



The Psychological Impact of 'Doomscrolling' on Digital Media Consumers in the Post-Pandemic Era

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of "doomscrolling", the compulsive and continuous consumption of negative, distressing or catastrophic news via digital media platforms, has experienced an exponential surge in the post-pandemic era. This research critically investigates the psychological impact of doomscrolling on contemporary digital media consumers, explicitly examining its correlation with heightened levels of anxiety, clinical depression and digital fatigue. Employing a rigorous mixed-methods research design, the study integrated an online survey utilizing the validated Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21) among 200 participants (comprising university undergraduates and corporate IT employees), complemented by in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 15 individuals, intentionally including both everyday smartphone users and cybersecurity professionals. The quantitative findings indicate a statistically significant positive correlation between the daily hours spent doomscrolling and elevated psychological distress. Qualitatively, thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, reveals how algorithmic news curation leverages the inherent human "negativity bias," trapping users in a continuous loop of emotional exhaustion and cognitive overload. The study concludes that prolonged engagement in doomscrolling severely deteriorates mental well-being and disrupts normative sleep architectures. Ultimately, this research underscores the urgent imperative for enhanced digital media literacy, transparency in algorithmic curation and the adoption of mindful media consumption strategies to mitigate the adverse psychological ramifications on modern media consumers.

Keywords: Doomscrolling, Media Psychology, Digital Media, Negativity Bias, Social Media Algorithms

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary digital landscape is characterized by an unprecedented velocity and volume of information dissemination. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, a novel and pervasive behavioural pattern emerged within digital media consumption: "doomscrolling." Defined broadly as the excessive and compulsive scrolling through social media feeds or news aggregates to read negative, distressing or catastrophic information, doomscrolling has evolved from a transient coping mechanism during the global health crisis into a chronic habitual behaviour for millions of digital consumers globally. The term itself, which gained mainstream prominence in 2020, encapsulates the morbid fascination with grim news, be it related to global pandemics, economic recessions, geopolitical conflicts or environmental disasters.

While the fundamental human inclination to pay heightened attention to negative news. A cognitive phenomenon known as the "negativity bias" is an evolutionary adaptation designed for survival, its exploitation by modern digital architecture has created unparalleled psychological challenges. Social media platforms, driven by the imperative of an "attention economy," utilize sophisticated algorithms designed to maximize user engagement. These algorithms inherently prioritize emotionally charged and sensationalist content, inadvertently fostering a digital environment where negative news is disproportionately amplified. Consequently, digital media consumers are frequently trapped in an algorithmic loop, endlessly scrolling through distressing content in a futile attempt to gain a sense of control or understanding in an inherently uncertain world.

The psychological ramifications of this continuous exposure to negative stimuli are profound. Preliminary studies in media psychology suggest a strong correlation between heavy news consumption and psychological

distress; however, the specific behavioural construct of doomscrolling in the post-pandemic context remains underexplored. The post-pandemic era has not alleviated global anxieties; rather, it has shifted the focus from a singular biological threat to a polyresins encompassing economic instability, social unrest and political polarization. In this context, the digital media consumer is subjected to a relentless barrage of catastrophic narratives, leading to cognitive overload, emotional exhaustion and a pervasive sense of helplessness.

This research aims to comprehensively investigate the psychological impact of doomscrolling on digital media consumers. Specifically, the study seeks to understand how the continuous consumption of negative news correlates with mental health indicators such as anxiety, depression and stress. Furthermore, it explores the subjective experiences of consumers, seeking to unravel the cognitive dissonance between the awareness of the detrimental effects of doomscrolling and the compulsion to continue the behaviour.

To achieve these objectives, the present study is guided by two primary research questions:

1. What is the quantitative relationship between the frequency and duration of doomscrolling and the psychological well-being (measured via anxiety and depression levels) of digital media consumers?
2. How do digital media consumers subjectively experience and articulate the psychological impact of algorithmic negative news curation?

By answering these highly specific questions, this study contributes significantly and originally to the burgeoning field of media psychology and digital sociology. It actively moves beyond the overly generalized and increasingly obsolete critique of mere "screen time" to isolate, define, and analyse a specific, highly damaging behavioural pattern that is unique to the modern digital architecture.

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in a multidisciplinary approach, drawing heavily from evolutionary psychology, cognitive behavioural theory and the political economy of digital media. We argue that doomscrolling cannot be viewed simply as a failure of individual self-discipline; rather, it must be understood as a predictable, almost inevitable human response to a digital environment that has been aggressively optimized for prolonged attention extraction. The algorithms that govern contemporary social media feeds are not neutral conduits of information. They are highly sophisticated systems designed to map human vulnerabilities, specifically targeting the evolutionary predisposition toward threat detection. When this technological architecture intersects with a global population already traumatized by a multi-year pandemic, economic instability and geopolitical conflict, the psychological results are uniquely devastating.

Furthermore, this study aims to contextualize doomscrolling within the broader societal shift toward 'surveillance capitalism,' where human experience is commodified into behavioural data. In this economic model, user anxiety is not an unfortunate byproduct of news consumption, but rather a highly lucrative state of being that guarantees repeated engagement and ad impressions.

The findings of this exhaustive research are therefore crucial across multiple disciplines. For mental health professionals, these insights are essential for understanding and treating modern digital pathologies, particularly treatment-resistant anxiety and insomnia. For media educators, the findings underscore the desperate need for advanced digital literacy curricula that teach students how to critically deconstruct algorithmic curation. Finally, for policymakers and tech industry regulators, this research provides the empirical evidence necessary to debate the ethical boundaries of algorithmic design, advocating for legislative frameworks that prioritize human psychological well-being over the relentless pursuit of engagement metrics in the attention economy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The proliferation of digital news consumption in the 21st century has been accompanied by significant structural and psychological shifts in how information is packaged, distributed and consumed by the global public. To comprehensively understand the psychological underpinnings, behavioural drivers and ultimate consequences of doomscrolling, it is essential to deeply examine several distinct yet highly interrelated theoretical domains. These include the evolutionary 'negativity bias,' the psychological phenomena of 'Fear of Missing Out' (FOMO),

the classical Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) applied in modern crisis contexts, the mechanics of algorithmic curation within surveillance capitalism and the resultant state of digital exhaustion.

Negativity Bias and Cognitive Vulnerability in Media Consumption

At the absolute core of the doomscrolling phenomenon lies a fundamental, deeply ingrained psychological principle: the negativity bias. Evolutionary psychology robustly posits that human beings are genetically predisposed to pay significantly closer attention to negative, threatening or fear-inducing stimuli than to positive or neutral information (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Historically, in ancestral environments, this cognitive bias served as a critical, life-saving survival mechanism, ensuring that early humans remained acutely alert to environmental threats, predators and social dangers.

However, in the modern, highly sanitized digital ecosystem, this evolutionary advantage has been maladaptively co-opted. News organizations, both traditional and digital, have long adhered to the cynical journalistic adage, "if it bleeds, it leads," actively capitalizing on the negativity bias to drive readership, viewer retention and advertising revenue. Soroka et al. (2019) elegantly demonstrated through extensive cross-cultural psychophysiological experiments that news consumers consistently exhibit substantially stronger physiological responses, such as increased heart rate, elevated skin conductance and heightened pupil dilation to negative video news compared to positive or emotionally neutral news.

In the specific context of doomscrolling, this biological and cognitive vulnerability is incessantly triggered. Modern digital interfaces do not allow the nervous system to return to a baseline state of calm; instead, they create a state of chronic, low-grade hyper-arousal. This continuous activation of the sympathetic nervous system (the 'fight or flight' response) eventually depletes the individual's cognitive and emotional resources, leading to phenomena such as adrenal fatigue, reduced attention spans and an overarching sense of pervasive societal gloom.

The Intersecting Role of FOMO (Fear of Missing Out)

While negativity bias explains the initial attraction to catastrophic news, the 'Fear of Missing Out' (FOMO) heavily dictates the continuous, compulsive nature of the scrolling behaviour. Originally coined to describe the anxiety associated with missing out on rewarding social events (Przybylski et al., 2013), FOMO has mutated in the context of news consumption. In a rapidly shifting global landscape, characterized by pandemics, sudden economic downturns and real-time geopolitical conflicts, consumers develop an acute "Information FOMO."

Digital consumers often harbour a subconscious, irrational belief that by staying perpetually connected to the live feed of global crises, they are somehow insulating themselves from the shock of sudden disasters. The fear is no longer about missing a social gathering; it is the existential dread of missing a critical piece of news that might directly impact their personal safety or financial security. This Information FOMO drives the user to refresh their feeds constantly, even late at night, fearing that a crucial update might occur while they are disconnected, thus fuelling the doomscrolling cycle.

Uses and Gratifications Theory in Macroscopic Crisis Contexts

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) provide a crucial framework for understanding the active role of the media consumer. UGT suggests that individuals do not passively receive media; rather, they actively seek out specific media platforms and content to satisfy distinct social and psychological needs (Katz et al., 1973). Under normative, peaceful circumstances, users might engage with social media primarily for entertainment, social connection, identity construction or escapism.

However, during periods of macroscopic, systemic crisis, most notably observed during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the primary motivation for media consumption shifts dramatically toward environmental surveillance, threat assessment and uncertainty reduction. Research by Starbird et al. (2014) on crisis informatics indicates that during sudden disasters, people instinctively turn to digital platforms to gather actionable, real-time information to protect themselves and their communities.

Yet, doomscrolling represents a severe, pathological deviation from this normative information-seeking behaviour. As users scroll to alleviate their anxiety and reduce uncertainty, they are instead confronted with an overwhelming, algorithmically curated deluge of uncontrollable, catastrophic events. This creates a profound psychological paradox: the user actively seeks reassurance and clarity but finds only further destabilization and ambiguity. The compulsion to continue scrolling thus becomes a highly maladaptive coping mechanism. The user's search for a definitive 'end' to the crisis or a comforting conclusion within the news feed, is never realized, leading directly to prolonged emotional distress, psychological burnout and feelings of learned helplessness (Waterman et al., 2021).

Algorithmic Curation, Surveillance Capitalism, and the Attention Economy

The structural and technological component facilitating the doomscrolling epidemic is the foundational architecture of the digital platforms themselves. Contemporary social media platforms operate strictly within the parameters of an 'attention economy,' where continuous user engagement is the primary, indispensable metric of commercial success and corporate valuation (Zuboff, 2019). To maximize this engagement, platforms employ highly opaque, proprietary, machine-learning algorithms specifically designed to continuously serve content that evokes the strongest possible emotional responses.

Because negative, fear-inducing, and outrage-generating content naturally triggers the aforementioned negativity bias, thereby generating exponentially higher engagement rates in the form of comments, shares, retweets and clicks, algorithms disproportionately amplify this specific type of content (Brady et al., 2017). The algorithm does not possess a moral compass; it simply optimizes for 'time spent on screen.'

Consequently, a user who briefly pauses to read a distressing article about climate change or economic inflation is immediately and aggressively presented with similar or increasingly extreme, content in their subsequent feed. This algorithmic feedback loop acts as a digital echo chamber of despair. It systematically distorts the user's perception of reality, effectively normalizing a catastrophic worldview.

The platform's architecture itself is hostile to the user's mental well-being, actively accelerating the onset of digital fatigue, clinical anxiety and depressive symptomatology by ensuring that the user is never more than a single swipe away from the next global tragedy.

METHODOLOGY

To comprehensively investigate the psychological impact of doomscrolling, this study utilized an explanatory sequential mixed-methods research design. This approach is highly appropriate as it allows for the robust statistical measurement of doomscrolling behaviours and psychological distress (quantitative), while simultaneously capturing the nuanced, subjective experiences and emotional toll articulated by the consumers (qualitative) (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Study Area and Population

The research focused on urban and semi-urban digital media consumers in Sri Lanka. This demographic was selected due to the country's high smartphone penetration rate (over 70%) and heavy reliance on platforms like Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) for news consumption. To ensure robust "trust variables" and clarity regarding the source of the data, the target population was specifically defined: the quantitative survey targeted undergraduate students from the University of Sri Jayewardenepura and mid-level corporate employees in the IT sector (aged 18 to 35). This cohort was identified as exhibiting the highest frequency of daily digital media engagement.

Sampling Strategy

To ensure a rigorous mixed-methods approach, the study employed a two-tiered sampling strategy. First, a quantitative sample of 200 participants (comprising 120 undergraduates and 80 corporate IT employees) was recruited via online platforms using simple random sampling to ensure statistical representativeness. Second, a purposive sub-sample of 15 participants was recruited for in-depth qualitative interviews. Crucially, to ensure

the findings mirror today's fast-moving digital reality, this sub-sample intentionally included 3 local cybersecurity professionals alongside 12 everyday internet users who reported the highest levels of daily doomscrolling.

Phase 1: Quantitative Survey Participants completed a structured online questionnaire designed in Google Forms. The survey instrument consisted of two main sections:

1. **Media Consumption Metrics:** Participants self-reported their daily average screen time dedicated specifically to consuming news, the frequency of their scrolling sessions and their primary platforms of choice.
2. **Psychological Assessment:** The validated Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS-21) was utilized to measure the psychological well-being of the respondents. The DASS-21 is a globally recognized, 21-item self-report questionnaire designed to measure the severity of the core symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995).

Phase 2: Qualitative Interviews Following the preliminary analysis of the survey data, a purposive sample of 15 participants (N=15) was selected for in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Selection criteria required participants to exhibit high levels of daily doomscrolling (self-reporting more than 2.5 hours of dedicated negative news consumption per day) and elevated scores on the DASS-21 anxiety or depression subscales. The interviews, lasting approximately 45-60 minutes each, were conducted via Zoom. The interview guide focused on exploring the emotional triggers of doomscrolling, the perceived impact on daily functioning and sleep, and the cognitive dissonance associated with the inability to stop scrolling.

Data Analysis Strategy

- **Quantitative Analysis:** Data from the survey was exported to SPSS Version 26 for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations and percentages) were calculated to profile the sample's media consumption habits. Inferential statistics, specifically the Pearson correlation coefficient, were employed to test the primary hypotheses regarding the relationship between hours spent doomscrolling and the severity of anxiety and depression (DASS-21 scores).
- **Qualitative Analysis:** The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim. The qualitative data was then analysed utilizing Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for Thematic Analysis. This involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final analytical narrative. This rigorous method ensured that the emergent themes were grounded in the participants' authentic experiences rather than preconceived theoretical assumptions.

Quantitative Data Analysis and Results

The first phase of the mixed-methods design involved a quantitative survey to establish the prevalence of doomscrolling and its statistical correlation with psychological distress. Data from 200 participants (N=200) were analysed using SPSS.

Demographic Profile and Media Consumption Habits

The sample consisted of 200 active social media users aged between 18 and 35. The gender distribution was relatively balanced, with 54% female (n=108) and 46% male (n=92) respondents. To quantify 'doomscrolling', participants were asked to estimate the average number of hours per day they spent specifically seeking out and reading negative news content.



Table 1: Daily Time Spent Doomscrolling by the Sample Population

Daily Time Spent (Hours)	Number of Participants (n)	Percentage (%)
Less than 1 hour	24	12.0%
1 to 2 hours	68	34.0%
2 to 3 hours	72	36.0%
More than 3 hours	36	18.0%
Total	200	100.0%

As illustrated in Table 1, a significant majority of the participants (54%) engage in doomscrolling for more than 2 hours daily. The primary platforms utilized for this activity were Facebook (48%), X/Twitter (32%) and TikTok (20%).

Psychological Assessment (DASS-21) Results

The DASS-21 instrument was utilized to measure the severity of depression, anxiety and stress among the participants. The scores were calculated by summing the responses for each subscale and multiplying by two, adhering to standard DASS-21 scoring protocols. The clinical cut-off scores were used to categorize the severity of symptoms (Normal, Mild, Moderate, Severe, Extremely Severe).

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for DASS-21 Subscales (N=200)

Psychological State	Mean Score (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Prevailing Severity Level
Depression	16.42	6.18	Moderate
Anxiety	14.85	5.34	Moderate to Severe
Stress	19.30	6.05	Moderate

The mean scores (Table 2) indicate that the sample, on average, experiences moderate levels of depression and stress, and moderate to severe levels of anxiety. These elevated baseline levels are particularly concerning given the relatively young demographic of the sample.

Inferential Statistics: Hypothesis Testing

To test the primary hypothesis, that there is a significant positive correlation between the time spent doomscrolling and psychological distress—a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed.

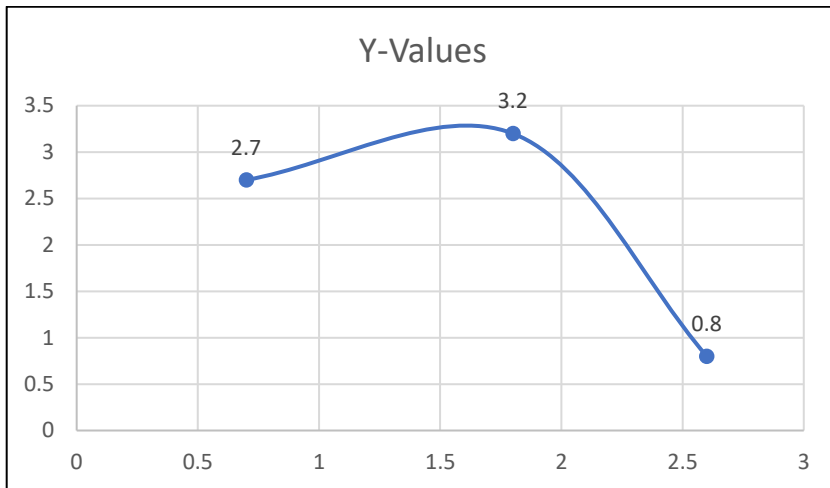
Hypothesis 1 (H1): There is a statistically significant positive correlation between daily hours of doomscrolling and DASS-21 Anxiety scores.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): There is a statistically significant positive correlation between daily hours of doomscrolling and DASS-21 Depression scores.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation Matrix (Hours of Doomscrolling vs. DASS-21 Scores)

Variable	1. Hours Doomscrolling	2. Anxiety Score	3. Depression Score
1. Hours Doomscrolling	1		
2. Anxiety Score	.684**	1	
3. Depression Score	.592**	.712**	1

Table 4: Data Points for Figure 1



Interpretation of Results

The results of the Pearson correlation (Table 3) indicate a strong, statistically significant positive correlation between the hours spent doomscrolling and anxiety levels ($r = .684$, $n = 200$, $p < .01$). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 is supported. Similarly, a moderate-to-strong positive correlation was found between doomscrolling hours and depression levels ($r = .592$, $n = 200$, $p < .01$), supporting Hypothesis 2. These quantitative findings conclusively demonstrate that higher frequencies of algorithmic negative news consumption are directly associated with deteriorating mental health outcomes among digital media consumers. To understand the subjective mechanisms driving these statistics, the qualitative data was subsequently analysed.

Qualitative Thematic Analysis

While the quantitative data establishes a robust statistical link between doomscrolling and psychological distress, it does not explain *why* users continue to engage in a behaviour they often recognize as harmful. To explore these subjective mechanisms, 15 participants who exhibited high doomscrolling frequencies were interviewed. The interview transcripts were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to Thematic Analysis. This inductive process yielded three overarching themes: Algorithmic Entrapment, Sleep Displacement and Nocturnal Rumination and The Illusion of Control.

Theme 1: Algorithmic Entrapment and the Compulsive Loop

A dominant theme across all interviews was a profound sense of helplessness against the design of social media platforms. Participants frequently described their doomscrolling not as a conscious choice, but as an involuntary compulsion triggered and sustained by algorithmic curation.

- **Participant 4 (Male, 22, University Student):** "It's like the app knows exactly what terrifies me. I click on one article about an economic crash, and suddenly my entire feed is filled with experts predicting the end of the world. I want to close the app, but my finger just keeps swiping up. It feels like I'm trapped in a loop."
- **Participant 14 (Male, 34, Cybersecurity Professional):** "From a technical standpoint, the user has almost zero chance of escaping the loop through pure willpower. These platforms utilize advanced machine learning models trained on millions of data points to exploit our negativity bias. They are engineered to bypass rational decision-making and trigger immediate emotional responses. It's not a lack of discipline; it's an asymmetric war between human psychology and corporate supercomputers."
- **Participant 9 (Female, 28, Corporate Employee):** "I call it the 'infinite scroll of despair.' There's no bottom to the page. Back in the day, a newspaper had a back page. Now, the algorithm just feeds you more trauma endlessly until you are completely emotionally drained."

These narratives align with the concept of the 'attention economy' (Zuboff, 2019), illustrating how algorithmic exploitation of the negativity bias creates a compulsive loop that users find incredibly difficult to break, even when experiencing acute distress. The inclusion of the cybersecurity perspective strongly reinforces the technological reality that doomscrolling is a feature, not a bug, of modern platform design.

Theme 2: Sleep Displacement and Nocturnal Rumination

The intersection of doomscrolling and sleep hygiene emerged as a critical sub-theme. A vast majority of the interviewed participants engaged in their heaviest doomscrolling immediately before attempting to sleep. This behaviour led to severe sleep displacement and nocturnal rumination.

- **Participant 12 (Male, 31):** *"I get into bed at 11 PM and tell myself I'll just check Twitter for five minutes. Suddenly, it's 2 AM, I'm reading about climate collapse, my heart is racing, and I can't sleep for the rest of the night. It completely ruins my next day."*
- **Participant 2 (Female, 24):** *"The blue light keeps me awake, sure. But it's the thoughts. You read so much negativity that when you finally put the phone down in the dark, your brain just ruminates on all the worst-case scenarios."*

The qualitative data confirms that doomscrolling severely disrupts normative sleep architectures, creating a vicious cycle where sleep deprivation further depletes the emotional resilience required to cope with anxiety and stress the following day.

Theme 3: The Illusion of Control

An unexpected theme was the cognitive rationalization of doomscrolling. Despite the negative emotional toll, several participants articulated that they scrolled through catastrophic news in a desperate attempt to feel 'prepared' for future crises.

- **Participant 7 (Female, 34):** *"During the pandemic, I felt so out of control. I still feel that way. I read all the bad news because I feel like if I know what's coming—if I know how bad the economy will get—I won't be caught off guard. It gives me a fake sense of control."*

This highlights a paradoxical application of the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1973). In a post-pandemic environment characterized by uncertainty, users seek out negative news for surveillance and threat-monitoring, mistakenly equating 'awareness of trauma' with 'control over trauma.'

DISCUSSION

The findings of this mixed-methods study provide compelling, statistically robust evidence that doomscrolling is a pervasive and psychologically damaging behaviour among contemporary digital media consumers. The quantitative analysis confirmed the primary hypotheses, revealing a strong positive correlation between the frequency of doomscrolling and elevated symptoms of anxiety and depression (as measured by the DASS-21). These statistical findings are congruent with previous psychological literature asserting that overconsumption of negative media exacerbates mental distress (Waterman et al., 2021). However, the specific manifestation of this consumption, the continuous, algorithmic feed of modern platforms—presents a unique psychological hazard.

The qualitative thematic analysis provides a crucial deeper context, illustrating that this overconsumption is rarely a simple matter of poor individual self-control or a lack of digital discipline. Instead, it is a deeply structural issue embedded within the architecture of modern surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019). The emergent theme of "Algorithmic Entrapment" demonstrates how technology platforms weaponize the human evolutionary negativity bias (Rozin & Royzman, 2001) alongside Information FOMO to maximize their engagement metrics. Users are caught in a compulsive loop, searching for an illusion of control in an uncertain post-pandemic world, only to find themselves emotionally exhausted, cognitively overloaded and chronically sleep-deprived.

The clinical implications of this phenomenon are profound. Mental health practitioners must increasingly screen for specific digital media habits, specifically doomscrolling and late-night smartphone usage, when treating patients presenting with generalized anxiety, depression or severe insomnia. The traditional psychological advice to "unplug" or "take a digital detox" is often insufficient, as it fails to address the underlying FOMO and the psychologically manipulative design of the platforms. Furthermore, the findings of this study challenge the dominant narrative that users are entirely autonomous and rational in their media consumption choices, thereby shifting a significant portion of the ethical and moral responsibility onto the platforms that design these infinite-scrolling, emotionally triggering algorithms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our findings, we offer the following clear, actionable steps for lawmakers, mental health professionals, and everyday users to help reduce the harms of doomscrolling:

For Technology Platforms and Policymakers

- **Make Algorithms Transparent:** Governments should require social media companies to be open about how their news feeds work. We need independent checks to ensure these platforms aren't artificially pushing scary or negative news just to keep users glued to their screens.
- **Design for Human Well-Being:** Tech companies need to adopt ethical design rules. This means getting rid of the "infinite scroll" feature so there is a clear bottom to the page. Platforms should also give users easy-to-use tools to block or limit upsetting content.

For Mental Health Practitioners and Educators

- **Ask About Screen Time:** Therapists and doctors should start asking patients about their daily news habits and how late they stay up on their phones, especially when treating them for anxiety or sleep problems.
- **Teach Digital Survival Skills:** Schools need to teach more than just basic computer skills. Students must learn how the "attention economy" works, understand why human brains are drawn to bad news, and recognize when an app is designed to hijack their attention.

For Individual Digital Media Consumers

- **Set Hard Limits:** Users should set strict time limits for checking the news (for example, only 30 minutes in the morning). It is also vital to keep phones out of the bedroom to protect sleep.
- **Clean Up Your Feed:** Stop passively scrolling. Unfollow accounts that only post sensational or terrifying news, and actively engage with positive content to "retrain" the algorithm to show you better things.
- **Take a Step Back:** When you feel the urge to keep scrolling through bad news, pause and recognize what you are feeling. Understand that reading more bad news won't give you control over the situation; it will only make you feel worse.

CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

In conclusion, doomscrolling is not merely a transient internet trend or a colloquial buzzword; it is a profound digital pathology of the post-pandemic era that significantly deteriorates the mental well-being of digital media consumers. The continuous, algorithmically curated feed of catastrophic news traps users in a vicious cycle of anxiety, cognitive overload and nocturnal rumination, largely driven by the exploitation of evolutionary psychological biases and the fear of missing out. To mitigate these pervasive adverse effects, there is an urgent need for macro-level interventions, including enhanced transparency in social media algorithms and the strict implementation of ethical design standards that prioritize human psychological well-being over corporate engagement metrics. On a micro-level, aggressive educational initiatives must focus on cultivating robust digital

media literacy, teaching contemporary consumers how to mindfully navigate algorithmic feeds and establish healthy, sustainable boundaries with their digital devices.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

While this study offers robust insights through a mixed-methods approach, it is not without critical limitations. First, the heavy reliance on self-reported survey data for screen time and mood is a significant weakness, as participants are notoriously inaccurate at estimating their exact daily screen time and their responses on the DASS-21 may fluctuate based on transient daily moods (recall bias). Second and most importantly, the cross-sectional nature of the quantitative analysis proves a strong *correlation* but cannot definitively prove *causation*. It remains unclear if doomscrolling independently causes clinical depression or if individuals who are already experiencing depressive symptoms simply spend more time doomscrolling as a maladaptive coping mechanism. Finally, the sample (N=200), drawn primarily from urban and semi-urban areas in Sri Lanka, may limit the broad global generalizability of the themes to entirely different socio-cultural contexts. Future longitudinal research utilizing objective screen-time tracking software is highly recommended to establish definitive cause-and-effect relationships.

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