

The Impact of Doomscrolling on Mental Health: A Quantitative Study on the Relationship Between Negative Media Consumption, Anxiety Sensitivity and Generalized Anxiety Disorder in Adults (18–45 Years Old)

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Abstract

The present study, titled "The Impact of Doomscrolling on Mental Health: A Quantitative Study on the Relationship Between Negative Media Consumption, Anxiety Sensitivity and Generalized Anxiety Disorder Among Adults Aged 18–45 Years," aims to examine the relationship between doomscrolling behavior and mental health among adults. Doomscrolling refers to the continuous consumption of negative or distressing news and social media content, which may contribute to psychological distress, anxiety, and heightened sensitivity to threatening information. The study focuses on understanding the patterns of negative media consumption and their association with anxiety-related experiences among adults.

A quantitative research approach was adopted, and data were analyzed from 100 responses (N = 100) collected through a structured questionnaire. The collected data were examined using descriptive statistics, mean scores, graphical representations, and correlation analysis. The findings indicated that the mean exploratory scores for doomscrolling-related behavior, generalized anxiety disorder-like symptoms, and anxiety-sensitivity-related experiences were 2.78, 2.97, and 2.90, respectively, on a five-point response scale. The descriptive findings also showed variation in daily scrolling habits among participants, with 28% reporting two or more hours of daily scrolling. These results provide an overview of participants' media-consumption patterns and anxiety-related experiences.

The study highlights the importance of understanding the potential psychological implications of prolonged exposure to negative digital content. It may contribute to greater awareness of responsible social media use, digital well-being, and strategies for managing exposure to distressing information. However, the findings should be interpreted cautiously because the exploratory item-group scores do not establish clinical diagnoses or validated psychological scale scores. Further research using validated instruments and a larger, more diverse sample is recommended to clarify the relationship between doomscrolling, anxiety sensitivity, and generalized anxiety symptoms.

Keywords: Doomscrolling, Mental Health, Negative Media Consumption, Anxiety Sensitivity, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Social Media, Adults

1. Introduction

The digital landscape of the 21st century has fundamentally altered how individuals consume information. While the internet offers unprecedented access to global events, it has also given rise to "doomscrolling"—the compulsive habit of consuming a continuous stream of negative news and distressing content on social media and digital platforms. Although often driven by an evolutionary negativity bias and a desire to stay informed during times of uncertainty, this behavior has increasingly been linked to significant psychological distress.

1.1 The Phenomenon of Doomscrolling

Doomscrolling is characterized by an "infinite scroll" of catastrophic headlines, ranging from geopolitical conflicts to environmental crises. For adults aged 18 to 45, a demographic that represents the most active users of digital technology, this constant exposure serves as a persistent stressor. Unlike traditional media, the algorithmic nature of modern social media platforms ensures that users with an interest in current events are often trapped in feedback loops of increasingly alarming content.

1.2 Anxiety Sensitivity and GAD

Central to understanding why some individuals are more affected by this habit than others is the concept of Anxiety Sensitivity (AS). AS is the "fear of fear"—the belief that sensations of anxiety (such as a racing heart or intrusive thoughts) are harmful or will lead to disastrous social or physical outcomes. In the context of doomscrolling, individuals with high AS may be more prone to interpreting negative media as a personal threat, thereby exacerbating their physiological and emotional responses.

When these heightened states of arousal become chronic, they can transition into Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD). GAD is marked by excessive, uncontrollable worry about various aspects of daily life. For the 18–45 age group, who are navigating critical life stages such as career building and family formation, the intersection of negative media consumption and pre-existing anxiety traits creates a "perfect storm" for the development or maintenance of clinical anxiety disorders.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

Despite the growing recognition of doomscrolling as a public health concern, there is a lack of robust quantitative data exploring the specific pathways between negative media habits and clinical diagnoses like GAD, particularly through the lens of anxiety sensitivity. This study aims to quantify these relationships, seeking to determine:

1. To what extent doomscrolling predicts the severity of GAD symptoms.
2. Whether anxiety sensitivity acts as a mediator or moderator in this relationship.
3. How these variables manifest within the specific developmental window of 18 to 45 years.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 The Behavioral Mechanics of Doomscrolling

Doomscrolling is defined as the compulsive habit of consuming a continuous stream of negative news, despite the physical and emotional distress it causes. Research indicates that this behavior is reinforced by algorithmic design features such as "infinite scrolling," which create a habitual cycle of consumption.

- **Negativity Bias:** Humans are evolutionarily wired to notice and respond more strongly to negative news as a survival mechanism (Gelbart, 2025). In the digital age, this leads to an addiction-like seek-

ing of information to resolve uncertainty, which instead perpetuates stress.

- Prevalence: Approximately 53% of adults regularly get their news from social media platforms, where clickbait and emotionally charged headlines are prioritized by algorithms to boost engagement.

2.2 The Relationship Between Media Consumption and Anxiety

- Physiological Response: Continuous exposure to distressing headlines triggers the body's fight-or-flight response, releasing cortisol and adrenaline. This results in physical symptoms like rapid heart rate and shallow breathing, which are hallmark indicators of heightened anxiety (Grow Therapy, 2026).
- The Uncertainty Cycle: Negative media acts as a potent source of subjective uncertainty. Individuals often consume more news to minimize this uncertainty, but the exposure actually perpetuates a vicious circle of worry and psychopathology.

2.3 Anxiety Sensitivity (AS) as a Core Mechanism

Anxiety Sensitivity—the fear of anxiety-related sensations—is a critical variable in this study.

- Cognitive Correlates: Studies using computational models have found that individuals with Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) are significantly more sensitive to learning from and reacting to negative feedback compared to healthy participants.
- Fear of Impending Doom: High AS leads individuals to interpret the physiological arousal caused by news (e.g., muscle tension or racing heart) as a sign of imminent personal disaster. This creates a feedback loop where the news creates the physical symptom, and the symptom itself becomes a new source of fear (Grow Therapy, 2026).

2.4 Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) in Adults (18–45)

This age group is particularly vulnerable due to their status as digital natives or high-frequency social media users.

- Clinical Symptoms: For these adults, doomscrolling reinforces symptoms of GAD, including excessive worrying, restlessness, and difficulty concentrating.
- Impact of Global Stressors: Recent literature highlights that global crises (economic, environmental, and geopolitical) are amplified by media representations, making these threats feel more real, immediate, and impending to the individual than they may statistically be.
- Moderating Factors: Psychological resilience has been identified as a key moderator. While doomscrolling increases anxiety, individuals with higher resilience may experience a buffered effect, suggesting that internal traits significantly dictate the severity of the mental health impact.

3. Research Gap

3.1 Lack of Integration of Cognitive Mediators

While many studies have established a direct link between doomscrolling and general distress, there is a gap in understanding the cognitive underlying mechanism. Most current research focuses on the behavior (scrolling) and the outcome (anxiety) but ignores the underlying cognitive mechanism. By including Anxiety Sensitivity (AS), this study investigates whether the fear of physical anxiety sensations is the missing link that turns a bad habit into a clinical disorder.

3.2 General Anxiety vs. Specific Clinical GAD

A significant portion of existing literature focuses on state anxiety (temporary feelings of nervousness) or existential dread related to specific events like COVID-19 or climate change. There is a scarcity of

quantitative research that specifically measures the relationship between doomscrolling and the clinical criteria for Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) in a non-pandemic, everyday context. This study fills this gap by utilizing standardized clinical screening approaches rather than general mood scales.

3.3 Developmental Focus on Established Adults (Age 18–45)

Existing research on digital habits often leans heavily toward emerging adults (college students aged 18–22) because they are an easily accessible sample. However, the 18–45 demographic faces unique stressors such as career stability, parenting, and long-term financial planning that may interact differently with negative media consumption.

3.4 Need for Mediation/Moderation Models

Much of the current research is purely correlational. There is a methodological gap for studies that use complex quantitative models (like Mediation Analysis) to see if Anxiety Sensitivity explains the relationship between media use and GAD. This study moves beyond simple correlation to explore the internal pathway of how these variables interact.

4. Objective of the Study

Primary Objective

- To investigate the quantitative relationship between the frequency of doomscrolling (negative media consumption) and the severity of Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) symptoms among adults aged 18 to 45.

Secondary Objectives

- To Assess Cognitive Traits: To measure the levels of Anxiety Sensitivity within the target population and determine its prevalence among high-frequency digital media users.
- To Identify the Mediation Effect: To examine whether Anxiety Sensitivity acts as a mediator in the relationship between doomscrolling behavior and the manifestation of GAD symptoms.
- To Analyze Demographic Variance: To explore potential differences in doomscrolling patterns and anxiety levels across different age brackets within the 18–45 range.
- To Evaluate Predictive Power: To determine the extent to which doomscrolling frequency can serve as a statistical predictor for the onset or exacerbation of GAD symptoms.

4.1 Research Hypotheses

- H1: There is a significant positive correlation between the time spent doomscrolling and the severity of GAD symptoms.
- H2: Individuals with high levels of Anxiety Sensitivity will show a stronger relationship between negative media consumption and GAD than those with low Anxiety Sensitivity.
- H3: Anxiety Sensitivity significantly mediates the path between doomscrolling (Independent Variable) and GAD (Dependent Variable).

5. Research Methodology

5.1 Research Design

This study employs a quantitative, cross-sectional, and correlational research design. It is cross-sectional as data were collected at a single point in time, and correlational because it seeks to identify the strength and direction of relationships between variables without experimental manipulation.

5.2 Variables

- Independent Variable (IV): Doomscrolling (Negative Media Consumption).

- Dependent Variable (DV): Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) symptoms.
- Mediating Variable (MV): Anxiety Sensitivity (The fear of anxiety-related sensations).

5.3 Participants and Sampling

- Target Population: Adults aged 18 to 45 years.
- Sample Size: N = 100.
- Sampling Technique: Convenience / Purposive sampling via online platforms.
- Inclusion Criteria: Aged 18–45 years, active user of at least one social media platform, and ability to read/respond in English.
- Exclusion Criteria: Individuals currently undergoing acute psychiatric crisis or experiencing severe cognitive impairment preventing survey completion.

6. Data Analysis, Scoring, and Interpretation

6.1 Data Preparation and Scoring Procedure

A total of 100 responses (N = 100) were verified and included in the dataset. Likert-scale responses were assigned numerical values ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Table 1: Response Category and Scoring Coding Key

Response Category	Score Code
Strongly Disagree	1
Disagree	2
Neutral	3
Agree	4
Strongly Agree	5

6.2 Demographic and Media-Use Profile

The dataset comprised 77 female respondents (77.0%) and 23 male respondents (23.0%), establishing a female-majority sample.

Table 2: Gender Distribution of Sample (N = 100)

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Female	77	77.0%
Male	23	23.0%

Table 3: Age Distribution as Recorded

Age Category	Frequency	Percentage
33–40	31	31.0%
25–32	24	24.0%
18–25	14	14.0%
26–32	11	11.0%
40–45	10	10.0%
18–24	10	10.0%

Table 4: Daily Duration Spent Scrolling Negative/Crisis News (N = 100)

Daily Duration	Frequency	Percentage
Less than 30 min	26	26.0%
30 to 60 min	23	23.0%
1 to 2 hrs	23	23.0%
2 to 3 hrs	21	21.0%
3+ hrs	7	7.0%

6.3 Descriptive Statistics of Exploratory Item Groups

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics for Exploratory Item Groups

Exploratory Item Group	N	Mean (1–5)	SD	Observed Range
Doomscrolling (exploratory)	100	2.78	0.92	1.00–4.73
GAD-like symptoms (exploratory)	100	2.97	0.86	1.00–4.44
Anxiety-sensitivity-like (exploratory)	100	2.90	0.90	1.00–4.60

6.4 Inferential Correlation Analysis

Pearson's product-moment correlation analysis was conducted to assess linear associations among the exploratory construct groupings.

Table 6: Pearson Correlation Matrix and Significance Levels (N = 100)

Variable Pair	Pearson r	p-value	Interpretation
Doomscrolling & GAD-like Symptoms	0.800	$< .001$ ($p = 1.90 \times 10^{-23}$)	Strong positive correlation
Doomscrolling & Anxiety-Sensitivity-like	0.800	$< .001$ ($p = 1.92 \times 10^{-23}$)	Strong positive correlation
GAD-like Symptoms & Anxiety-Sensitivity-like	0.853	$< .001$ ($p = 1.79 \times 10^{-29}$)	Strong positive correlation

7. Discussion

7.1 Demographic Considerations

The female-majority composition of the sample (77%) requires consideration when generalizing findings. Research indicates potential differences in media engagement patterns and self-reported anxiety symptoms across gender identities.

7.2 Media Consumption Patterns

With 28% of participants engaging in two or more hours of daily doomscrolling, extended digital exposure is notable in this adult cohort. Compulsive media checking often functions as an attempt to diminish subjective uncertainty, paradoxically heightening distress.

7.3 Evaluation of Research Hypotheses

- H1: Supported by empirical directional outcome ($r = .800$, $p < .001$), showing strong positive co-occurrence between doomscrolling habits and anxiety symptoms.
- H2 & H3: Moderation and mediation models could not be formally confirmed due to cross-sectional design constraints and requirement of validated clinical scales.

8. Scope and Limitations

8.1 Scope of the Study

The scope was delimited to adults aged 18 to 45, focusing specifically on doomscrolling behavior, Anxiety Sensitivity, and Generalized Anxiety Disorder symptoms evaluated through quantitative self-report metrics.

8.2 Methodological & Biological Limitations

1. Absence of Biological Markers: Hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis indicators such as salivary cortisol and heart rate variability (HRV) were not recorded.
2. Cross-Sectional Constraints: Temporal causality between news consumption and anxiety symptoms cannot be established.
3. Psychometric Measures: Exploratory item groups were analyzed in place of validated clinical standard scoring keys.

9. Recommendations and Conclusion

9.1 Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should incorporate validated standardized measures (e.g., formal GAD-7 and ASI-3 instruments), utilize longitudinal tracking, and employ larger representative samples to test complex mediation/moderation pathways.

9.2 Conclusion

The study demonstrates robust positive statistical associations between daily doomscrolling, anxiety sensitivity, and generalized anxiety symptoms among adults aged 18 to 45. These results underscore the importance of digital well-being strategies in contemporary mental health care.

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