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Research Paper

Caught in the Scroll: Assessing the Extent of Doomscrolling and Its Psychological Impact among Undergraduate Students

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ABSTRACT

Background: The internet serves as a major source of information and communication, but has also fostered maladaptive behaviours such as *doomscrolling*—the compulsive consumption of negative online content. While moderate information-seeking can enhance awareness, excessive engagement with distressing news may lead to psychological consequences such as anxiety, stress, and depressive symptoms. Understanding this emerging phenomenon is crucial, especially among young adults who are frequent social media users. **Materials and Methods:** A descriptive research design was adopted. A total of 390 undergraduate students were enrolled through a total enumeration sampling technique. Data were collected using standardised self-administered tools: the Doomscrolling Scale, Hamilton Anxiety Rating Scale (HARS), Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), and Hamilton Depression Rating Scale (HDRS). Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS Version 20 to compute descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, prevalence) and inferential statistics (Chi-square test) to determine associations between variables. **Results:** Among the 390 participants, 343 (87.8%) exhibited mild doomscrolling behavior, while 4 (1.1%) demonstrated severe doomscrolling tendencies. A statistically significant association was found between doomscrolling and sociodemographic variables, including gender, socioeconomic status, marital status, type of electronic device used, number of social media platforms accessed, and type of platforms used ($p < 0.05$). **Conclusion:** Compulsive engagement with negative online content adversely affects mental well-being. The findings highlight that doomscrolling contributes to increased anxiety, stress, and depressive symptoms among students. Promoting awareness about healthy online habits and strategies to break the doomscrolling cycle can help improve psychological resilience and overall quality of life.

Keywords: *Doomscrolling, Anxiety, Stress, Depressive symptoms, Undergraduate students, Mental health*

The Internet, as a global communication medium, has revolutionised the exchange of information and connectivity. Despite its numerous benefits, excessive and unregulated internet use has emerged as a growing public health concern. Prolonged online engagement, particularly for leisure and social media activities, is linked to social,

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psychological, and physical health issues, including adverse effects on mental well-being, interpersonal relationships, and overall quality of life.

As of 2022, approximately 5.16 billion people worldwide were active internet users, with around 27.1 billion networked devices connected globally, underscoring the Internet's pervasive influence on modern lifestyles and mental health. [1,2]

Doomscrolling, a recently identified behavioural phenomenon, refers to the compulsive tendency to continuously browse or scroll through negative or distressing online content.[3] This behaviour gained particular attention during the COVID-19 pandemic, when individuals across the world—including India—became increasingly fixated on negative news related to health crises, mortality, and social disruption.[4] Such repetitive exposure to pessimistic information fosters anxiety, fear, and depressive symptoms, further reinforcing the cycle of excessive consumption.

Doomscrolling has been associated with multiple adverse outcomes, including psychological distress, sleep disturbances, reduced attention span, and decreased productivity. [5] Constant exposure to distressing online content can lead to cognitive overload, emotional exhaustion, and a heightened sense of helplessness. Furthermore, the spread of misinformation during global crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, acts as a significant stressor by amplifying fear and uncertainty. [6–8] Continuous online vigilance and information overload further exacerbate anxiety, stress, and depressive symptoms, particularly among young adults who are heavy social media users.

This maladaptive coping behaviour highlights the urgent need to recognise and address the mental health consequences of doomscrolling. Screening, education, and awareness programs are crucial in promoting healthy digital behaviours and mitigating the psychological burden associated with excessive online exposure. [9]

Objective: To assess the extent of doomscrolling and its association with anxiety, stress, and depressive symptoms among undergraduate students of the National Institute of Nursing Education (NINE), PGIMER, Chandigarh.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted among undergraduate nursing students at a premier nursing institution that offers undergraduate and postgraduate nursing programs, providing clinical training in affiliated hospitals and community health settings in Chandigarh. Participants who were willing to participate and met the inclusion criteria were enrolled through a total enumeration sampling technique.

Data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire comprising standardised tools: the Doomscrolling Scale, Hamilton Anxiety Rating Scale (HARS), Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), and Hamilton Depression Rating Scale (HDRS). The questionnaire captured information on sociodemographic characteristics, internet use patterns, and psychological parameters.

Data was analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 20.0. Descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, and mean, were used to describe the sample characteristics. The Chi-square test was applied to examine the associations between doomscrolling and selected

variables. Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Ethics Committee, and informed consent was secured from all participants.

RESULTS

A total of 390 undergraduate nursing students from the premier nursing institute in Chandigarh were enrolled in the study, as determined by the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Data was collected over a period of 10 days using standardised and validated tools. The analysis employed descriptive and inferential statistics, including the Chi-square test to examine associations between sociodemographic variables and doomscrolling, and the Pearson correlation coefficient to assess the relationship between doomscrolling, anxiety, stress, and depressive symptoms.

Table 1 depicts that among 390 participants, 71% were within the 17–21 years age group, and the majority were female (98.5%). Most participants were unmarried (97%), while 3% were married. Regarding the place of residence, 68% of students resided in hostels, 12% lived at home with their parents, 7% lived with friends, 4% lived alone, 4% resided with their husbands, and 3% stayed as paying guests (PGs).

Table 1: Sociodemographic distribution of participants N=390

Variables	**f(%)**
Age* (in years)	
17-22	**280(71.8)**
23-28	103(26.5)
29-34	4(01.0)
35-40	3(00.8)
Gender	
Female	**384(98.5)**
Male	6(01.5)
Class	
B.Sc.Nursing 1st yr	**92(23.6)**
B.Sc.Nursing 2nd yr	59(15.1)
B.Sc.Nursing 3rd yr	61(15.6)
B.Sc.Nursing 4th yr	74(19.0)
Post. Basic Nursing 1st yr	55(14.1)
Post. Basic Nursing 2nd yr	49(12.6)
Marital Status	
Married	12(03.1)
Single/ unmarried	**378(96.9**)
Current Living Status	
Living alone	16(04.1)
At Home with Parents	48(12.3)
With Husband	16(04.1)
With Friends	29(07.4)
PG	14(03.6)
Hostel	**267(68.5)**

Table 2 shows that the majority of undergraduate nursing students primarily used the internet for academic purposes (1–5 hours/day), while the time spent on doomscrolling was generally low (<3 hours/day). Smartphones were the primary device used (73.6%), indicating a high level of mobile dependence. The majority (91.7%) used social media for

less than 5 hours daily, most commonly WhatsApp, Instagram, and YouTube, and were active on 1–3 platforms. Awareness of doomscrolling was limited, with only 44.1% having heard of the term and just over half correctly identifying its meaning. Overall, students demonstrated frequent internet and social media use, but showed a limited understanding of unhealthy online behaviours, highlighting the need for digital well-being education.

Table 2: Variables related to internet usages & doomscrolling among study participants

Variables	**f(%)**
Daily internet usage for academic purposes in(hours)*	
1-5	**374(96)**
6-10	16(4.3)
Daily internet usage for doomscrolling in (hours)**	
< 3	**378(97.1)**
4-6	19(03.2)
Electronic devices used	
Computer/PC	17(04.4)
Laptop	27(06.9)
Smartphone	**287(73.6)**
Tablet	3(00.8)
Both computer and smartphone	56(17.4)
Daily hours of social media use***	
< 5	**357(91.7)**
6-10	29(7.4)
11-15	4(1.1)
Number of social media platforms used******	
1-3	**296(76.0)**
4-6	88(22.5)
7-9	6(01.5)
Social media platforms used	
Whatsapp	**390(100)**
Instagram	279(71.5)
Youtube	166(42.6)
Snapchat	130(33.3)
Facebook	85(21.8)
Twitter	17(04.4)
Telegram	27(06.9)
Hotstar	9(02.3)
Netflix	10(02.6)
Doomscrolling known /heard by participants	
Yes	**172(44.1)**
No	218(55.9)
Meaning of doomscrolling according to participants	
Scrolling or surf through social media	84(21.5)
Spending more screen time	75(19.2)
Constantly scrolling or surf through negative news	**222(56.9)**
The feeling dread or disappointment	9(02.3)

Table 3 shows that 87% of participants exhibited mild doomscrolling behaviour, **11%** showed **moderate** levels, and **1.1%** demonstrated **severe** doomscrolling tendencies.

Table 3: Extent of doomscrolling among study participants

Levels of doomscrolling (score)	**f(%)**
Mild (0-10)	343 (87.8)
Moderate (11-20)	43 (11.0)
Severe (21-30)	4 (1.1)

Table 4 represents the level of anxiety based on the Hamilton Anxiety Rating Scale (HARS), 80.2% of participants had mild anxiety (<17), 9.4% exhibited mild to moderate anxiety (18–24), 4.6% experienced moderate to severe anxiety (25–30), and 5.8% demonstrated very severe anxiety (>31).

Table 4: Levels of anxiety among study participants

Levels of anxiety (Score)	**f(%)**
Mild severity (<17)	312(80.2)
Mild to moderate severity (18-24)	37(9.4)
Moderate to severe (25-30)	18(4.6)
Very Severe (>31)	22(5.8)

Table 5 depicts the perceived stress levels, as the majority of students (273; 70.0%) reported moderate levels of stress, while 89 (22.8%) had low stress levels, and 28 (7.3%) experienced high stress levels.

Table 5: Levels of perceived stress among study participants

Levels of perceived stress (Score)	**f (%)**
Low stress (0-13)	89(22.8)
Moderate stress (14-26)	**273(70.0)**
High perceived stress (27-40)	28(7.3)

Table 6 indicates that 219 participants (56.3%) had no depressive symptoms, whereas 171 participants (43.9%) exhibited moderate levels of depression as measured by the Hamilton Depression Rating Scale (HDRS).

Table 6: Levels of depression among study participants

Levels of depression(score)	**f(%)**
Nil (0-7)	**219(56.2)**
Mild (8-16)	106(27.2)
Moderate (17-23)	46(11.8)
Severe (24 and above)	19(4.9)

Table 7 illustrates a positive correlation between doomscrolling and anxiety ($r = 0.145$), indicating that higher doomscrolling tendencies were associated with increased anxiety levels. Similarly, a positive correlation was found between doomscrolling and depressive symptoms ($r = 0.279$), suggesting that participants with higher doomscrolling scores were more likely to experience depressive symptoms. Conversely, a negative correlation was

noted between doomscrolling and perceived stress ($r = –0.120$), indicating an inverse relationship between these variables.

Table 7: Correlation between doomscrolling, anxiety, stress and depression

Variables	**Doomscrolling**	**Anxiety**	**Stress**	**Depression**
Doomscrolling	1 390	.145 .004 390	-.120 .017 390	.279 .000 390
Anxiety	.145 .004 390	1 390	.149 .003 390	.024 .640 390
Stress	-.120 .017 390	.149 .003 390	1 390	.088 .083 390
Depression	.279 .000 390	.024 .640 390	.088 .083 390	1 390

Overall, findings demonstrate that mild levels of doomscrolling were prevalent among the majority of participants, yet the behaviour showed significant associations with anxiety and depressive symptoms. The observed correlations suggest that compulsive exposure to negative online content may contribute to psychological distress among undergraduate students, highlighting the importance of early awareness and preventive interventions.

DISCUSSION

The present descriptive study aimed to assess the extent of doomscrolling and its association with anxiety, stress, and depressive symptoms among undergraduate nursing students of NINE, PGIMER, Chandigarh. The findings revealed a high prevalence of mild doomscrolling behaviour among students, with significant associations between doomscrolling, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. These findings align with international research emphasising the adverse psychological consequences of excessive media exposure and compulsive online behaviours.

A descriptive study conducted by Moritz et al. among the German population explored the relationship between COVID-19–related media exposure and symptoms of anxiety, depression, and fear. The study found that individuals exposed to approximately seven different media sources and those spending more than 2.5 hours per day on COVID-19-related media demonstrated higher levels of anxiety and depression.[12] Similarly, in the current study, 204 participants (52.3%) exhibited mild anxiety, and 357 participants (91.7%) reported using social media for more than five hours daily. These findings suggest that prolonged exposure to distressing digital content can elevate anxiety levels and emotional distress.

In an online survey conducted by Bryan McLaughlin at Texas Tech University, participants reported being in a persistent state of heightened alertness due to continuous exposure to 24-hour news cycles portraying a negative worldview. The study revealed that 27.3% experienced moderate problematic use, 27.5% had minor effects, and 28.7% reported no adverse impact.[11] Comparatively, the present study found that 378 participants (97.1%)

engaged in doomscrolling for more than three hours daily, underscoring a high prevalence of excessive negative information consumption among students.

A cross-sectional study by Seydi Ahmet Satici et al. (2022) evaluated the Doomscrolling Scale and its associations with personality traits, psychological distress, social media use, and well-being. The authors concluded that doomscrolling was linked to greater psychological distress and lower mental well-being.[20] Consistent with this, the current study demonstrated a positive correlation between doomscrolling and anxiety ($r = 0.145$, $p = 0.004$) and between doomscrolling and depression ($r = 0.279$, $p < 0.001$), while a negative correlation ($r = –0.120$, $p = 0.017$) was found between doomscrolling and perceived stress. Additionally, a statistically significant association was found ($p = 0.019$, $p < 0.05$) between doomscrolling and the type of social media platform used by participants.

An online survey conducted in Virginia and Maryland examined the effects of doomscrolling on sleep and overall health, concluding that doomscrolling has an adverse impact on both.[14] Similarly, the current study observed that 230 participants (59%) did not experience insomnia, while 12 participants (3.1%) reported very severe insomnia, indicating that excessive late-night information seeking may contribute to sleep disturbances.

A study conducted by Matthew Price (2022) among the U.S. population explored the relationship between daily media use and mental health symptoms during the COVID-19 pandemic. Results indicated that 44.6% of participants viewed COVID-19–related content via social media, compared with 34.3% through traditional news media. Newspapers accounted for 23.7% of all traditional media exposure, followed by television (16.4%), radio (30.7%), and podcasts (2.2%).[4] Similarly, in the current study, there was a significant association ($p = 0.019$, < 0.05) between doomscrolling and the type of social media platform used, suggesting that social media may serve as a primary channel for doomscrolling-related behaviours.

A qualitative study by S. Rajeshwari et al. (2023) in India investigated the advantages and disadvantages of social media for students. The authors concluded that reduced and mindful social media use can mitigate the negative effects on academic performance and well-being.[10] In agreement, the current study found that the type of social media platform was significantly associated with the level of doomscrolling, highlighting the importance of moderation in online engagement.

An experimental study conducted by J.C. Caroline et al. (2022) in the United States examined the relationship between anxiety and information-seeking behaviour during significant life events. Findings indicated that heightened anxiety led to increased information-seeking related to COVID-19.[15] Correspondingly, the current study observed a positive correlation between doomscrolling and anxiety ($r = 0.145$), suggesting that individuals experiencing anxiety may engage more frequently in doomscrolling as a maladaptive coping mechanism.

Collectively, the present findings reinforce global evidence that doomscrolling is a maladaptive digital behaviour linked to psychological distress, particularly anxiety and depression. The study underscores the need for mental health education, digital literacy, and coping interventions to promote healthy online behaviours and safeguard the psychological well-being of students

CONCLUSION

The present study concludes that the compulsive tendency to scroll through negative online content—commonly referred to as *doomscrolling*—has a detrimental impact on mental health. Among participants, 343 (87.8%) demonstrated mild involvement in doomscrolling, 43 (11.0%) exhibited moderate involvement, and 4 (1.1%) showed severe levels of doomscrolling.

Significant positive correlations were observed between doomscrolling and anxiety ($r = 0.145$) and depression ($r = 0.279$), whereas a negative correlation ($r = –0.120$) was found between doomscrolling and perceived stress. These results suggest that excessive consumption of negative digital content contributes to emotional distress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms among undergraduate students.

Interventions aimed at raising awareness, developing healthy digital habits, and promoting digital mindfulness can help mitigate the psychological burden associated with doomscrolling, thereby improving overall mental well-being and quality of life.

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