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The Relationship Between Doomscrolling And Emotional Exhaustion: A Review Of Digital Stress And Psychological Outcomes

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Abstract

The increasing use of social media has given rise to maladaptive digital behaviours that may negatively impact psychological well-being. Doomscrolling, defined as the repetitive consumption of negative and distressing news content, has been widely associated with anxiety and psychological distress. However, its relationship with emotional exhaustion remains underexplored. Emotional exhaustion, a core dimension of burnout, refers to a state of emotional depletion resulting from prolonged exposure to stress and excessive cognitive demands. The present review aims to examine the potential link between doomscrolling and emotional exhaustion by consolidating existing literature on negative news exposure, social media fatigue, technostress, and information overload. Evidence suggests that continuous engagement with distressing digital content increases emotional arousal, cognitive load, and rumination, leading to the depletion of psychological resources over time. Studies on social media overuse and digital stress further support the likelihood of emotional fatigue resulting from excessive online engagement. Despite strong indirect evidence, there is a lack of direct empirical research examining doomscrolling as a predictor of emotional exhaustion. The review highlights this gap and emphasizes the need for future research to investigate this relationship, particularly among young adults exposed to continuous digital and occupational demands.

Keywords: doomscrolling, emotional exhaustion, social media use, negative news exposure, technostress, information overload, digital behaviour

I. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary digital era, social media has become an integral part of daily life, particularly among young adults. These platforms provide continuous access to information, communication, and real-time updates about global events. While such accessibility has enhanced connectivity and awareness, it has also led to the emergence of maladaptive patterns of digital engagement that may negatively affect psychological well-being.

One such emerging behaviour is *doomscrolling*, which refers to the repetitive and prolonged consumption of negative or distressing news content through digital platforms. The term gained widespread attention during the COVID-19 pandemic, when individuals were frequently exposed to continuous streams of crisis-related information. Although doomscrolling may initially serve as a way to stay informed, persistent exposure to negative content has been associated with increased emotional strain and psychological discomfort.

Research in media psychology suggests that repeated exposure to distressing information can heighten emotional arousal and sustain stress responses over time. When individuals continuously engage with threatening or negative content, it may lead to prolonged activation of stress-related processes, reducing the ability to recover emotionally. Over time, such patterns of engagement may contribute to more enduring psychological outcomes. One such outcome is emotional exhaustion, which is widely recognized as a central component of burnout. Emotional exhaustion refers to a state of emotional depletion and reduced psychological energy resulting from prolonged exposure to stress and excessive demands (Christina Maslach & Susan E. Jackson, 1981). It reflects a condition in which individuals feel emotionally overextended and unable to cope effectively with ongoing pressures. The relationship between continuous digital exposure and emotional strain can be understood through established theoretical frameworks. The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, proposed by Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman (1984), suggests that stress occurs when individuals perceive environmental demands as exceeding their coping resources. In the context of doomscrolling, repeated exposure to negative information may be appraised as overwhelming, thereby increasing psychological strain.

Similarly, the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory proposed by Stevan Hobfoll (1989) provides further insight into this process. According to this theory, individuals strive to maintain and protect their psychological resources, and prolonged exposure to stress leads to resource depletion. Continuous engagement with distressing digital content may gradually exhaust emotional and cognitive resources, thereby increasing vulnerability to emotional exhaustion. In addition, the concept of information overload suggests that excessive exposure to large volumes of information can overwhelm cognitive capacity, leading to mental fatigue and reduced processing efficiency. Doomscrolling, characterized by continuous and repetitive consumption of negative content, may intensify this overload by combining emotional and cognitive demands. Despite growing research on social media use and psychological distress, limited attention has been given to specific maladaptive behaviours such as doomscrolling and their potential role in contributing to emotional exhaustion. Most existing studies have focused on immediate outcomes such as anxiety and stress, while long-term emotional consequences remain underexplored.

Therefore, there is a need to examine the relationship between doomscrolling and emotional exhaustion in order to better understand how maladaptive patterns of digital engagement impact psychological well-being. Such understanding is particularly important among young adults, who are frequently exposed to both continuous digital stimuli and external demands such as academic or occupational stress.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A. Doomscrolling and Psychological Distress

Doomscrolling is a relatively recent digital behaviour characterized by the repetitive and prolonged consumption of negative, distressing, or threatening news content through social media and online platforms. The term gained prominence during the COVID-19 pandemic, when individuals increasingly engaged with continuous streams of crisis-related information. Unlike general information-seeking behaviour, doomscrolling is often compulsive, emotionally driven, and sustained by algorithmic content delivery systems that prioritize engagement.

Sharma et al. (2022) provided one of the earliest empirical conceptualizations of doomscrolling and developed a standardized scale to measure the construct. Their findings indicated that doomscrolling is significantly associated with anxiety, fear of missing out, problematic social media use, and personality traits such as neuroticism. These results suggest that individuals who are more emotionally reactive or have difficulty regulating their impulses are more likely to engage in doomscrolling behavior. Importantly, the study highlighted that doomscrolling is not merely passive consumption but an emotionally reinforced behavior that is maintained through negative reinforcement mechanisms. Similarly, Satici et al. (2022) examined the relationship between doomscrolling and well-being indicators. Their findings revealed that doomscrolling is positively correlated with psychological distress and negatively associated with life satisfaction. The authors suggested that doomscrolling may function as a maladaptive coping strategy in response to uncertainty and stress. Individuals may repeatedly seek out negative information in an attempt to gain control or predict outcomes; however, this behavior paradoxically increases emotional discomfort and reinforces distress.

Further empirical evidence supports the association between doomscrolling and anxiety-related outcomes. El-Sayed and Alzaharni (2025) found that increased doomscrolling behavior is significantly

associated with higher levels of anxiety, particularly among individuals with low psychological resilience. This suggests that individual differences play a crucial role in determining how individuals respond to negative digital content. Beyond direct studies on doomscrolling, a substantial body of literature on negative news exposure provides strong supporting evidence. Price et al. (2022) demonstrated that frequent exposure to distressing media content during crisis situations is associated with increased psychological distress and depressive symptoms. Similarly, Roxane Cohen Silver et al. (2013) found that repeated exposure to traumatic media coverage can produce stress responses comparable to direct exposure to traumatic events. These findings highlight the powerful psychological impact of indirect exposure to negative information. Earlier research by Mary McNaughton-Cassill (2001) also indicated that excessive news consumption contributes to heightened stress levels and emotional overload. Likewise, Garry Young et al. (2012) found that exposure to negative news increases worry, pessimism, and emotional strain. Collectively, these studies suggest that sustained engagement with distressing content can significantly disrupt emotional regulation and contribute to psychological burden. In addition to individual and content-related factors, technological mechanisms also play a significant role in maintaining doomscrolling behavior. Li and Qiu (2023) highlighted that recommendation algorithms are designed to maximize user engagement by promoting emotionally salient content, often resulting in increased exposure to negative information. This creates a feedback loop in which users are repeatedly exposed to distressing content, reinforcing the habit of doomscrolling.

Despite consistent evidence linking doomscrolling with anxiety and psychological distress, most studies have focused on immediate emotional outcomes. There remains a lack of research examining its long-term psychological consequences, particularly emotional exhaustion.

B. Emotional Exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion is widely regarded as the central component of burnout and reflects a state of emotional depletion resulting from prolonged exposure to stress. According to Christina Maslach and Susan E. Jackson (1981), emotional exhaustion occurs when individuals feel emotionally overextended and unable to cope effectively with ongoing demands. It represents the depletion of emotional resources and is often considered the initial stage of burnout. Christina Maslach (2016) further emphasized that emotional exhaustion is associated with reduced motivation, impaired performance, and increased psychological distress when it persists over time. Unlike acute stress, emotional exhaustion develops gradually and is typically the result of chronic exposure to stressors without adequate recovery. The Oldenburg Burnout Inventory proposed by Demerouti et al. (2003) conceptualizes burnout through two dimensions: exhaustion and disengagement. The exhaustion component includes emotional, cognitive, and physical fatigue, highlighting the multidimensional nature of the construct. This broader conceptualization is particularly relevant in modern contexts where stressors are not limited to occupational settings but also include digital environments.

Emotional exhaustion has been widely studied in workplace contexts; however, recent research suggests that it can also arise from non-traditional stressors such as digital overload and continuous information exposure.

C. Digital Stress, Social Media Use, and Emotional Exhaustion

With the increasing integration of digital technologies into everyday life, researchers have begun to explore the concept of digital stress and its impact on psychological well-being. Han et al. (2020) found that excessive social media use is associated with increased burnout and emotional strain. The study suggested that continuous exposure to curated content, social comparison, and performance-related pressures may intensify psychological fatigue. Similarly, Molino et al. (2020) introduced the concept of technostress, which refers to stress arising from prolonged interaction with digital technologies. Their findings indicated that constant connectivity, information overload, and the pressure to remain available contribute significantly to emotional exhaustion. Supporting this, Tarafdar et al. (2015) and Ayyagari et al. (2011) emphasized that digital demands increase cognitive load and reduce opportunities for psychological recovery, thereby leading to sustained emotional fatigue.

In addition, social media–specific fatigue has been widely documented. Bright et al. (2015) introduced the concept of social media fatigue, demonstrating that excessive engagement results in emotional exhaustion. Similarly, Dhir et al. (2018), Zhang et al. (2016), and Wang et al. (2019) found that information overload and excessive social networking use contribute to psychological fatigue and emotional depletion.

D. **Information Overload and Theoretical Framework**

The concept of information overload provides a key explanation for understanding how digital behaviors contribute to emotional exhaustion. Eppler and Mengis (2004) suggested that excessive information processing demands overwhelm cognitive capacity, leading to stress and fatigue. Similarly, Bawden and Robinson (2009) highlighted that continuous exposure to large volumes of information results in mental fatigue and reduced decision-making ability.

From a theoretical perspective, the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Richard Lazarus & Susan Folkman, 1984) explains that stress arises when individuals perceive demands as exceeding their coping resources. Additionally, the Conservation of Resources Theory (Stevan Hobfoll, 1989) suggests that prolonged exposure to stress depletes psychological resources, ultimately leading to emotional exhaustion.

III. Research Gap

The existing body of literature provides substantial evidence linking doomscrolling with psychological distress, anxiety, and reduced well-being. Similarly, a large number of studies have established that excessive digital engagement, technostress, and information overload contribute to emotional exhaustion. However, despite these parallel findings, several important gaps remain in the literature.

First, although doomscrolling has been examined in relation to anxiety and distress, very limited studies have directly investigated its relationship with emotional exhaustion. Most existing research focuses on immediate emotional outcomes rather than long-term consequences such as burnout and emotional depletion. Second, the majority of studies have explored general social media use rather than specific maladaptive behaviours like doomscrolling. This limits the understanding of how repetitive exposure to distressing content uniquely contributes to emotional strain. Third, existing research often relies on cross-sectional designs and self-report measures, which restrict the ability to establish deeper psychological mechanisms and long-term effects. Fourth, there is limited research focusing on populations such as young adults who experience both continuous digital exposure and external demands, including academic or occupational stress, which may increase their vulnerability to emotional exhaustion. Finally, while theoretical frameworks such as stress and resource depletion models suggest a potential link between digital stressors and emotional exhaustion, empirical research specifically examining doomscrolling as a contributing factor remains scarce.

Therefore, there is a clear need for further research to examine the relationship between doomscrolling and emotional exhaustion in order to better understand the psychological impact of maladaptive digital behaviours and to address this gap in the existing literature.

IV. Conclusion

The present review aimed to examine the relationship between doomscrolling and emotional exhaustion by synthesizing existing literature on digital behaviour, negative news exposure, and psychological outcomes. The findings from the reviewed studies consistently indicate that doomscrolling is associated with increased psychological distress, anxiety, and emotional strain. Although direct empirical evidence linking doomscrolling to emotional exhaustion remains limited, substantial indirect support can be drawn from research on social media overuse, technostress, and information overload.

Doomscrolling represents a unique form of maladaptive digital engagement characterized by repetitive exposure to distressing content combined with sustained cognitive involvement. This pattern of behavior not only increases emotional arousal but also places continuous demands on cognitive and psychological resources. Over time, such prolonged engagement may hinder emotional recovery and contribute to the gradual depletion of psychological energy.

Theoretical frameworks further strengthen this understanding. Stress-based models suggest that continuous exposure to negative stimuli can overwhelm an individual's coping capacity, while resource-based theories indicate that prolonged stress leads to depletion of emotional and cognitive resources. In the context of doomscrolling, these mechanisms may operate simultaneously, increasing the likelihood of emotional fatigue and eventual exhaustion.

Moreover, the role of digital environments cannot be overlooked. Algorithm-driven content exposure, constant connectivity, and the pressure to remain informed contribute to sustained engagement with

negative information. These factors create a reinforcing cycle in which individuals are repeatedly exposed to distressing content, thereby intensifying emotional strain.

Despite these insights, the review highlights a significant gap in the literature. There is a lack of direct empirical research examining doomscrolling as a predictor of emotional exhaustion, particularly among young adults who are highly engaged in digital environments while also managing academic or occupational demands. This underscores the need for future research to investigate this relationship more explicitly.

In conclusion, the existing evidence suggests that doomscrolling has the potential to contribute to emotional exhaustion through mechanisms of emotional arousal, cognitive overload, and resource depletion. Understanding this relationship is essential in the context of increasing digital engagement, as it may inform the development of interventions aimed at promoting healthier patterns of media consumption and reducing the psychological burden associated with maladaptive digital behaviours.

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