Mental Health Conditions of Youth: Understanding Their Challenges and Coping Mechanisms After the Geopolitical Crisis in Bangladesh

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Abstract
Bangladeshi youth protested the return of quotas, resulting in a geopolitical crisis. They face internet outages and callous aggression (Amnesty International, 2024), which seems to have affected their mental health negatively. The purpose of this study was to understand the predominant mental health issues experienced by youth and young adults that became visible after the recent geopolitical crisis. It also explores coping techniques utilized by this population to manage their issues. This study employed a qualitative approach, with data collected through eight focus group discussions (FGDs), including 80 youth from Bangladeshi public and private universities. Purposive sampling was used to choose participants. Inductive reflective thematic analysis was carried out for data analysis using text mining and manual coding. The geopolitical crisis had a range of psychological consequences on the study population, including major psychological symptoms such as depression, anxiety, stress, and post-traumatic stress. Additionally, they dealt with minor symptoms such as sleep difficulties, exam phobia, feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and grief. Male participants at the private university were found to be more vulnerable because of their frequent exposure to violence. The study also found that peer support, creative outlets, social media involvement, and denial of the circumstance were found as coping techniques for the youth. To address the mental health issues of students, different measures should be taken, such as mental health awareness initiatives, one-to-one or group psychological counseling sessions, peer group support sessions, etc. These measures can assist students in building resilience and accessing an effective supportive system.

Keywords*: Higher Education, Youth, Mental Health, Geopolitical Crisis, Bangladesh

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Introduction

An estimated one billion people worldwide suffer from a mental illness, demonstrating the prevalence of mental diseases. Anxiety disorders afflict 260 million individuals, or 3.6% of the world's population, while depression affects about 322 million people, or 4.4% (Chaudhari et al., 2024). A substantial amount of the global disease burden is attributed to mental diseases, which are the primary causes of impairment in young people (Erskine et al., 2014). High rates of depression (29.4%), anxiety (42.4%), stress (16.4%), disordered eating (13.9%), and suicide ideation (7-8%) are prevalent among Southeast Asian youth, mainly university students (Dessauvagie et al., 2021). This data highlights the growing mental health issues that local youth are facing.

Risky behaviors, poor academic performance, unemployment, poor sexual health outcomes, self-harm, and an increased risk of early mortality are just a few of the severe results that young people who are experiencing psychological distress may have to deal with (Livingston et al., 2012). Additionally, young individuals who experienced increased depressive symptoms reported a lower quality of life in terms of meeting basic needs and their own personal lives (Celebre et al., 2021).

Civil rights, economic injustice, gender equality, and political freedom are among the issues that young people are actively concerned about. According to Wahyuningroem and colleagues (2024), these movements usually manifest as both online activism and live protests. Young people often experience both short-term and long-term mental health issues as a result of global crises, political unrest, violence, and internet restrictions (Kirkbride et al., 2024; Ventriglio et al., 2024). Young people are more likely to commit suicide when political instability exacerbates feelings of hopelessness and social isolation in this group (Tasfi & Mostofa, 2024). Particularly for urban male students who have firsthand experience with violence, prolonged exposure to violence and ongoing instability significantly raises the risk of PTSD and other mental health problems in young people (Khoury-Malhame et al., 2024). Adolescents from Hong Kong who took part in anti-government protests reported experiencing a range of mental health issues, such as emotional distress and sleeplessness (Kwan, 2023b). In addition, statistics showed that major depression rose by 7% and the rate of PTSD varied from 4% to 41% in riot-affected districts, impacting the broader population irrespective of individual involvement (Ni et al., 2020).

A geopolitical crisis marked by internet outages and harsh government responses, such as disproportionate force, arbitrary detentions, and bloodshed, has resulted from young people's protests in Bangladesh against the return of quotas (Amnesty International, 2024). People may experience anxiety, depression, prolonged grief, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of these measures, which have sparked conversations about violations of human rights (Faruk, 2024). However, as far as the authors are aware, there isn't much thorough study on the main mental health issues that Bangladeshi teens and young adults face during the recent geopolitical crises. Our goal is to investigate the key mental health issues and coping strategies used by this population in order to improve students' well-being during these difficult circumstances.

Methodology

Sampling

Eight focus group discussions (FGDs) with a total of 80 participants, ages 19 to 25, with a mean age of 22.5 years, were used to gather data for this study. The Purposive sampling method used to choose the participants from Bangladesh's public and private universities to explore the primary mental health issues and the coping strategies utilized by this demographic to promote the well-being of students during challenging periods. There were ten participants from each student group in each FGD.

Study Design and Data Collection

This examination was conducted using a qualitative research design. Focus group discussions, or FGDs, were utilized to collect information. Ethical approval was taken before starting the data collection process. Selected students participated in open-ended discussions led by the data collectors. This strategy was used throughout the talks to elicit participants' challenges and coping mechanisms following Bangladesh's geopolitical crisis. Each FGD lasted from sixty to ninety minutes. Confidentiality of the participants were ensured and every FGD was recorded with permission for in-depth data and analysis. The FGD was structured to include demographic data collection and open-ended questions to understand mental health challenges of the participating youths and also to understand their coping strategies in times of challenging situations. The FGDs were in Bengali but later transcribed and translated to English. The focus was to make sure that the translations were as precise as possible while still preserving the original context and sense of the original verbatim. To analyze the data, an inductive reflective theme analysis methodology was used. This method combined text mining with data coding. The first phase entailed manually categorizing and summarizing the data, arranging related codes into overarching themes.

Results

Characteristics of the Participants

The study involved 80 participants, with a mean age of 22.5 years. The majority were male (60%) and pursuing honors-level education (68.75%). Family income ranged widely, with 45% reporting a monthly income between 50,000 and 100,000 BDT ($400-$800). Detailed demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Several themes were identified through the analysis of focus group discussions (FGDs), and they shed light on the mental health challenges encountered by Bangladeshi youth during geopolitical crises, while the coping mechanisms they used to navigate these challenges were also drawn attention to. Both adaptive and maladaptive strategies were identified through the analysis of the themes.

Table 1: Demographic Features of the Participants (N=80)

Variables	Number	%
Sex		
Male	48	60%
Female	32	40%
University		
Public	36	45%
Private	44	55%
Educational Status		
Honor's	55	68.75%
Master's	25	31.25%
Monthly Family Income		
<25,000	10	12.5%
25,000-50,000	26	32.5%
50,000-1,00,000	36	45%
>100,000	8	10%

Theme 1: Major Psychological Symptoms

This theme highlights the significant psychological symptoms experienced by Bangladeshi youth following the geopolitical crisis. Depression, anxiety, stress, and post-traumatic stress syndrome are the primary themes that emerged from the FGDs when exploring the symptoms participants experienced during and since the geopolitical crisis.

Depression

Participants in the focus group discussions frequently reported symptoms of depression, illustrating the profound emotional and psychological disruptions they faced following the geopolitical crisis. Many expressed feelings of detachment, hopelessness, and changes in routine that significantly impacted their lives.

For instance, one male participant described his disinterest in formerly enjoyable activities, stating, "I don't feel like doing anything... even watching football feels useless... I can't sleep, I get irritated with people around me... I don't know what to do with life anymore" (Participant: 1, age: 22, FGD: 2).

Similarly, a female participant articulated her struggles, saying, "It's like being in a dark room with no door… I feel weak and stay in bed most of the time" (Participant: 2, age: 23, FGD: 4).

These accounts reflect not only a loss of interest in activities and social connections but also the physical toll of prolonged emotional distress, such as fatigue and changes in appetite.

Anxiety

The research identified significant anxiety among students as they faced the aftermath of the geopolitical crisis. Many expressed ongoing concerns about their safety, the instability of the current situation, and uncertainties regarding their future, particularly in terms of education and career paths.

One female participant shared, "Each sound of notification triggers anxiety, and I worry whether violence has erupted again. These thoughts often prevent me from focusing on anything else" (Participant: 2, age: 20, FGD: 1).

Similarly, another male student shared, "I am paralyzed by indecision about my career, and the pressure to choose makes me avoid family discussions altogether" (Participant: 6, age: 25, FGD: 3).

Stress

The data shows the stress during moments of crisis is being carried in different forms. They feel stressed out about the current incident, returning to studies, preparing and giving exams again, conflicts in the group, etc.

One male student expressed, "Even as things return to normal, I still feel tense about the chaos and conflicts among my peers. They remain stuck in the protest mindset, and it's exhausting trying to make them understand" (Participant: 2, age: 20, FGD: 6).

Similarly, a female student shared, "I get headaches and irritability when I hear about violence, and my body feels stiff" (Participant: 8, age: 21, FGD: 2).

Another female participant conveyed, "I don't know how to return to normal; everything is delayed, and I feel overwhelmed by the uncertainty of starting over" (Participant: 3, age: 24, FGD: 7).

Post-traumatic Stress Symptoms

Participants reported experiencing trauma-related symptoms following the geopolitical crisis. Some had direct exposure to traumatic events, while others were indirectly affected by hearing accounts or viewing distressing media. These experiences led to symptoms such as intrusive memories, nightmares, and heightened startle responses.

One male participant recounted, "Being a private university student, I was not prepared for anything. But then suddenly the situation changed. I saw people being struck, blood, screams, and tear gas. Those memories replay when I hear loud noises, and I feel like hiding" (Participant: 1, age: 21, FGD: 5).

Another male participant described how consuming news and videos created vivid, painful imagery: "In a private university, we always see less protest. But this time it was different. I saw it becoming a battlefield. Also the videos from my classmate about the violence were on

social media. The screams and graphic details still haunt me. I still have nightmares about them" (Participant: 6, age: 25, FGD: 3).

A female participant noted feelings of detachment and physical reactions: "I feel ashamed for not participating; remembering the events makes me sweat and shake" (Participant: 9, age: 19, FGD: 1).

Theme 2: Minor Physiological and Psychological Symptoms

The study identified that while some students did not exhibit severe psychological symptoms following the protest and post-protest crisis, they experienced mild symptoms that disrupted their daily lives. This included difficulty concentrating, minor anxiety, and irritability, which negatively impacted their productivity. Over time, the persistence of these symptoms could place them at risk of developing more serious psychological distress if not addressed. These findings emphasize the importance of early interventions to support mental well-being and prevent escalation into major psychological challenges.

Sleep Difficulties

The research highlighted that some participants experienced persistent yet mild psychological symptoms that disrupted their everyday functioning. These symptoms included sleep disturbances or developing insomnia, difficulty concentrating, and irritability, which impaired their productivity and quality of life. While not severe, the prolonged presence of these symptoms could predispose participants to significant psychological distress.

A female participant shared, "I sleep but wake up after having nightmares. I don't always remember them, but the bad feelings linger" (Participant: 3, age: 22, FGD: 8).

A male participant explained, "At night, I can't sleep. I just lie in bed thinking about everything, unable to rest" (Participant: 2, age: 20, FGD: 4).

Exam Phobia

In some FGDs, participants mentioned experiencing significant academic challenges post-crisis. The pressure of impending deadlines, exams, and assignments, coupled with the disruptions in their academic routines, has left them overwhelmed and apprehensive about their educational progress and future.

A female participant stated, "I'm worried about the sudden rush of exams. I can't focus or recall anything I studied before. It feels like I never prepared" (Participant: 4, age: 21, FGD: 7).

A male participant shared, "I couldn't adjust to university life before the crisis, and now I'm lost. I haven't studied and feel unprepared for exams or presentations" (Participant: 1, age: 25, FGD: 3).

Feeling of Hopelessness

The participants expressed feelings of hopelessness regarding the future of their country and personal lives, reflecting a sense of hopelessness about their efforts during the protest.

A male participant reflected, "It's not like I expected drastic changes, but the violence and conflicts between groups make me question what the protest was for. It feels pointless. Maybe I should have left the country like my friends" (Participant: 1, age: 24, FGD: 1).

A female participant shared, "I thought things would improve, but now I wonder—what does 'better' even mean? I feel lost about what I want anymore" (Participant: 4, age: 22, FGD: 3).

Helplessness

The findings revealed that students felt a profound sense of helplessness during the crisis, marked by a belief that they lacked control or the ability to effect meaningful change.

A male participant shared, "I joined the protest, but it felt like an endless journey. I saw my classmates get hurt, some even hospitalized, yet nothing changed. I felt powerless—nothing I did seemed to matter" (Participant: 5, age: 25, FGD: 3).

A female participant reflected, "The situation doesn't make sense anymore. People only care about their own benefit. What are we supposed to do? I feel helpless" (Participant: 1, age: 20, FGD: 5).

Grief

The findings revealed that some participants experienced grief stemming from the loss of mobility, physical abilities, or loved ones due to the crisis. This grief manifested as a profound emotional struggle, reflecting the long-term impacts of traumatic events.

A male participant reflected, "I wasn't close to my classmate, but whenever I see the seat left empty in his memory, I can't process it. He should have been here, studying with us, worrying about his career. He was so close, like a friend, and now he's gone. We'll continue, but his life ended in chaos" (Participant: 6, age: 22, FGD: 2).

Another female shared, "My younger brother, who is in college, joined the protest. When the police responded with violence in the protest, I went there to find him. On my way, a police officer told me to go home. When I explained that I was looking for my brother, he struck my leg with his baton. As a result, I sustained an injury to my leg and still experience difficulty walking.

Theme 3: Coping Strategies

The study explored various coping strategies used by youth and young adults in response to mental health challenges following the recent geopolitical crisis. The participants shared several approaches to managing stress and psychological distress. These strategies, which were critical for maintaining emotional balance, included engaging in physical activities, seeking social support from friends and family, and limiting exposure to distressing news. Many students also reported the use of isolation or withdrawal from social media to reduce stress, while others focused on engaging in creative or recreational activities to distract themselves from negative emotions.

Sub-theme - Adaptive Coping

From the focus group discussions (FGDs), several adaptive coping strategies emerged, which were categorized into distinct themes. These strategies varied among participants, reflecting their individual responses to the geopolitical crisis. The themes included seeking social support, engaging in physical activities, limiting exposure to distressing media, and practicing avoidance through isolation. Other strategies involved focusing on academic or personal goals as a means of distraction and cultivating a sense of resilience through self-reflection or creative outlets. These coping mechanisms helped participants manage stress and maintain emotional stability during challenging times.

Peer Support

The research indicated that spending time with family and peers during distressing times helps students cope and manage their emotions. Several participants highlighted the importance of sharing their feelings with loved ones.

One female participant noted, "I talk to my mother and sister, or friends; when feeling overwhelmed, I listen to music or watch films" (Participant: 1, age: 23, FGD: 6).

A male in an FGD shared, "I read books, talk to friends, or play when distressed, and sometimes my favorite work helps distract me positively" (Participant: 2, age: 22, FGD: 1).

Another male student emphasized, "I try not to stay alone; being with my family calms me down" (Participant: 3, age: 23, FGD: 10).

Self-Care

The findings show that engaging in self-care activities, such as creative outlets, playing games, writing, and some relaxation techniques, helped participants manage stress and distract themselves from their problems.

One female student explained, "Self-care is something I used to do that makes me feel good about myself or is interesting" (Participant: 1, age: 24, FGD: 2).

Another female student shared, "I am drawing pictures and also trying to draw mandalas so that I can distract myself from stress" (Participant: 1, age: 20, FGD: 4).

Some also found comfort in prayer, with one male participant stating, "I can pray and that gives me peace" (Participant: 1, age: 24, FGD: 9).

Sub-theme - Maladaptive Coping

During the focus group discussion, participants shared numerous maladaptive copings they have experienced. After analyzing their responses, we organized them into several themes.

Over-Reliance on Social Media

Many students reported over-reliance on social media and news channels during the protests, which they identified as a maladaptive coping mechanism. This reliance triggered anxiety,

leading some to binge-watch movies or series to alleviate stress. These behaviors disrupted their daily activities, including sleep schedules.

One male student shared, "I do sleep and when I get up seeing a bad dream, I start using social media to make myself easy, and during the daytime, my mood becomes very irritated" (Participant: 1, age: 21, FGD: 2).

Another female student stated, "Whenever I feel overwhelmed, I binge-watch shows all night to avoid thinking about my problems, even though I know it makes me tired the next day" (Participant: 5, age: 22, FGD: 1).

Denial and Avoidance

Many participants mentioned using avoidance as a coping strategy to deny their feelings of overwhelmness that developed from the national situation.

One male student shared, "To avoid the situation's anxiety, I keep myself engaged in gaming. Day and night I play games using a device. Once I do not feel hungry, lose interest in taking a shower, become disorganized in my daily routine, changed my sleep cycle, and consequently feel irritated all the time" (Participant: 6, age: 24, FGD: 3).

Similarly, a female student stated, "I want to avoid these problems because when I think about them, they make me feel like a puzzle" (Participant: 2, age: 19 FGD: 3).

Conclusion

This study investigates the psychological impact of the recent geopolitical crisis on youth in Bangladesh and examines their coping strategies. Employing a qualitative approach, the research analyzes verbatim accounts to document the mental health status of young people following the crisis. The findings reveal that the geopolitical upheaval resulted in a spectrum of psychological effects on youth, encompassing severe symptoms like depression, anxiety, stress, and post-traumatic stress. Furthermore, minor symptoms such as disrupted sleep patterns, exam phobia, feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and grief were observed. Male students at private universities were identified as particularly vulnerable due to their frequent exposure to violent incidents. The study also uncovered various coping mechanisms employed by youth, including seeking support from peers, engaging in creative activities, utilizing social media, and employing denial as a defense mechanism. Research indicates that prolonged exposure to violence and persistent instability significantly increases the likelihood of PTSD and other mental health disorders among young people, with urban male students being especially at risk due to their direct encounters with violence (Khoury-Malhame et al., 2024).

Previous research has indicated that men in conflict-ridden areas such as Kashmir experience greater exposure to traumatic events than women. This includes observing acts of violence and being directly involved in violent situations, leading to a high incidence of trauma among males (Dar & Deb, 2021). Our research also revealed that men who acted on the frontline during this geopolitical crisis witnessed situations where friends were struck by bullets, pellets, or other explosive devices and experienced anxiety during search operations. Furthermore, following the forced evacuation of major public universities, male students from private institutions actively participated in protests, resulting in their frequent exposure to violent incidents. Our study findings imply depressive symptoms like low mood, loss of interest, and sleep problems

in the young participants due to the geopolitical crisis, make it challenging for participants to lead functional lives. The finding is similar to another study that showed COVID-19-like crises also showed the rate of moderate to severe depressive symptoms increased from 6.4% to 8.8% (Peters et al., 2020). The study also revealed that youth experience significant anxiety due to the current instability, compounded by concerns about future events and the uncertainty surrounding their education and life choices. These factors contribute to heightened anxiety levels. This finding aligns with other studies, which show that anxiety levels were notably elevated during times of war, with average scores exceeding the threshold for mild anxiety symptoms (Gottschick et al., 2023). The crisis events brought about significant stress, leaving many youth feeling overwhelmed and exhausted by the ongoing conflicts among peers. The added pressures of academic and career concerns also contributed to stress-related symptoms, such as headaches and fatigue. These findings are consistent with a study that reports over one-third (37.4%) of participants experiencing at least one stress-related symptom during crisis events (Bleich, 2003). The current findings indicate that youth are experiencing post-traumatic stress symptoms as a result of both direct and indirect exposure to violence. Common symptoms include nightmares about the traumatic events, a tendency to avoid discussions about them, re-experiencing the emotions associated with the violence, and heightened sensitivity to anything that triggers memories of the events. These patterns align with a study that found multiple exposures to traumatic events resulted in PTSD-like symptoms in 20.4% of participants (Scholte, 2004).

Participants reported difficulties falling asleep and experiencing restful sleep, which negatively impacted their daily productivity. This finding aligns with a study showing that 23% of individuals in unrest situations reported experiencing sleep difficulties (Hunt et al., 2016). It is not major but affects the functioning of the participants. The geopolitical crisis and the resulting vulnerable conditions have heightened participants' concerns about their studies and future career paths. The pressure of approaching exam deadlines further exacerbates their stress, which aligns with a survey showing that university students experience moderately high levels of exam anxiety (Jirjees et al., 2024). The study highlighted participants' feelings of hopelessness following the crisis. Due to the changes and uncertainty they experienced, many felt despair about both the future of the country and their own personal prospects. This finding is similar to a study showing that, after a disaster, participants exhibited high levels of hopelessness and intolerance of uncertainty (Erkan & Budak, 2024). Some participants showed helpless feelings due to violence and uncertain events. They had a feeling of not being controlled and also felt that there were some parts of the geopolitical crisis that they couldn't predict. There is a positive relationship between conflict and helplessness (Dijkstra et al., 2005). Participants in this study exhibited a grief response immediately following the crisis. The geopolitical upheaval led to feelings of grief related to the loss of mobility and the loss of loved ones which is similar to a study that found that while the death of friends and community members can lead to grief and distress, prolonged grief outcomes were relatively rare (Harms et al., 2015). This research indicates that strategies aimed at "denial" or distracting oneself may initially be successful in reducing psychological distress during ongoing conflicts where individuals have limited ability to address their stressors. However, the study found that avoidance was ultimately maladaptive, as it only provided short-term relief while disrupting daily life and limiting social well-being. One study revealed that for girls, avoidant coping effectively reduced psychological symptoms of internalizing and externalizing problems but negatively impacted empathy as a measure of handling challenging environments and experiencing improved well-being outcomes measures (Cherewick et al., 2016). This research also noted that sharing distress with friends helped individuals cope with situations and manage their emotions more effectively. Consequently, despite significant political instability, those

who exhibited support-seeking behavior were better equipped to handle challenging environments and experienced improved well-being outcomes. The findings are supported by another study which demonstrated that positive coping strategies involving support-seeking behavior are well-established methods for enhancing psychological well-being and significantly reducing distress (El Khoury-Malhame et al., 2024). The current findings suggest that creative activities such as writing and drawing serve as effective coping mechanisms for young people facing mental health issues. These pursuits enable emotional expression, introspection, and stress alleviation, thereby enhancing mental well-being. This aligns with a previous study involving university students, which found that engaging in self-initiated creative literacy practices like reading, writing, and journaling could assist students in managing their mental health (Peach, 2023). This study reveals that media sources, including television, social networks, and newspapers, have contributed to anxiety and disrupted daily routines, particularly sleep patterns. Participants noted that while they use social media for relaxation, the prevalence of infodemics or potential misinformation often results in irritability or reliance on movies and series to improve their mood. Comparable outcomes have been observed in other research. The finding is supported by another study which finds that persistent exposure to crisis-related news and narratives can induce feelings of anxiety, fear, uncertainty, panic, or psychological distress (Rocha et al., 2021).

Limitations

There may have been social desirability bias among participants, as the data were collected through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Participants could have been inclined to provide responses they deemed more socially acceptable. Furthermore, the use of online platforms for data collection led to the loss of non-verbal cues, which might have offered additional context to the participants' responses.

Implications

The study identified key mental health challenges faced by youth and explored the coping strategies they employ to address these concerns. Based on the findings, various initiatives can be implemented to raise mental health awareness. These could include individual or group counseling sessions and peer support groups, all of which would significantly benefit young people. It is also important to disseminate the findings through conferences and collaborate with governments and stakeholders to address vulnerabilities and promote youth mental well-being. By taking proactive steps to help youth build resilience and connect with a strong support system, we can better equip them to practice self-care, be more confident and proactive, and also manage the after-crisis stressors more efficiently.

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