

Doomscrolling and Mental Health: The Impact of Social Media on Anxiety

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Abstract

In this literature review, the relationship between doomscrolling and its impact on anxiety, depression, PTSD, and overall psychological distress is examined. Doomscrolling is a habit of endlessly scrolling through social media and news feeds and obsessively seeking depressing and negative information. Through analysis of empirical studies that were conducted during traumatic events, this paper will explore how personality traits, social media algorithms, social media addiction, and traumatic events affect an individual's doomscrolling behaviors. All of the studies found that excessive exposure to distressing online content worsens mental health. Individuals with pre-existing vulnerabilities are at a higher risk of this and should avoid consuming distressing news as a whole. In fact, evidence suggests that news avoidance and psychological resilience during difficult times would be the smartest decision for one's mental health. There were limitations found in each study reviewed, such as small, skewed samples that relied on self-reporting. Future research in this field would benefit greatly from exploring more diverse populations and more precise media tracking. Overall, this analysis emphasizes the importance of understanding how social media affects a population's mental health in times of crisis.

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The effects of long-time social media exposure have been researched, and it has been found to have detrimental effects on an individual's mental health. For the latest generations, there is not always a difference between social content consumption and news consumption. They get both directly from social media platforms like X, Instagram, and Tiktok. This makes it incredibly difficult to differentiate one from the other and put limits on consumption. Due to most social media platforms utilizing the algorithmic solution to draw users back for more, this further pushes social media addiction and consumption of harmful amounts of news information. The algorithmic solution utilizes social media users' activity history, like engagement duration, comments, and likes, to dictate what their daily feed will look like.

Doomscrolling is a term that was recently studied as a pandemic phenomenon. It's defined as a habit of endlessly scrolling through social media and news feeds where users obsessively seek depressing and negative information. Many people resorted to doomscrolling as a means to know and keep up-to-date with pandemic-related information. Although this was studied primarily due to the rise of social media and news consumption during the COVID-19 lockdowns, this phenomenon was also studied through one-time disasters, like earthquakes in Türkiye. Findings show that the rise in doomscrolling began to seem more significant in certain populations, like those with pre-existing psychopathology symptoms. Researching the relationship between psychological distress and doomscrolling levels may help us bring awareness to the importance of understanding people's trauma and future anxiety. It can also spread the word to avoid abundant news consumption during traumatic times.

The studies I will be reviewing are empirical studies that analyze the relationship between doomscrolling and generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), social media addiction (SMA), news avoidance, psychological resilience, PTSD, depression, big five personality traits, and overall psychological distress. In order to better understand how we are measuring the levels of doomscrolling, we'll begin reviewing Satici et al. (2022), which tests the validity and reliability of the doomscrolling scale developed by Sharma and Colleagues (Sharma et al. 2022) in a COVID-19-related environment. This paper lays the foundational principles that help establish how doomscrolling is measured and understood across contexts. Then we'll review Price et al. (2022), which dives into how media consumption can trigger PTSD and enhance depression. This study states that pre-existing conditions have a huge effect on GAD, SMA, and other psychopathology symptoms, which will be reviewed in detail. We'll also go over a small empirical study, Mannell et al. (2022), that reports findings of the positive effects of news avoidance collected during Australia's COVID-19 lockdowns. This study lays a foundation for what could possibly be a solution to lowering, or eliminating, the symptoms of doomscrolling. Since COVID-19 was a continuous traumatic event, it is assumed that people will develop a traumatic memory of the experience. This is why it's also important to study the effects of one-time disasters and determine if psychological effects are heavily dependent on the duration of a situation, severity, or other factors. Kartol et al. (2023) will also be reviewed—they analyzed the psychological status of adults that experienced the earthquakes in Türkiye to examine the role of future anxiety in the relationship between psychological distress and doomscrolling levels. Lastly, we'll review Türk et al. (2025), which studies the relationship between all of the variables we've described thus far but without gathering earthquake or COVID-19 trauma into context. Examining the relationship between doomscrolling and psychological distress without a

specific event in context will allow us to determine the severity of the impact that events like COVID-19 truly had. Understanding the different findings reported from all 5 empirical studies will also allow us to make more informed decisions about coping mechanisms and conducting future research.

Literature Review

Personality Traits and Behavioral Factors in Doomscrolling

Satici et al. (2022) investigated doomscrolling and the psychological effects through 3 different studies. The first study developed and validated the doomscrolling scale to be reliable and have true discriminative power (Satici, 2022). The second study examined the relationships between doomscrolling and personality traits, social media addiction (SMA), and fear of missing out (FOMO). They were able to confirm significant associations between multiple variables with the use of the doomscrolling scale (Satici, 2022). The third study investigated the relationship between doomscrolling, psychological distress, and well-being indicators, like life satisfaction, harmony in life, and mental well-being (Satici, 2022). Results showed that psychological distress mediates the relationship between doomscrolling and well-being. They describe doomscrolling as a “habitual immersive scanning for timely negative information on social media newsfeeds” (Satici, 2022), which is similar to how I’ve operationally defined doomscrolling. They mentioned a different study that states how algorithmic systems serve us with content that will get our attention based on previous history, like comments, viewing time, and likes (Nguyen, 2020, as cited in Satici et al., 2022). During COVID-19, most of the young-adult population was utilizing TikTok as a way to find community and stay informed. Due to this, an overwhelming amount of news consumption was hard to avoid if you were on TikTok, even if you were primarily seeking something else. This is a topic that could be more deeply researched. Is the

algorithm based on previous likes hurtful to individuals' mental health during traumatic events? It would be interesting to determine how hurtful versus helpful the effects of the algorithmic solution are. Understanding the difference in users' mental health from algorithms that amplify negative content versus positive and balanced content might help in pushing platforms to develop more protective measures.

Satici et al. aimed to test the validity and reliability of the doomscrolling scale to allow researchers to examine the relationships between doomscrolling and other mental health variables (2020). While they had high success rates, their studies were not perfect. Study I had 378 participants where they did not disclose the gender percentage, the mean age was 23 years old, and around 67% of the participants were middle social economic status (SES). Study II had 419 participants; 74% were women with a mean age of around 24 years old, and 66% were middle SES. Study III included 460 participants; 74% were women, and around 64% were middle SES. Due to all of their data being skewed in terms of gender, age, and SES, the generalizability of their findings is low. Another limitation of this study is that their data was collected using self-reported questionnaires, which may cause bias and may explain why their data is skewed to a population that is more willing to participate.

They found that doomscrolling was significantly and negatively correlated to life satisfaction, mental wellbeing, and harmony in life (Satici, 2022). Doomscrolling was also found to be positively related to psychological distress, while it also showed a significant mediation between doomscrolling and harmony in life (Satici et al., 2022). Ultimately, they found the doomscrolling scale to be a reliable and valid measuring tool. In addition to validating the doomscrolling scale, these results highlight the scale's importance for future studies that link online behaviors to psychological well-being.

Doomscrolling and Its Psychological Effects

Price et al.'s study examined the relationship between media consumption, depression, PTSD, and childhood maltreatment (2022). As media consumption rose during the COVID-19 pandemic, they defined doomscrolling as the surge in negative emotional effects from repeated consumption of pandemic-related media (Price et al., 2022). Their participants completed a baseline psychopathology assessment, and daily assessments of depression, PTSD, and media use were taken for over 30 days. The results showed that social media exposure was tied to increased depression and PTSD, but the effects fluctuated depending on the participants' childhood maltreatment history and baseline psychopathology assessment. This study concluded that pandemic-related social media use can worsen mental health, and most specifically, vulnerable individuals. Price et al. stated that mass traumas are acute events, whereas COVID-19 was an ongoing, multi-year-long stressor, which significantly changed the psychological impact on individuals (2022).

The data skewness for Price et al. (2022) showed great similarities to that of Satici et al.'s study in 2022. Where the majority of the participants were female, with a middle SES, and in this case, 90% identified as White. The participant pool for this study was more specific, as they were selected with targeted recruitment by partnering with local advocacy agencies that work with youth that have maltreatment backgrounds. Participants were asked the same question for 30 days on how they're consuming COVID-19 news. I believe that this would most likely cause a ceiling effect since all participants are expecting to answer this every day, which would cause them to consume more media to have a more supportive answer. Due to the 30-day period, they had a missing data rate of around 19%, and it continued to increase over the course of the study. Their data was constructed using full information maximum likelihood estimation, which has

high accuracy but is nevertheless just an estimation. Unlike Satıcı et al. (2022), Price et al.'s results did not disclose much data on the relationship between doomscrolling and childhood maltreatment (2022). They indicated that depression was elevated on days when social media was viewed and that this increase was greater for those with more severe childhood maltreatment histories (Price et al., 2022). It also stated that baseline PTSD and depression were positively associated with social media use during the start of the pandemic, therefore correlating it with the increased levels of doomscrolling. This doesn't align with the definition of doomscrolling previously stated here and in other supporting articles. Depression can be elevated by the use of social media for other reasons than consuming news on pandemic-related information. It could stem from insecurities, feelings of envy, loneliness, or other emotional factors unrelated to news content. This would indicate that social media use would be higher for those with more severe childhood maltreatment, as they most likely were not taught how to regulate their feelings.

This study had many limitations, the first being that they didn't collect the amount or duration of media consumed per day, which does not align with the concept of doomscrolling. Their sample size was specifically chosen and so small that generalizability was greatly impacted. Their data was skewed by gender, age, and race, and it was only conducted in the early stages of COVID-19 in the United States. In order to enhance this study, I would re-introduce childhood maltreatment as trauma and operationally define it as the traumatic effects and trauma responses that remain for a lifetime after experiencing trauma in childhood. There could possibly be different levels of this, and it would allow for a bigger and more representative sample. The duration of social media consumption will also have to be measured, as one can't doomscroll for only 1 minute. This study could've also been replicated during the middle, end, and far stages of COVID-19 to compare how the differences reflect on doomscrolling duration and what different

news outlets are being used. A future replication of this study could further research what it means to doomscroll, how long it is, and how to determine if it's truly a doomscroll in the context of negative news consumption or a doomscroll of any content for long periods of time. I think it would be interesting to introduce engagement time as an extraneous variable in order to determine the intensity of the doomscroll, and it could determine what types of content warrant higher versus lower engagement. This would allow researchers to determine whether doomscrolling is more highly correlated to a traumatic event or to those with pre-existing vulnerabilities.

Coping Mechanisms and News Avoidance

Although Mannell et al. (2022) doesn't specifically define doomscrolling, it does talk about excessive news consumption and its effects on mental health. This study specifically examines news avoidance during Australia's COVID-19 lockdowns and why/how individuals limited their news consumption. They interviewed 20 participants from Victoria who were able to successfully decrease their news consumption during the pandemic while still staying informed and maintaining mental well-being. The findings of this study may show that limiting news intake during crises is better for one's mental health.

The sample size of this study was very small, with only 20 survey respondents and the majority falling within the highly educated bracket. Due to their participants being highly educated, this is most likely responsible for their results supporting their hypothesis. These participants may have more commitments that impede excessive social media use and may not have much to worry about in terms of funding help or any emergencies. This is not the case for those with low to middle SES, which explains why news avoidance may be more challenging

and doomscrolling is often used as a form to cope with stressors. The results of this study aren't generalizable, but some of their key findings match those of Satici et al. 2022. They held an online survey for around 2 months, and the researchers' own networks shared and retweeted the recruitment posts (Mannell et al. 2022). Utilizing a purposive sampling strategy, they recruited interview participants who they believed would provide information-rich examples of key themes. This seems like they purposefully chose the participants that were going to support their original statements, which raises concerns about confirmation bias and limits the validity of their conclusions. They also continued recruitment until they had “sufficient data to conduct a robust analysis” (Mannell et al. 2022), which also lowers the reliability of their hypothesis, since this is not the correct way to collect a representative sample. The research offers important insights into how deliberate news avoidance may lessen the negative psychological effects associated with crises, despite the limitations. This points to an important direction for future research on coping strategies.

Kartol et al.'s 2023 study was conducted 3 months after the earthquakes in Türkiye on February 6th, 2023, and focuses on the psychological impact (depression, anxiety, stress, future anxiety, and doomscrolling) this had on the people of Türkiye. They found that while participants had low to no psychological distress, they did experience high future anxiety and moderate doomscrolling impulses. Furthermore, they found that increases in stress and future anxiety were directly tied to greater doomscrolling. The key takeaway from this study is that negative life events drive individuals to seek information online, which increases their exposure to distressing and misleading information.

The finding that explains why individuals look for comforting information online supports key themes mentioned by the previous articles discussed. They operationally defined

doomscrolling as uncontrollably and compulsively continuing to search and scroll current negative news even if it creates unhappiness and despair (Kartol et al. 2022). This study aimed to examine the mediating role of future anxiety in the relationship between psychological distress (depression, anxiety, and stress) and doomscrolling levels (Kartol et al. 2022). Findings showed that psychological distress positively predicts doomscrolling and future anxiety, while future anxiety also positively predicts doomscrolling (Kartol et al. 2022). Although the internal consistency coefficients were relatively high for all scales used, their sample data was skewed female, highly educated, and experienced little to no residential damage due to the earthquakes. The majority of participants (around 51%) had also experienced a family member or close relative passing away due to the earthquakes, which could be responsible for the higher levels of anxiety and depression. A future extension of this study could be to apply the same criteria to individuals who did not experience the earthquake and compare the results in order to give more weight to the findings. Kartol et al. stated that preventative studies that improve an individual's ability to avoid negative news can lead to a reduction in psychological distress and an increase in well-being (2022). This directly correlates with the key finding in Mannell et al. 2022 that news avoidance during traumatic events, like the COVID-19 pandemic or earthquakes in Türkiye, can help individuals in maintaining good mental health. Based on these findings, we can predict that news avoidance will decrease or fully eliminate doomscrolling since they are not consuming any news at all. Overall, Kartol et al.'s findings reinforce the idea that both individual coping mechanisms and broader media consumption patterns play critical roles in shaping mental health outcomes during traumatic events.

Anxiety, Social Media Addiction, and Psychological Resilience

Türk et al. (2025) examined the relationship between generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), social media addiction (SMA), psychological resilience, doomscrolling, and cyberchondria. The study consisted of data from 553 adults, in which they found that GAD is positively linked to SMA, with doomscrolling, cyberchondria, and psychological resilience mediating the relationship (Türk et al., 2025). In this study, they operationally defined doomscrolling as the compulsive consumption of negative online news and social media content. Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) is also defined as a chronic, debilitating condition that impacts the quality of one's life. Social media addiction (SMA) is defined as a type of internet addiction that causes excessive desire to use social media, leading to difficulties in professional, academic, or personal life (Türk et al., 2025). As discussed in Mannell et al. 2023 and Satıcı et al. 2022, this study also supports the belief that resilience is influenced by personality traits, which in turn play a determining factor in their doomscrolling tendencies. For example, since extroverted people have more positive reactions, while neurotic people have more negative reactions, we could rightfully assume that more neurotic individuals would have a higher tendency to doomscroll as a means of sensation-seeking (Satici et al., 2022).

All of the articles reviewed have been skewed female, including Türk et al. (2025). 76% of the participants were female, with a mean age of around 23 years old. The participants were also mostly (63.8%) part of the middle SES bracket, which could've been due to one of the inclusion criteria requiring easy internet access. All of the scales used in this study resulted in an excellent to good internal consistency reliability coefficient, and in-depth data analysis was administered and reported (Türk et al., 2025). Results showed that GAD was negatively associated with psychological resilience and positively correlated with doomscrolling, cyberchondria severity, and SMA (Türk et al., 2025). SMA was found to be positively correlated

with doomscrolling, and cyberchondria severity is negatively correlated with psychological resilience (Türk et al. 2022). These results are very similar to those of Satıcı et al. (2022). The belief that people with GAD are mostly seeking gratifications, like health-related assurance or social support, and utilizing social media as a source for that in this study is also consistent with findings from the previous articles reviewed.

This study did have certain limitations that were similar to those of the others. It relied on self-reported data, which is susceptible to multiple biases, such as social desirability bias (participants presenting themselves in a favorable light), recall bias (inaccurate memory of past behaviors), and response bias (misunderstanding or misinterpreting survey items). These limitations can affect the reliability and validity of the results. Furthermore, it did not take account of contextual factors like the COVID-19 pandemic or major disasters. Türk et al. made an interesting choice by not linking their study to a specific traumatic event. This approach allowed them to explore broader patterns of anxiety and social media addiction in everyday life. As a result, their findings have greater relevance and provide valuable insights into how doomscrolling and resilience operate outside of extraordinary crises. The replicability of this study would be interesting to see in the context of the United states and throughout different gender identities, states (north vs. south), and feelings through the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, using longitudinal designs could evaluate how these relationships change over time and offer deeper insights into the long-term mental health effects of doomscrolling.

Discussion

Building on the reviewed research, I propose studying whether adaptive social media algorithms that consider users' self-reported mental health can help reduce doomscrolling behaviors during collective crises. This study would examine the effects of algorithms that

periodically prompt users with brief mental health check-ins, such as “How are you feeling today?” or “How are you feeling about [current crisis, e.g., COVID-19]?” In response to users' answers, the algorithms would adjust the content in their feeds. For example, if a user reports feeling anxious or overwhelmed and has recently engaged with stressful news content, like repeated searches, the algorithm would purposefully decrease the amount of distressing content shown to that user. This would prioritize neutral or positive content to help mitigate the effects of their negative emotions. I hypothesize that participants exposed to this adaptive algorithm would report lower levels of doomscrolling, anxiety, and psychological distress compared to participants receiving a standard algorithmic feed. This prediction is informed by prior findings that excessive negative media exposure exacerbates distress (Price et al., 2022; Kartol et al., 2023) and that interventions focused on reducing exposure or encouraging avoidance can act as protective factors (Mannell et al., 2022). Testing this type of system could offer new insights into how social media companies should ethically modify content to protect user well-being in times of crises.

Conclusion

Overall, the reviewed literature indicates that consistent excessive social media use, like doomscrolling, can have negative mental health outcomes. Studies agree on the idea that prolonged exposure to distressing content enhances symptoms of anxiety, depression, and PTSD, particularly among individuals with pre-existing vulnerabilities or a history of trauma. The studies also include evidence that suggests that deliberate news avoidance might serve as a protective factor that can help individuals manage stress during traumatic events. Many of the articles discussed share the same limitations. Most rely on self-report questionnaires, which can introduce bias, and all samples are demographically narrow (often young, female, and of middle

socioeconomic status). While I can understand these results in Türkiye, since the population is more women than men, it does not correlate to the findings in studies conducted in the United States. These factors challenge the generalizability of the findings and highlight the need for more robust methodological designs, including objective tracking of media use and diversified participant pools. Furthermore, the interesting nature of social media algorithms and their role in doomscrolling remains an underexplored area that could greatly benefit from future investigation. Understanding these dynamics is crucial, especially as social media becomes the main source of information for most people. By investigating these relationships further, researchers, clinicians, and platform designers can help reduce the mental health risks associated with digital media consumption.

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