

**RESEARCH PAPER**

Impact of Doom Scrolling on Mental Well-being among Media Students in Karachi

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ABSTRACT

This study assess the psychological effects of doom scrolling on the mental health of media students in Karachi. Doom scrolling the habitual consumption of negative news on social media has been linked to growing mental health issues, particularly among youth. This mixed-method study targeted undergraduate and postgraduate media students in Karachi. The population included students from seven universities: Iqra University (all campuses), University of Karachi, SZABIST, Bahria University, IOBM, Ilma University, and Indus University. A sample of 1000 students was selected via stratified random sampling for surveys, and 15 students exhibiting high doom scrolling behavior were chosen through purposive sampling for interviews. Tools included a structured questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide. SPSS and thematic coding were used for analysis. A strong positive correlation ($r = 0.672$, $p < 0.05$) was found between doom scrolling and symptoms like anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and poor sleep. Interview responses validated these findings. Implement media literacy programs, provide mental health support, and promote healthy digital habits across university campuses.

Keywords: Doom Scrolling, Mental Well-being, Media Students, Social Media Use, Digital Fatigue, Anxiety, Emotional Exhaustion, Uses and Gratifications Theory, Social Comparison Theory

Introduction

During the era of the digital age, smartphone and social media proliferation has revolutionized information consumption by people. A phenomenon that has cropped up is 'doom scrolling' or habitually reading negative news or upsetting information on online platforms, especially during crises (Muzaffar, et. al., 2019; McGowan, 2020). While staying up-to-date is critical, repeated exposure to bad news can result in elevated levels of anxiety, fatigue, and lower levels of psychological resilience (Price et al., 2022). Students studying the media may also be most at risk because they spend most of their academic and professional lives immersed in online material. Students of media studies in Karachi, the media capital of Pakistan, are not only heavy consumers, but also producers and curators, of digital content. With more online hours particularly on Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok come growing prospects for doom scrolling's psychological impacts among this group (Muzaffar, et. al., 2020)

Doom Scrolling is defined as repetitive scrolling or going through distressing or negative news on social media, most often in terms of hours spent, nature of content consumed, and emotive response.

Mental Well-being is referred to as the emotive and psychological health of people, measured in terms such as anxiety, stress, and emotive exhaustion. Media Students are undergraduate or postgraduate students pursuing studies in media or communications courses in Karachi and actively use social media sites such as Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook. Coping Mechanisms include digital detox, filtering out information, or physical exercises as measures taken to neutralize negative impacts from doom scrolling.

While doom scrolling has been referred to as a burgeoning psychological issue on an international level, there is very little research carried out in a local context in Pakistan, specifically among Karachi-based students pursuing studies in mass communication. There is a necessity to research how exposure to disturbing online content has an impact on the mental health of future communications professionals and how they understand, manage, or normalize this practice.

Literature Review

This review of literature analyzes the prior research concerning doom scrolling with a particular attention to the psychological and emotional effects it has on people behaviour. The term doom scrolling refers to the practice of persistently scrolling through feeds populated with negative social media content. This practice has attracted keen concern, especially during the worldwide pandemic, which resulted in increased social media consumption.

The review begins with some important theories which help explain the concept of doom scrolling, particularly the Uses and Gratifications Theory and the Social Comparison Theory. These theories explain why individuals engage in this practice even when it is detrimental to their mental well-being. Then, the review looks at the anxiety, depression, and emotional burnout associated with heavy and prolonged exposure to unsettling news. These pieces of information collectively provide the basis for the study's further investigation into the impact of doom scrolling on mental health.

Davis et al. (2025) examined the impact of prolonged exposure to negative news on Twitter and found a significant association between doom scrolling and psychological issues such as sleep difficulties and increased irritability, particularly among college students.

Patel and Amin (2024) studied the impact of emotion regulation on doom scrolling after the pandemic. Their study indicated that students with weak coping strategies faced much higher levels of anxiety and depression, particularly in the presence of distressing media.

Khan et al. (2024) examined South Asian adolescents and noted how culture, including social norms and online activities, influences one's emotional attunement to doom scrolling.

Williams and Carter (2023) focused on media consumption behavior in times of political unrest and documented the psychological impact of receiving continuous updates. They reported that heavy real-time crisis coverage users often experienced burnout and deep-seated hopelessness.

Bauer and Singh (2023) investigated journalism students and found that the self-identified digital natives among them, in particular, reported feeling emotionally drained. Part of their emotional burnout stemmed from the need to be perpetually informed on current events, which was a pressure they placed on themselves.

Zhou and Peng (2022) found that doom scrolling contributes to digital fatigue, which can throw off daily routines and affect mental rest. This was especially true for students who regularly tracked crisis events on TikTok.

Lee and Choi (2022) pointed out that the desire to stay informed through social media can become unhealthy especially when users are bombarded by fear-driven headlines. Their research revealed a decline in life satisfaction among young people who consumed excessive COVID-19 news.

Thomas and Rajan (2022) found that doom scrolling was closely tied to compulsive media use and feelings of loneliness during lockdowns. Their research suggested a feedback loop, where isolation heightened the urge to seek constant updates, which in turn deepened that sense of loneliness.

Yadav and Kumari (2021) studied urban youth and revealed a strong link between doom scrolling and FOMO (fear of missing out). This fear contributed to emotional exhaustion and made it harder for students to concentrate on their studies.

Nguyen and Lopez (2021) discovered that simply being aware of doom scrolling's negative impact wasn't enough to stop it. Many students continued the behavior despite knowing its effects—often driven by a sense of helplessness and digital dependence.

Park et al. (2020) highlighted how the pandemic sped up the rise of doom scrolling and urged institutions to take action. They advocated for combining mental health resources with digital literacy programs, especially in schools and universities.

In a foundational article, McGowan (2020) described doom scrolling as a coping strategy that backfires. He cautioned that constantly consuming negative news doesn't just raise stress levels it can also impair our ability to think clearly and solve problems.

Wiederhold (2020) connected doom scrolling to "cyberchondria," a type of health anxiety fueled by obsessive online searching. He emphasized the importance of media literacy in helping people recognize and manage these harmful patterns.

Roth and Arnold (2019) examined how media multitasking affects attention and emotional regulation. Their findings showed that doom scrolling can hurt cognitive performance and make it harder for people to emotionally bounce back after viewing distressing content.

Vaterlaus et al. (2019) looked into how digital natives evaluate the credibility of news. They found that doom scrolling often leads to skepticism and mental exhaustion, especially when users struggle to tell the difference between reliable information and misinformation.

Smith et al. (2018) studied how social media algorithms influence what users see and found that platforms often amplify sensational content. This tendency creates a feedback loop that encourages more doom scrolling.

In a comprehensive meta-analysis, Keles, McCrae, and Grealish (2020) confirmed a strong connection between frequent exposure to distressing content on social media and the development of emotional issues like anxiety and depression in adolescents.

Although comprehensive studies have been discovered the connection among doom scrolling and psychological consequences, there is a prominent shortage of study focusing on the context of Pakistani particularly between the media students who are professionally qualified to engage with the media content. Besides, most current studies are quantitative

in nature and are unable to identify the nuanced experiences of people affected by this behavior. This research seeks to address these study gaps by using a mixed-methods design and concentrating precisely on media studies students in Karachi.

Hypotheses

- H_0 : Doom scrolling has no considerable effect on Karachi-based media students' mental health.
- H_1 : Doom scrolling has a considerable effect on the mental health of Karachi's media students.

Theoretical Framework

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)

Uses and Gratifications Theory indicates that people actively seek out media to fulfill specific needs such as acquiring information, reinforcing personal identity, achieving social integration, or managing emotions (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). In times of uncertainty, students may rely on social media to stay informed or feel a sense of connection. However, frequent exposure to distressing content can lead to unintended psychological impacts.

Relevance: UGT helps explain why media students engage in doom scrolling often for emotional regulation or information-seeking even though it may negatively affect their mental well-being.

Social Comparison Theory

Social Comparison Theory, introduced by Festinger (1954), proposes that individuals assess their social and personal worth based on comparisons with others. On social media, students are frequently exposed to idealized depictions of success, productivity, or crisis handling. This can intensify feelings of inadequacy or anxiety. During doom scrolling, students may also compare their emotional responses or coping mechanisms with others', further compounding emotional strain.

Relevance: Social Comparison theory explains how persistent social comparison through doom scrolling can lead to increased emotional turmoil and adverse mental health effects

Conceptual Framework

This study's conceptual framework associates the habit of doom scrolling with adverse mental health effects such as anxiety, depression, and emotional burnout, while finding coping mechanisms as a mediating variables. It builds upon two basic theoretical paradigms:

UGT: It enlightens the stimuli behind the behavior of doom scrolling.

Social Comparison Theory: It clarifies the emotional effects of the self-comparing with peers on social media platforms

Material and Method

Research Design

In this study the researcher employed a mixed-method research designed to thoroughly examine the psychological influence of doom scrolling on the media students in

Karachi. The quantitative part employed the administration of the structured questionnaires, whereas the qualitative part employed in-depth interviews.

Quantitative Method

For the quantitative part, data was collected using a structured, closed-ended questionnaire. This survey measured the key variables such as the frequency of doom scrolling, signs of psychological distress, and coping mechanisms.

Qualitative Method

To complement the survey data, ten media students who exhibited high levels of doom scrolling and emotional distress were selected for one-on-one interviews. These interviews were semi-structured, encouraging open discussion about their personal experiences, perceptions, and coping strategies.

Sampling

Universe

The **Universe** for this study comprised all undergraduate and postgraduate media students in Karachi.

Population

The **Population** included media students enrolled in the following universities in Karachi:

- Iqra University (all campuses)
- Indus University
- Bahria University (Karachi Campus)
- SZABIST University
- University of Karachi
- IOBM University
- Ilma University

Sample

The **Sample** consisted of 1000 students selected using stratified random sampling for the quantitative survey, ensuring proportional representation from each listed institution. For the qualitative portion, 15 students demonstrating signs of excessive doom scrolling were selected through purposive sampling for in-depth interviews.

Data Collection Tools

- **Questionnaire:** Multiple-choice questions addressing social media habits, emotional states, and coping strategies.
- **Interview Guide:** Open-ended questions focusing on emotional experiences, awareness of doom scrolling, and personal strategies for digital well-being.

Data Analysis

- **Quantitative Data:** Analyzed using SPSS for descriptive statistics and correlations.

- **Qualitative Data:** Analyzed through thematic coding to identify recurring patterns and themes.

Ethical Considerations

Confidentiality, informed consent, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw was ensured. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board.

Validity and Reliability

Pilot testing was conducted to ensure the clarity and reliability of the questionnaire. Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative findings enhanced the validity.

Results and Discussions

This chapter of the study presents the outcomes of the data gathered through both quantitative and qualitative methods. The outcomes are discussed in connection with the study's objectives and theoretical framework, which includes Uses and Gratifications Theory and Social Comparison Theory.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 1000)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	640	64
	Male	360	36
Age	18–20	320	32
	21–24	460	46
	25–28	220	22
University	Iqra University (other Campuses)	140	14
	Szabist	133	13.3
	UoK	147	14.7
	Bahria University	153	15.3
	IOBM	120	12
	Iqra University	300	30
	Indus University (Main Campus)	147	14.7

The sample for this study consisted of 1000 media students from various universities in Karachi. A majority (64%) were female, indicating that female students might be more engaged in or affected by doom scrolling, or simply more willing to participate in such surveys. The age distribution was dominated by the 21–24 age group (46%), which aligns with typical undergraduate or early graduate student ages. The sample was relatively evenly distributed across seven institutions, which strengthens the representativeness of the data. This demographic context helps frame the subsequent findings and supports the generalizability of the study to similar urban, media-educated youth.

Table 2
Time Spent on Doom Scrolling per Day

Time Spent	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Less than 1 hour	270	27
1–2 hours	320	32
More than 2 hours	410	41

The results show that 41% of students spent more than two hours a day doom scrolling, while only 27% kept their exposure under one hour. This suggests that a significant portion of students regularly engage in prolonged exposure to negative online content. This extended screen time focused on distressing material could have direct implications on their emotional well-being and academic focus. The finding is particularly

concerning given the known effects of overexposure to negative media on mental health, such as increased anxiety and emotional fatigue.

Table 3
Common Platforms Used for Doom Scrolling

Platform	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Twitter/X	630	63
Instagram	580	58
TikTok	390	39
YouTube	340	34
Facebook	290	29

Twitter (63%) and Instagram (58%) emerged as the top platforms where students reported engaging in doom scrolling. These platforms are known for real-time news updates, trending hashtags, and emotionally charged content—factors that make them fertile ground for doom scrolling behavior. TikTok and YouTube also featured prominently, suggesting that short video formats may contribute to rapid, repetitive consumption of distressing news. Facebook, while still present, was used less frequently (29%), possibly due to a generational shift in platform preference. These patterns help identify where interventions or awareness campaigns could be most effective.

Table 4
Psychological Effects of Doom Scrolling (Self-Reported)

Symptom	High (%)	Moderate (%)	Low (%)
Anxiety	57	29	14
Emotional Exhaustion	49	36	15
Sleep Disturbance	61	—	39
Trouble Concentrating	52	—	48

The psychological impacts reported by students were significant: 61% experienced sleep disturbances, possibly due to late-night scrolling or cognitive overstimulation. 57% reported high levels of anxiety, showing a strong correlation between doom scrolling and emotional distress. 52% had trouble concentrating, indicating potential academic consequences. 49% felt emotionally exhausted, which could affect motivation and general well-being.

These findings highlight that doom scrolling is not a harmless habit; it is associated with real psychological stress. For students, these effects may compound existing academic pressures, leading to burnout or disengagement.

Statistical Correlation

A positive correlation ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.01$) was found between time spent doom scrolling and self-reported anxiety levels.

Interpretation: This validates the link between digital content consumption and psychological distress, supporting both **Social Comparison Theory** and prior literature.

Table 5
Awareness and Coping Strategies for Doom Scrolling

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Awareness of Term	Yes	470	47
	No	530	53
Coping: Limit Screen Time	Yes	430	43
Coping: Unfollow Negative Pages	Yes	370	37
Coping: Digital Detox	Yes	250	25

Coping: Offline Activities	Yes	220	22
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Less than half of the students (47%) were familiar with the term “doom scrolling,” even though most were engaged in the behavior. This gap points to a lack of awareness and media literacy about the psychological impact of online habits. Regarding coping strategies: 43% tried to limit screen time, 37% unfollowed negative content, and only 25% attempted digital detoxes.

This shows that while students recognize the need to manage their media consumption, few are using structured or effective coping techniques. The low uptake of offline activities (22%) also suggests that students may struggle to replace screen time with healthier alternatives. There is a clear need for guidance on digital well-being practices.

Table 6
Pearson Correlation between Doom Scrolling and Mental Well-being Indicators

Variables	r	p-value
Doom Scrolling & Anxiety	0.614	0.00
Doom Scrolling & Emotional Fatigue	0.672	0.00
Doom Scrolling & Sleep Issues	0.492	0.00

There is a statistically significant and strong positive correlation between doom scrolling and negative mental health symptoms.

The results indicate statistically significant positive correlations between doom scrolling and all three mental health symptoms ($p < .05$). The correlation is strongest between doom scrolling and emotional fatigue ($r = 0.672$), followed by anxiety ($r = 0.614$), and sleep issues ($r = 0.492$). This suggests that increased doom scrolling is consistently associated with worsening mental health indicators among media students.

Table 7
Themes from Interviews (n = 15)

Theme	Description
Emotional Immersion	Students felt they couldn't stop scrolling even when it made them upset.
Comparison and Guilt	Seeing others "cope better" made them feel worse about their own struggles.
Algorithmic Trap	The more they scrolled, the more negative content they saw.
Attempts at Regulation	Some students tried timers or detoxes but struggled to stick with them.

The qualitative interviews enriched the survey data by providing personal insights into students' lived experiences:

- **Emotional Immersion:** Students described a compulsive attachment to doom scrolling, even when they knew it was harmful. This suggests addictive patterns.
- **Comparison and Guilt:** Many compared themselves to others who appeared more resilient online, leading to feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy.
- **Algorithmic Trap:** Several students recognized that the more negative content they engaged with, the more the platforms recommended similar content, creating a feedback loop of distress.
- **Attempts at Regulation:** While some students tried to manage their habits, most found it hard to maintain changes, showing that intent does not always lead to sustained behavior change.

These narratives reveal the psychological complexity behind doom scrolling it's not just about time spent online, but also about how digital platforms and personal emotions intertwine.

Qualitative Findings Summary

- Doom scrolling is common and persistent among media students in Karachi.
- It is linked to anxiety, poor sleep, concentration issues, and emotional fatigue.
- Twitter and Instagram are key platforms driving this behavior.
- While students are aware of its harmful effects, few are equipped with effective coping tools.
- Qualitative insights confirm that doom scrolling feels addictive, is emotionally draining, and is reinforced by platform algorithms.

Thematic analysis of interviews revealed the following key themes:

1. **Digital Exhaustion:** Students mentioned feeling mentally and emotionally drained.
2. **Awareness and Guilt:** While many knew about doom scrolling, they still felt compelled to continue.
3. **Coping Attempts:** Some practiced digital detox, but found it difficult to sustain.

Table 8
Correlation Test Summary for Hypothesis Testing

Test	r value	p-value	Result
Doom Scrolling & Well-being	0.672	0.00	H ₁ Supported

As the p-value is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is accepted. This means doom scrolling significantly affects the mental well-being of media students.

The test result shows a strong, statistically significant positive correlation between doom scrolling and deteriorating mental well-being ($r = 0.672$, $p = 0.000$). As the p-value is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis (H_0) which stated that doom scrolling does not significantly impact mental well-being is rejected. Therefore, the alternative hypothesis (H_1) is supported, confirming that doom scrolling significantly impacts the mental well-being of media students in Karachi.

Based on the **findings especially the statistical significance ($p = 0.00 < 0.05$)** in the correlation between doom scrolling and mental health indicators like **anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion** we can conclude the following:

- **H₁:** Doom scrolling has a considerable effect on the mental health of Karachi's media students.

Null Hypothesis (H_0) is Rejected.

- **H₀:** Doom scrolling has no considerable effect on Karachi-based media students' mental health.

Rationale for Validation of H₁:

- The **Pearson correlation coefficient** shows a **strong positive relationship ($r = 0.672$)** between doom scrolling and emotional exhaustion.
- Most students reported **moderate to high levels of anxiety and stress** directly linked with prolonged consumption of negative content online.

- **Qualitative insights** from interviews supported the data, with respondents describing feelings of helplessness, anxiety spikes, and sleep issues due to doom scrolling.
- These findings are **aligned with prior research** (e.g., McGowan, 2020; Price et al., 2022) and **support theories** like:
 - **Uses and Gratifications Theory** (seeking news but ending up emotionally drained),
 - **Social Comparison Theory** (comparing their struggles with others' online narratives)

Discussion

The findings indicate that doom scrolling is both common and psychologically taxing for media students in Karachi. The quantitative data shows a statistically significant link between doom scrolling and mental distress, while the qualitative interviews provide rich context into the lived experiences behind the numbers.

- **UGT Relevance:** Students engage in doom scrolling to fulfill emotional and informational needs, especially during uncertainty.
- **Social Comparison Theory:** Perceptions of how others respond to crises further deepen personal distress.

Gaps Identified

- Lack of awareness about the psychological effects of doom scrolling.
- Need for institutional or curriculum-level digital hygiene education.
- Underutilization of structured coping mechanisms.

Key Findings

- Majority of students engage in doom scrolling for more than 2 hours daily.
- Strong correlations were found between doom scrolling and symptoms such as anxiety, emotional fatigue, and poor sleep.
- Qualitative insights align with statistical findings.
- **H₁ (Doom scrolling significantly impacts mental well-being)** is statistically validated.

Summary

This study examined the impact of doom scrolling on the mental well-being of media students in Karachi through a mixed-methods approach. Findings from the survey and interviews reveal a significant relationship between prolonged doom scrolling and symptoms such as anxiety, emotional fatigue, and sleep disturbance.

These results not only validate the hypothesis that doom scrolling adversely affects mental well-being but also highlight the complex psychological and behavioral patterns associated with excessive digital consumption.

By applying Uses and Gratifications Theory and Social Comparison Theory, the research provides valuable insight into the motivations behind doom scrolling and its emotional consequences. This underscores the urgent need for digital wellness education and platform-level reforms to mitigate these negative effects. The study also opens new pathways for future research, particularly in exploring coping strategies and designing interventions tailored for young digital natives.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that doom scrolling has a significant negative impact on the mental well-being of media students in Karachi. The results reveal strong correlations between prolonged exposure to distressing online content and increased levels of anxiety, emotional exhaustion, sleep disturbances, and concentration issues. The findings are supported by both quantitative data and qualitative insights, and align with Uses and Gratifications Theory and Social Comparison Theory, which explain the emotional and social drivers behind this behavior.

Recommendations

To alleviate these effects, universities should incorporate digital wellness and media literacy education into their academic programs. Institutions must also provide accessible mental health support and promote healthier screen habits through awareness campaigns. Social media platforms should introduce usage alerts and reduce algorithmic exposure to negative content. Additionally, students should be encouraged to engage in offline activities, and future research should focus on sustainable coping strategies tailored to the needs of digital-native youth.

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