation were used to summarize the data.

The relationship between media literacy and psychological outcomes was initially examined using Pearson correlation analysis. Additionally, Multivariate linear regression analysis was conducted to evaluate the association between media literacy and depression, anxiety, and stress while controlling for demographic variables. A p-value less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Khoj University of Medical Sciences (Ethics code: IR.KHOY.REC.1404.026). Participation in the study was voluntary, and written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their information.

Results

Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the participants (N = 472). The mean age was 37.03 ± 11.49 years. The majority of the sample were women (67.4%) and married (81.6%), while 15.0% were single. Regarding education, the largest group held a university degree (36.9%), followed by those with a high school diploma (32.8%) and a high school education (26.9%). In terms of occupation, homemakers (46.4%) represented the largest portion of the participants.



Regarding their economic situation, more than half of the participants (54.7%) described their status as average, while 33.3% reported a poor economic condition, and only 12.1% rated it as good. The primary news source during wartime was domestic media (55.5%), with social media (24.6%) being the second most common source. Finally, only 5.5% of the participants had received psychological or counseling services during wartime, whereas the vast majority (94.5%) had not utilized such services.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Participants (N=472)

Variable	Category	Mean $\pm$ SD N (%)
Age (years)		37.03 $\pm$ 11.49
Gender	Men	154 (32.6%)
	Women	318 (67.4%)
Marital Status	Married	385 (81.6%)
	Single	71 (15.0%)
	Divorced/Widowed	16 (3.4%)
Education	uneducated	16 (3.4%)
	High School	127 (26.9%)
	Diploma	155 (32.8%)
	University	174 (36.9%)
Job	Employee	108 (22.9%)
	Homemaker	219 (46.4%)
	Self-employed	119 (25.2%)
	Unemployed	26 (5.5%)
Economic Situation	Poor	157 (33.3%)
	Average	258 (54.7%)
	Good	57 (12.1%)
Main Source of News During Wartime	Domestic media	262 (55.5%)
	Foreign media	55 (11.7%)
	Social media	116 (24.6%)
	Interpersonal communication	39 (8.3%)
Received Psychological or Counseling Services During Wartime	Yes	26 (5.5%)
	No	446 (94.5%)

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients of the study variables. The measures included media literacy (20 items, $M=57.53$, $\alpha=.90$), depression (7 items, $M=8.07$, $\alpha=.84$), anxiety (7 items, $M=9.27$, $\alpha=.85$), and stress (7 items, $M=8.81$, $\alpha=.83$). All scales demonstrated good internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeding the acceptable threshold of .70, indicating satisfactory reliability of the measurement instruments.



Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variables	Items	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	Cronbach's α
Media Literacy	20	57.53	14.59	20	92	0.90
Depression	7	8.07	7.15	0	20	0.84
Anxiety	7	9.27	7.75	0	20	0.85
Stress	7	8.81	6.14	0	19	0.83

Pearson correlation analysis showed that media literacy was negatively and significantly correlated with anxiety ($r=-0.22$, $p<0.001$) and stress ($r=-0.12$, $p=0.009$), while no significant correlation was found with depression ($r=0.02$, $p=0.70$). In addition, significant positive correlations were observed between depression and anxiety ($r=0.60$, $p<0.001$), depression and stress ($r=0.31$, $p<0.001$), and anxiety and stress ($r=0.42$, $p<0.001$) (Table 3).

Table 3. Correlation Matrix among Media Literacy, Depression, Anxiety, and Stress

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Media Literacy	1.00			
2. Depression	0.02	1.00		
3. Anxiety	-0.22	0.60	1.00	
4. Stress	-0.12	0.31	0.42	1.00
All correlations except that of media literacy with depression are statistically significant ($p < 0.01$).				

Unadjusted Multivariate Linear Regression analyses indicated that media literacy was significantly associated with lower levels of stress ($\beta=-0.05$, $p=0.01$) and anxiety ($\beta=-0.12$, $p<0.01$). However, no significant association was observed between media literacy and depression ($\beta=0.01$, $p=0.70$). The regression models for stress ($F=6.88$, $p=0.01$) and anxiety ($F=24.02$, $p<0.01$) were statistically significant, whereas the model for depression was not significant ($F=0.15$, $p=0.70$) (Table 4).

Table 4. Unadjusted Multivariate Linear Regression of media literacy with mental health outcomes

Variable	Stress β (SE)	p-value	Anxiety β (SE)	p-value	Depression β (SE)	p-value
Media literacy	-0.05 (0.02)	0.02	-0.12 (0.02)	<0.01	0.01 (0.02)	0.38
Outcome	N	Parameters	RMSE	R ²	F	p-value
Stress	472	2	6.09	0.01	6.88	0.01
Anxiety	472	2	7.56	0.05	24.02	<0.01
Depression	472	2	7.15	0.00	0.15	0.70

Notes: All values are rounded to two decimal places.

β =regression coefficient; Std. err =standard error

; CI=confidence interval.

In this analysis, in addition to the main variable of media literacy, demographic variables including age, gender, marital status, education level, employment status, and economic status were also added to the regression model so that the effect of media literacy on mental health outcomes could be examined while controlling for these covariates.

The results showed that for each one-unit increase in media literacy score, stress score decreased by an average of 0.06 units ($\beta=-0.06$, $p<0.01$), and for each one-unit increase in media literacy, anxiety score decreased by an average of 0.13 units ($\beta=-0.13$, $p<0.01$). However, the relationship between media literacy and depression was not statistically significant ($\beta=-0.01$, $p=0.75$).

Among demographic factors, women reported, on average, 2.63 units higher stress scores than men ($\beta=2.63$, $p<0.01$), and their depression scores were 2.14 units higher than those of men ($\beta=2.14$, $p<0.05$), while the difference in anxiety between genders was not significant. Regarding marital status, compared with married participants, single individuals had, on average, 2.43 units higher anxiety scores ($\beta=2.43$, $p<0.05$) and 4.13 units higher depression scores ($\beta=4.13$, $p<0.01$), whereas divorced or widowed individuals reported, on average, 7.45 units higher stress ($\beta=7.45$, $p<0.01$), 4.44 units higher anxiety ($\beta=4.44$, $p<0.05$), and 6.00 units higher depression ($\beta=6.00$, $p<0.01$) compared with married individuals.

Regarding educational level, participants with university education had, on average, 3.77 units lower stress scores than uneducated individuals ($\beta=-3.77$, $p<0.05$), while those with high school or diploma education did not show significant associations with stress, anxiety, or depression. Employment status showed no significant association with any of the mental health outcomes. Additionally, participants with poor economic status reported, on average, 1.47 units higher stress scores than those with good economic status ($\beta=1.47$, $p<0.05$), whereas the associations between economic status and anxiety or depression were not statistically significant (Table 5).

Table 5. Multivariate Linear Regression of Factors Associated with Mental Health Outcomes

Variable	Stress β (SE)	p-value	Anxiety β (SE)	p-value	Depression β (SE)	p-value
Media literacy	-0.06 (0.02)	0.00**	-0.13 (0.03)	0.00**	-0.01 (0.02)	0.75
Age	0.02 (0.03)	0.43	0.04 (0.03)	0.20	0.04 (0.03)	0.24
Gender (Ref Men)						
Women	2.63 (0.77)	0.00**	1.84 (1.00)	0.07	2.14 (0.92)	0.02*
Marital Status (Ref Married)						
Single	1.70 (0.88)	0.05*	2.43 (1.14)	0.03*	4.13 (1.05)	0.00**



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Divorced/Widowed	7.45 (1.52)	0.00**	4.44 (1.97)	0.03*	6.00 (1.81)	0.00**
Education (Ref: uneducated)						
High School	-2.40 (1.59)	0.13	2.50 (2.05)	0.22	-1.48 (1.89)	0.44
Diploma	-2.34 (1.58)	0.14	1.40 (2.04)	0.49	-2.93 (1.88)	0.12
University	-3.77 (1.67)	0.02*	1.68 (2.16)	0.44	-2.87 (1.99)	0.15
Job (Ref: Employee)						
Housewife	-0.98 (0.92)	0.29	0.35 (1.19)	0.77	-1.40 (1.10)	0.20
Self-employed	0.57 (0.92)	0.54	0.78 (1.19)	0.51	-1.21 (1.10)	0.27
Unemployed	-0.98 (1.40)	0.48	-0.63 (1.81)	0.73	-1.85 (1.67)	0.27
Economic Situation (Ref:Good)-						
Average	1.13 (0.95)	0.24	1.11 (0.78)	0.15	1.03 (0.72)	0.15
Poor	1.47 (0.60)	0.02*	0.84 (1.23)	0.50	-0.14 (1.13)	0.90
Received Psychological or Counseling Services(Ref: yes)						
no	1.41 (1.21)	0.22	-1.04 (1.56)	0.50	-0.35 (1.44)	0.80

Notes: β = regression coefficient; SE = standard error; Ref = reference category (cell left blank shows reference group).
Higher scores of stress, anxiety, and depression indicate poorer mental health.

*p < 0.05 **p < 0.01

Discussion

The findings of the present study showed that higher levels of media literacy are significantly associated with lower levels of stress and anxiety, while no significant relationship was observed between media literacy and depression. This indicates that media literacy may play an important role in mitigating certain psychological consequences resulting from exposure to war-related news and media content in the aftermath of the conflict. In this regard, Zareipour and Hung emphasized that media literacy, by strengthening individuals' ability to critically analyze media messages, detect misinformation, and understand the intentions behind media content, can protect individuals from the adverse effects of such exposure on mental health (13, 20). Thompson *et al.* also demonstrated that repeated exposure to violent news coverage is associated with increased psychological distress, anxiety, and stress within communities (8). Similarly, research by Gordon *et al.* showed that media literacy is positively and significantly associated with psychological well-being (21). In an Iranian sample, Sobhanifar *et al.* found that electronic health literacy was inversely correlated with stress, anxiety, and depression (22). Additionally, the study conducted by Sotoodeh *et al.* in Iran revealed that improvements in media literacy can lead to substantial enhancements in community mental health (17). Higher media literacy helps individuals better identify misleading or negative information and more critically evaluate media content. Such skills can buffer against stress and anxiety induced by media overload.

These findings are also consistent with recent conflict-related evidence from other regions. In Ukraine, perceived negative media experiences during the war were associated with higher anxiety and distress and lower psychological resilience (23). In another study among adults in Poland and Ukraine, greater time spent following Russo-Ukrainian war news was associated with psychological distress, and rumination partially mediated this relationship (24). Similarly, in a multinational study from five Arab countries, exposure to Israel-Gaza war media coverage was associated with depression and acute stress, which in turn predicted insomnia (11). Collectively, these studies suggest that repeated exposure to war-related media content is more strongly linked with acute emotional reactions such as stress and anxiety than with long-term depressive symptoms alone.

In contrast, depression often stems from more chronic and long-term factors; therefore, short-term changes in media literacy may have limited influence on depressive symptoms. Prior studies examining media exposure during wartime have shown that extensive exposure to war and crisis news can have significant psychological consequences. Castro *et al.* reported that continuous monitoring of news related to the Russia–Ukraine war was associated with increased stress and anxiety among the general population (9). Similarly, Abd El Fatah *et al.* found that individuals with greater exposure to war-related news experience higher levels of stress and anxiety (10). In line with this, Fekih Romdhane *et al.* reported that excessive exposure to war news is linked to sleep disturbances and increased psychological distress (11). War-related media content often contains threatening messages, violent imagery, and emotionally charged information, all of which can increase feelings of insecurity and concern among audiences. Under such conditions, media literacy enables individuals to better regulate both the amount and manner of their news consumption, thereby preventing excessive and potentially harmful exposure.

On the other hand, the present study found no significant relationship between media literacy and depression. This may be due to the complex and multifactorial nature of depression. It has been noted that depression during crises is strongly influenced by long-term factors such as economic conditions, traumatic experiences, social instability, and the level of social support (25, 26). Carpinello also indicated that depressive outcomes in wartime are typically

the result of intertwined social, economic, and psychological factors rather than a single determinant (14).. Therefore, although media literacy may reduce short-term emotional reactions such as stress and anxiety, depression is often shaped by more prolonged and complex psychosocial processes and is unlikely to be substantially affected solely through enhancements in media-related cognitive skills.

This interpretation is further supported by evidence from war-affected populations in Ethiopia, where depression, anxiety, PTSD, poor social support, and perceived life threat were common and were strongly linked to broader conflict-related adversity rather than media exposure alone (27, 28). In Gaza, recent findings have also shown that tracking war news can negatively affect students' mental health and academic motivation, underscoring the psychological burden of indirect exposure to conflict through media (29).

Regarding demographic variables, findings showed that women reported higher levels of stress and depression than men. This is consistent with previous research. For example, Enav *et al.* reported that exposure to war-related news may trigger stronger emotional reactions among women, increasing their likelihood of experiencing anxiety and psychological distress (12). Similarly, Abu Elenin *et al.* found that exposure to violent images and war-related news can lead to increased anxiety and emotional distress (30). These differences may be related to various psychological and social factors affecting the processing of emotional information and the perception of threat. Women, compared to men, often display greater sensitivity to threatening cues and messages, which may influence how they react to and evaluate different situations. Such differences may contribute to the formation of emotional responses, decision-making processes, and even patterns of interaction with the surrounding environment.

Furthermore, the results showed that single and divorced individuals reported higher levels of anxiety and depression compared with married individuals. This finding may be related to the role of social support in mental health. Vaingankar *et al.* demonstrated that the presence of family support networks can help reduce the psychological impact of crises and disasters (31). Married individuals typically benefit from greater emotional and social support, which

can enhance feelings of security and control and reduce the intensity of stress responses. In contrast, the absence of such support systems may make single or divorced individuals more vulnerable to psychological distress. In addition, the findings indicated that having a university education was associated with lower levels of stress, whereas unfavorable economic conditions were linked to higher levels of stress. These results suggest that socioeconomic factors can significantly influence both the intensity and nature of individuals' psychological responses when exposed to crisis-related news in the post-war period. In general, individuals with higher educational attainment tend to possess more advanced cognitive skills, including the ability to analyze information, critically evaluate media messages, and distinguish credible information from unreliable sources. These abilities may help individuals avoid impulsive emotional reactions when encountering threatening news and enable them to assess situations in a more realistic and controlled manner. Some studies have also supported this finding, indicating that higher education may play a protective role against psychological distress resulting from crisis-related media coverage (32).

In contrast, poor economic conditions are often associated with financial concerns, job insecurity, livelihood difficulties, and uncertainty about the future. These factors naturally elevate individuals' baseline levels of stress and make them more sensitive to threatening or crisis-related news. In other words, individuals facing economic challenges may perceive news about risk, instability, or crises as more personally relevant, which can intensify their emotional reactions (15, 16). Overall, these findings emphasize that individuals' responses to crisis-related news are not determined solely by personal emotional or psychological characteristics; rather, broader socioeconomic structures also play a crucial role in shaping stress levels and the ways in which media messages are processed during the post-war period.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that media literacy can play an important role in understanding and managing the psychological effects associated with exposure to war-related news and media content. in the aftermath of the Iran–Israel war. With the rapid expansion of digital media and the widespread accessibility of information and images related to crises and conflicts, the ability to critically analyze and evaluate media messages has

become increasingly important. Individuals with higher levels of media literacy are generally better able to process media information more consciously, evaluate information sources more accurately, and consequently display more balanced emotional responses to threatening or distressing news. This capability may help reduce the negative psychological consequences associated with continuous exposure to war-related news, including stress and anxiety.

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