

Psychological Perspectives on Doomscrolling and Existential Anxiety Among University Students: Challenges for Education in the Digital Age

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Abstract

The rapid development of information technology has presented various new challenges in the world of education, one of which is the phenomenon of doomscrolling—the habit of accessing negative information excessively through digital media. This study aims to analyze in depth the relationship between doomscrolling behavior and existential anxiety in college students, as well as its implications for the educational process in the digital age. This research uses a qualitative approach with the literature study method (library research), which examines various scientific journals, books, and other reliable sources relevant to the topic. The results of the study show that doomscrolling has a significant impact on the increased level of existential anxiety in college students, especially in terms of future uncertainty, loss of meaning in life, and increased feelings of isolation. This anxiety has the potential to interfere with concentration, motivation to learn, and overall mental health, ultimately hindering the educational process. This study also highlights the importance of the role of educational institutions in providing digital literacy and adequate psychological support to equip students with the ability to face the challenges of the digital era in a healthy and adaptive manner. These findings are expected to serve as a reference for education policymakers, educators, and mental health practitioners in designing holistic and preventive strategies.

INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technology in the last two decades has fundamentally changed the way individuals access, manage, and respond to information in their daily lives, especially among students (Ng & Peggy, 2021). In the midst of the ease of access to information offered by the internet, a new phenomenon known as doomscrolling has emerged, which is the habit of consuming negative or scary content repeatedly through digital media, especially social media (O'Reilly et al., 2021). This behavior has become increasingly

prevalent since the COVID-19 pandemic and remains a deep-rooted habit until the post-pandemic period, especially among the younger generation and students (Gao et al., 2020).

Previous research has linked doomscrolling to increased stress, depression, and sleep disorders (Thompson et al., 2022; Zhao & Zhou, 2021). However, there are still limited studies that examine the link between doomscrolling and existential anxiety, which is deep anxiety related to the meaning of life, death, freedom, and alienation (Yalom, 1980; Iverach et al., 2014). In fact, students as individuals who are in the stage of searching for identity and meaning in life are very vulnerable to this form of anxiety (Arnett, 2000).

The research gap lies in the lack of a comprehensive psychological approach to understanding how doomscrolling affects existential anxiety among college students, as well as how it impacts learning and mental health in the context of higher education (Vaterlaus et al., 2021; Drouin et al., 2020). This research is important and urgent to be carried out given the increasingly dominant role of digital media in students' academic and social lives, which can shape their mindsets, emotions, and behaviors in the long term (Bergman et al., 2023).

Previous research conducted by Baloran (2020) showed that excessive consumption of information has an impact on emotional disturbances and reduced effectiveness of online learning. Meanwhile, a study by Boursier et al. (2021) confirms that anxiety caused by exposure to negative news on social media has an impact on a decrease in emotion regulation skills in college students. Nonetheless, there have not been many studies that explicitly link doomscrolling to the dynamics of existential anxiety in an educational context.

The uniqueness or novelty of this research lies in its approach that combines the perspective of existential psychology and digital media to explore the phenomenon of doomscrolling among students in the context of higher education. This study uses a qualitative method through literature review to analyze theories, empirical findings, and critical thinking from various reliable sources.

The aim of this study is to understand in depth the relationship between doomscrolling and existential anxiety in students, as well as to identify the challenges posed to the educational process in the digital age. The benefits of this research are expected to make a theoretical contribution to the development of digital psychology studies, as well as become a practical reference for educators, policymakers, and mental health practitioners in designing interventions and policies that are more responsive to the psychosocial challenges of today's students.

Doomscrolling

Doomscrolling is a term that refers to the habit of accessing and scrolling negative information continuously through digital media, especially social media and online news portals. The information consumed is usually related to crises, conflicts, disasters, illnesses, and news that triggers fear or anxiety. Although initially aimed at seeking information, this behavior often becomes compulsive and difficult to stop, even when the individual is aware of its adverse impact on mental health. Doomscrolling can worsen mood, decrease sleep quality, and increase the risk

of stress, depression, and anxiety.

Existential Anxiety

Existential anxiety is a deeply ingrained and philosophical form of anxiety, concerned with fundamental questions about the meaning of life, death, freedom, isolation, and personal responsibility. In contrast to ordinary anxiety that is often triggered by concrete threats, existential anxiety arises from an awareness of human limitations and future uncertainty. College students are at a developmentally vulnerable stage to this type of anxiety, as they are facing challenges in shaping their identity, determining the direction of life, and dealing with social and academic pressures. When not managed properly, existential anxiety can lead to identity crises, despair, and even mental health disorders.

The Relationship of Doomscrolling and Existential Anxiety

The phenomenon of doomscrolling can be a trigger as well as a reinforcement of existential anxiety, especially for college students. Constant exposure to bad news and negative narratives in digital media can magnify feelings of helplessness, uncertainty, and fear of the future—which are at the heart of existential anxiety. This destructive and repetitive information can disrupt the healthy process of self-reflection, making individuals feel like they have lost direction and meaning in life. In the context of education, this is a serious challenge because it can disrupt the focus of learning, reduce motivation, and weaken the overall mental health of students. Therefore, it is important to understand the relationship between the two in order to develop appropriate prevention and intervention strategies in the educational environment.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with the type of literature study (library research) which aims to explore and analyze in depth the relationship between the phenomenon of doomscrolling and existential anxiety in students in the context of educational challenges in the digital era. Literature studies were chosen because this method allows researchers to critically examine various theories, empirical findings, and relevant previous research results in order to build a conceptual understanding and theoretical synthesis of the issues studied (George, 2008; Snyder, 2019).

The data sources in this study are in the form of secondary data obtained from various scientific literature, such as indexed national and international journal articles, academic books, research reports, and trusted digital publications that discuss the topics of doomscrolling, existential anxiety, student mental health, and the dynamics of digital education. The selection of sources is carried out purposively, namely by considering relevance, credibility, and up-to-date (at least the last 10 years), and focusing on publications that contain conceptual analysis or in-depth empirical findings.

The data collection technique was carried out through a systematic search of scientific databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, ScienceDirect, and ProQuest, using keywords such as

"doomscrolling", "existential anxiety", "mental health in higher education", and "digital media effects on students". This process involves screening, organizing, and recording literature that meets the established inclusion and exclusion criteria.

The data analysis method used is content analysis or thematic content analysis, namely by identifying, categorizing, and interpreting the main themes of the literature studied (Krippendorff, 2013). The analysis is carried out inductively, starting from the observation of patterns that appear in the literature data, then developed into a comprehensive theoretical understanding. The results of this analysis are the basis for compiling a synthesis of the concept and educational implications of the relationship between doomscrolling and existential anxiety among students.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this study, the author conducted a systematic literature search through various scientific databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, ScienceDirect, and ProQuest. From a number of articles found, a selection process was carried out based on relevance to the topic, year of publication (maximum last 10 years), as well as its quality and contribution to the theme of doomscrolling, existential anxiety, and educational challenges in the digital era. As a result, as many as 10 scientific articles were selected for in-depth analysis. The following table presents a summary of the selected articles, which form the main basis for the synthesis of this study.

Table 1. Summary of Selected Literature in Literature Studies

Yes	Author & Year	Title	Findings
1	Vaterlaus et al. (2021)	<i>Doomscrolling and adolescent mental health during COVID-19</i>	Doomscrolling increases anxiety and depression in teens
2	Boursier et al. (2021)	<i>Social media use and emotional regulation during isolation</i>	Excessive exposure to negative content lowers the ability to regulate emotions
3	Thompson et al. (2022)	<i>Media exposure and anxiety during pandemic</i>	Constant consumption of negative news increases stress and anxiety
4	Ng & Peggy (2021)	<i>The perils of doomscrolling</i>	Doomscrolling causes symptoms of depression and feelings of helplessness
5	Iverach et al. (2014)	<i>Death anxiety and psychopathology</i>	Existential anxiety can be the root of a variety of psychological disorders
6	Arnett (2000)	<i>Theory of emerging adulthood</i>	Students are in the search phase for the meaning of life and are prone to existential anxiety
7	Yalom (1980)	<i>Existential Psychotherapy</i>	Existential anxiety stems from an awareness of death, freedom, and isolation
8	Gao et al. (2020)	<i>Mental health and social media exposure during COVID-19</i>	Social media increases anxiety due to exposure to negative information
9	Drouin et al. (2020)	<i>Technology use in families during the pandemic</i>	Excessive consumption of digital media has an impact on psychological well-being
10	Bergman et al.	<i>The impact of digital media on well-</i>	Exposure to negative digital information causes

Yes	Author & Year	Title	Findings
	(2023)	<i>being</i>	long-term mental health disorders

The results of a review of ten selected scientific articles show that the phenomenon of doomscrolling has a strong correlation with an increase in psychological disorders, especially anxiety and depression. Articles such as those put forward by Vaterlaus et al. (2021) and Thompson et al. (2022) provide evidence that the constant consumption of negative information through digital media, especially during the pandemic, worsens the mental health conditions of individuals, particularly the younger generation. This pattern shows that doomscrolling is not just an ordinary digital habit, but a form of maladaptive behavior that can trigger a psychological crisis.

More in-depth, several studies such as those conducted by Boursier et al. (2021) and Ng & Peggy (2021) highlight how doomscrolling interferes with an individual's ability to regulate emotions and creates prolonged feelings of helplessness. This becomes especially relevant in the context of students, because at their developmental stage, the regulation of emotions plays an important role in the process of academic and social adaptation. When these abilities are impaired due to uncontrolled exposure to negative content, students become more susceptible to pressure and lose motivation to learn.

Existential anxiety, as described by Iverach et al. (2014) and Yalom (1980), is rooted in uncertainty regarding the meaning of life, death, freedom, and loneliness. Students, who are in the stage of early adult development as described by Arnett (2000), are experiencing a search for self-identity and the meaning of life. In this condition, excessive exposure to negative information can be a catalyst for the emergence of existential questions that have not been able to be answered maturely, thus triggering existential anxiety.

The relationship between doomscrolling and existential anxiety is also shown through the link between exposure to disturbing digital content and the emergence of a sense of loss of direction or emptiness of meaning. Studies by Gao et al. (2020) and Bergman et al. (2023) corroborate that digital content loaded with narratives of threats, conflicts, or future uncertainty reinforces the fear of losing control and meaning of life. This indirectly reveals that doomscrolling can act as a trigger for an existential crisis, especially in the context of a student's stressful academic life.

From the aspect of education, this phenomenon is a serious challenge because it has an impact on the teaching and learning process. Students who experience existential anxiety due to doomscrolling tend to experience difficulty concentrating, decreased motivation to learn, and increased procrastination and academic disorientation. This requires intervention strategies that are not only curative, but also preventive, including the integration of digital literacy education and emotional literacy in the higher education curriculum.

Overall, interpretations of the literature data show that doomscrolling and existential anxiety are interrelated and have a multidimensional impact on students' lives. Therefore, a deep

understanding from a psychological perspective is essential to build a more adaptive educational approach to the challenges of the digital age. This approach must be able to overcome not only cognitive problems, but also emotional and existential problems of students in the midst of increasingly uncontrolled information flows.

Discussion

The phenomenon of doomscrolling has become increasingly prominent in the digital age, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world. The surge in social media use and unrestricted access to information, including negative information, has created unhealthy news consumption patterns. A number of studies such as those put forward by Vaterlaus et al. (2021) and Thompson et al. (2022) show that doomscrolling has a significant impact on mental health, especially in terms of increased levels of anxiety and depression among young people, including college students.

College students are a particularly vulnerable group to the psychological impact of doomscrolling because they are in the phase of identity development and the search for meaning in life, as described in the theory of Emerging Adulthood by Arnett (2000). In this phase, individuals begin to experience a shift in values, facing academic, social, and existential pressures. When they are constantly exposed to negative information from digital media, this can reinforce feelings of helplessness, future uncertainty, and identity crises, all of which are major triggers of existential anxiety.

Existential anxiety itself, as explained by Yalom (1980), arises as a result of human awareness of the four fundamental aspects of life: death, freedom, isolation, and the meaning of life. In the context of today's students, these aspects are reflected in anxiety about the future of their careers, fear of academic failure, and increased social pressure through social media. When this is exacerbated by exposure to doomscrolling, then existential anxiety does not just become a momentary reaction, but develops into a psychological disorder that requires serious attention.

In the study studied, it was found that doomscrolling not only interferes with psychological conditions in general, but also directly impacts students' ability to regulate emotions (Boursier et al., 2021). Poor emotional regulation then weakens an individual's resilience in the face of life stresses, including academic stress. In the context of education, students who experience emotion regulation dysfunction tend to experience difficulty concentrating, low motivation to learn, and increased procrastination behavior.

This phenomenon can be attributed to the theory of Cognitive Load in educational psychology, which states that human cognitive capacity is limited and can be impaired if burdened by excessive or repetitive information with high emotional intensity (Sweller, 1988). Doomscrolling creates a cognitive and emotional load simultaneously, which can ultimately hinder the learning process. Thus, doomscrolling is not only a psychological issue but also a serious challenge in the management of education in the digital era.

Furthermore, repeated exposure to negative information—without being balanced with critical thinking skills and digital literacy—can lead to distortions of reality perceptions. This is shown by Gao et al. (2020), who found that college students tend to perceive the world as an increasingly insecure and uncertain place. As this perception continues to be reinforced, students begin to lose meaning and purpose, thus becoming trapped in a spiral of existential anxiety that is difficult to recover.

From an educational perspective, this condition is certainly worrying. Education should be a space to build hope, meaning, and critical power. However, with unhealthy digital media interventions such as doomscrolling, the education space can actually turn into a fertile ground for anxiety and psychological crises. This requires a transformation of educational approaches, especially in integrating digital literacy, emotional literacy, and positive psychology approaches in the learning process.

The authors are of the view that it is important for higher education institutions to focus not only on academic achievement, but also on the psychological well-being of students. The curriculum needs to be structured more holistically, including strengthening existential values, stress management skills, and the ability to limit media consumption wisely. In addition, the existence of campus counseling services must also be strengthened, both in terms of human resources and accessibility.

On the other hand, students also need to be equipped with critical awareness of how they consume information. They must learn to sort and limit digital content, as well as develop the ability to self-reflect on their own emotional state. In this context, the existential psychotherapy approach as offered by Yalom (1980) can be used as inspiration to help students deal with deep and philosophical anxiety.

In closing, the results of this literature study make it clear that doomscrolling and existential anxiety are not two issues that stand alone, but are interrelated and mutually reinforcing in shaping the psychological condition of students. This challenge needs to be systematically faced by all stakeholders in education—from policymakers, lecturers, parents, to students themselves. Through a collaborative and interdisciplinary approach, education can be a major force in building the mental resilience of the younger generation in the midst of an increasingly complex digital world.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the significant psychological impact of doomscrolling on university students, particularly its contribution to heightened levels of existential anxiety. The pervasive exposure to negative and often distressing information through digital media intensifies feelings of uncertainty, fear, and helplessness, which in turn adversely affect students' mental well-being and academic performance. These findings underscore the urgent need for educational institutions to recognize and address the challenges posed by excessive digital consumption in the contemporary learning environment.

Furthermore, the research reveals that the psychological burden of doomscrolling is not only an individual issue but also reflects broader societal anxieties that manifest through students' digital behaviors. The interplay between digital media use and existential concerns suggests a complex dynamic where students struggle to find meaning and stability amid a flood of alarming information. This phenomenon calls for integrated psychological support systems and digital literacy programs tailored to help students navigate and critically engage with digital content.

In light of these insights, it is clear that managing the mental health implications of doomscrolling requires a multidisciplinary approach involving educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers. By fostering resilience, critical thinking, and mindful media consumption, educational systems can better equip students to cope with the psychological demands of the digital age while maintaining academic and personal growth.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies should explore longitudinal designs to assess the long-term effects of doomscrolling and existential anxiety on student outcomes. It would also be beneficial to investigate intervention strategies, such as digital detox programs or mindfulness training, to mitigate these psychological effects. Additionally, research that examines diverse student populations across different cultural and educational contexts can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how digital behaviors influence mental health globally.

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