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The influence of media framing and peer opinion on victim blaming

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Abstract

This study examined the independent and combined effects of media framing and peer opinion on victim blaming among 192 young adults from an Indian cultural background. Using a 2x2 between-subjects factorial experimental design, participants were exposed to either a neutral or victim-blaming media narrative, accompanied by peer comments that either supported or opposed the framing. Victim blaming was measured using the Attribution of Blame Scale across four dimensions. 2x2 Factorial ANOVA revealed no significant main effects of media framing or peer opinion, and no significant interaction effect, with all three null hypotheses accepted. These null findings are discussed in the context of cultural specificity, pre-existing attitudes, and the limitations of single-exposure designs, highlighting the need for culturally grounded research on media framing and victim blaming beyond western contexts.

Keywords: Victim Blaming; Media Framing; Peer Opinion; Attribution of Blame; Indian Young Adults

1. Introduction

Media framing refers to how news media structure narratives by emphasizing certain aspects of reality while downplaying others, significantly shaping how audiences perceive and respond to events [1]. The "influence of presumed media influence" hypothesis further suggests that individuals estimate media effects on others and consequently modify their own attitudes and behaviors [2]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, media influence operated through agenda-setting and framing, compounded by infodemic conditions [3]. Beyond individual cognition, peer influence—defined as the effect attributable to experiences with friends and affiliates [4]—shapes how individuals filter and incorporate social information. At the group level, recurring peer interactions may produce complex opinion dynamics including polarization, fragmentation, or consensus [5].

Young adults (aged 18–25), consistent with Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood, are particularly sensitive to peer influence [6]. This developmental period is marked by identity exploration, instability, and a sense of possibility, making them especially susceptible to social and media-driven attitude formation. Victim blaming—a psychological phenomenon where responsibility for harm is placed on the victim rather than the perpetrator—is frequently observed across populations. Theoretical explanations include the defensive attribution hypothesis, which links blame to perceived similarity with the victim, and the just world theory, which holds that individuals attribute misfortune to victims to preserve a belief in a fair and orderly world [7].

This study is grounded in five complementary theoretical frameworks. Attribution Theory [8, 9, 10] provides the cognitive basis for understanding how individuals assign cause and blame. Kelley's covariation model identifies internal versus external attributions via consistency, consensus, and distinctiveness, while Weiner's model emphasizes how attributions shape emotional and behavioral responses. The theory also acknowledges systematic biases—self-serving bias, the need for control, and social image management—that distort the attribution process.

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The Friedkin-Johnsen Model with Memory and Multihop Influence (FJ-MM) extends classical opinion dynamics by incorporating memory (the influence of past beliefs) and multihop influence (indirect peer effects through social networks). Its findings indicate that diverse exposure over time moderates polarization and may reduce victim blame [11]. Zaller's Receive-Accept-Sample (RAS) Model explains individual-level variability in media influence: individuals receive, accept, or resist media frames depending on cognitive engagement, political awareness, and prior exposure, with the most recently activated considerations shaping expressed attitudes [12]. The Classification-Based (CB) Agent Model bridges individual psychology and collective opinion dynamics by modeling how traits such as conformism, radicalism, and stubbornness interact with social influence to produce group-level outcomes including consensus, clustering, or polarization [13]. Finally, Shaver's sequential responsibility framework and Alicke's Culpable Control Model (CCM) address the psychological mechanisms of blame attribution [14, 15]. While Shaver outlines rational criteria—causation, knowledge, intentionality, coercion, and moral awareness—Alicke demonstrates that spontaneous, emotionally driven judgments frequently override these criteria, particularly when victim characteristics trigger blame-validation processing.

Although sexual violence remains a well-documented social problem, media portrayal continues to influence public perception [16]. Existing research has largely examined media framing effects in isolation, without accounting for the concurrent influence of peer opinions—particularly social commentary accompanying online news content. Given that peer influence significantly shapes individual judgments among young adults, this gap limits understanding of blame attribution in today's socially embedded media environment. The present study addresses the gap by investigating the individual and combined effects of media framing and peer opinions on victim blame among young adults.

There is a general consensus among the studies that have been assessed that the attribution of blame is a process that is influenced by social context and media framing. Whether it is done through references to the actions of the victim, their clothing, or their personal preferences, there is evidence that victim-blaming language in media content will increase the probability of the audience attributing the blame to the victim rather than the perpetrator [16, 17, 18]. This is a phenomenon that has been found to occur across a variety of cultures, including the US, Indonesia, and Pakistan.

The moderating effect of social and individual variables in blame attribution is the second trend that is evident throughout the literature. Although Porumbescu and his colleagues suggest that ideological congruity with a specific frame of reference increases the impact of victim blaming, Dvir and Nagar demonstrate that empathy significantly decreases victim blaming [19, 20]. Likewise, Sandstrom demonstrated that moral attribution is affected by peer norms, even in infants [21]. Taken together, these findings make it clear that blame is not attributed in a vacuum but is instead shaped by an individual's identity, beliefs, and perceptions.

Nevertheless, there is a considerable gap in the vast majority of this literature: the vast majority of studies examining media framing or social influence are conducted separately, rarely exploring their interactions. A good example of a partial exception to this rule is the study by [22], which discovered a large interaction between gender framing and a social media response setting. Nevertheless, peer opinion is not directly manipulated as a variable in this study either. This is a considerable gap in the knowledge of how media framing interacts with peer comments, which are becoming increasingly frequent in digital media settings.

In the field, there is also a debate on methodology. Many studies rely on content or discourse analysis, which yields a profound understanding of the construction of blame in media language but lacks the ability to grasp the response of actual audiences to that language [16, 19]. The relatively small sample diversity of studies that actually include participants [22, 19, 20] often rely on some cultural or demographic subgroup, which raises the question of generalizability. This points to a greater need for experimental designs that are diverse in terms of sample and ecologically valid.

Objectives

- To examine the effect of media framing (blaming vs neutral) on victim blame.
- To examine the effect of peer opinion (blaming vs opposing opinion) on victim blame.
- To examine the interaction effect between media framing and peer opinion on victim blame.

Hypotheses

- H_{01} - Media framing will not significantly affect victim blame.
- H_{02} - Peer opinion will not significantly affect victim blame.
- H_{03} - There is no significant interaction effect between media framing and peer opinion on victim blaming.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research

The study followed a quantitative 2x2 factorial between-subjects research design.

2.2. Participants

The sample for this study consists of 192 participants with age ranging from 18 to 25 years from the Indian population selected using convenience sampling. This age range was chosen to focus on individuals who are in their early adulthood, which is considered as a critical developmental stage. The vast majority of the participants were middle-class, urban, female, and pursuing college education.

2.3. Instruments

- **The Attribution of Blame Scale (ABS):** The Attribution of Blame Scale (ABS) was developed by Loza and Clements is a 24-item self-report questionnaire designed to assess victim-blaming, offender responsibility, societal influences, and the role of alcohol or media [23]. Each item is rated on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 6 (Strongly Agree). In terms of psychometrics, the ABS has demonstrated acceptable internal consistency, with a reported Cronbach's alpha coefficient score of 0.75.
- **Vignettes:** A standardized vignette created by Wright and colleagues was used as vignettes for media framing [22]. The vignettes entailed a news article on intimate partner homicide that was based on online news article formats, this allowed a feeling of authenticity to the vignette. The vignette on peer opinions on media narrative had been created by the author and the vignette followed the standardization process under the guidance and approval of professional postdoctoral researchers from the Department of Psychology at Kristu Jayanti (Deemed to be University), Bangalore, India. The vignettes on peer opinions contained comments that either strongly aligned with the media narrative or strongly opposed with the media narrative.

2.4. Procedure

An information sheet that included information about the purpose of the study, qualifications and contact information of the author and supervisor, inclusion criteria, a section about confidentiality, and potential risks and benefits was given to participants. Only participants who gave their consent were allowed to proceed with the study. After that, participants were asked to answer a brief demographic survey that asked about their initials, age, gender, place of residence, socioeconomic status, educational attainment, and work status. Participants were asked to choose a number between 1 and 4 in order to randomly assign participants to one of four experimental conditions that consisted of a unique combination of media framing (blaming victim versus neutral) and peer opinion (supporting versus opposing media narrative). In order to ensure the equal distribution of numbers, once a number was selected, it was removed from the pool for the next participant. Participants were asked to complete the 24-item Attribution of Blame Scale (ABS) after reading the selected vignette. From November to January, 130 participants answered an online Google Form to provide their responses, whereas the remaining 62 participants answered printed hard copies of the response sheets and the vignettes.

2.5. Data Analysis

The data was analysed using Jamovi. Descriptive statistics were recorded, which included the mean, frequencies, and standard deviations for the demographic data. A two-way between-subjects factorial ANOVA was employed to examine the main effects of media framing and peer influence on victim blaming and the combined effect of both. Before conducting any inferential statistical analysis, the assumptions of homogeneity of variance and normality were checked.

2.6. Ethical Considerations

Before any data was collected, informed consent was obtained, and participants had the right to stop at any time without any fees being charged. All information was stored properly to prevent unauthorized access. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured. The research was conducted in a way that ensured that participants did not experience any discomfort or distress. In case of need, information will be provided to support this. Finally, in order to maintain integrity in the research, information was reported honestly and responsibly without any form of exaggeration or misrepresentation.

3. Results

The total sample collection is 192, out of which females are 122, and males account for 68 of these responses, the remaining 2 indicate "other" gender category. The majority of them (52 participants)are 18-year-olds, while 33 of the participants are 21-year-olds. The age category of 20-year-olds, 19-year-olds and 22-year-olds each have 26 participants, 17 of the participants are 23-year-olds, and 11 of them are 25-year-olds and the remaining are 24-year-olds. The majority of the participants come from an urban residential area (130 participants), followed by 42 from semi-urban residential and 20 from rural backgrounds. Socio-economic status of 160 participants are described as middle-class, while 31 of the participants belong to the upper class background and 1 participant is from a lower-class background. 107 of the participants have a Bachelor's degree while 45 of them have a Master's degree, 38 of them have a high school diploma and 2 have a doctoral degree. 164 participants are students, 12 of them are unemployed, 8 of them are engaged in a full-time career, 5 of them are in internship and 3 are self-employed.

3.1. Descriptive Statistics on Victim Blame Scores

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics and Normality Tests for Victim Blaming Across Media Framing and Peer Opinion Conditions

Media Framing	Peer Opinion	*M*	*SD*	Min	Max	Shapiro-Wilk	*p*
Neutral	Supporting	16.90	7.86	7	30	0.896	0.001
Neutral	Opposing	18.30	7.42	7	29	0.919	0.003
Blaming	Supporting	17.30	8.97	7	42	0.886	0.001
Blaming	Opposing	16.30	7.77	7	31	0.897	0.001

Descriptive statistics were computed to summarise the distributional characteristics of victim blaming scores across the four experimental conditions formed by media framing (neutral vs. blaming) and peer opinion (supporting vs. opposing). The analysis was based on data obtained from 192 participants, with equal group sizes across conditions. The mean, standard deviation, range, and normality statistics are presented in Table 1.

The results indicated that participants in the neutral framing and supporting peer condition reported a mean victim blaming score of 16.90 (SD = 7.86). In the neutral framing and opposing peer condition, the mean score was slightly higher at 18.30 (SD = 7.42). For participants exposed to blaming media framing with supporting peer opinion, the mean score was 17.30 (SD = 8.97), whereas those in the blaming framing and opposing peer condition reported a mean of 16.30 (SD = 7.77). Overall, the differences in mean scores across the four conditions were relatively small, suggesting limited variation in victim blaming across experimental manipulations at the descriptive level.

To assess the assumption of normality, the Shapiro–Wilk test was conducted for each group. The results indicated statistically significant deviations from normality across all four conditions, as all p-values were below .05. This suggests that the distribution of victim blaming scores within each experimental group did not fully meet the assumption of normality. However, given the equal group sizes and the robustness of factorial ANOVA to moderate violations of normality, particularly when sample sizes are balanced, parametric analyses were deemed appropriate for subsequent testing. The minimum and maximum scores across conditions indicated a reasonable range of responses, suggesting variability in the degree to which participants attributed blame to the victim. Standard deviations were comparable across groups, indicating similar levels of dispersion within each condition.

3.2. Statistical Findings

3.2.1. Test of Homogeneity of Variance (Levene's Test) for Victim Blaming Scores

A 2 × 2 between-subjects ANOVA was first conducted to examine the effects of media framing and peer opinion on victim blame, followed by examination of effects of media framing and peer opinion on offender blame, alcohol blame and societal blame.

Prior to conducting the factorial ANOVA, Levene's test of homogeneity of variance was performed. The test was not significant, $F(3, 188) = 0.46$, $p = 0.712$, suggesting that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was satisfied.

3.2.2. Main Effect of Media Framing on Victim Blaming

There was no significant main effect of media framing on victim blaming, $F(1, 188) = 0.53$, $p = 0.467$, $\eta^2_p = 0.003$; thus the null hypothesis H01 is accepted. Participants exposed to blaming media framing did not significantly differ in victim blaming scores from those exposed to neutral framing. The effect size was negligible.

3.2.3. Main Effect of Peer Opinion on Victim Blaming

There was no significant main effect of peer opinion on victim blaming, $F(1, 188) = 0.04$, $p = 0.836$, $\eta^2_p < 0.001$, thus the null hypothesis H02 is accepted. Participants exposed to supporting versus opposing peer opinions did not significantly differ in their levels of victim blaming.

3.2.4. Interaction Effect Between Media Framing and Peer Opinion on Victim Blaming

The interaction between media framing and peer opinion was not statistically significant, $F(1, 188) = 1.07$, $p = 0.303$, $\eta^2_p = 0.006$; thus the null hypothesis H03 is accepted. This indicates that the effect of media framing on victim blaming did not depend on peer opinion.

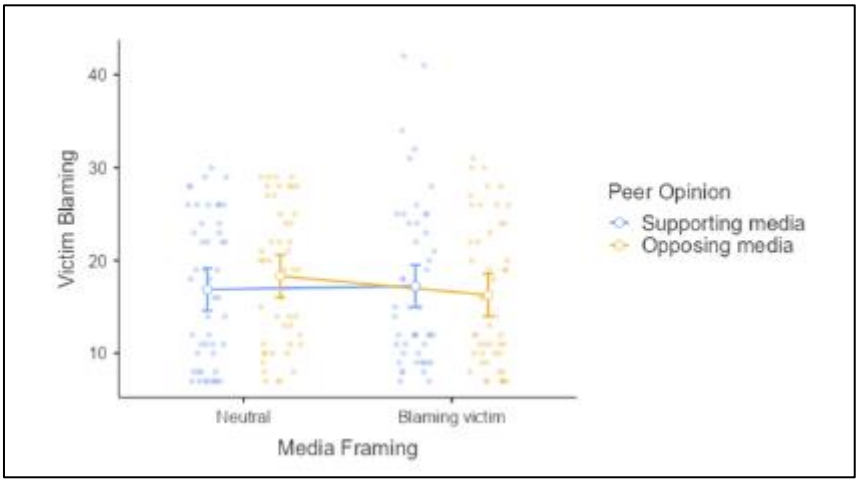

Figure 1 Interaction Plot Between Media Framing and Peer Opinion on Victim Blaming

Because no significant interaction or main effects were found, post hoc comparisons did not reveal meaningful differences between any specific group combinations.

3.2.5. Test of Homogeneity of Variance (Levene's Test) for Offender Blaming Scores

A 2 × 2 between-subjects ANOVA was conducted to examine the effects of media framing and peer opinion on offender blaming scores. Prior to conducting the factorial ANOVA, Levene's test of homogeneity of variance was performed. The test was significant, $F(3, 188) = 3.36$, $p = 0.020$, indicating that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was violated. However, given the equal group sizes across conditions, the ANOVA was considered sufficiently robust to proceed with interpretation.

3.2.6. Main Effect of Media Framing on Offender Blaming

There was no significant main effect of media framing on offender blaming, $F(1, 188) = 0.97$, $p = 0.327$, $\eta^2_p = 0.005$; thus, the null hypothesis is accepted. Participants exposed to blaming media framing did not significantly differ in offender blaming scores from those exposed to neutral framing. The observed effect size was very small, indicating minimal practical influence.

3.2.7. Main Effect of Peer Opinion on Offender Blaming

There was no significant main effect of peer opinion on offender blaming, $F(1, 188) = 0.23$, $p = 0.632$, $\eta^2_p = 0.001$; thus, the null hypothesis is accepted. Participants exposed to supporting versus opposing peer opinions did not significantly differ in their levels of offender blaming. The effect size was negligible.

3.2.8. Interaction Effect Between Media Framing and Peer Opinion on Offender Blaming

The interaction between media framing and peer opinion was not statistically significant, $F(1, 188) = 0.25$, $p = 0.616$, $\eta^2_p = 0.001$; thus, the null hypothesis is accepted. This indicates that the effect of media framing on offender blaming did not depend on peer opinion. In other words, the combined influence of framing and peer opinion did not produce a statistically meaningful change in offender blaming scores.

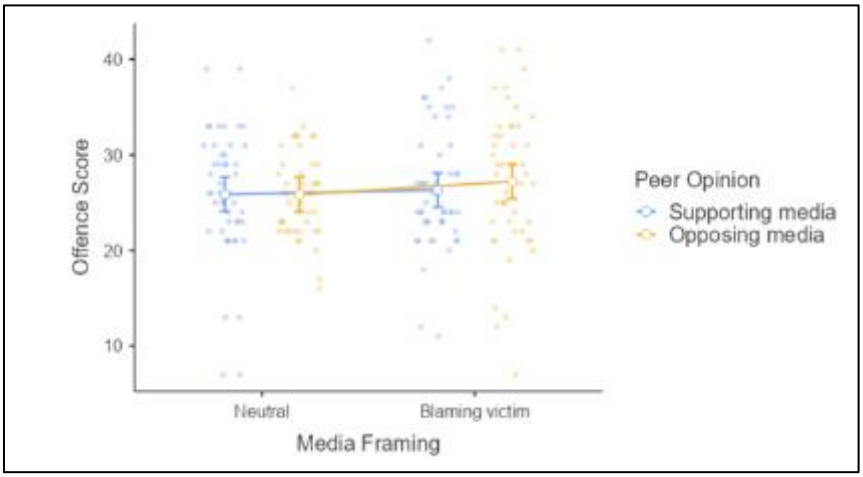

Figure 2 Interaction Plot Between Media Framing and Peer Opinion on Offender Blaming

Because no significant main or interaction effects were found, post hoc comparisons did not reveal meaningful differences between any specific group combinations.

3.2.9. Test of Homogeneity of Variance (Levene's Test) for Alcohol Blaming Scores

A 2 × 2 between-subjects ANOVA was conducted to examine the effects of media framing and peer opinion on alcohol blaming scores. Prior to conducting the factorial ANOVA, Levene's test of homogeneity of variance was performed. The test was not statistically significant, $F(3, 188) = 1.35$, $p = 0.259$, indicating that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was satisfied.

3.2.10. Main Effect of Media Framing on Alcohol Blaming

There was no significant main effect of media framing on alcohol blaming, $F(1, 188) = 1.55$, $p = 0.215$, $\eta^2_p = 0.008$. Participants exposed to blaming media framing did not significantly differ in alcohol blaming scores from those exposed to neutral framing. The observed effect size was small, suggesting that media framing accounted for only a minimal proportion of variance in alcohol blame.

3.2.11. Main Effect of Peer Opinion on Alcohol Blaming

There was no significant main effect of peer opinion on alcohol blaming, $F(1, 188) = 0.36$, $p = 0.547$, $\eta^2_p = 0.002$. Participants exposed to supporting versus opposing peer opinions did not significantly differ in their levels of alcohol blaming. The effect size was negligible.

3.2.12. Interaction Effect Between Media Framing and Peer Opinion on Alcohol Blaming

The interaction between media framing and peer opinion was not statistically significant, $F(1, 188) = 2.45$, $p = 0.119$, $\eta^2_p = 0.013$. This indicates that the effect of media framing on alcohol blaming did not depend on peer opinion. Although the interaction effect was slightly larger than the individual main effects, it remained statistically non-significant and accounted for a very small proportion of variance.

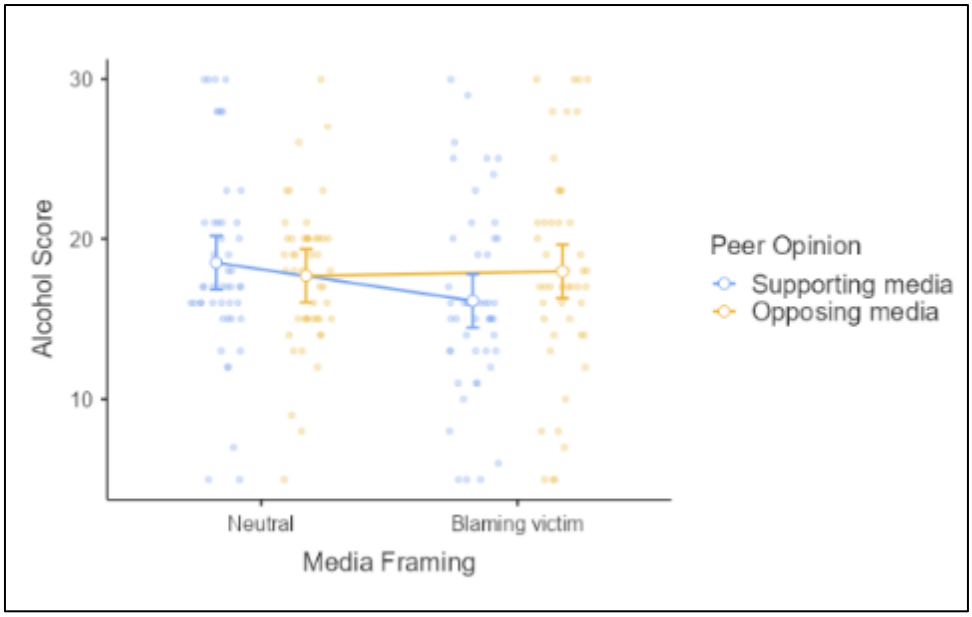

Figure 3 Interaction Plot Between Media Framing and Peer Opinion on Alcohol Blaming

Because no statistically significant main or interaction effects were observed, post hoc comparisons did not reveal meaningful differences between specific group combinations.

3.2.13. Test of Homogeneity of Variance (Levene's Test) for Societal Blaming Scores

A 2 × 2 between-subjects ANOVA was conducted to examine the effects of media framing and peer opinion on societal blaming scores. Prior to conducting the factorial ANOVA, Levene's test of homogeneity of variance was performed. The test was not statistically significant, $F(3, 188) = 1.85$, $p = 0.140$, indicating that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was satisfied.

3.2.14. Main Effect of Media Framing on Societal Blaming

There was no significant main effect of media framing on societal blaming, $F(1, 188) = 0.49$, $p = 0.486$, $\eta^2_p = 0.003$. Participants exposed to blaming media framing did not significantly differ in societal blame scores from those exposed to neutral framing. The effect size was negligible.

3.2.15. Main Effect of Peer Opinion on Societal Blaming

There was no significant main effect of peer opinion on societal blaming, $F(1, 188) = 0.02$, $p = 0.880$, $\eta^2_p < 0.001$. Participants exposed to supporting versus opposing peer opinions did not significantly differ in their societal blame attributions. The effect size was extremely small.

3.2.16. Interaction Effect Between Media Framing and Peer Opinion on Societal Blaming

The interaction between media framing and peer opinion was not statistically significant, $F(1, 188) = 0.67$, $p = 0.414$, $\eta^2_p = 0.004$. This indicates that the effect of media framing on societal blame did not depend on peer opinion. The interaction accounted for only a very small proportion of variance.

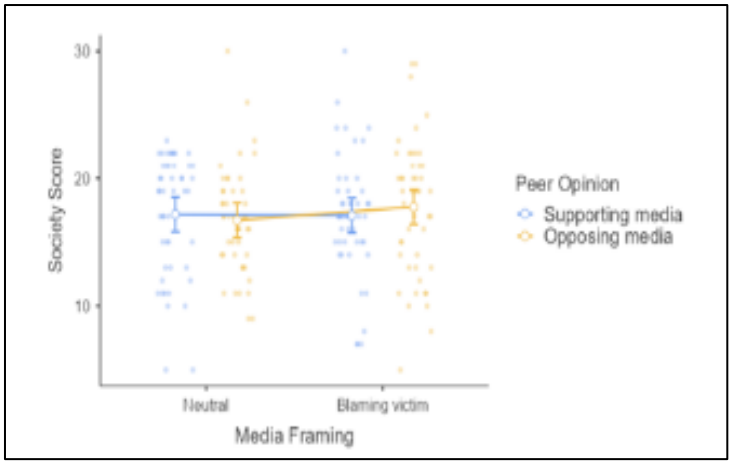

Figure 4 Interaction Plot Between Media Framing and Peer Opinion on Societal Blaming

Because no statistically significant main or interaction effects were observed, post hoc comparisons did not reveal meaningful differences between specific group combinations.

4. Discussion

To examine the individual and joint impact of media framing and peer opinion on victim blaming among 192 young adults aged 18 to 25 years belonging to the Indian cultural context, the current study employed a 2x2 between-subjects factorial experimental design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions, which were generated by combining peer opinion, either supporting or challenging the media frame, with media framing, which could be either neutral or victim-blaming. The Attribution of Blame Scale (ABS), which assessed blame on four attribution dimensions: victim blame, offender blame, alcohol blame, and societal blame, was employed to assess victim blaming.

The main result of this study is that none of the three research hypotheses were supported. The first hypothesis, which stated that there would be a significant main effect of media framing on victim blame, was not supported. The ANOVA showed that there was no significant difference in victim blaming scores between participants exposed to the blaming versus neutral media frame, $F(1, 188) = 0.53$, $p = 0.467$, with a negligible effect size. The second hypothesis, which stated that there would be a significant main effect of peer opinion on victim blame, was also not supported. Participants who read supportive peer comments did not significantly differ in victim blaming from those who read opposing peer comments, $F(1, 188) = 0.04$, $p = 0.836$, with an effect size of less than 0.001. The third hypothesis, which stated that there would be a significant interaction effect between media framing and peer opinion on victim blame, was also not supported, $F(1, 188) = 1.07$, $p = 0.303$, $\eta^2_p = 0.006$.

These null findings applied to all four of the ABS's blame dimensions. There were no significant main or interaction effects for either of the two independent variables, offender blame, alcohol blame, and societal blame. The standard deviations were relatively comparable, and the mean blame scores were relatively similar for all four experimental conditions, as suggested by the descriptive statistics. The validity of the parametric analyses was established by the equality of group sizes and the insensitivity of factorial ANOVA to mild violations of normality assumptions, despite the violation of the assumption of normality in some cases as suggested by the Shapiro-Wilk tests.

4.1. Implications

The findings of this study provide us with insights into identifying individuals, specifically young adults, who could be at risk of maladaptive aggression and to create interventions to enhance emotional regulation and empathy among young adults. The results of gender moderation also imply the necessity of gender sensitive approaches while developing intervention. The research also provides for practical implications for conflict management in educational and juvenile settings, where individuals high in Machiavellianism may benefit from interventions that focus on assertiveness and communication training.

4.2. Limitations

One of the study's limitations included a limited sample that had been specific to the southern region of India. Social desirability biases may have also occurred due to the study's reliance on self-report measures. The current study did not examine a number of individual difference variables, including empathy, prior exposure to victim-blaming media, gender attitudes, acceptance of rape myths, and cultural orientation, all of which have been shown to influence the relationship between media framing and blame attribution. It cannot be determined at this point whether framing and peer opinion effects were present for some subgroups of participants but not for others because of the absence of these moderator variables, but this is certainly a possibility that cannot be ruled out at this point. Future studies could be more subtle and distinctive in their examination of the conditions under which framing effects occur.

5. Conclusion

The primary objective of the current study was to determine whether victim blaming among young individuals in an Indian cultural context is affected by media framing and peer opinion, both individually and cumulatively. The overall interpretation of the results is that neither peer opinion nor media framing had a statistically significant effect on victim blaming within the context of the current study. The effect sizes for all analyses were small to virtually insignificant, providing support for the acceptance of all three null hypotheses and indicating that the interventions had no detectable effect on the attribution patterns of guilt.

The existing western literature on media framing and victim blaming has repeatedly demonstrated that the use of victim-blaming language in the media significantly enhances victim blame attribution, which goes against the expectations generated by this finding [16, 17, 22]. Furthermore, it goes against the theoretical expectations generated by opinion dynamics models, which assume that individual opinion states over time should be modified by both microscopic peer pressure and macroscopic societal forces, such as the dissemination of media frames. However, this discrepancy has theoretical implications in its own right. It suggests that cultural context, pre-existing attitudes, the strength and salience of the experimental manipulation, and the conditions under which social influence is exerted all mediate the relationship between media framing and blame attribution rather than constituting it as a simple, universal causal mechanism.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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