

Doom Scrolling and Existential Anxiety among Young Adults: Unlocking the Gendered Perspective

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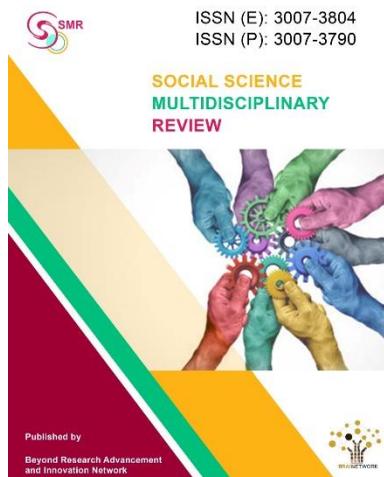
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Doom Scrolling and Existential Anxiety among Young Adults: Unlocking the Gendered Perspective

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ABSTRACT

With growing usage of digital media and increasing global crises, the continuous exposure to negative content heightens the challenge to find a sense of meaning. The present study aimed to investigate the moderating role of gender between the relationship of doom scrolling and existential anxiety among young adults. A cross-sectional study was carried out with a convenient sample of 176 participants aged 20–35 years, collected through convenient sampling. Results of moderation analysis showed that doom scrolling and gender were found to be significant positive predictors of existential anxiety. The interaction effect of doom scrolling and gender was also found to be significant, indicating that the nature of the relationship between doom scrolling and existential anxiety becomes positive for men. These insights could inform gender-sensitive interventions aimed at mitigating the concerns related to existential anxiety.

Keywords: Doom scrolling, Existential anxiety, Internet, Social media, News consumption, Negative news, Young adults.

JEL Classification Codes: I12, I23, I31, D91

1. INTRODUCTION

The digital age has unified the world into a global village where access to any kind of information, whether positive or negative, is easily accessible to everyone present anywhere around the globe. The COVID-19 pandemic and other global crises have further accelerated digital media consumption. Social media and television are the primary channels of news propagation, where negative information tends to grab more audience attention, especially among women, and positive news or information is often overlooked. Conclusively, the information that holds negative language or content is shared consistently and attracts greater viewership (Robertson *et al.*, 2023; Soroka *et al.*, 2016; Watson *et al.*, 2024). Research has shown that the dissemination of negative information exacerbates stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms, highlighting the adverse impact of digital media on overall mental health (Alshehri *et al.*, 2024). Amidst such exposure to negativity, it does affect one's thoughts, emotions, and

perception about one's purpose in life and about the world, inculcating feelings of meaninglessness and uncertainty.

Moreover, prior research suggests that gender influences media preferences, with men preferring news and video games, and women mostly inclined towards entertainment and music (Kontolatou, 2025). However, the gendered perspective in terms of meaning making and digital behaviour, especially in consuming distressing information, is limited.

Thus, this study addresses these gaps by investigating the relationship between doom scrolling and existential anxiety among young adults, with gender as a moderator, specifically in our culture, Pakistan, taking into account the political and economic aspects overall. By integrating the gendered perspective, the present study provides a nuanced understanding of how continual negative information shapes existential concerns.

1.1. Aim and Significance of the Study

In the age of a hyper-connected world and ceaseless information flow, doom scrolling has become a form of coping to avoid an information gap, as people tend to engage more in doom scrolling during the COVID-19 pandemic, which eventually contributed to existential concerns among individuals (Anand *et al.*, 2022; Shabahang *et al.*, 2023). While numerous studies have been conducted on doom scrolling, however, the limited research has examined its impact on existential anxiety, more specifically in terms of the gender perspective. The present study focuses on investigating gender as a moderator between doom scrolling and existential anxiety, broadening the understanding of internet-mediated mental health and existential vulnerabilities across gender.

1.2. Objectives

The following were the main objectives of the study:

- To investigate the relationship between Doom Scrolling and Existential Anxiety (anxiety about faith and death, anxiety about emptiness and meaninglessness, and anxiety about guilt and condemnation) in young adults.
- To investigate the moderating role of Gender between Doom Scrolling and Existential Anxiety in young adults.

1.3. Hypotheses

To meet these objectives, following hypothesis are developed

H₁: There will be a positive relationship between Doom Scrolling and Existential Anxiety (anxiety about faith and death, anxiety about emptiness and meaninglessness, and anxiety about guilt and condemnation) in young adults.

H₂: Gender will moderate the relationship between Doom Scrolling and Existential Anxiety in young adults.

Thus, this study addresses these gaps by investigating the relationship between doom scrolling and existential anxiety among young adults, with gender as a moderator, specifically in our culture, Pakistan, taking into account the political and economic aspects overall. By integrating the gendered perspective, the present study provides a nuanced understanding of how continual negative information shapes existential concerns. The findings of this study are expected to inform gender-sensitive mental health interventions and contribute to the broader literature on digital media and existential wellbeing.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Doom Scrolling

Doom scrolling is defined as a vicious cycle of consumption of negative information with complete vigilance. The individual compulsively scrolls through news feeds, especially for distressing information (Satici *et al.*, 2023). It involves excessive scrolling and consumption of negative information, accompanied by reduced awareness of time and surroundings, and is linked with pessimistic thoughts, resulting in counterproductive behaviours (Nguyen, 2020; Shabahang *et al.*, 2023).

Doom scrolling is a self-perpetuating habit of reading and listening to adverse information (Chen, 2020). Research indicates that men consume more news as compared to women, and younger people have a stronger preference for negative news as compared to older people (Kleemans *et al.*, 2012; Sindermann *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, the widespread media exposure to traumatic news raises the chances of post-traumatic stress disorder, and maladaptive consequences, including heightened negative affect and less positive affect (Abdalla *et al.*, 2021; De Hoog & Verboon, 2020).

2.2. Existential Anxiety

Existential anxiety is a frightful emotional state experienced when an individual is confronted with a sense of meaninglessness and preoccupation with death. The feeling of insecurity and helplessness is often accompanied by apprehension of death, emptiness, and guilt (Sherral, 2022). According to Paul Tillich (1952), existential anxiety has three fundamental concepts, including meaninglessness or emptiness, faith and death, and, lastly, guilt and condemnation. Meaninglessness

is the diminished purpose of life and despair towards self, world, and future (Berman *et al.*, 2006). Whereas guilt and condemnation arise when the individual perceives that their actions are not aligned with their own moral standard as well as with the expectations of the world. For the dimension of faith and death, anxiety related to death is the fundamental contributing factor to all other anxieties (Weems *et al.*, 2004).

2.3. Doom Scrolling and Existential Anxiety

Negative news information is a source of different mental health issues. Studies suggest that exposure to negative media or traumatic information has the potential to instigate depression and anxiety. In addition, it enhances negative emotions, including anger and fear among individuals. Furthermore, negatively framed news increases negative emotions and lessens the intentions to resolve the problems, whereas positively framed news stories evoke positive affect (Baden *et al.*, 2019; Park, 2015; Pfefferbaum *et al.*, 2021).

Moreover, people tend to listen to negative news in order to reduce the information gap, as was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. It has a negative impact on mental health, including apprehension and anxiety, contributing to sleep disturbances and lower levels of motivation (Anand *et al.*, 2022; Watercutter, 2020). Research suggests that it is in human nature to be more inclined towards negative or distressing pieces of information (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). Exposure to such disturbing news disrupts gracious beliefs about the world and inculcates uncertainties about the future, and pessimistic thoughts, such as meaninglessness and hopelessness, which ultimately culminate in existential concerns (Shabahang *et al.*, 2024).

Research suggests that experiencing a lack of meaning in life results in heightened emotional distress, resulting in depressive symptoms, decreased self-compassion, stress, and anxiety (Alshehri *et al.*, 2024; Farooq *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, adolescents exposed to disaster have heightened existential anxiety in conjunction with post-traumatic stress disorder and depressive symptoms. Studies have also highlighted that increasing environmental crises evoke higher existential anxiety, which profoundly impacts the sense of meaning in life (Passmore *et al.*, 2023; Weems *et al.*, 2016). Whereas, having a clear sense of purpose in life is linked with lesser depressive symptoms and overall better mental health (Kleftaras & Psarra, 2012), as hope and meaning in life both help the individual to deal with stressors effectively.

Experiences of existential anxiety vary across gender, reflecting differences in terms of emotional processing and coping styles. Studies suggest that women have higher existential anxiety than men, arising from being more emotionally

sensitive, which fosters greater existential themes, including life's purpose and mortality. Moreover, being more emotionally expressive renders them more likely to report existential concerns (Shrivastav & Chauhan, 2025; Zhang *et al.*, 2024).

The overabundance of media exposure has a profound negative impact on mental health (Li & Qiu, 2023; Rodrigues, 2023). The Cultivation Theory by George Gerbner (1960) is an effective theoretical framework that explains how doom scrolling leads to existential anxiety among young adults. Individuals have certain views about the world and about themselves, which serve as a source of purpose and meaningfulness in one's life. According to the theory, exposure to media messages and types of news content significantly influences or shapes the individual's perception of the world. In the context of social media, ceaseless exposure to distressing news and information causes the individual to see the world as more dangerous and unkind (Shrum & Shrum, 2017). These thoughts have the potential to make the individual experience depression, anxiety, and disconnection from others (Edmondson *et al.*, 2011). Thus, continuous consumption of negative news and information distorts an individual's sense of meaning and purpose, resulting in heightened existential anxiety.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Design

A correlational cross-sectional research design was used to investigate the relationship between doom scrolling and existential anxiety.

3.2. Participants

The study sample consisted of 176 young adults (calculated using G*Power). The sample comprised both men (115) and women (61), aged 20–35 years ($M = 22.13$, $SD = 1.970$), and were selected using the convenient sampling technique. Participants were recruited from different institutes in Rawalpindi and Islamabad.

3.3. Measures

3.3.1. Demographic Information Sheet

The demographic information sheet was used to gather data on demographic variables of the participants.

3.3.2. Doom Scrolling Scale

A self-report, 15-item instrument developed by Anand *et al.* (2022). It is a 7-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (7) to

rate the items. The Cronbach alpha reliability of the scale is $\alpha = 0.935$.

3.3.3. Existential Anxiety Questionnaire

A self-report, 13-item instrument developed by Weems (2024). It is a dichotomous scale, with each response scored as “yes = 1” or “no = 0”. The instrument also has reverse scoring. Item numbers 2, 4, 7, 9, 10, 12, and 13 are reverse scored. Total scores ranged from 0 to 13, with higher scores indicating high existential anxiety. No cutoff score has been established. In addition, the Cronbach alpha for the scale is 0.71, with Mean = 5.28 and SD = 2.8. Furthermore, the questionnaire has three subscales:

- i. Anxiety about faith and death (5 items)
- ii. Anxiety about emptiness and meaninglessness (4 items)
- iii. Anxiety related to guilt and condemnation (4 items)

3.4. Procedure

The research was approved and reviewed by the University’s Research Committee. Additionally, approval was taken from the authors of the scales used in the research study. The participants were provided with informed consent, including clear guidelines, ethical considerations, and the purpose of the study, and were ensured that the study was for educational purposes and that all responses would be confidential. Age, gender, residence, type of news, and time spent on news consumption were all included in the demographic information sheet. Data was collected from different institutes. The IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27 was used for statistical analyses, including descriptive statistics, reliability, Pearson product-moment correlation, and moderation analysis.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

- Permission was taken from the Department’s Research Committee before data collection.
- Permission was taken from authors before using the scales.
- Informed consent was taken from participants.
- The participants were guided about the postulates of the study and were given the right of withdrawal.
- The participants were assured that data was kept confidential and anonymous.
- The participants were not harmed physically or psychologically during

research.

4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics of study participants are shown in Table 1. The participants consisted of 115 (65.3%) men and 61 (34.7%) women. The age range of the participants was 20–35 years with a mean age of 22.13 (SD = 1.970).

Table 1: Frequencies and Percentage of the Demographic Information of Participants (N = 176)

Demographics	f	(%)	M	SD
Age			22.13	1.970
Gender				
Men	115	65.3		
Women	61	34.7		
Residence status				
Hostelite	92	52.3		
Day scholar	83	47.2		
Institute type				
Private	25	14.2		
Government	92	52.3		
Semi-government	58	33		
Job status				
Full time	6	3.4		
Part time	13	7.4		
Unemployed	153	86.9		
The type of news one prefers to listen to is political.				
Yes	124	70.5		
No	51	29		
The type of news one prefers to listen to includes natural disasters, violence & war, environmental problems and others.				
Yes	107	60.8		
No	67	38.1		

Source: Author’s field data collected from participants via structured questionnaire.

Table 2: Descriptive and Reliability Analysis (N = 176)

Variables	k	M	SD	Range (Actual)	Range (Potential)	α
Doom Scrolling	15	46.27	17.25	1–7	15–105	0.88
Existential Anxiety	13	6.983	2.453	0–5	0–60	0.75
Anxiety About Faith & Death	5	2.624	1.552	0–5	0–5	0.70
Anxiety about Emptiness and Meaninglessness	4	2.332	1.414	0–4	0–4	0.71
Anxiety about Guilt & Condemnation	4	2.039	1.441	0–4	0–4	0.72

Note. k = no. of items, M = mean, SD = standard deviation, and α = Cronbach alpha reliability.

Source: Author’s field data collected from participants via structured questionnaire, analyzed for internal consistency

4.2. Pearson Product Moment Correlation

Pearson product moment correlation analysis showed that doom scrolling was positively correlated with existential anxiety ($r = 0.319$, $p < 0.01$) and anxiety about emptiness and meaninglessness ($r = 0.196$, $p < 0.05$) (see Table 3).

Table 3: Correlation Analysis between Doom Scrolling and Existential Anxiety Dimensions (N = 176)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Doom Scrolling	—				
2. Existential Anxiety	0.319**	—			
3. Anxiety About Faith and Death	0.096	0.575**	—		
4. Anxiety About Emptiness and Meaninglessness	0.196*	0.519**	-0.015	—	
5. Anxiety About Guilt and Condemnation	0.017	0.534**	-0.034	-0.095	—

Note. $p < 0.05^*$, $*p < 0.01$, $**p < 0.001$. Values represent Pearson correlation coefficients.

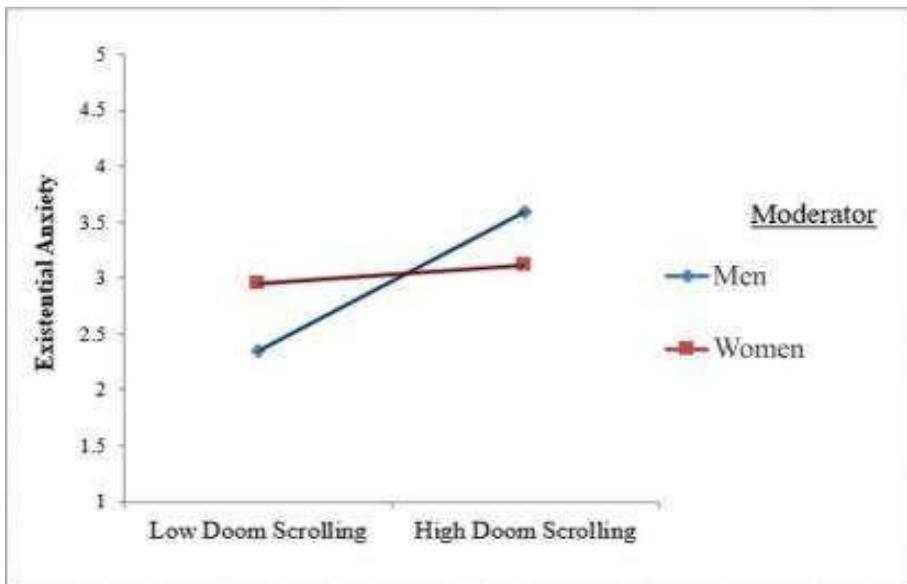
Source: Author’s field data collected from participants via structured

questionnaire, analyzed for Correlation analysis.

4.3. Moderation Analysis

It was hypothesised that gender will moderate the relationship between doom scrolling and existential anxiety. The results (see Table 4) demonstrated that doom scrolling and gender were found to be significant positive predictors of existential anxiety, indicating that men experienced more existential anxiety. Whereas, the interaction effect of doom scrolling and gender was significant with existential anxiety (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Interaction Plot of Doom Scrolling and Gender on Existential Anxiety.



Source: Author's field data analyzed using SPSS.

Table 4: Moderation Analysis Examining the Interaction Effect of Doom Scrolling and Gender on Existential Anxiety (N = 176)

Predictor	B	SE	95% CI LL	95% CI UL
Constant	1.658***	0.017	0.279	0.548
Doom Scrolling	0.035***	0.013	0.034	0.083
Gender	0.086*	0.031	0.043	0.101
Doom Scrolling × Gender	-0.036*	0.025	-0.086	-0.122

Doom Scrolling and Existential Anxiety among Young Adults

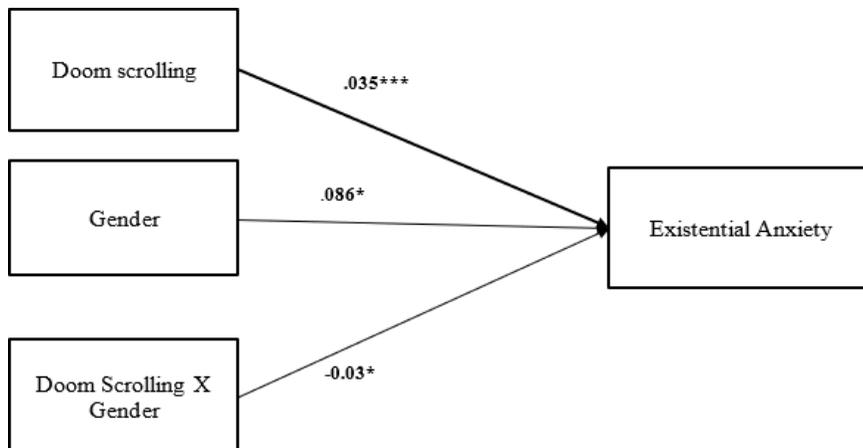
R ²	0.224			
F	6.249*			

Note. $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.001$. Gender was dummy coded (0 = women, 1 = men). CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit.

Source: Author's field data collected from participants via structured questionnaire, analyzed for Moderation Analysis.

The interaction plot indicated that the relationship between doom scrolling and existential anxiety was positive and stronger for men. In contrast, the relationship between doom scrolling and existential anxiety remained relatively unchanged for women (see Figure 1).

Figure 2: Emerged Statistical Model.



Source: Developed by the author based on the moderation analysis results.

Figure 2 presents the emerged statistical model illustrating the direct effect of doom scrolling on existential anxiety and the moderating role of gender. The model indicates that doom scrolling significantly predicts existential anxiety, with gender shaping the strength and direction of this relationship. Specifically, the effect of doom scrolling on existential anxiety is more pronounced among men than women.

Overall, the findings confirm that doom scrolling is a meaningful psychological risk factor for young adults, and that gender differences play an important role in explaining how negative online consumption translates into existential anxiety.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study broaden the growing yet limited literature investigating the existential connotation of unceasing exposure to negative news. This study aimed to elucidate the possible correlation between doom scrolling and existential anxiety, along with possible gender-based differences.

The findings revealed that doom scrolling was positively associated with existential anxiety and (anxiety about emptiness and meaninglessness) (see Table 3), indicating that participants who engage in doom scrolling reported higher levels of existential anxiety. The results are consistent with cultivation theory, which suggests that media content shapes the perception and belief of people, and that doom scrolling inculcates a sense of uncertainty and meaninglessness (Shrum, 2017). Moreover, these findings also corroborate existing literature, as individuals consuming more negative news experience heightened existential anxiety (Shabahang *et al.*, 2024). Furthermore, consuming negative news compulsively can make people develop negative thought patterns, anxiety, depression, and stress (Anchan & Puranik, 2025). This exposure can consequently weaken the meaning of life, fostering hopelessness and emptiness among individuals, leading to questioning their sense of purpose.

Moreover, it was also hypothesised that gender will moderate the relationship between doom scrolling and existential anxiety. The moderation analysis revealed gender as a significant moderator between doom scrolling and existential anxiety (see Table 4), indicating the positive association for men as compared to women (see Figure 1). These findings align with prior studies that men scored higher on doom scrolling, and consuming negative stories or news results in higher arousal levels as compared to women (Grabe & Kamhawi, 2006; Shabahang *et al.*, 2023). With such exposure to negative news media, it results in uncertainty evolving into distress and anxiety (Kesner *et al.*, 2025). Moreover, exposure to negative news also leads to negative affect and mental health problems (De Hoog & Verboon, 2020; Li & Qiu, 2023; Zhao & Zhou, 2020). As vicarious exposure to negative news is linked to emotional arousal, stress, anxiety, and declined well-being, it makes men more susceptible to experiencing meaninglessness and overall heightened existential concerns.

6. CONCLUSION

Over the past few years, because of the rapid digitalisation, the exposure, especially to negative media content, has increased a lot, raising concerns about the well-being of individuals, particularly young adults. In this context, the present research contributes to the understanding of how doom scrolling is associated with heightened existential anxiety among young adults. The study highlights the psychological implications of continual exposure to negative

media, highlighting the need to promote psychological resilience in response to increasing challenges due to intense usage of digital media.

Furthermore, the present study examined the gendered perspective of doom scrolling and existential anxiety. The results indicated that the impact of distressing information is not uniform across gender, with men exhibiting higher existential anxiety as compared to women. The result suggests that the patterns of consuming distressing information are associated with different psychological and social factors. Moreover, it emphasised differences in experiencing existential anxiety, specifically due to the vicarious exposure to negative content. These findings underscore the importance of tailor-made mental health awareness and interventions incorporating a gender-sensitive framework, specifically due to technology-related psychological problems. Mental health professionals play a significant role in promoting digital literacy, advocating for regulating news media consumption, and relying on credible media sources. Moreover, these insights advance the theoretical assumptions, as the results extend the literature by illustrating doom scrolling as a significant behavioural antecedent of existential anxiety. Conclusively, the study overall highlights a balanced approach towards digital media usage for psychological well-being.

7. LIMITATIONS

The present study has several limitations. Firstly, individual differences, such as personality traits, are strong determinants of human behaviour, which may influence the tendency to engage in doom scrolling, potentially inclining individuals to interpret negative news as significant insights. Future research could examine personality-based frameworks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of doom scrollers. Secondly, the consumption of different types of negative news may vary across age groups; therefore, future studies should include essential age cohorts that engage with distinct forms of negative news consumption. Lastly, the onset of doom scrolling may play a pivotal role in shaping existential anxiety. Individuals who have been consuming negative news for only a short duration may experience existential anxiety differently compared to those who have been exposed to negative news for a year or longer.

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