

**Psychological effects of terrorism on Pakistani society: A Study
of PTSD of APS Peshawar Incident among School-going
Children in Lahore**

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Abstract

This paper investigates relationship between media, especially television coverage of terrorist attacks and post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among the viewers of such media coverage. This is a case study of television coverage of terrorist attack on Army Public School (APS) Peshawar, in which 132 children and 10 staff members were killed and more than 121 children were injured. The present study was designed to investigate that (1) whether *exposure to television content* relating to the incident of attack on APS Peshawar has any relationship with *post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)* among children viewers in other parts of the country, (2) whether *the extent of time spent in viewing content* relating to the incident of APS Peshawar has any differential effect on the *post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)* among the children viewers, (3) to examine that whether *gender* has any relationship with the *post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)* among children viewers of television content relating to the incident of APS Peshawar massacre, (4) to find out that whether the *type of school* children reading in has any relationship with *post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)* among children viewers of television content relating to the incident of Army Public School Peshawar. The results indicate that majority of the children learnt about the APS Peshawar terrorist attack through television however, generally television footage of the incident did not cause PTSD among the respondents.

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Background

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in America resulted into new alliances, intelligence sharing, and devising novel strategies among different countries for combating terrorism at the global level. These concerted efforts against terrorism or counter-terrorism campaign were named as War-on-Terror (WoT). The mandate of WoT is fighting terrorism anywhere in the world against selected organizations and countries (Jackson, n.d). Pakistan also joined this multi-nation war against terrorism in 2001 (Khalid & Roy, 2016) and since then has been playing very active role in fighting terrorism at the cost of heavy human and economic losses as a reaction from the terrorists groups.

Since 2001 the total economic losses suffered by Pakistan due this WoT were estimated at \$123.13bn (Jamal, 2017). Besides, economic losses every year since 2001 a great number of innocent people including children, women and elderly persons are becoming victims of terrorist attacks. According to Maj. Gen. Asif Ghaffor, Director General of Inter-Services Public Relations, Pakistan has sacrificed over 75000 Pakistanis in this WoT so far (Ahmed, 2018). Among them more than 50,000 civilians lost their lives (The Express Tribune, 2018). In fact Terrorists' attacks particularly the ones targeting civilian in bazaars, schools, mosques, churches, etc are part of a well-planned strategy of psychological warfare to terrorize the nation and demoralize the government and armed forces.

Mamdani (2005) views terrorism as a technique of warfare in which the opponents are intimidated through the killing of unarmed non-combatants. The European Union's Commission on Terrorism defines terrorism in terms of its intent. The Commission defines terrorism as acts which "are intentionally committed by an individual or a group against one or more countries, their institutions or people with the aim of intimidating them and seriously altering or destroying the political, economic, or social structures of those countries" (Mathiesen, 2002, p. 87). Victims of these incidents in general have nothing to do with the decision-making role however; the main objective that the terrorists

want to achieve from gruesome killing of innocent people is to terrorize the society and weaken support for anti-terrorist measures.

Symbiotic relationship between media and terrorism

The main sources of information on these violent acts of mass level killings and destruction for the masses are mass media. Many people don't see terrorist acts physically but the media become their ears and eyes and enable them to get spontaneous news about such events which may occur thousands of kilometers away from them. According to Pfefferbaum (2001) exposure to some traumatic situation may be through presence, victimization of relatives, and by means of mass media. In this way the media advances the objectives and terrorize others living beyond the vicinity of the event (Shoshani & Slone, 2008). In fact, today we live in a world in which the concept of separation by time and space has been ended. Mass media have become global in their reach and impacts. Events and issues which were once supposed to be local in nature are influencing today people, policies/ strategies and alliances at the global level. Simultaneously local happenings are shaped by events occurring quite away. Sreberny-Mohammadi (1996, p.181) viewed this global-local relationship as "the global in the local, the local in the global".

Coverage of violent acts, especially those related to terrorism have implications both at micro-level (individual) and macro-level (societal), and there are scholars who are really concerned about the relationship between mass media and terrorism. They view that media and terrorism have symbiotic relationship (Peresin, 2007). Rather mass media are viewed as oxygen of terrorists (Camphuijsen & Vissers, 2012). It is very unfortunate that terrorist acts qualify the news standards/ values which are taught to students of journalism in academic departments, and which are considered good for improving rating of television channels and enhancing circulation of newspapers. Terrorism and violence contain conflict, drama, impact, oddity and even sometimes human interest which are considered as the criteria of news selection. Terrorists know about these principles of news selection and hence they frame their acts (violence acts) in such a way which attracts the media for coverage. Moreover, they release their own propaganda content in the form of press release, telephone call or videocassette. And the mass media accommodates these content and disseminate them to a wider audience who may be living at a

distance of thousands of kilometers away from the scene (terrorism). Besides the victims of terrorism, it also have very negative psychological effects for those who either witness the event physically or get indirect knowledge of its destruction, casualties, and bloodshed through some other source, especially the mass media. These effects may be depression, demoralization, hopelessness or a feeling of helplessness (Institute of Medicine, 1999).

Terrorist acts occur randomly in different parts of Pakistan, including PATA, FATA and the settled areas across the country. As per the prevailing news values, which are deemed as the criteria of news selection in traditional news mass media, terror acts in which the number of casualties and devastation is greater (magnitude/impact), which happen nearby (proximity), and which contain the elements of drama and/or human interest get prominent space and time in national as well as international news media.

Psychological effects of media coverage of terrorism

Media coverage of violence and terrorism causes various social and psychological effects among media consumers. Studies show that television cultivates the fear of victimization of terrorism/ violence in audience of all age groups (Signoriell, 1990). Brynt, Carveth, and Brown (1981) assert that some experimental studies had also found that frequent television viewing causes fear of victimization in the audience (as cited in Wilson, 2008). Michelle Slone (2000, 520) concluded that "mass media has an impact on the psychological well-being of viewers. Specifically, television broadcast of political violence and national threat have the power to increase personal level of state of anxiety among viewers." Shuster, Stein, Haycox, Collins, Marshall, Elliott, Zhou, Kanouse, Lorrison and Berry (2001) in a national survey conducted in America found that the 9/11 incident caused mental health effects, especially stress, and victimization of terrorism in people across the country. The researchers viewed that majority of the respondents did not experience the terrorist attack personally rather they watched the attacks through television video footage. Their findings indicate that media coverage of terrorist attacks, particularly television coverage can be a solid reason for traumatic symptoms among the audience who may not be present at the scene of incident. The researchers also found that media coverage of the September 11, 2001 incident caused stress among 35 percent American

children (Shuster, et al, 2001). Similarly, Shoshani and Slone (2008) found that exposure to violent media increases anxiety, anger, and negative perception of the enemy.

Other studies indicate that although exposure to media content portraying violence and terrorism can be a basis for fear, fright, and anxiety among the viewers but viewers' ages, gender and the type of content moderate these effects. Fantasy content showing violence causes fright among children below eight while news content especially regarding violence and injury affects children older than eight years (Wilson, 2008). Umbreen Javed (as cited in Khalid & Roy, 2016) views that terrorism in Pakistan by Taliban and Al-Qaida, and anti-terrorism measures on the part of the government have affected psychologically children and adults alike. Similarly, other studies (La Greca, Silverman, Vernberg, & Prinstein, 1996; Pfefferbaum, Nixon, Krug, Tivis, Moore, Brown, Pynoos, Foy & Gurwitch, 1999; Pfefferbaum, 2001; Pereda, 2013; Comer, Dantowitz, Chou, Edson, Elkins, Kerns, Brown, & Green, 2014, etc) confirmed relationship between exposure to traumatic situation portrayed by the mass media, especially exposure to traumatic footage of television and post traumatic stress disorder among the viewers, especially children and adolescents.

Media coverage of terrorism and PTSD

Effects of terrorism, particularly traumatic effects on individuals as well as society may either be immediate or insidious, and short term or long term. Researchers have found that those who suffer some injuries in a terrorist act and even those who get unscathed carry long-term psychological effects of terrorism (Abenheim, Dab, & Salmi, 1992; Curran, Bell, Murray, Loughrey, Roddy & Rocke, 1990; Weisaeth, 1989). Psychological trauma which usually caused either by experiencing or by witnessing some painful and dreadful situation which may be natural (earthquake) or man-made disaster such as mass shooting in a school, bomb blasts in mosques/churches/bazars or some other terrorist act sometimes begins after the incident (delayed) and lasts for longer periods is called post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (NIMH, n . d). It is a psychiatric disorder that occurs after experiencing or witnessing events that threaten death. According to DiGrande, Neria, Brackbill, Pulliam, and Galea (2010, p. 271) man-made disasters, especially terrorism-related acts allow for application of PTSD. It is caused by exposure to some traumatic or stressful events (American Psychiatric

Association, 2013). Besides directly experiencing and witnessing acts of destruction and bloodshed, media portrayal of such incidents also causes both short and long term effects (Anderson, Gentile & Buckley, 2007). In other words, media coverage of terrorism and violence is a cause of PTSD. The present study was designed to investigate prevalence of PTSD among children based in Lahore due to television coverage of the incident of Army Public School, Peshawar.

APS Peshawar terrorist attack

On 16 December 2014 like other days of the academic session students, teachers and other staff of the Army Public School (APS) Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan, came to the school and the teaching-learning process started as usual. However, around 10:30 a.m. six-nine terrorists stormed into the school premises and started indiscriminate firing and throwing grenades. They killed 131 schoolchildren and 10 others including the principal, teachers and other staff. Besides the deceased 121 children and three staff members were injured in the massacre. The government announced three-day national mourning to express solidarity with victims of the deadliest attack and their families. Soon after the attack spokesman for the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) called reporters from some unidentified place and accepted responsibility of the attack (Khan, 2014). This was the blackest day in the history of APS and the lives of Pakistanis.

The incident received enormous media coverage at national as well as international level. Nevertheless Pakistani mass media, especially television channels gave unprecedented coverage not only to the event but they kept on continuous follow-up reporting by interviewing family member of the victims, the injured students, teachers, staff members, other witnesses,

government officials, and law enforcement personnel. Similarly, the print media also published a large number of news items, pictures, articles, features, columns, and editorials. The huge media coverage condemned the attack on one hand but on the other it terrorized both the parents and students across the country. Academic institutions were remained closed for almost one month after the attack.

Keeping in view the above discussion the researchers assumed that the APS Peshawar terrorist attack would be a source of post traumatic stress disorder not only for those children who survived the attack, and/or got injured in the incident but also for other Pakistani children across the country who viewed the APS, Peshawar attack through television coverage of the incident. Hence the present study was designed to investigate that (1) whether *exposure to television content* relating to the incident of attack on APS Peshawar has any relationship with *post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)* among children viewers in other parts of the country, (2) whether *the extent of time spent in viewing content* relating to the incident of APS Peshawar has any differential effect on the *post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)* among the children viewers, (3) to examine that whether *gender* has any relationship with the *post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)* among children viewers of television content relating to the incident of APS Peshawar massacre, (4) to find out that whether the *type of school* children reading in has any relationship with *post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)* among children viewers of television content relating to the incident of Army Public School Peshawar.

Methods and measures

Survey technique was employed for reaching the respondents. Although researchers usually use experimental research design for exploring psychological effects but survey is also an appropriate technique for examining PTSD. Other researchers, for example, Comer, Dantowitz, Chou, Edson, Elkins, Kern, Brown, & Green (2014) also used survey method for examining PTSD in their study.

As per the initial design of the study the researchers planned to compare prevalence of PTSD (if any) among the students of APS Lahore with students of other schools of that city. However, the administration of APS Lahore did not permit the researchers to access the students for data collection. They viewed that the APS Peshawar massacre had negative psychological effects on the students of APS Lahore and they were trying to uproot that psychological trauma, hence interviewing them (students) regarding the APS Peshawar incident would not be healthier for their mental health. They were also mindful about the image and reputation of Army Public School in the country. The researchers then selected three other schools i.e., Government Islamia High School, Defence Public School System and Lahore Grammar School, in the vicinity

of APS Lahore. Data were collected from Grade Five of the selected schools through interview schedule. From each school 66 students (33 boys and 33 girls each) were selected. Hence sample size of the study was 198.

The researchers operationalized the concept “post-traumatic stress disorder” (PTSD) by using its symptoms such as re-experiencing, avoidance, arousal/reactivity, and cognition/mood. Different empirical indicators were used for measuring each dimension of the PTSD. Increased heart beat, sweating, and fight were used as empirical indicators of re-experiencing symptoms and quitting schooling was the empirical indicator of avoidance. Similarly, losing temper (anger), sleeplessness and feeling stiffness were used for measuring the reactivity/arousal dimension of PTSD, whereas, ‘negative thoughts about himself’ was used as an indicator of cognition and mood dimension of PTSD in the present investigation.

Results and discussion

Majority of the respondent (84% respondents) were familiar with the term “terrorism”, and 85 per cent respondents knew about APS, Peshawar massacre. It was found that out of 198 respondents television was the source of information for 168 respondents (85%), while the remaining 15 percent respondents identified newspaper, internet or some interpersonal communication channel as their source of information on the APS, Peshawar incident. The analysis indicated that none of the respondents physically witnessed the massacre. In other words all of them got knowledge of the incident through some source of information, which was either mass media or some interpersonal communication channel. Furthermore, as compared to 26 percent respondents 74 per cent claimed that they watched television footage of APS Peshawar massacre much/very much.

Ninety-nine respondents out of 198 (50%) agreed with the statement that they were feeling increased heart beat whenever they recall the television footage of APS Peshawar, while 82 (41%) disagree and 17 (9%) remained neutral. Sixty-four per cent respondents disagreed with the statement that recalling of APS Peshawar incident increases breathing, 28 per cent showed their agreement, while eight per cent responded as “don’t know”. Sixty-two per cent of the sampled children disagreed with the statement that they get sweating when they

recall APS Peshawar footage, 29 per cent agreed while nine per cent remained neutral.

Majority of the respondents (85.85%) did not agree with the statement that students used to avoid going to school after the APS Peshawar attack. However, 11.61 per cent respondents agreed with the statement, and 2.52 per cent children responded as “don’t know”.

The collected data showed that 55 per cent respondents showed disagreement with the statement that the APS Peshawar footage disturbed their sleep, 37.37 per cent agreed with it while 7.57 per cent respondents remained neutral. Majority of the respondents (60%) disagreed that they were feeling stiffness in neck muscles after exposure to the APS Peshawar footage. Nevertheless 25.57 per cent children had suffered from stiffness in neck muscles after viewing the APA footage. The analysis shows that 14.64 per cent opted for the “don’t know” option. The analysis further indicates that 38 per cent respondents who said they used to get more irritated after exposure to the APS footage while 62 per cent denied any such effect.

When the respondent were asked about negative feelings about themselves after the APS Peshawar incident, 43per cent viewed that they felt helplessness after the incident, 51 per cent disagreed with the statement while six per cent remained neutral.

To address the research (Q1) relating to investigating relationship between *exposure to television content* on the APS Peshawar and *post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)* among children viewers in other parts of the country, the researchers explored relationship between television as a source of information on the APS Peshawar incident and the extent of viewing television footage of APS, Peshawar and symptoms of PTSD among the respondents.

Table 1: Television as information source on APS, Peshawar incident and PTSD among the viewers

PSTD indicators	χ^2	df	p
Increased heartbeat	4.093	4	.394
Breathing	2.468	4	.650
Sweating	5.071	4	.280
Fright	4.472	4	.346
Quitting school	7.493	4	.112
Sleeplessness	7.477	4	.114
Stiffness in neck muscles	9.219	4	.056
Losing temper	3.495	1	.062
Negative feelings about himself/herself	10.24	4	.036

Values of χ^2 and p shown in Table1 for association between television as a source of information on the APS Peshawar incident and the various symptoms of PTSD indicate that there was no significant relationship among the paired variables, except for “negative feeling about him/her”.

The second research question of the study was about relationship between *extent of time spent in viewing content* relating to the incident of APS Peshawar and *post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)* among the children viewers. As both the variables were ordinal hence rank correlation (Spearman’s) was employed. Results of the analysis are given in Table2.

Table2: Relationship between extent of viewing television footage of APS Peshawar attack and symptoms of PTSD among the viewers

PTSD's symptoms	Spearman's rs	Sig.
Increased heart beat	.06	.187
Racing breathing	.10	.08
Sweating	.173**	.007
Fright	-.05	.24
Quitting school	.129*	.03
Feeling stiffness in neck muscles	.110	.061
Sleeplessness	.004	.477
Feeling negative about oneself	.313**	.000

Table2 indicates weak positive but significant relationship between exposure to APS footage and PTSD's symptoms sweating ($\rho=.173^{**}$, $p=.007$), quitting school ($\rho=.129^{*}$, $p=.03$) and feeling negative about himself/ herself ($\rho=.313^{**}$, $p=.000$), whereas correlations between the other pairs of variables were not significant.

To address research question3 relationship was investigated between gender and the PTSD by using crosstabulation. Table3 given below indicates that there were no significant differences among boys and girls as far as PTSD was concerned.

Table3: PTSD among respondents by gender

PSTD indicators	χ^2	df	p
Increased heartbeat	5.424	4	.246
Breathing	8.665	4	.070

Sweating	8.301	4	.081
Fright	2.089	4	.719
Quitting school	7.379	4	.119
Sleeplessness	7.427	4	.115
Stiffness in neck muscles	1.094	4	.895
Losing temper	.342	1	.331
Negative feelings about himself/herself	8.128	4	.087

To find answer to research question4 regarding the relationship between type of school of the respondents and PTSD, the collected data were analyzed by using cross tabulation technique with the help of SPSS. Table 4, given below, shows that there were significant relationships between 'type of school' and individual indicators of PTSD. Students of the three different types of schools showed different levels of agreement/ disagreement when they were asked about the various symptoms of PTSD. Children of Government Islamia High School belonged to lower social stratum, those of Defence Public School and Lahore Grammar School belonged to middle and upper class respectively. Symptoms of PTSD were more in Lahore Grammar School as compared to Government Islamia High School and Defence Public School.

Table3: PTSD among respondents by type of school

PSTD indicators	χ^2	df	p
Increased heartbeat	29.996	8	.000
Breathing	26.916	8	.001
Sweating	27.859	8	.001

Fright	15.783	8	.046
Quitting school	30.194	8	.000
Sleeplessness	25.813	8	.001
Stiffness in neck muscles	34.594	8	.000
Losing temper	9.268	2	.010
Negative feelings about himself/herself	66.421	8	.000

Conclusion

The analyses indicate that although children living in other parts of the country knew about the incident of APS Peshawar and television was the major source of information for majority of them but as tables 1, 2 and 3 show television coverage of this gruesome incident did not cause significant post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among them. Nevertheless a significant relationship was found between the “type of school” and PTSD. In fact, the type of school was reflecting the economic level of the children studying in these three different types of schools, which was determining their access to other sources of information, especially the internet-based sources/gadgets that were limited to children of high social-economic-status. Hence, the present study did not confirm results of previous studies (La Greca, Silverman, Vernberg, & Prinstein, 1996; Pfefferbaum, Nixon, Krug, Tivis, Moore, Brown, Pynoos, Foy & Gurwitch, 1999; Pfefferbaum, 2001; Pereda, 2013; Comer, Dantowitz, Chou, Edson, Elkins, Kerns, Brown, & Green, 2014, etc) exhibiting relationship between media coverage of terrorism/ violence and PTSD among the media consumers. Nevertheless, findings of the present investigation are in line with Qureshi, Gulraiz and Shahzad’s study titled “An analysis of media’s role: case study of Army Public School (APS) Peshawar attack. The reason behind this may be the timely measures taken by the Inter Services Service Relations (ISPR), public relations wing of Pakistan armed forces, to avoid/ neutralize or at least minimize the negative psychological effects of terrorism in the country in general and that of

the APS Peshawar attack in particular. After the attack the ISPR produced a song (*BARA DUSHMAN BANA PHIRTA HAY JO BACHON SE DARTA HAY*) which was sung by children attired in school uniform of the Army Public School, Peshawar. Lyrics of the song condemned the attack, activated patriotism among masses, and encouraged children to continue their studies and not to feel fright from a coward enemy who even scares off children. The song was run on television so frequently that majority of the children learnt it by heart.

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