

Research Paper

## Digital Dissociation: Examining the Link Between Doomscrolling and Dissociative Experiences in Online Media Engagement

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### ABSTRACT

Doomscrolling refers to repetitive and prolonged consumption of distressing online content. This cross-sectional study examines the relationship between doomscrolling and anomalous experiences in young adults using the Černis Felt Sense of Anomaly (ČEFSA) Scale. All eight anomalous experience domains demonstrate strong positive correlations with doomscrolling, and greater disruptions in emotional, self, bodily, and perceptual experiences are linked to higher doomscrolling behavior. Preliminary findings suggest that no significant gender differences are observed in anomalous emotional experiences. These results imply that rather than being linked to isolated symptoms, doomscrolling is linked to a broad pattern of anomalous experiences of self and perception.

**Keywords:** *Doomscrolling, Digital Dissociation, Anomalous Experiences, Online Media Use*

**D**oomscrolling is the excessive online consumption of negative news and social media, often associated with heightened disengagement with reality. Dissociation is a maladaptive coping strategy that manifests as a detachment from one's emotions, environment or self. The smooth transition of digital media into everyday life has shaped how individuals interact with information, influencing the emergence of novel psychological phenomena such as doomscrolling. The prevalence of social media and online news sources, with distinct algorithms magnifying pessimistic and catastrophic narratives, creates an atmosphere that is favorable to the emergence and sustenance of doomscrolling behaviors.

According to Khalaf et al. (2023), the human mind is vulnerable to the continual bombardment of distressing information, which may cause dissociation states as a coping mechanism for intense emotions. To increase user engagement, personalized algorithmic recommendations in digital platforms frequently give preference to sensational and negative information (Li & Qiu, 2023). This reinforces the habit of doomscrolling by exposing viewers to negative news on a regular basis. Excessive use of social media has been linked to alexithymia, a condition marked by an inability to recognize and communicate emotions, which in turn promotes emotional numbness (Ihsani et al., 2022). The passive aspect of social media use, which frequently results in negative emotional states, can worsen disengagement (Gebhardt et al., 2024).

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### Doomscrolling

Doomscrolling has been linked to higher levels of egotropic (personal anxiety) and sociotropic (anxiety for others) anxiety, according to studies (Kazun & Malygina, 2024). This anxiety causes individuals to feel powerless and helpless because they may believe they have little control over their own lives or larger social issues. Furthermore, secondary traumatic stress, which results from media consumption that exposes people indirectly to traumatic events, has been associated with doomscrolling (Taskin et al., 2024).

Doomscrolling may be described as a trance-like absorption characterized by diminished sense of self-awareness, automatic scrolling as opposed to conscious scrolling, emotional overload, numbness, time distortion, and diminished physiological anchoring, all of which could influence emotional, self-experience, and perception difficulties. In this state, repeated exposure to emotionally charged material may prolong elevated arousal while restricting integration and recuperation, thus sustaining anomalous experiences. Doomscrolling may contribute to issues with anxiety, depression, and digital well-being by reinforcing unhealthy avoidance techniques.

### Digital Dissociation

Exposure to digital trauma can cause dissociative responses, in which individuals distance themselves from their feelings and thoughts as a coping strategy. The dissociation processes seen in conventional trauma cases are identical to the dissociative response seen in digital trauma exposure (Schimmenti, 2018). Constant exposure to upsetting content may evoke the consequences of acute trauma experiences by increasing emotional dysregulation and dissociation (Shahbaz et al., 2019). Doomscrolling is associated with a vicious circle of psychological detachment, making individuals emotionally numb and making it more difficult for them to deal with trauma (Maiese, 2024). According to Nemchenko (2024), this detachment may eventually lead to persistent dissociative states that affect interpersonal relationships and mental health in general. This psychological turmoil may contribute to disorders like depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which can have an adverse impact on mental health in general (Price et al., 2022).

The study builds on trauma-based models of cognitive-perceptual abnormalities by employing a non-pathologizing framework of dissociation to study the association between digital habits and cognitive and emotional processing. The study aims to examine the relationship between doomscrolling behavior and dissociative experiences during online media engagement.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Hypotheses*

- **Hypothesis 1:** Doomscrolling behavior is significantly correlated with specific domains measured by the Černis Felt Sense of Anomaly (ČEFSA) Scale.
- **Hypothesis 2:** There is a significant gender difference in Anomalous Experience of Emotion scores.

### *Sampling and Data collection*

The sample size is 76, consisting of 61 female, 14 male and 1 non-binary participant aged between 18 to 30 years.

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### *Inclusion criteria*

Individuals of the age range 18-30 years, who use social media are included in the study.

### *Exclusion criteria*

Participants who are eligible should not have been diagnosed with any psychiatric illness that affects comprehension.

### *Measures*

- **The Doomscrolling Scale:** It is used to assess the frequency, severity, and emotional reactions of doomscrolling behaviours. The scale consists of 15 items with rated on a 7-point Likert scale. The items include searching for negative news on social media and losing track of time while consuming negative media. Respondents score the extent to which they agree with each statement. The scale showed excellent reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.960 and high internal consistency. The unidimensional structure was supported by confirmatory factor analysis, indicating that the scale can measure doomscrolling as a single construct. The scale's convergent validity was further supported by the significant positive correlations it exhibited with depression and anxiety measures (Sharma et al., 2021; Sharma et al., 2022).
- **Černis Felt Sense of Anomaly (ČEFSA) Scale:** The scale consisting of 35 items was developed to evaluate dissociative experiences via the lens of anomalous self-experiences across several domains: Felt Sense of Anomaly, Anomalous Experience of the Self, Anomalous Experience of the Body, Altered Sense of Familiarity, Anomalous Experience of Emotion, Altered Sense of Connection, Altered Sense of Agency and Altered Sense of Reality. In non-clinical populations, it is especially helpful for exploring dissociation without pathologizing it as a mental health condition since it includes seven essential dimensions: self, body, emotion, familiarity, connection, agency, and reality. The scale exhibits strong test-retest reliability (ICC = 0.92) and excellent internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.98$  non-clinical; 0.97 clinical). A global FSA factor and a seven-factor structure are supported by confirmatory factor analysis, and the model fits well across populations (e.g., CFI > 0.91, RMSEA = 0.05). With DES-II, the scale has strong convergent validity ( $r = 0.802$ ). Dissociative phenomena are consistently documented by ČEFSA Scale in both clinical and non-clinical groups (Černis et al., 2021).

### *Data Analysis*

The collected data will be used for data cleaning using jamovi (Version 2.3). The final analysis is done after completion of data validation. Data is analysed through jamovi (Version 2.3) using correlation and regression.

## RESULTS

**Table No. 1 Descriptive statistics for Doomscrolling behavior and ČEFSA domains (N = 76)**

Variable	N	M	SD	Median	Shapiro-Wilk W
Doomscrolling behavior	76	35.8	20.0	28.5	0.893
Felt Sense of Anomaly	76	6.26	4.76	5.00	0.927
Anomalous Experience of Emotion	76	5.50	4.47	5.00	0.914
Anomalous Experience of Self	76	5.32	4.78	4.00	0.900
Altered Sense of Connection	76	5.47	4.55	5.50	0.915
Anomalous Experience of the Body	76	4.46	4.51	3.00	0.869
Altered Sense of Agency	76	6.30	4.56	6.00	0.936
Altered Sense of Familiarity	76	4.29	4.88	2.00	0.809
Altered Sense of Reality	76	4.57	4.67	3.00	0.863

Note: Shapiro–Wilk test indicates that none of the variables are normally distributed ( $p < .001$ ).

Descriptive statistics for doomscrolling behavior and Černis Felt Sense of Anomaly (ČEFSA) domains are shown in Table 2. Doomscrolling scores of participants ranged from low to high levels, with a median of 28.5 and a mean of 35.8 (SD = 20.0). Among the ČEFSA domains, Anomalous Experience of the Body had the lowest mean (M = 4.46, SD = 4.51) and Altered Sense of Agency had the highest mean (M = 6.30, SD = 4.56).

All variables showed a significant deviation from a normal distribution (all  $p < .001$ ) according to the Shapiro-Wilk tests, indicating non-normality. Spearman's rank-order correlations were used to investigate the connections between doomscrolling behaviour and the ČEFSA domains because of the breach of normalcy assumptions.

**Table No. 2 Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 76)**

Variable	Category	n	%	Mean ± SD	Median
Gender	Female	61	80.3		
	Male	14	18.4		
	Non-binary (NB)	1	1.3		
Age (years)	Female			22.9 ± 2.78	23.0
	Male			23.9 ± 4.45	23.5
	Non-binary (NB)			26.0	26.0

Note: Percentages are rounded to one decimal place. SD for the Non-binary participant is not calculated due to a single observation.

There were 14 male participants (18.4%) and 1 non-binary participant (1.3%), but the majority of the sample (n = 61, 80.3%) were female. The female participants' median age was 23.0 years, and their mean age was 22.9 years (SD = 2.78). The median age of the male participants was 23.5 years, whereas the mean age was 23.9 years (SD = 4.45). The sole non-binary individual was 26 years of age.

Young adult females made up the majority of the sample. Due to the solitary observation, the non-binary individual was not included in inferential analysis, although being reported descriptively. These demographics give background for understanding later analyses of ČEFSA domains and doomscrolling behaviour.

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**Table No. 3 Spearman’s Correlations Between Doomscrolling and Anomalous Experience Domains**

Variable	Spearman’s $\rho$
Felt Sense of Anomaly	.73
Anomalous Experience of Emotion	.76
Anomalous Experience of Self	.68
Altered Sense of Connection	.73
Anomalous Experience of the Body	.67
Altered Sense of Agency	.73
Altered Sense of Familiarity	.73
Altered Sense of Reality	.72

*Note: All correlations are significant at  $p < .001$  and  $df = 74$*

Hypothesis one proposed that there is a significant relationship between doomscrolling behavior and the domains measured by the Černis Felt Sense of Anomaly (ČEFSA) Scale. A Spearman’s rank-order correlation was conducted to examine the associations among doomscrolling and eight anomalous experience domains. All correlations were positive and statistically significant (see Table 3).

Doomscrolling was strongly correlated with felt sense of anomaly ( $\rho = .73, p < .001$ ), anomalous experience of emotion ( $\rho = .76, p < .001$ ), anomalous experience of self ( $\rho = .68, p < .001$ ), altered sense of connection ( $\rho = .73, p < .001$ ), anomalous experience of the body ( $\rho = .67, p < .001$ ), altered sense of agency ( $\rho = .73, p < .001$ ), altered sense of familiarity ( $\rho = .73, p < .001$ ), and altered sense of reality ( $\rho = .72, p < .001$ ).

The anomalous experience domains were also positively intercorrelated ( $\rho = .72-.88$ ).

**Table No. 4 Welch’s *t* test and Mann–Whitney *U* test for gender differences in Anomalous Experience of Emotion**

Test	Variable	t / U	df	p	Effect Size
Welch’s <i>t</i>	Female vs. Male	-1.53	16.2	.146	Cohen’s <i>d</i> = -0.50
Mann–Whitney <i>U</i>	Female vs. Male	321	—	.147	$r = 0.25$

*Note: Welch’s *t* test was used due to violation of homogeneity of variances (Levene’s test,  $p < .05$ ). Mann–Whitney *U* test was additionally used due to violation of normality (Shapiro–Wilk,  $p < .001$ ).*

Hypothesis two proposed that there is significant gender difference across Anomalous experience of Emotion scores. An independent-samples Welch’s *t* test indicated that female participants ( $M = 4.98, SD = 4.07$ ) did not significantly differ from male participants ( $M = 7.43, SD = 5.67$ ) in Anomalous Experience of Emotion scores,  $t(16.2) = -1.53, p = .146$ , Cohen’s  $d = -0.50$ , indicating a medium effect size. A Mann–Whitney *U* test confirmed this nonsignificant difference,  $U = 321, p = .147$ , with a rank biserial correlation of  $r = 0.25$ , also reflecting a small-to-medium effect. Although the effect sizes show a slight pattern, with male participants scoring marginally higher, these data imply that there is no statistically significant gender difference in the Anomalous Experience of Emotion scores. The single participant identifying as non-binary reported an Anomalous Experience of Emotion score of 10, which was descriptively higher than the sample mean of 5.5.

## DISCUSSION

This study investigated the relationships between doomscrolling behavior and anomalous experience domains as determined by the Černis Felt Sense of Anomaly (CEFSA) Scale. Overall, the results show that the first hypothesis was strongly supported, but the second was not.

Doomscrolling demonstrated substantial positive associations with all eight CEFSA domains, which is consistent with the first hypothesis. The strong correlations observed among the anomalous experience domains themselves ( $\rho = .72-.88$ ) further highlight the interconnected nature of these phenomena, suggesting that doomscrolling may contribute to a broader cluster of dissociative or anomaly-related experiences rather than isolated symptoms. Greater disruptions in emotion, self-experience, bodily awareness, perceptual familiarity, and reality were linked to higher doomscrolling scores. These results support existing research indicating that repetitive exposure to distressing online content can exacerbate digital dissociation, perceptual instability, and altered self-perception. Ang (2025) similarly noted that doomscrolling compromises mental health by decreasing present-moment awareness (mindfulness) and raising secondary traumatic stress, that is trauma-like symptoms occurring after exposure to the traumatic experiences of others through social media. Related research has shown that doomscrolling is associated with worsened negative affect and risky behavioral tendencies (Soraci et al., 2025). Doomscrolling may serve as a mechanism that increases or maintains episodes of digital disconnection rather than just being a maladaptive habit, according to the persistent pattern of high correlations.

There was no significant evidence to support the second hypothesis. Effect sizes were small to medium, and neither the Welch's *t* test nor the Mann-Whitney *U* test revealed a significant gender difference, even though males had somewhat higher Anomalous Experience of Emotion mean scores than females. The preliminary finding suggests that there is no significant gender difference in anomalous emotional experiences in this population. The need for more gender diversity in future research is highlighted by the fact that the lone non-binary participant had a higher score but could not be included in statistical tests.

In contrast to some previous research showing that women, especially younger women, frequently report increased emotional distress during digital engagement, there are no evident gender differences (Carcelén-García et al., 2023; Carcelén-García et al., 2024). However, the lack of gender effects might have been caused by the construct being tested here or by features of the current sample. According to preliminary findings in this study, doomscrolling might exhibit similar effects on perception and emotion across genders.

### *Limitations and Future Directions*

The sample's limited generalizability to larger populations stems from the fact that it was primarily female and made up of young adults. It is unknown whether doomscrolling causes abnormal experiences or whether individuals who exhibit these tendencies are more drawn to immersive digital behaviors because the cross-sectional design prevents drawing inferences about causality. More gender-diverse samples must be included, and potential mediators like stress exposure or emotional regulation techniques must be studied to determine whether these factors influence the associations across these groups. For instance, Alkal (2025) found that higher levels of smartphone addiction were found to reduce psychological flexibility and result in poorer emotion regulation, which in turn caused

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decline in adolescents' well-being. Future research could use experimental or longitudinal approaches to understand the causal direction and explain how doomscrolling contributes to dissociative or anomaly-related experiences.

The results may also impact the design of news media and social media to reduce distress-driven engagement, guide neuroscientific studies on memory and attention, and even result in new therapeutic advances. In order to promote mental resilience in the digital era, this research can be used to identify at-risk individuals and create targeted interventions such as digital hygiene techniques. Digital hygiene might entail purposefully limiting exposure to distressing content, taking scheduled pauses, and reorienting attention to the body and surroundings using grounding or context-shifting techniques. Digital hygiene requires deliberate and thoughtful participation that lowers dissociative absorption and promotes psychological stability, as opposed to encouraging digital avoidance.

### CONCLUSION

Digital habits may exacerbate emotional, perceptual, and self-related anomalies, as evidenced by the study's high correlations with doomscrolling and all CEFSA anomalous experience dimensions. No statistically significant gender differences in anomalous experiences of emotion were found, although results must be interpreted as preliminary due to the uneven gender distribution. To fully understand the mechanisms linking digital engagement to dissociative and anomaly-related experiences, more research is crucial.

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***Conflict of Interest***

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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