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The Algorithm of Anguish: Examining Doomscrolling and Gen-Z Mental Health

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The present research explored the association between doomscrolling, and mental health problems in Gen-Z. In this correlational and cross-sectional research, data (*N*=250) was collected from students of both private and public universities by using purposive and quota sampling technique. The sample included equal number of males, and females (125 each) with age range of 18-25 years. The data collection protocol included permission letter, consent form, demographic sheet, Doomscrolling Scale (DS; Sharma et al., 2022), and Depression, Anxiety, and Stress scale (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). IBM-SPSS statistics was used to run the statistical analysis. Correlation analysis showed doomscrolling to have a significant positive moderate relationship (0.27^{**}) with mental health problems. Regression analysis depicted doomscrolling to be a significant positive predictor of mental health problems in Gen-Z. Future research should explore the longitudinal impacts and the effectiveness of digital literacy programs as a preventive approach.

Keywords: doomscrolling; mental health problems; gen-z

Generation Z, or more commonly known as Gen-Z are the individuals who are born approximately between 1997 to 2012 (Jayatissa, 2023). Digital technology has had a huge influence on Gen-Z, offering both benefits and concerns. On the plus side, digital technology has increased Gen Z's access to information, learning opportunities, and social connectedness, allowing them to acquire great digital literacy, creativity, and global awareness from an early age (Rideout & Robb, 2018). Social media and online platforms have allowed for self-expression, peer support, and civic involvement, whilst digital technologies provide flexible education, skill development, and job discovery. However, excessive and uncontrolled use of digital technology has also been linked to negative results, such as increased screentime, decreased attention span, emotional dampening, and greater levels of anxiety, depression, and loneliness among Gen-Z (Keles et al., 2020). Constant social comparison, cyberbullying, and pressure to maintain an online persona can also have a severe impact on self-esteem and psychological health (Odgers & Jensen, 2020).

Gen-Z has much more social media participation than earlier age groups, rendering this demographic especially vulnerable to maladaptive online behaviours like doomscrolling. Empirical research reveals that Gen Z spends far more time on social platforms than Millennials, Gen-X, and Baby Boomers—for instance, Gen-Z spent over 5 hours per day on social media, which is over double that of millennials and three times that of older adults (Winslow, 2025). The term doomscrolling emerged in early 2020 to commonly describe a digital media practice which took on greater life during the (COVID-19) pandemic and social distancing. It was coined in 2018, and was later popularized, referring to the "constant consumption of negative social media content or digital news which often leads to heightened stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion" (Satici et al., 2023). Doomscrolling further causes mental health problems in Gen-Z that may affect an individual's emotional, psychological, and social well-being, disrupting daily functioning, and overall quality of life (Schulte-Körne, 2016). As this generation typically spends hours on social media, and this habit became deeply ingrained in them during the COVID-19 times, which has now become a source of distress for them and the rise of doomscrolling has further exacerbated the anxiety and stress issues in Gen-Z (Tang et al., 2021).

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Research by Taskin et al. (2024) explored the effects of doomscrolling on the mental health of 400 Turkish social media users (18-65 years) in relation to the mediating roles of mindfulness and secondary traumatic stress. The results determined that greater levels of doomscrolling were linked to lower mindfulness and greater secondary traumatic stress, which were themselves related to lower mental well-being. A cross-cultural study by Shabahang et al. (2024) examined the psychological impact of doomscrolling across 675 university students from Iran and the United States who were active social media user (18-65 years) and the results signified that overconsumption of negative news was linked to elevated levels of existential anxiety in both cultures.

Kellerman et al. (2022) found in 18 above college students who were assessed using Ecological Momentary Assessment (EMA) that the continuous exposure to disturbing news such as those in COVID-19 times, and stressful environment can result in a hyper-alert state, keeping individuals in a chronic state of stress and preventing them from effectively managing their emotional well-being and mental health. Such negative effects can contribute to an increase of mental health problems, particularly higher levels of stress, worry, and anxiety among Gen-Z.

While recent studies have begun to document the link between doomscrolling and poorer mental health outcomes in adolescents and young adults, particularly anxiety, depression, sleep disturbance, there is still relatively little empirical research focused specifically on Gen-Z as a distinct cohort (Alruthaya et al., 2021; Jayatissa, 2023; Rideout & Robb, 2018; Price et al., 2022; Usman et al., 2025; Winslow, 2025). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated doomscrolling behaviours, as lengthy lockdowns, social distance, and increased uncertainty caused Gen-Z to rely significantly on social media and digital news platforms for information and emotional connection. Continuous exposure to pandemic-related upsetting information during this time period normalised doomscrolling while also exacerbating Gen-Z psychological fragility (Tang et al., 2023). As a result, the current study will look into doomscrolling and mental health issues in Gen-Z. The goal is to lay the groundwork for psychologists, educators, and digital media designers, and future researchers by providing them new direction for future research in Pakistan for the issue of doomscrolling as well as to offer future study goals and viable interventions for Gen-Z (Brailovskaia, 2023).

Method

Correlational and cross-sectional research design was used in the current study to identify the relation between doomscrolling and mental health problems (depression, anxiety, and stress) among Gen-Z. Data of 250 participants (125 males and 125 females; 18-25 years old) was taken from both public and private universities (Punjab University, and University of Management and Technology) by using purposive and quota sampling. To ensure a diverse and comprehensive representation of Gen-Z, 62 males and 63 females were taken from public sector universities. The same number of males and females were taken from private sector universities. The participants ranging from age 18-25 years, who were social media users, using at least one social media platform once a week, were included in the research study. The participants who were diagnosed with any kind of psychological disorders were excluded to avoid confounding effects on study outcomes, assessed via self-report of any previous diagnosis. The participants who were not full-time students and belonged to other educational levels; participants other than Bachelors (BS) were excluded from study.

Assessment Measures

Doomscrolling was assessed using Doomscrolling Scale (Sharma et al., 2022), a 15 item

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7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), having a very high reliability of α = .935 with a mean and standard deviation of (M= 15.78, SD= 2.75) for age range 11-25 years. Mental Health Problems were assessed using Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale DASS-21 (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995), a 21-item scale categorized into 3 sub-scales, scored on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (do not apply to me at all) to 3 (apply to me most of the time), with a high reliability value of α = .93. A demographic sheet was designed in order to obtain basic information from the participants, including participant's age, gender, university type, university year, and social media usage, assessed on the basis of hours per day.

Procedure

Initially, permission was obtained from the Institutional Research Board (IRB) of each institution. After receiving approval, the permit with a signed informed consent was obtained from the department to collect the data. The data was collected from the Lahore's public and private sector universities (Punjab University, and University of Management and Technology) with sample size of 250 participants (125 males, and 125 females; 18-25 years old) using purposive and quota sampling strategy. The participants received all the instructions verbally, and their confidentiality, and anonymity was maintained throughout the research process. Participants were also assured of their right to withdraw from the research. After collecting the data, it was entered into SPSS, and statistical analysis (correlation and regression) were run to draw conclusions.

Results

Statistically, correlation analysis showed doomscrolling to have a significant moderate positive relationship with mental health problems and all its sub-scales and doomscrolling was found to be the positive predictor of mental health problems among Gen-Z. Conversely, doomscrolling showed a non-significant relationship with gender and university type.

Table 1

Demographics, Frequency, and Percentage of Participants (N=250)

Variables	*f*	*(%)*
Gender		
Male	125	50.0
Female	125	50.0
Birth Order		
Only Born	22	8.8
Youngest	68	27.2
Middle	98	39.2
Eldest	62	24.8
University Type		
Private	125	50.0
Public	125	50.0
University Year		
1st year	61	24.4
2nd year	52	20.8
3rd year	48	19.2
4th year	89	35.6

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Social Media Usage		
Less than 1 hour	6	2.4
1-3 hours	75	30.0
4-6 hours	111	44.4
7+ hours	58	23.2

Note. *f*= Frequency, *%*= Percentage

Table 2

Mean and Standard Deviation of Age of Participants (N=250)

Variable	*M*	*SD*
Age	21.06	1.63

Note. *M*=Mean, *SD*=Standard Deviation

Table 3

Correlation Analysis among Gender, University Type, DS, and DASS-21 of Gen-Z (N=250)

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Gender	1.50	0.50		-0.24	0.00	-0.01	-0.05	-0.02	0.05
University Type	1.50	0.50			0.03	-0.06	-0.03	-0.09	-0.02
DS	46.02	13.10				0.27**	0.22**	0.23**	0.26**
DASS-21	23.84	9.82					0.87**	0.86**	0.86**
DASS1	6.74	3.43						0.61**	0.66**
DASS2	8.38	3.81							0.61**
DASS3	7.62	3.50							-

Note. DS = Doomscrolling Scale, *DASS-21*= Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale, *DASS1*= Depression, *DASS2*= Anxiety, *DASS3*= Stress *$p<0.05$, **$p<0.01$, ***<0.001

Table 4

Multiple Linear Regression Analysis of Demographics, Doomscrolling, and Mental Health Problems among Gen-Z (N=250)

Variables	*B*	SE	*β*	95% CI	
				LL	*UL*
Age	-0.46	0.37	-0.07	-1.19	0.26
Gender	-0.21	1.20	-0.01	-2.59	2.16
University Type	-1.52	1.20	-0.07	-3.88	0.83
DS	0.20	0.04	0.27	0.11	0.29
R^2	0.29				

Note. CI= Confidence Interval, *LL*=Lower Limit, *UL*= Upper Limit, R^2= Co-efficient of Determination, *β*= Standardized Co-efficient, *B*= Unstandardized Co-efficient, *SE*= Standardized Error, *DS*=Doomscrolling Scale, *DASS-21*= Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale. *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Multiple Linear Regression was used to find out the predictors of mental health problems in Gen-Z. This table shows R^2= 0.29 that regression model explains 29% of variance in mental health problems scores. Multiple Linear Regression showed that doomscrolling was found to be significant positive predictor of mental health problems, while age, gender, and university type were found non-significant negative predictors of mental health problems.

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Discussion

The present research studied the relationship between doomscrolling, and mental health problems in Gen-Z, revealing that doomscrolling is a significant positive predictor and is positively correlated with mental health problems in Gen-Z. The present study verifies previous findings by looking at the association between doomscrolling and these mental health problems in the current group.

Rodrigues (2023), in a narrative review of existing literature, emphasized that extended exposure to negative social media content increases stress, and anxiety. Moreover, she found out that doomscrolling led to hopelessness. Rodrigues highlighted that those who were doomscrolling were actually subjected to more psychological distress as it served as a threat to mental health. The results of the present research compared with that of Rodrigues support the understanding that doomscrolling leads to psychological distress, thus validating the current findings. Similar research on a sample of 1,000 university students aged 18-28 years, with 15 participants selected through purposive sampling who exhibited high levels of doomscrolling, found that excessive doomscrolling was associated with increased anxiety and emotional exhaustion among university students (Usman et al., 2025). The current study's findings are congruent with earlier conclusions, since both studies show a substantial link between doomscrolling and mental health issues. The closeness in findings can be linked to similar demographic features, notably the prevalence of Gen-Z who are heavily involved with digital media and online news consumption.

A cross-cultural study examined the psychological impact of doomscrolling across 675 university students (18-65 years) from Iran and the United States. The results signified that overconsumption of negative news was linked with increased levels of stress, existential anxiety, and excessive worry about future events in both cultures (Shabahang et al., 2024). The similarities between their work and the present study support our hypothesis that doomscrolling has a negative effect on mental health, therefore causing stress and anxiety. Furthermore, the consistent direction of the relationship across studies suggests that increased exposure to doomscrolling is a common risk factor for anxiety and stress, implying a potentially universal link between doomscrolling and poor mental health outcomes among Gen-Z. Similarly, a 2025 study of 235 adults in Singapore discovered that doomscrolling was associated with higher levels of psychological distress, including depression, anxiety, and stress, and that this distress mediated the relationship between doomscrolling and secondary traumatic stress symptoms associated with social media use. This study found that doomscrolling can cause psychological distress similar to trauma, thereby contributing towards mental health problems (Ang, 2025). Correspondingly, the present research findings also align with results of another research which found that individuals who engaged in doomscrolling developed higher depressive symptoms, thereby linked to poorer mental health (Price et al., 2022).

Furthermore, a key discovery was the issue's demographic universality, since doomscrolling was unrelated to gender or university type. This shows that susceptibility is not isolated to a single grouping, but rather a generational trademark, most likely resulting from a common identity as digital natives who are universally exposed to the architectural design of social media platforms (Satici et al., 2022).

This study also contributes to the current knowledge by revealing the powerful impacts of doomscrolling in a non-Western, developing society. For Pakistani Gen-Z, the internet domain is more than just a source of global news; it also provides a constant stream of material regarding local political instability, economic inflation, and social difficulties. The authors believe based on

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their observations that lack of strong mental health support services, along with existing societal stigma, exacerbates the problem, generating a unique pressure cooker effect. In this context, doomscrolling may be a maladaptive effort to exert control over huge and sometimes insurmountable real-world pressures, making the current findings especially important for regional public health initiatives (Abbasi at al., 2025).

The findings of this study also have significant implications for mental health experts, educational institutions, and digital platform builders. Universities should proactively include digital literacy and a critical consumption curriculum into their student orientation and wellness programs. These classes should go beyond technical skills and educate information hygiene, which includes recognizing algorithmic manipulation, setting purposeful time limits for news intake, and developing thoughtful participation with social media to reduce obsessive scrolling. Clinicians should make measuring clients' digital behaviors a regular element of their mental health exams. Furthermore, engagement with technology businesses is critical for advocating and developing ethically designed platform features such as customizable algorithms, well-being cues, and break reminders that enable users to escape the loop of negative reinforcement. On a personal level, the study provides the valuable insights for individuals seeking to improve their digital habits and mental health. By understanding the intricate relation between doomscrolling and mental health, this research can empower Gen Z to develop healthier relations with digital media.

Even though it has contributed, this research has various limitations. Firstly, this study used a cross-sectional design, which limits the changes, and the long-term effects could not be examined. Secondly, data were collected via self-report measures, which may be subject to social desirability or recall biases. Thirdly, the sample was limited to university students in Lahore, restricting generalizability to other regions or age groups. Purposive and quota sampling may have introduced selection bias, potentially affecting the representativeness of the findings.

Future research should employ longitudinal or experimental designs to provide stronger evidence as how doomscrolling affects mental health in Gen-Z over longer period of time. Moreover, future research should include more diverse representative samples from different cities, and age groups, and educational backgrounds to improve generalizability.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study demonstrates a significant positive relationship between doomscrolling and mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, and stress, among Gen-Z. Doomscrolling emerged as a significant predictor of mental health issues, regardless of gender or university type, highlighting its universality. Overall, the study underscores the importance of addressing excessive negative media consumption to safeguard Gen-Z mental health.

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