

# PSYCHOMETRIC STUDY OF MEDIA INDUCED MORAL PANIC AMONG YOUNG ADULTS

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## ABSTRACT

Media-created moral panic describes the emotional and behavioral reactions to a perceived crisis or threat that is exaggerated and often sensationalized by the media. This is particularly pertinent to the study of young adults aged between 18 and 25, who are deeply engaged with digital platforms. Using a psychometric approach, the study creates and tests a formative model to measure the media-induced panic phenomena of fear perception, believing to social decay, and associated withdrawal tendencies. The final instrument, which achieved a formative model of panic with three dimensions, was tested with 398 respondents through a survey, supported by qualitative interviews. The instrument showed high reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.89 and strong construct validity. Results indicate that media operated through social and streaming platforms, especially, is positively correlated with increased panic scores. Trust in media, ability to think critically about the media, and, more importantly, active media engagement and reflection, moderated these effects, indicating that media-induced emotional reactions are far more complicated than the content presented. The implications of the study affect media literacy, public policy design, and public communication targeting youth. In times when digitally framed narratives are used to construct a perception of public risk, the study provides understanding. It means resolving media-created moral panics and promoting smarter, emotionally healthier media use among young adults.

## Keywords:

Media-induced panic, moral panic, psychometric scale, young adults, media influence, fear psychology, media literacy.

## I.INTRODUCTION

The media have always played a critical role in influencing people's views. Particularly in times of crisis, when there are events of social deviance or when there are perceived threats to social order, the impact is far-reaching. Amplification of specific people or issues that the media portrays as threats to societal values is called moral panic. It is now worse than ever in the social media age, alongside the trend of 24-hour news cycles, and the rise of influencer content, which has always heightened emotion and sped up content [1]. This has allowed the unrestricted dissemination of outrage and fear.

Young people between 18 and 25 are most affected by this. During a basic developmental stage, when individuals are most susceptible to social cues and media, and their sense of identity is being formed, they are inundated with emotionally charged press, leaving them perplexed [13]. Ageist, misogynistic portrayals and slandering of women, the fear of moral decay, withdrawal from social interaction or extreme damage to the social fabric are all potential outcomes. The digital media engagement of users necessitates specific psychological evaluation methodologies to enable a systemic understanding of the impact of content on their responses [9].

Analytic interest in moral panic seems to be ever-growing, but attempts to genuinely dissect the phenomenon and understand its psychological ramifications on the individual level remain very scarce. Little attention is given to a person's traits, like media literacy or emotional self-control, and their impact on the experience in the context of focus discourse analysis or media framing. Distinguishing between media-triggered fear and genuine concern is highly challenging in the scope of research due to the absence of measurement tools, leading to a lack of concern witnesses. Because of this, a gap in valuable information in formulating educational or policy-focused strategies is generated [7].

With today's media, where content is dictated by algorithms that amplify emotions, the urge to understand panic reactions has surged. There is no longer a clear distinction between news and entertainment, and this complicates matters for young adults trying to determine credibility and shape worldviews [2]. The research aims to shed light on this gap by developing and validating a psychometric scale measuring media-induced moral panic. The goals include exploring its cognitive-emotional structure, probing its relation to media consumption habits, and studying the impact of gender and education as moderators [6]. This research adds to the field of media psychology by creating a psychometric scale measuring media-induced moral panic.

### Key Contributions:

- This study presents a distinctly created and empirically validated instrument to measure the components of moral panic induced by media in young adults cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally optimized through analytical methods.
- The study quantitatively documents the relationship between social media, digital news, streaming services, and the distinct variations in magnitude of moral panic, and, therefore, it documents the effects of media scientifically.
- The study investigates demographic and psychological moderators, such as education, media literacy, and gender. It brings to the fore the gaps in personal and contextual factors that shape media panic suspicion, guiding policy formulation.

This document is divided into five primary sections. Section II features a thorough review of literature focusing on the theories of moral panic, their portrayal in the media, and the attempts that have been made to quantify them. Section III introduces the research methodology and the sampling method, the creation and review of the psychometric scale, and the statistical methods applied. Section IV describes and interprets the results, and also includes descriptive statistics and factor analysis with the corresponding graphs that illustrate the most critical relationships in the data set. Finally, Section V presents a comprehensive summary of the research's most important lessons, analyzes key issues related to media impact and moral panic, suggests next steps for research in the area, and highlights the many limitations that are rarely mentioned in comparable research.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

About sociology, psychology, and even media studies, the phenomenon of moral panic has been of concern for many years. It can be explained as a state in which an individual, a group, or a behavior is considered a media amplified risk to social order or societal norms. Early moral panic analysis identified several key features, including hostility to the designated group, public concern, and a perceived threat that was greatly exaggerated, which was coined the danger [12]. For the most part, these basic constituents still uphold and explain how moral panic has in the past and continues to today, emerge and propagate in a society, and particularly through the means of mass communication.

In recent times, particularly with the onset of the digital era, moral panic has changed and propagated more easily and fluidly. The advancement of social media, as well as the ability to provide information instantaneously, has enabled powerful and emotionally charged content to disseminate with an unparalleled pace [3]. Echo chambers, where users are exposed to a single, emotionally charged point of view considered provocative, have become the norm. The resulting amplification, or the cycle of acting and reacting, can cause public anxiety. This type of environment is even more dangerous for young adults who tend to spend a lot of time on digital platforms.

Threatening media content is dealt with through a dual pathway of cognitive appraisal and emotional activation [8]. While attending to crime stories, societal breakdown narratives, or health scares, individuals consider if the threat is relevant and how serious the threat and personal level of risk are. In instances where the threat is perceived to be serious and coping strategies are unclear or absent, the emotions of fear and anxiety, as well as behavioral avoidance,

may arise [14]. The media content that tends to inspire fear, panic, and maladaptive coping responses certainly lacks in offering healthy coping skills. In storytelling, the risk of portraying a threat using heightened emotional content is that the audience's ability to reason is clouded, and therefore, even the unlikely risks are overestimated.

The panic narratives produced and advertised through various media are believed only by people who have faith in the media [4]. Strong media credibility allows people to take the content as is and in turn, they suffer more emotional disturbance. Low media trust people do not believe in media and hence are less vulnerable to panic, however too much skepticism causes apathy and hence lack of active citizenship and informed decision making [15]. As such, media trust and emotional responses are interconnected and are shaped by individual characteristics as well as contextual factors.

Even with an abundance of theory, there is still an empirical media-moral panic assessment gap on a person-to-person level. Current media effect assessment frameworks utilize media dependency, media literacy, or media anxiety, using no shrink frameworks to overlook the psychological sides of moral panic [10]. There is an absence of psychometric tools that quantitatively tie the distinct thoughts, feelings, and actions triggered through the exposure to media that is tagged as 'morally sensitive'. Creating the psychometric tool will detail and crystalize the ways through which individuals process media, especially during emotionally charged digital contexts.

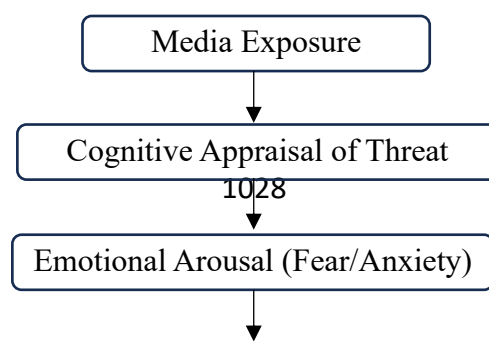
Developments in media culture have, in recent years, shifted the transmission of panic from traditional sources to user-generated content. Through postings, hashtags, shared videos, and misinformation, social media users actively fuel panic narratives [5]. Content posted by users is substantially more impactful than verified information and reaches younger audiences who navigate news and opinions through friend-based digital platforms. This highlights the need to measure the business of media consumption and emotional manipulation in the new online reality.

To summarize, the theoretical framework of moral panic is constructed well, but the actual measurement of it in empirical reality with young adults is still very thin [11]. Addressing this gap with the development of an adequate media-induced moral panic framework, the authors constructed and validated the psychometric scale which, through advanced measurement and responsive media, evaluation enables systems to properly intervene and adjust the educational responses to psychological manipulation.

### III. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research is to construct and validate a psychometric scale measuring the media-induced moral panic of young adults. This was carried out by means of a quantitative survey. To achieve demographic diversity, stratified sampling was utilized which yielded 420 responses and 398 valid responses. The scope of the survey included emotional responses, perceived threats, trust on media, and behavior change.

The construction of the scale was conducted in four major steps: item generation, validation by experts, piloting, and final administration. From the 36 items created, 24 were kept after the piloting. Responses were scored using a 5-point Likert scale and the reliability and structural validity were tested using Exploratory and Confirmatory Factor Analysis.



### Figure 1: Conceptual Architecture of the Study

Media engagement functions as the first stimulus that leads to the assessment of the perceived threat, which sparks emotional reactions to the trigger, predominantly anxiety and fear. Psychometrically, the entire sequence of actions is represented in the explanation of the MIMPS, which stands for Media Induced Moral Panic Scale and which was developed as the main psychological evaluative tool for the study in question. Individual assessments of the situation fair as trust/ skepticism of the media shape the adaptive and rational behaviors of media-induced panic.

To assess the reliability of the scale, Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha$ ) was employed:

$$\alpha = \frac{N \cdot c^-}{v^- + (N - 1) \cdot c^-}$$

Where:

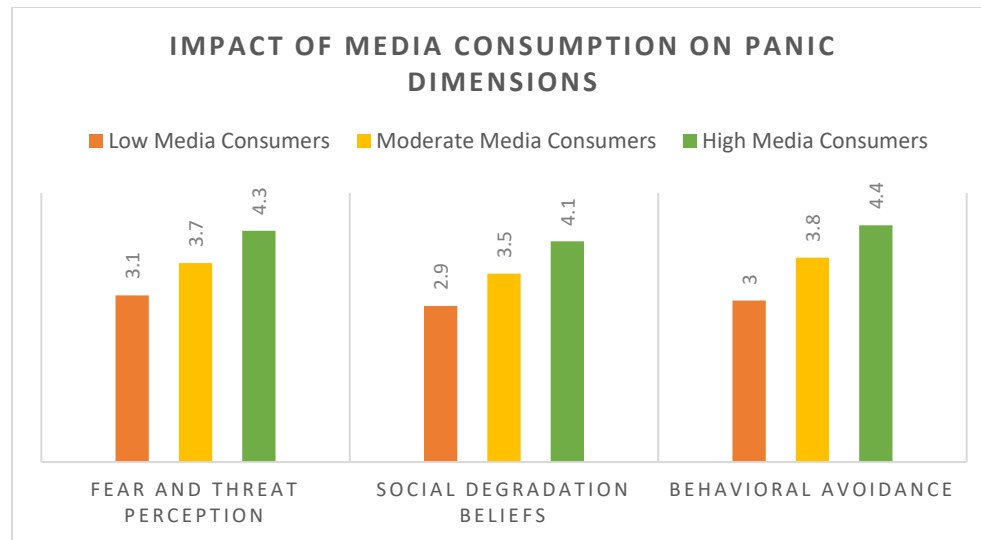
- $N$  = Number of items
- $c^-$  = Average covariance between item pairs
- $v^-$  = Average variance of each item

This formula assesses the internal consistency of the scale with reflecting the items are measuring the same underlying concept. A value of  $\alpha \geq 0.7$  is considered "acceptable," while  $\alpha \geq 0.85$  indicates "strong reliability". In this analysis, the overall Cronbach's Alpha obtained was 0.89 which showed high internal consistency and strong correlation between the items and subscales developed.

## IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Insights from the research conducted with 398 participants reveal that media-induced moral panic can be understood through three critical dimensions: fear perception, social degradation beliefs, and behavioral avoidance, with the three factors cumulatively explaining over 67% of the variance. Increased media exposure evoked stronger emotional and behavioral reactions, particularly heightened fear and avoidance, in participants who had alarming content thrust upon them.

Confirmatory analysis ascertained the model's validity. Interestingly, heightened panic scores were recorded for participants who were female and for those with lower media literacy. The Media-Induced Moral Panic Scale (MIMPS), measurement model suggested, is a reliable panic level variance measurement and can be used for media literacy psychological evaluation as well as for the implementation of tailored media literacy awareness programs.



**Figure 2: Comparison of Average Subscale Scores by Media Consumption Level**

As illustrated in Figure 2, as media consumption rises from low to high, panic levels in all three dimensions Fear Perception, Social Beliefs, and Behavioral Avoidance increase. Users with high levels of media consumption demonstrated significantly higher panic levels, with Behavior Avoidance escalating the most steeply. This trend underscores the impact of repeated sensational media exposure on emotional and behavioral reactions. The results of this study suggest that there is a growing need for specialized media literacy education aimed at empowering young adults to analyze and counter media narratives designed to instill panic.

## V. CONCLUSION

This paper describes the development and validation of the Media Induced Moral Panic Scale (MIMPS) which specifically focuses on the psychological reactions of young adults to panic-inducing media. The scale defined three key dimensions: fear perception, social degradation beliefs, and behavioral avoidance, showing adequate reliability and validity. It was noted that media consumption was greater among those with lower media literacy, which in turn, triggered greater panic responses. These findings demonstrate the need to focus on the emotional and behavioral impact media narratives have on the youth.

This would allow the exploration of other populations and regions to test the validity of the scale. The mental health impacts of prolonged media exposure could be explored in longitudinal studies. Other interventions such as media literacy or emotion regulation programs could also be assessed with this tool. In summary, this work serves as a stepping stone towards developing effective strategies to reduce panic and encourage critical engagement with the media among young adults.

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