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Review Paper

Cause and Consequence of Mindless Social Media Scrolling: A Comprehensive Review

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ABSTRACT

Mindless scrolling, a seemingly harmless universal behavior in the digital age, involves endless browsing through online content with little active engagement, awareness, or any benefit. This phenomenon has become increasingly prevalent due to the rise in and popularity of "short- form" videos across all major social media platforms. There is only a vague awareness of mindless scrolling among the general population, leading to the dismissal of its profound implications on psychological and physical well-being. The objective of this comprehensive review paper is to understand in detail, the underlying psychosocial basis and effect of mindless scrolling from various studies. Findings revealed that features such as personalized curated content based on algorithms, display of continuous similar content, regular push-notifications and updates, and "refresh" and "infinite" scrolling, are specifically designed to capture and retain user attention. The key mechanisms of dopamine-related variable reward system, constant novelty, fear of missing out, along with psychological factors such as boredom, stress, digital escapism, procrastination, reflexive habit and compulsiveness pave the path for the constant flicking. The analysis exposes the multifaceted toll on the user's brain structure, attention span, memory, productivity, sleep, physical health, mood, self-esteem, in-real-life relationships, life satisfaction and overall well-being, culminating in the emergence and worsening of psychological disorders. These implications warrant the need for developing diagnostic criteria, identifying mindless scrolling as problematic behavior, quantifying healthy screen time and usage, and effective methods for digital detox and mindfulness.

Keywords: *Mindless scrolling, Human-Computer Interaction, Cognitive Processes, Well-being*

In the digital age, mindless scrolling has become an all-too-common behavior, characterized by habitual, unintentional browsing of online content. This phenomenon, fueled by the presence of smartphones and social media platforms everywhere, has gained prominence with the rise of short-form content and algorithmically curated feeds (Şot, 2023). Although often perceived as harmless, mindless scrolling has far-reaching implications, influencing cognitive, emotional, and physical well-being. As this behavior becomes increasingly entrenched, understanding its causes and consequences is crucial.

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The deliberate design of digital platforms plays a pivotal role in fostering mindless scrolling. A study by Almachnee (2022) found that Gen Z usually prefer using social media to watch entertaining content rather than interacting with their friends. The rise in 'short-form' content with features like infinite scrolling, autoplay, and personalized content is engineered to capture and sustain user attention, leveraging cognitive vulnerabilities such as curiosity and the dopamine-driven reward system. Psychological factors further exacerbate this behavior.

Boredom, stress, FOMO, and the need for digital escapism often drive users to engage with social media as a coping mechanism.

The consequences of mindless scrolling extend across multiple dimensions. Cognitive effects include reduced attention spans and impaired memory. Physically, the sedentary nature of prolonged scrolling contributes to issues such as body and sensory strain, and disrupted sleep patterns. Mental health is similarly affected, as excessive scrolling is linked to increased anxiety, depression, and feelings of inadequacy, and even to exacerbating pre-existing psychological conditions.

Mindless scrolling remains underexplored as a distinct area of research. Existing studies often conflate it with broader digital media use, overlooking its unique psychological and technological dynamics (Griffiths et al., 2014). Addressing this gap requires developing standardized diagnostic criteria, distinguishing healthy from problematic use, and promoting interventions such as design frictions to encourage mindful engagement (Ruiz et al., 2024; Lin et al., 2016)

This paper aims to discuss the causes and consequences of mindless scrolling, synthesizing findings from interdisciplinary research to highlight its multifaceted impacts.

Causes of Mindless Scrolling

Understanding the causes of mindless scrolling is crucial in addressing its widespread prevalence and mitigating its negative effects. This section explores the psychological, technological, and social factors contributing to mindless scrolling.

Technological Design

Technological design is a major driver behind mindless scrolling, as digital platforms are intentionally engineered to capture and sustain user attention. Infinite scrolling, for instance, removes natural stopping cues, encouraging users to continue consuming content without realizing the time spent (Lora et al., 2024). Research by Sera et al. (2023) underscores how infinite scrolling exploits the brain's difficulty in recognizing completion. This design creates a feedback loop, where the ease of access to new content traps users in a prolonged engagement. Similarly, Rixen et al. (2023) discuss how infinite scrolling fosters a "sticky" environment by leveraging human tendencies toward curiosity and completion, making disengagement challenging.

Recommendation algorithms also play a critical role. These systems curate content based on users' past behaviors, ensuring a steady stream of personalized material. Such algorithms not only prolong screen time but also intensify doom-scrolling tendencies by prioritizing emotionally charged content (Li & Qiu, 2023). A study by Adams et al. (2015) emphasizes that these algorithms are not passive tools but are engineered to subtly influence user behavior. Design elements, including personalized feeds and visual aesthetics, further

contribute to the problem. Vibrant interfaces and tailored recommendations align with psychological principles of reward, enticing users to scroll endlessly (Sinha et al., 2023).

Design frictions are 'points of difficulty in users' experience with technology' that attempt to counteract this issue by introducing features like usage limits and reminders (Ruiz et al., 2024). While effective in reducing mindless scrolling for some, these interventions often face resistance from users accustomed to seamless interfaces. Ultimately, the combination of infinite scrolling, algorithmic curation, and minimal design frictions perpetuates an environment conducive to mindless engagement.

Dopamine System & Instant Gratification

The interplay between the dopamine system and instant gratification is central to understanding mindless scrolling. Social media platforms are designed to exploit the brain's reward pathways (Chen et al., 2022). Dopaminergic activity is particularly heightened by the unpredictable nature of the type of content and its likes and comments. Coming across a 'good' post acts as an intermittent reinforcement, a phenomenon termed "variable reinforcement," which ensures that users remain engaged, as they anticipate the next reward (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017).

This mechanism is similar to the reward structures found in cases of gambling addiction, creating a similar cycle of anticipation and gratification (Sinha et al., 2023).

Similarly, a study by de Segovia Vicente et al. (2024) on mindless scrolling further emphasizes the role of instant gratification in sustaining scrolling habits. The quick and rewarding feedback loops strengthen scrolling habits and create a dependency on immediate gratification, and the constant availability of new information creates a desire to keep scrolling, even when it detracts from productivity or well-being.

Short-form content amplifies this cycle. Platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels capitalize on the brain's preference for novel and concise stimuli, delivering high dopamine rewards in short bursts (Şot, 2023). These bite-sized, highly stimulating videos foster a cycle of constant consumption. This constant stimulation diminishes users' capacity for delayed gratification, making them increasingly reliant on instant feedback for satisfaction. The brain is rewired over time to prioritize short-term rewards over long-term goals.

Fear Of Missing Out (FOMO)

FOMO, or the fear of missing out, is a key factor in compulsive social media use, with users frequently checking their feeds to stay updated (Rajeshwari & Meenakshi, 2023). This perceived need to remain informed compels users to continually check their feeds without a clear purpose. This study is further supported by Chen et al. (2022) who found that Instagram users experiencing high levels of FOMO were more likely to engage in habitual scrolling without deriving genuine satisfaction from the activity.

FOMO was especially amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ghanayem et al., 2024) where many turned to social media to maintain connections. However, this behavior often led to excessive and purposeless scrolling.

Boredom

Boredom is another significant cause of mindless scrolling, acting as both a cause and a consequence of the behavior. Digital platforms provide an easily accessible escape from idle

moments, and scrolling serves as a form of "existential distraction" (Marek, 2023). Tam & Inzlicht (2024) describe this as "switching behavior," where users repeatedly shift between apps and platforms in search of engaging content, only to end up feeling more bored, i.e., as they rapidly switch between apps or content types, they become less engaged and are more likely to continue scrolling in search of stimulation which creates a feedback loop. This is also supported by Woolley & Sharif (2022) who suggest that prolonged scrolling can lead to a phenomenon known as "digital fatigue," where users feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of content.

Moreover, the lack of alternative activities and the ease of digital engagement reinforce this habit, particularly in environments where downtime is frequent, such as during commutes or waiting periods (Lin et al., 2016).

Stress

Stress is a common motivator for mindless scrolling, as individuals often use digital platforms as a coping mechanism. When faced with challenges or overwhelming emotions, individuals frequently turn to their phones to distract themselves or to seek comfort in familiar digital interactions (Ghanayem et al., 2024). This is supported by various other studies conducted all over the globe. While providing temporary relief, this often leads to increased anxiety and reduced mental health over time.

Thorell et al. (2024) explore the role of social media motives in stress-induced scrolling, identifying two key patterns: scrolling for fun and scrolling to cope. While the former provides momentary pleasure, the latter is often rooted in a desire to escape negative emotions. Both patterns contribute to habitual scrolling behaviors, reinforcing the association between stress and digital engagement.

Digital Escapism

Digital escapism refers to the use of online platforms as a means of avoiding real-life challenges or emotions. Baym et al. (2020) highlight that many users turn to platforms like Facebook to escape from personal or professional challenges. This form of escapism, while initially therapeutic, often evolves into habitual scrolling. According to the users, social media provides a space where individuals can temporarily disconnect from their challenging realities. However, this often creates a disconnect from offline responsibilities and relationships, forming a cycle of avoidance (Jovicic, 2021).

By presenting content that aligns with users' preferences, algorithms create a personalized escape that is difficult to resist. While this tailored experience can provide comfort, it also reinforces mindless scrolling behaviors, making it harder for users to re-engage with the real world. In a way, procrastination could also be considered a part of digital escapism. Meier et al. (2016) suggested the term "Facebocrastination" to describe the phenomenon of using Facebook as a means of avoiding work. This behavior is not limited to Facebook; other platforms like Instagram and TikTok also serve as common distractions.

Habit

Habits play a significant role in the persistence of mindless scrolling. Repeated interactions with smartphones create habitual behaviors, making scrolling an automatic response to triggers like boredom or stress (Oulasvirta et al., 2012). Over time, these habits become deeply ingrained, making it difficult for users to disengage from digital platforms.

Habitual scrolling creates a sense of routine (Heitmayer & Lahlou, 2021, as cited in Eid, 2022). The reinforcement mechanisms embedded in digital platforms also play a pivotal role in habit formation. Algorithms that serve personalized and engaging content keep users coming back, reinforcing the habit loop. This is also supported by Lin et al. (2016), who observed that individuals often turn to their devices without conscious intention, driven by environmental or situational triggers such as waiting in lines or experiencing idle moments.

Moreover, breaking the habit of mindless scrolling can be challenging due to its deeply rooted nature. The study by Marek (2023) revealed that even when users recognized the negative impact of excessive scrolling on their productivity or mental well-being, they struggled to stop. This difficulty stems from the automatic and unconscious nature of habits, which bypasses deliberate decision-making processes. As such, addressing habitual scrolling requires intentional interventions, such as setting screen time limits or altering environmental cues to disrupt the habitual loop.

The causes of mindless scrolling highlight a complex interplay between technological manipulation and human psychology. By addressing these, individuals can reclaim control over their behavior and can foster healthier interactions with technology. This awareness is a critical step towards mitigating the pervasive effects of mindless scrolling.

Consequences of Mindless Scrolling

The swiping and scrolling across the various sites serves as a great source of inspiration, information, entertainment, creativity, a platform for self-expression, a sense of community and a temporary relieving break from the stress of jobs and day-to-day problems of the real world. Though it appears to make us calm, relaxed and happy for a while, it gradually sucks us into a deep rabbit hole, swallowing our valuable time, visually hooked to the screen, losing awareness of self and surroundings and negligent of our daily tasks and responsibilities. Mindless scrolling is not just wasted time, but found to have both physical and psychological implications.

Attention

Recent statistics revealed an average of 2 hours and 27 minutes of usage across all platforms, with men using 20 minutes lesser than women (Kemp, 2022). The average attention span of millennials at 12 seconds has dropped by 4 seconds in Gen Z (Khaled, 2024) due to the distractibility factor (Buñag, 2024) and fragmented attention. A study on the effects of short video usage on the educational outcomes of secondary school students (Asif & Kazi, 2024) has revealed a perceived attention deficit and lowering of exam scores according to time and frequency of access. A Pew Research Centre Survey (Anderson & Jiang, 2018) has shown that 8% of teens lose focus in class often and 15% of the parents of teens lose focus at work.

Structural and Functional Changes in the Brain

Regions of the brain undergo structural alterations in addictive users. Voxel-based morphometry of structural MRI scans shows a reduction in grey matter volumes of the bilateral amygdala due to pruning and a highly efficient impulsive behavior is in place.

In those with relatively lower impulsivity and addiction scores, there is an increase in grey matter volume in the anterior and mid-cingulate cortex because of a normal adaptation response (He et al., 2017).

People indulging in doomscrolling, which is obsessive scrolling for negative news show strengthened neural pathways mediating fear and anxiety. Also, there is increased amygdala activity and chronic stress-induced reduced pre-frontal cortex function, impairing impulse control and decision-making (Shah, n.d.).

Adolescents on Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat with habitual checking behavior showed lower neural sensitivity to social anticipation of rewards and punishments, in the bilateral amygdala, ventral striatum, insula and left dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC) than in non-habitual behavior. Longitudinal follow-up showed an increase in the neural sensitivity of the above areas compared to a developmentally normal reduced sensitivity to social anticipation in non-habitual behaviors (Maza et al., 2023).

Although neurons of the prefrontal cortex are generated before birth, the differentiation of its neurons and development of synaptic connections in humans extends to the 3rd decade of life. Young children showed a delay in learning and acquisition and failure to develop milestones of problem-solving, language and motor skills, and negative physical, cognitive and behavioral outcomes. More screen time also led to thinning of the cortex and impaired cognition and memory. Adolescents and young adults showed reduced grey matter volume, hyperactivity, mental health disorders like depression and anxiety and risk-taking behaviors. The developmental insults may lead to neurodegeneration, premature cognitive decline, and early-onset dementia (Neophytou et al., 2021).

Cognitive Processing

Mindless scrolling loads the brain with a barrage of information in a short span frequently leading to cognitive overload resulting in decreased cognitive processing and attention span. Frequent interruptions during work associated with complex tasks may cause reduced task accuracy and decision accuracy by increasing the cognitive load (Basoglu et al., 2009).

Gen Z is struggling to engage with complicated information because of their split attention. The state of being engaged constantly with likes and notifications leads to distraction and hypervigilance (Buñag, 2024).

Excessive short-form content consumption by students can lead to attention deficits and disinterest in longer lectures, less avenue for practicing sustained attention, and mal-development of the prefrontal cortex leading to impulse control issues and shortened attention spans even in adult life. Also, the algorithmic content may lead to limited exposure to diverse viewpoints (Kim, 2024). Individuals with severe excessive usage displayed risky decisions in the Iowa Gambling Task indicating a deficient value-based decision making (Meshi et al., 2019).

The stimulating experiences from the scrolling release a slow drip of dopamine, which accumulates to an excessive quantity. Hence, one starts to choose the slow drip activities over demanding tasks as they acquire the same pleasure without much effort. This results in reduced motivation or lack of incentive to work hard or be productive (Kershaw, 2023).

Productivity

Multitasking leaves an attention residue effect on the previous activity, leading to poorer quality of work. The effortless source of dopamine leads to neglect of productive tasks, hampering the quantity of work done (Kershaw, 2023).

Work-related productivity is affected and an increased number of work hours are lost. The time spent on screen during leisure reduces non-work-related productivity as well (Duke & Montag, 2017). Doom scrolling for negative news acts as a source of stress and reduces work engagement, especially in people with neuroticism (Hughes et al., 2024).

Memory

Multitasking or task switching alerts multiple areas of the brain, and the shared attention between them results in limited myelination of neurons that may impact the mastery of the skill and the ability to retain both short and long-term memory (Kershaw, 2023).

Dementia

Bio-psychosocial research has shown that chronic sensory overstimulation during brain development phases of adolescence and early adulthood increases the risk of cognitive, behavioral and emotional disorders similar to mild cognitive impairment (MCI) seen in the initial stages of dementia due to accelerated neurodegeneration. Excessive screen time can cause abnormal trajectories of brain development, which persist into adulthood and increase the chances of dementia. The rates of Alzheimer's disease and related dementias (ADRD) are predicted to rise from twofold to four-to-sixfold from 2060 to 2100 compared to individuals born before 1950 with no access to technology during their periods of brain development. This alarming prediction will overburden healthcare and cause severe economic and social distress (Manwell et al., 2022).

Eye Strain

Digital eye strain from prolonged screen time leads to dry eyes, presenting with symptoms of burning, grittiness, foreign body sensation, itching, watering, and blurred vision. 60 minutes of viewing produced sore eyes, reduced accommodation, and reduced tear film stability due to low blink rate and gaze angle (Nayak et al., 2020). The prevalence of eye strain has increased in children post-COVID (Kaur et al., 2022).

Muscle Fatigue and Pain

The unvarying forward head posture and repeated movements in static posture during smartphone use are seen to cause fatigue in the cervical erector spinae and upper trapezius muscles and myalgia measured by electromyography and Visual Analog Scale (Kim & Koo, 2016).

Boredom

It is the boredom that often leads to stimulation-seeking activities, but the digital switching results in boredom itself. This insists that enjoyment comes with immersing oneself rather than swiping through the screen (Tam & Inzlicht, 2024).

Physical Health

The sedentary behavior leads to declining physical health, manifesting in increased risk for obesity, cardiovascular disorders, hypertension, insulin resistance, reduced HDL cholesterol and poor stress regulation (Nakshine et al., 2022).

Sleep

Sleep deprivation is one of the major consequences of mindless scrolling on social media. Social media usage before bedtime produces physiological and psychological hyperarousal and an inability to relax, which leads to increased sleep-onset latency. The blue light (480nm) emitted from the screen produces suppression of melatonin. Sleep displacement

leads to reduced duration of sleep. This causes daytime sleepiness, fatigue and irritability. Sleep disturbances increase the risk of raised cortisol, hypertension, immunosuppression, risk of cancers (Blask, 2009), psychiatric illnesses and risky behaviors. Youths of 15-24 years suffer sleep loss and disturbances due to social media usage and the data that 75% of psychiatric illnesses have their origins in adolescence is a serious concern (Yu et al., 2024). Nighttime-specific usage is strongly associated with poor sleep quality (Heather, et al 2016). The frontal brain is vulnerable to sleep deprivation leading to poor cognitive performance and memory (Alhola & Polo-Kantola, 2007).

Sleep displacement is suggested to be a two-step process of bedtime (decide to go to bed) and shuteye time (decide to go to sleep) separated by a shuteye latency. Pre-bedtime electronic media use is found to affect the shuteye latency; the higher the latency, the poorer the sleep quality (Exelmans & Van den Bulck, 2017). Higher levels of in-bed media users are likely to have short sleep time, insomnia and mood dysfunctions (Bhat et al., 2018). In light of this, data on in-bed usage and shuteye latency seem relevant rather than just pre-bedtime usage or bedtime.

Mental Health

The endless scrolling is found to impact mental health by increasing the chances of depression, anxiety and hyperactivity either through disturbing sleep or through cognitive factors like inattention and reduced productivity and self-esteem, FOMO, body satisfaction and emotional investment.

TikTok usage was also found to correlate positively with an absent-minded way of scrolling and anxiety levels. Individuals who used scrolling to stay up-to-date or escape from their problems did it in an absent-minded and problematic way leading to higher anxiety. Absent-minded scrolling positively correlated with problematic ways implying more absent-minded scrolling behavior is leading to problematic scrolling behaviors (Eid, 2022).

Instagram usage has shown a negative impact on the mental well-being of young adults (17-22yrs). Data from a structured survey questionnaire has shown that 95% of youth frequent more on Instagram, 46% spend more than 4 hours/day, and 90% of them prefer reels to stories or photos. Instagram influenced the self-esteem of 75% of them, 82% experienced FOMO and 70% reported feelings of anxiety, depression and inadequacy (Lunia, 2024).

Low academic performance due to reduced attention and low self-esteem can contribute to mental health symptoms (Hou et al., 2019). Habitual absent-minded scrolling may land a person in problematic social media use (Griffiths et al., 2014). The frequency of social media use, rather than the time, seems associated with an increase in depressive symptoms (Escobar-Viera et al., 2017).

A study aimed to investigate the independent and conjoint association of passive and active social media use with depressive symptoms. Independently, passive use was positively associated with depressive symptoms, with each increment in usage linked to a 33% rise in symptoms, while active use didn't have an association. Joint analysis revealed passive use caused a 44% rise in depressive symptoms, while active use led to a 15% fall (Escobar-Viera et al., 2018).

Excessive digital device usage is prevalent among younger children and teenagers who have been diagnosed with ADHD or found to be dealing with attention issues or impulsivity (Nakshine et al., 2022).

Loneliness and Relationships

The excess screen time, inattention and phubbing may lead to reduced relationship satisfaction and well-being due to loneliness, reduced face-to-face conversations, and reduced intimacy. This induces conflicts, which can further trigger an addictive use (Bouffard et al., 2022; Gull et al., 2019; Roberts & David, 2015).

Well-Being

Mindless scrolling leads to negative experiential feelings of having wasted valuable time, hindering the completion of planned tasks, goal conflict, and guilt (de Segovia Vicente et al., 2024). Passive Facebook usage breeds envy and undermines affective well-being (Verduyn, 2015).

CONCLUSION

Mindless scrolling, as harmless as it sounds, is a silent antagonist taking away not just one's time, but having short and long-term repercussions. This review tries to some extent to unearth the key motivators for this behavior and expose the potential damage that it can do.

Though there is enough research done and ongoing for social media usage and smartphones, studies on the individual effects of active and passive media use are less. Under passive use, the specific domain of mindless scrolling needs to be studied in a more focused manner.

We also need measured effects to be able to devise a diagnostic criterion for pathological use. Whether time, the content or the activity suffice as criteria or should it encompass subjective feelings and belief systems? Whether frequency, duration or both are a better predictor of unhealthy use?

The major villainous component at play is the algorithmically appealing and arresting content, further enabled by external circumstances, at-hand availability of a smartphone, lack of awareness of the harm done or low self-control, and the mental health of the individual.

Identifying the dominant factors helps to bring out the best holistic plan of action for this silent epidemic and achieve a healthy equilibrium with online platforms.

Sufficient light must be shed on its individual effects on various domains such as sleep displacement, cognitive functioning, and mental health effects, as well as its positive effects with limited usage. We need platform-wise data for the explicit time spent and the implicit subjective measures of guilt and well-being.

We need longitudinal studies to study the directionality of mindless scrolling culminating in problematic social media usage.

More than the study and emphasis on the negative effects of scrolling, there needs to be more studies on healthy usage of social media to encourage people to build a positive, healthy and useful relationship with social media and devices. Our adolescents and young

adults need more awareness and protection to be able to mature into a healthy adult population.

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Conflict of Interest

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