



Doomscrolling, Sleep Quality, and Psychological Distress Among Young Adults: A Review

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Abstract

Doomscrolling refers to the compulsive tendency to continue consuming negative or distressing online content despite the discomfort it causes. This paper reviews current psychological literature examining how doomscrolling relates to sleep quality and psychological distress among young adults, a population with particularly high rates of smartphone and social media use. Evidence from recent studies indicates that doomscrolling and related patterns of heavy digital media use are consistently associated with poorer sleep quality and elevated symptoms of anxiety and depression, and that disrupted sleep may itself act as a pathway through which doomscrolling contributes to psychological distress. The paper discusses possible explanations for these patterns, including intolerance of uncertainty and heightened emotional arousal from negative content, and considers what these findings mean for young adults and mental health professionals in India, where research specifically on doomscrolling remains limited even as related digital-behaviour research grows. The paper closes with a discussion of gaps in the current literature and suggestions for future research.

Keywords: doomscrolling, sleep quality, psychological distress, young adults, social media

Introduction

Smartphones have changed how people, especially young adults, encounter news and information. One behaviour that has drawn increasing attention from psychologists is doomscrolling: the habit of repeatedly scrolling through negative or distressing content online, even when it leaves the person feeling worse (Satıcı et al., 2022). The term became widely used during the COVID-19 pandemic, when uncertainty about the virus led many people to check case counts and alarming headlines late into the night (Anand et al., 2022).

Young adulthood, roughly the late teens through the twenties, is a life stage marked by high smartphone use and high sensitivity to social and environmental information, which may make this age group especially prone to doomscrolling. Two outcomes are repeatedly linked to the behaviour in the literature: poorer sleep and higher psychological distress. Sleep is easily disrupted by late-night phone use, both because screen light delays the body's natural sleep signals and because upsetting content keeps the mind alert at a time it should be winding down. Psychological distress, including anxiety and low mood, appears to work in both directions with doomscrolling: distress can push people toward compulsive checking, and the checking itself can then deepen the distress (Kaya & Griffiths, 2025).

This paper brings together recent research on these relationships to better understand how doomscrolling, sleep, and psychological distress connect among young adults, and what this might mean specifically for young adults in India, where this behaviour is common but has been studied less than in other countries.

Review of Literature

The Doomscrolling Construct

Satıcı et al. (2022) developed and validated the Doomscrolling Scale across three studies and found that doomscrolling was meaningfully related to psychological distress and lower wellbeing, even after accounting for related constructs such as social media addiction and fear of missing out. Their work established doomscrolling as a distinct and measurable pattern of behaviour, not simply a symptom of general heavy phone use. Sharma et al. (2022) similarly described doomscrolling as a specific pattern of newsfeed engagement in which users are drawn into an escalating cycle of negative content, distinguishing it conceptually from ordinary news consumption or general social media browsing.



Doomscrolling and Psychological Distress

Anand et al. (2022), writing on the Indian experience of the COVID-19 lockdown, described how doomsurfing and doomscrolling generated anxiety, fear, and uncertainty among adults, which in turn led to difficulty falling asleep and lower sleep quality. This is one of the few studies situated directly in an Indian context and offers early evidence that the pattern seen internationally also applies locally.

Kaya (2025) studied adolescents and found that doomscrolling helped explain why young people with problematic social media habits also reported higher psychological distress, suggesting doomscrolling is not just a side effect of heavy phone use but an active link in the chain leading to distress. Kaya and Griffiths (2025) extended this by showing that people who struggle to tolerate uncertainty are more likely to doomscroll, and that doomscrolling then predicts lower mental wellbeing, positioning the behaviour as a kind of reassurance-seeking that backfires.

Buchanan et al. (2021) tested this experimentally, exposing participants to just a few minutes of pandemic-related negative content. Even this brief exposure lowered participants' positive mood and optimism compared to neutral or uplifting content, suggesting the emotional tone of what is scrolled matters more than how long someone spends online. Longitudinal work supports the idea that these relationships build over time rather than appearing all at once. Akat and Hamarta (2025) followed adolescents across two time points and found doomscrolling and social media addiction reinforced each other. Chang et al. (2022), following university students for nine months, found a similar back-and-forth pattern between problematic social media use and psychological distress. Price et al. (2022) tracked adults during the pandemic and found that people who consumed more distressing daily media reported worse mental health over time.

Broader Social Media Use and Psychological Distress Among Indian Young Adults

Although doomscrolling-specific research from India remains limited, a wider body of Indian research on social media and internet use points in the same direction. Kumar et al. (2023), studying college-going young adults in India, found that psychological distress and personality traits were meaningfully related to patterns of social network use, including substance-related content within these networks. More recently, Pradeep Kumar et al. (2025) surveyed over four hundred undergraduate and postgraduate students in Tamil Nadu and found a significant positive correlation between hours spent on social media and scores on the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale, with excessive users reporting distress at more than double the rate of non-excessive users. Outside India, Keles et al. (2020), in a systematic review, concluded that heavier social media use was consistently associated with higher depression, anxiety, and psychological distress in adolescents and young adults, providing a broader evidence base into which doomscrolling-specific findings fit.

Sleep Quality and Digital Media Use

The Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index, developed by Buysse et al. (1989), remains the most widely used tool for assessing subjective sleep quality and has been applied in the large majority of studies linking digital media habits to sleep. Exelmans and Van den Bulck (2016) found that phone use in bed, particularly texting and calling after lights were out, was associated with lower sleep quality scores and greater daytime tiredness in adults. Within an Indian setting, Goel et al. (2023), studying undergraduate medical students in Dehradun, found that greater smartphone screen time was associated with poorer sleep quality and later bedtimes, even after accounting for other factors, indicating that this pattern is not unique to Western samples.

The clearest evidence connecting doomscrolling directly to sleep comes from Yang et al. (2024), who studied a large sample of Chinese university students and found that doomscrolling was linked to both insomnia and depression, and that it helped explain the back-and-forth relationship between the two: poor sleep worsened depressive symptoms, which in turn fed further doomscrolling and further sleep disruption. Anand et al. (2022) reported a parallel pattern among Indian adults during the pandemic, where doomscrolling-related anxiety directly interfered with the ability to fall and stay asleep.



Interventions and Protective Approaches

A smaller body of research has examined whether reducing negative digital media consumption can reverse some of these effects. Alanzi et al. (2024) found that a simple two-week digital detox intervention produced significant reductions in both anxiety and depression scores among young adults across genders and occupational groups, suggesting that the relationship between heavy negative content consumption and distress may be at least partially reversible through relatively brief behavioural change. This offers a hopeful counterpoint to the largely correlational literature on doomscrolling itself.

Taken together, this body of research points to a consistent pattern: doomscrolling and related patterns of negative digital media use are linked to worse sleep and higher psychological distress, these two outcomes are connected to each other, the relationships tend to build and reinforce over time rather than being isolated effects, and there is preliminary evidence that reducing this behaviour can improve wellbeing.

Rationale and Objectives

Despite this growing evidence base, the studies that examine doomscrolling by name have mostly been conducted with samples from Turkey, China, Taiwan, and North America. Indian research so far has tended to study the broader categories of social media use, internet use, or smartphone addiction rather than doomscrolling specifically, even though India has one of the largest populations of young smartphone users in the world. This paper aims to bring together what is currently known, both from doomscrolling-specific studies and from the closely related Indian literature on digital media and distress, and to consider its relevance to Indian young adults. The specific objectives are:

1. To review existing research on the relationship between doomscrolling and sleep quality among young adults.
2. To review existing research on the relationship between doomscrolling and psychological distress among young adults.
3. To consider the possible psychological mechanisms underlying these relationships.
4. To discuss the relevance of these findings for young adults and mental health professionals in India.

Method

This paper is based on a review of published, peer-reviewed research rather than newly collected data. Relevant studies were located through searches of Google Scholar, PubMed, and PsycINFO using terms such as "doomscrolling," "sleep quality," "psychological distress," and "young adults," focusing primarily on studies published between 2020 and 2026, since doomscrolling only began to be studied as a distinct construct around this time. Where doomscrolling-specific research was limited, particularly for the Indian context, the search was widened to include closely related constructs such as smartphone addiction, problematic internet use, and social media use, provided the study measured sleep quality and/or psychological distress in a young adult sample. Priority was given to peer-reviewed empirical studies. The findings of these studies were then grouped and discussed according to common themes rather than analysed statistically.

Discussion

The reviewed literature suggests that doomscrolling, poor sleep, and psychological distress are closely intertwined rather than separate problems. A plausible explanation is that doomscrolling, particularly when it happens at night, keeps the mind emotionally activated at a time the body is meant to be settling down for sleep. Over time, poor sleep makes it harder to regulate emotions the next day, which may make a person more likely to reach for their phone and scroll again, especially if they already struggle with uncertainty or worry. This creates a loop where the behaviour, the poor sleep, and the distress all feed into one another rather than one simply causing the other.



Not everyone who doomscrolls seems to be affected equally. Traits such as intolerance of uncertainty appear to make people more vulnerable, since checking the news can feel like a way of managing anxiety even though it usually increases it instead (Kaya & Griffiths, 2025). This suggests that interventions aimed at helping people tolerate uncertainty, rather than simply telling them to use their phones less, might be more effective. At the same time, the finding that a brief digital detox can measurably reduce anxiety and depression (Alanzi et al., 2024) suggests the cycle is not fixed and can be interrupted with relatively modest changes in behaviour.

For India specifically, the limited doomscrolling-specific research (Anand et al., 2022) is reinforced by a wider body of Indian evidence on social media use, sleep, and distress (Goel et al., 2023; Kumar et al., 2023; Pradeep Kumar et al., 2025), all of which point toward the same basic pattern. Still, there is not yet enough Indian data specifically on doomscrolling to say how factors such as academic pressure, family expectations, or cultural attitudes toward mental health might shape the way this particular behaviour affects young Indian adults differently from young adults elsewhere.

Implications

These findings suggest that mental health professionals working with young adults might benefit from asking about nighttime phone habits when assessing sleep problems or mood symptoms, since doomscrolling could be an unrecognised contributing factor in both. Since the tone of content, not just time spent online, appears to matter most, sleep advice that focuses only on reducing screen time may miss the point; guidance that specifically addresses late-night engagement with distressing content may be more useful. Given the possible role of intolerance of uncertainty, approaches that build comfort with not knowing, such as those used in anxiety treatment, may also help reduce the pull toward compulsive checking, and brief structured digital detox periods may offer a practical, low-cost starting point for intervention.

Limitations and Future Directions

Because this paper is a review of existing literature rather than a new study, its conclusions depend on the quality and scope of the research already available. Much of the doomscrolling-specific research comes from outside India, and where Indian data exists, it more often concerns broader constructs such as social media addiction or general internet use rather than doomscrolling itself. Future research would benefit from studies conducted directly with Indian young adults that measure doomscrolling specifically, using established tools such as the Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index and the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales, and ideally following participants over time so that the direction of these relationships can be established more clearly rather than inferred from existing patterns.

Conclusion

The literature reviewed here points consistently to doomscrolling, and closely related patterns of heavy negative digital media use, being linked with poorer sleep and greater psychological distress among young adults, with these two outcomes reinforcing one another over time. While the international evidence base is growing, and a parallel Indian literature on social media, sleep, and distress is building, research specific to doomscrolling among Indian young adults remains limited relative to how common the behaviour appears to be. Understanding and addressing this pattern, both through further research and through clinical attention to nighttime digital habits, may be a useful part of supporting the mental health of young adults today.

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