

Digital Moral Witnessing Among Indian Adolescents: Identity, Moral Reasoning, and Cultural Grounding in Response to Global Conflict Media

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Adolescents encounter graphic, emotionally charged accounts of distant conflict through social media, streaming platforms, and interactive digital storytelling, and this encounter is rarely incidental. The present study examines how such exposure shapes identity formation and moral reasoning among Indian adolescents, drawing on Indian psychological constructs, *sahṛdayatā* (empathetic resonance), *svadharma* (personal moral responsibility), and the evolving self, or *ātman*, alongside narrative identity theory. Eighteen adolescents (ages 16–19; ten female, eight male) from urban schools and colleges in Bengaluru and Chennai viewed curated, age-appropriate conflict-related media and subsequently completed semi-structured interviews and written reflections. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis, with coding cross-checked by two independent coders. Four themes emerged: empathic resonance and emotional overload, moral reflection and personal responsibility, disturbance in self-identity, and cultural framing as a source of grounding. Engagement with conflict media fostered empathy and prompted critical moral reflection, yet it also produced distress and, in some participants, identity dissonance; cultural and spiritual resources appeared to buffer this dissonance, although the buffering effect could not be measured directly within the present design. These findings indicate that digital moral witnessing is not a peripheral feature of adolescent media use but a substantive site of moral and identity development, one that Western frameworks alone do not fully capture. Implications for culturally responsive digital literacy education and adolescent mental health practice are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

Adolescents now encounter war, displacement, and political upheaval as routine features of a media environment they did not choose and cannot easily step outside of. Films, short-form news, and algorithmically surfaced social media narratives place graphic and ideologically complex content from global conflict zones directly in front of young viewers, often without the mediating presence of a

parent, teacher, or news editor (Franco & Boniel-Nissim, 2024; Livingstone & Third, 2017). This is not passive spectatorship. Adolescents comment on, share, and reinterpret what they see, and in doing so they fold conflict media into an already active process of identity construction (Avci et al., 2025; Branje et al., 2021). Such engagement can foster empathy and geopolitical awareness. It can equally destabilize a still-forming sense of self and raise

questions about emotional regulation and moral development that existing frameworks address only partially (Narvaez, 2016).

The dominant psychological accounts of moral development in digital contexts remain substantially Western in origin. Kohlberg's (1969) stage model treats moral reasoning as the progressive application of abstract, universalizable principles, while Turiel's (1983) domain theory distinguishes moral judgments from matters of social convention based on their perceived obligatoriness. Both frameworks have shaped decades of research on adolescent moral identity (Hardy & Carlo, 2011) and continue to offer a defensible account of how young people reason about right and wrong in the abstract. Nevertheless, both models were developed on individualist assumptions about the self as a bounded, autonomous reasoner, and neither was built to accommodate a self that is constituted relationally, through obligation to family, community, and cosmic order. That gap becomes

consequential once the object of moral reasoning is not a hypothetical dilemma but the mediated suffering of a stranger on another continent, encountered nightly on a personal screen.

The study argues for the necessity of integrating Indian psychological perspectives into this literature, particularly the emphasis on relational identity (*sambandha*), moral reflection (*viveka*), and empathetic resonance (*sahṛdayatā*), in order to understand how Indian adolescents engage with these global narratives (Cornelissen et al., 2013; Misra, 2010; Rao, 2011). These constructs do not replace Kohlberg's or Turiel's contributions so much as they redirect attention toward affective unity with others and toward duty-based rather than purely principle-based moral reasoning. Such a redirection matters for a population whose moral vocabulary is saturated with relational and dharmic idiom well before any exposure to conflict media begins.

The paper introduces the construct of digital moral witnessing, defined here as the psychological process through which adolescents engage with mediated representations of distant suffering and conflict in ways that implicate their own identity and moral compass, rather than leaving them as detached observers. The construct is adapted from Felman and Laub's (1992) work on testimony and witnessing in the context of trauma and psychoanalysis, where witnessing describes a relationship of ethical implication between a survivor's testimony and its listener. Felman and Laub, however, were describing direct testimony given and received in person; their framework does not, on its own, anticipate a screen-mediated, algorithmically distributed, and repeatable form of exposure. Moreover, empirical work on media-based collective trauma exposure suggests that this extension is warranted: graphic mediated exposure to the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings, for instance, was associated with elevated acute stress and later posttraumatic

symptoms even among viewers with no direct connection to the event (Holman et al., 2020). Digital moral witnessing, as used in this paper, therefore names a psychologically consequential process, not a metaphor borrowed loosely from trauma studies.

Using a qualitative approach centered on narrative responses from Indian adolescents who had engaged with media concerning conflicts in Syria, Palestine, and Ukraine, this research pursues three questions:

1. How do adolescents interpret and internalize global conflict narratives encountered through digital media?
2. What psychological and moral processes are activated through such engagement?
3. How do Indian cultural and philosophical values mediate these effects?

In addressing these questions, the study contributes to the developing field of digital moral psychology and to a broader effort, evident elsewhere in the literature on adolescents, social media, and well-being (Popat & Tarrant, 2022), to specify how global digital exposure interacts with local cultural resources. The aim is not to displace existing developmental frameworks but to show where they require supplementation once the adolescent self is understood as relationally and culturally constituted.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Research Design

A qualitative exploratory design is adopted, suited to the subjective, reflective, and morally inflected nature of adolescents' responses to conflict media. A thematic analysis approach was used to identify patterns and constructs emerging from participants' written and verbal responses, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. This design privileges depth over generalizability; it is not intended to establish the prevalence of any given response in the wider adolescent population, a point taken up again in the Limitations section.

2.2 Participants

The sample comprised eighteen Indian adolescents (ages 16–19; ten female, eight male) recruited from urban schools and colleges in Bengaluru and Chennai through purposive sampling. All participants were regular users of social media platforms, including Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter/X, and each reported having previously encountered media content related to global conflicts — among them the Israel–Palestine conflict, the Syrian civil war, the war in Ukraine, and the Rohingya crisis prior to participation in the study. Table 1 summarizes participant characteristics as reported in the original data collection.

Table 1 *Participant Characteristics (N = 18)*

Characteristic	Value
Gender	Female: 10 (55.6%); Male: 8 (44.4%)
Age range	16–19 years
Recruitment sites	Urban schools and colleges, Bengaluru and Chennai
Sampling strategy	Purposive
Reported social media platforms	Instagram, YouTube, Twitter/X
Conflict content encountered before study	Israel–Palestine, Syria, Ukraine, Rohingya crisis

Ethical clearance was obtained from an institutional review board prior to data collection, and informed consent was collected from participants together with parental or guardian consent.

2.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through a combination of semi-structured interviews and written reflection

prompts. Participants were first shown curated, publicly available, age-appropriate content, short documentary clips, verified Instagram stories, and short-form news reports concerning conflict zones. They were then invited to respond to the reflection prompts reproduced in Appendix A. Each session lasted between 30 and 45 minutes; interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which permits flexible identification of meaningful themes across a heterogeneous qualitative dataset. Initial codes were generated inductively and subsequently grouped into themes concerning empathy, identity disturbance, moral reflection, and cultural framing. The process included repeated reading, memoing, and coding, with two independent coders cross-checking theme assignment to strengthen the dependability of the analysis.

Trustworthiness was addressed primarily through this coding cross-check and through the thick description of participants' own words retained throughout the Results section, in the sense outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Member checking,

Table 2

Summary of Emergent Themes from Thematic Analysis returning coded themes to participants for confirmation, was not conducted in the

Theme	Description	Illustrative Quotation
Empathic Resonance and Emotional Overload	Intense emotional identification with victims, at times overwhelming	"It was haunting... I felt like I needed to do something."
Moral Reflection and	Internal questioning of digital passivity; a	"Am I just scrolling past people's
Personal Responsibility	felt desire to act morally	pain?"
Disturbance in Self-Identity	Comparisons leading to guilt, confusion, and worldview disruption	"I started to feel like my own problems are fake..."
Cultural Framing and the Need for Grounding	Use of Indian cultural and spiritual resources to cope and make meaning	"Lighting a lamp helped me feel less helpless."

present study; this omission is addressed as a limitation below, since its absence means the interpretive layer of the analysis rests on the researcher's and coders' judgment rather than on participant validation.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

The analysis is grounded in a fusion of Western moral psychology and Indian psychological constructs:

- Digital moral witnessing, adapted from Felman and Laub's (1992) account of testimony and extended here to mediated, screen-based exposure;
- Indian psychology constructs, specifically *sahṛdayatā* (empathetic resonance), *svadharma* (personal moral responsibility), and *ātman* (the evolving self) (Misra, 2010; Rao, 2011);
- Narrative identity theory (McAdams & McLean, 2013), which treats identity as an internalized and evolving life story rather than a fixed trait.

3. Results and Discussion

Thematic analysis of participants' reflections identified four interconnected themes: empathic resonance and emotional overload; moral reflection and personal responsibility; disturbance in self-identity; and cultural framing as a source of grounding. Table 2 summarizes these themes together with illustrative quotations; the sections that follow examine each in turn.

3.1 Empathic Resonance and Emotional Overload

Many participants described a deep emotional connection with victims shown in conflict media. This response is consistent with *sahṛdayatā*, an Indian philosophical construct denoting affective unity with another's suffering rather than mere sympathetic observation (Rao, 2011). Such empathy motivated moral concern in most participants, yet it just as often produced psychological discomfort that participants struggled to resolve on their own.

"I couldn't stop thinking about the little girl in that video. It was haunting. I felt like I needed to do something, but I didn't know what." — R1, Female, 17

This pattern is consistent with research documenting adolescents' heightened sensitivity to moral injustice and to trauma exposure encountered via digital platforms (Franco & Boniel-Nissim, 2024; Holman et al., 2020; Segura et al., 2020). It may indicate that emotional overload of this kind is not an incidental byproduct of viewing conflict media but a near-predictable consequence of encountering graphic suffering repeatedly and without the interpretive scaffolding an adult mediator might otherwise provide.

3.2 Moral Reflection and Personal Responsibility

Beyond the immediate emotional response, participants frequently questioned their own role and moral obligations. Some participants described this in the language of *svadharma*, or personal duty; others expressed unprompted guilt over their own inaction. These reflections align with narrative approaches to moral identity, in which moral development is understood as inseparable from the ongoing construction of a life story (McAdams & McLean, 2013; Narvaez, 2016).

"Watching that made me ask, am I just scrolling past people's pain? Isn't that wrong?" — R4, Male, 18

Such reflections illustrate digital moral witnessing directly: participants did not describe themselves as passive observers but as psychologically implicated in the suffering of others (Felman &

Laub, 1992). The distinction matters. An adolescent who experiences conflict media as testimony addressed to them, rather than as content that merely passes before them, is engaging in a fundamentally different psychological act than one who scrolls past unaffected.

3.3 Disturbance in Self-Identity

For a subset of participants, repeated exposure to traumatic digital content produced measurable distress and identity dissonance. Some described confusion about their own beliefs, their sense of safety, or their broader worldview. This finding is consistent with prior work showing that digital trauma narratives can destabilize an adolescent's still-forming identity (Livingstone & Third, 2017), and it sits within a developmental period already characterized, independent of conflict media exposure, by heightened identity flux and self-reevaluation (Branje et al., 2021).

"I started to feel like my own problems are fake compared to theirs. It makes me question everything I complain about." — R9, Female, 16

On the contrary, not every participant reported this kind of destabilization, and the present data cannot establish which adolescents are more susceptible to it or why. Further destabilization can be anticipated among adolescents with less access to cultural coping resources, although this cannot be confirmed directly within the present dataset. What can be said is that the disturbance, where it occurred, was not incidental to empathic engagement but appeared to be one of its direct costs.

3.4 Cultural Framing and the Need for Grounding

Where distress did occur, participants frequently turned to cultural or spiritual resources to manage it. Several referred to family values, Indian scriptures, or meditation practices as ways of processing emotional discomfort generated by conflict media. *"My mother told me to light a lamp and pray for the people. It helped me feel less helpless."* — R13, Male, 17

This theme supports existing calls to incorporate culturally embedded resources into adolescent

psychological resilience research and practice (Misra, 2010; Rao, 2011), rather than treating resilience as a culturally neutral capacity that operates identically across populations.

3.5 Integrative Discussion

Taken together, these findings indicate that adolescents do not engage with digital conflict content passively. Their emotional and moral responses reveal a complex interplay between global digital exposure and local cultural grounding. Western frameworks such as narrative identity theory and domain-based moral reasoning offer genuine analytic purchase on this material (Hardy & Carlo, 2011; McAdams & McLean, 2013; Narvaez, 2016); on their own, however, they underspecify the affective and duty-based dimensions that Indian

participants repeatedly invoked. *Sahādayatā* and *svadharma*, by contrast, provide a more culturally grounded account of how these adolescents morally process distant suffering, and they do so without requiring the self to be modeled as an autonomous reasoner detached from relational and dharmic obligation.

These results also extend the broader literature on adolescents, social media, and well-being (Popat & Tarrant, 2022) and on social media's role in identity development generally (Avci et al., 2025) into a domain that literature has not yet addressed directly: exposure not to peer content or self-presentational pressure, but to the mediated suffering of distant strangers. In comparison with studies of social comparison or self-presentation online, the present findings suggest that this domain deserves separate empirical attention, since the psychological mechanisms activated empathic resonance, moral implication, identity disturbance, and culturally specific coping appear qualitatively distinct.

This pattern supports a broader call to integrate indigenous psychology into global developmental science (Misra, 2010), a call that gains particular urgency as digital media increasingly mediates how adolescents everywhere encounter suffering that is not their own.

4. Limitations

Several limitations qualify these findings. First, the sample was small ($N = 18$), urban, and purposively drawn from two South Indian metropolitan cities; transferability to rural, non-English-medium, or differently resourced adolescent populations cannot be assumed. Second, the design was cross-sectional: participants reflected on conflict media at a single time point, and the study cannot speak to how digital moral witnessing unfolds or resolves over weeks or months of continued exposure. Third, the media stimuli were curated by the researcher rather than drawn from participants' own unprompted media diets, which may have shaped responses in ways that self-directed exposure would not. Fourth, member checking was not conducted, so the thematic interpretations offered here, although cross-checked by two independent coders, were not validated directly against participants' own assessment of whether the themes captured their experience. Fifth, the interviews were conducted in English, and some questions though were translated into the regional language; the participants found it hard to grasp the nuances of the questions.

These limitations do not diminish the themes identified, but they do constrain the strength of claims that can be made about their prevalence or generalizability.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study set out to examine how Indian adolescents process digital conflict media, and it finds that this processing is neither purely cognitive nor purely emotional but is woven into the ongoing construction of identity and moral selfhood. Digital moral witnessing, as documented here, generates genuine moral growth — heightened empathy, critical reflection on one's own passivity, and an activated sense of duty — but it does not do so without cost. Emotional overload and identity disturbance were real features of participants' accounts, not marginal ones, and they arose from the same engagement that produced moral reflection.

Two implications follow. First, educators and

school counselors working with adolescents who consume conflict media require training in critical digital literacy that treats emotional and moral processing as central rather than incidental to media education. Nearly all adolescents with a smartphone fall into this category. A curriculum that teaches adolescents to evaluate a source's reliability while ignoring what the content does to their sense of self addresses only part of the problem this study documents. Second, mental health professionals working with Indian adolescents may find that indigenous coping resources, among them family ritual, scriptural reference, and meditation, are already doing real psychological work for their clients; treatment approaches imported wholesale from Western trauma-informed frameworks therefore risk overlooking resources adolescents are already using effectively. Culturally responsive practice, in this domain, means building on saṃśāyātā and svadharma rather than substituting for them.

More broadly, this study contributes to integrating non-Western perspectives into psychological research on youth digital engagement, an integration that becomes more urgent, not less, as conflict media grows more graphic, more algorithmically persistent, and more difficult for any adolescent to avoid entirely.

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Declarations

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Data Availability: The interview transcripts generated during this study are not publicly available owing to participant confidentiality. De-identified excerpts are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Consent to Participate: Informed consent was obtained from participants, along with parental or guardian consent.

Consent for Publication: Consent for publication of de-identified participant quotations was obtained in accordance with the approved research protocol.

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Appendix A: Reflection Prompts Used in Data

Collection

1. How did the content you viewed make you feel?
2. What thoughts came to your mind while watching or reading this story?
3. Did this media change your view of the world, yourself, or others?
4. What values or lessons do you take away from what you just witnessed?
5. How would you respond or act after seeing such content?