



Doomscrolling and Existential Nihilism in Undergraduate Students: Implications for Resilience and Meaning-Making

¹Vedika Kapoor

Msc Clinical Psychology, CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Delhi-NCR

²Sakshi Khatri

Msc Clinical Psychology, CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Delhi-NCR

³Dr. Payal Sharma

²Assistant Professor, CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Delhi-NCR

Abstract

The increasingly common phenomenon of doomscrolling, i.e., the continuous, unchecked, and unconscious consumption of negative news items that can be accessed on the internet, is a rapidly evolving threat to the psychological health of the undergraduate student population. While the preponderance of existing work has explored the relationship between doomscrolling, anxiety, depression, and stress, the role of doomscrolling in the promotion of student-level existential concerns remains a concern for which limited work has been performed. As a means of fostering a greater understanding of the role which doomscrolling plays in the lives of the undergraduate population, this article will perform a conceptual analysis of the trend, through the application of the perspectives which the existing body of modern science has to offer, with an exploration of the role which the concept of uncertainty regulation, the role of the search for meaning, the role of the concept of resilience in countering this, the function which the search for meaning plays alongside this, the manner through which doomscrolling represents a function of broader cultural

changes, and the manner through which this represents an expression of a broader shift in the means through which human entities frame the individual level of existence. The implications for these areas, including higher education, digital well-being programs, and psychological literacy, address aspects such as the value of reflective involvement, tolerating uncertainty, and value-based living. This paper seeks further contributions towards an understanding of student well-being in relation to digital-saturated learning environments, firstly by exploring topics in relation to those of doomscrolling, but also in relation to an existing state of being in an existential manner, i.e., it is not an action or an activity in itself.

Keywords: doomscrolling; existential nihilism; meaning-making; resilience; undergraduate students; digital well-being.

Introduction

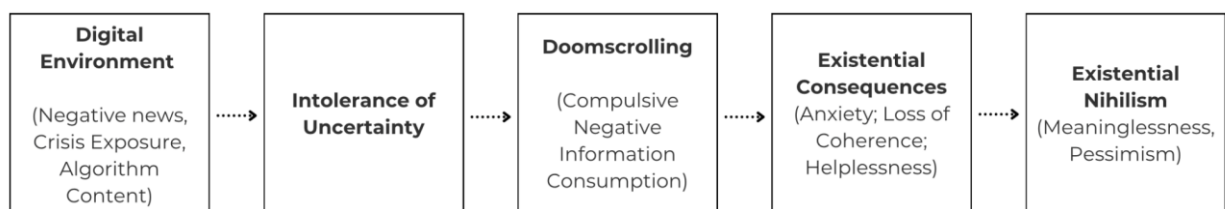
The transformation in an individual's daily lives as a consequence of the concept of digitization has also influenced the way an individual receives and comprehends any form of information associated with major events taking place in the world as well as the management of his/her personal emotions in the face of occurrence. For the contemporary student in an undergraduate setting, digital media is not just an instrument, it is an environment that is constantly present in daily life. And in the process of processing and understanding contemporary student culture in relation to the environment of digital media, a practice termed as "doomscrolling" has become a ubiquitous student behavior. Though it was first conceived as being linked to a world crisis as in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is now an enduring feature beyond such events.

Previous research has focused on doomscrolling from a pathological point of view, an online behavior that has also been correlated with anxiety, depression, sleeping difficulties, and tension-related outcomes, according to Price et al. (2022) and Musiał (2025). Despite being useful research, it is narrow-sighted. Current literature is suggesting that instead of considering it a pathological online behavior, it is more connected to how humans are facing or understanding uncertainties that are attached to building meanings regarding their positions within an uncertain world (Shabahang et al., 2024).

Undergraduates highlight this phenomenon in particular. Emerging adulthood entails being faced with the developmental tasks of identity formation, determining personal values, and making future decisions while functioning in an environment where stories of upheaval and uncertainty are more readily available than success stories. The cumulative adverse effects of an environment in which threatening information dominates may contribute to increased levels of existential distress in students in particular. The gradual desiring-outcome framework may lead individuals to nihilistically perceive life in particular.

This paper approaches doomscrolling from a theoretical and integrative perspective, as an existentially relevant behavior. Rather than conceptualize the behavior as an unequivocally maladaptive coping habit, this paper describes doomscrolling in regard to its being an attempt at uncertainty regulation by regaining psychological equilibration—an effort that often backfires and ensconces distress and meaninglessness. The following paper synthesizes empirical findings and theoretical insights to explore how experiences of doomscrolling feed into existential nihilism and what role resilience and meaning-enhancing might play as protective processes.

Figure 1. *Conceptual framework*



Doomscrolling as an Existential Phenomenon

The common description of the phenomenon of doomscrolling is represented as an habitual use of harmful information found on the internet, often fueled by the assumption of needing to stay informed or ready to cope with possible danger (Sharma et al., 2022). At the same time, following this description of behavior, one can identify another level of psychological phenomenon represented as management of uncertainties. The basis of any human behavior is represented as an inherent need for predictability or coherence. In other words, people choose to seek information when they are faced with some ambiguous situation.

Empirical research implies that individuals who exhibit elevated levels of intolerance for uncertainty can easily develop "doomscrolling." This is affirmed by Kütük et al. (2025) and Salsabila and Qonitatin (2025). What was initially meant to provide a sense of alleviating anxiety through information search turns out to be an unproductive process itself.

The continuous consumption of ever-increasing volumes of trending negatively informing our minds negatively impacts our mental well-being. Doomscrolling, instead of reducing our level of uncertainty, heightens it.

This has particular import from an existential point of view. Existential psychology is theoretically grounded on concerns for meaning, freedom, and mortality, all inherent within humanity (Greenberg et al., 1986). Constantly being exposed to stories about dangers, unfairness, and tragedies eventually undermines people's connections to meaning. Doomscrolling is, from one point of view, an expression of people's existential anxiety, an effort to grapple with uncertainties that ultimately exacerbates these uncertainties.

Existential Nihilism and Digital Exposure

Existential nihilism is a belief that life does not possess any meaning or purpose. It may be evident that despite their ruminative behaviors, doomscreeners may not necessarily judge or hold a nihilistic perspective. Nevertheless, there exist proofs that create a connection between a lack of existential well-being.

Research on intercultural samples suggests that there is a significant link between engaging in this behavior and experiencing existential anxiety and negative beliefs about human nature (Shabahang et al., 2024). The phenomenon has been correlated with heightened senses of meaninglessness and negative views of human nature within both Iranian and American samples. In a sample of European young adult University Students, a significant link between digital consumption and a loss of perceived meaning with depression was also found (Mandelkow & Hillesund, 2025).

The mechanism through which this constituent dynamic operates would seem to be one of cognitive saturation/desensitization. This implies that with numerous exposures to experiences of suffering and crises, individuals could finally lose their perceived personal agency or moral integration. Such coping mechanisms could finally produce in them a worldview of cynicism, socialization, or fatigue. Severe psychological consequences can be

expected of students who are having difficulty coping with pressures of school or with struggles of identity in general.

Resilience as Meaning-Making Rather Than Resistance

The traditional definition of the construct of resilience entails some degree of exposure to stressing situations, as if one is able to bounce back from some difficulty that he/she experienced, and so on, but recent research suggests a different viewpoint by defining this construct as "more a process of meaning creation rather than merely enduring stressing situations or/and the process of recovery (bouncing back) from these stressing situations" (Ostafin & Proulx, 2020). In terms of doomscrolling, resilience may not eliminate the experience of temporary distress associated with scrolling through doom-related content; rather, resilience may help change how an individual interprets the distress and subsequently relates to it.

An analysis of the literature reveals that there is a significant relationship between both resilience and problem Internet use, as well as between resilience and maladaptive behaviours that arise from using the Internet. While the level of protection afforded by resilience will vary, it provides very little, if any, protection against the negative impact of repeated exposure to disruptive content on our mental wellbeing. However, when combined with systems of social support, having a strong sense of purpose, and engaging in a variety of meaningful activities, resilience can be a powerful tool for protection.

The context driven nature of resilience was highlighted by the themes of cross-cultural studies. While social affiliations and meaning systems can counterbalance the effects of digital stress in collectivist cultures, in individual cultures this is possibly ineffective, and an individual can rely insufficiently on their internal resilience. Moreover, studies conducted among Indonesian and Norwegian students reinforce the significance of spiritual involvement, social ties, and nature as vital forces of stability in the face of existential threat (Munir & Taufiq, 2024, and Mandelkow & Hillesund, 2025).

These findings suggest that resilience is best understood, not in psychological terms, but in terms of resisting meaninglessness under conditions of uncertainty--and this is especially subject to influence by culture, society, and environment.

Doomscrolling, Meaning, and the Modern Student Experience

Traditional concepts of resilience viewed it as an individual's capacity to manage or bounce back from adversity; however, recent research indicates that there is a growing understanding of resilience as a more dynamic process through which we construct meaning rather than simply enduring. In the case of doomscrolling, being resilient does not necessarily remove an individual's distress but instead helps them create meaning out of the distress experienced during their doomscrolling experience.

Doomscrolling is a paradox; people do it to search for certainty but find uncertainty in the information they are seeing. The continuing cycle of doomscrolling comes from intermittent reinforcement and the lack of consistency from algorithms and cognitive distortions such as negative biases. Eventually, doomscrolling creates a norm for individuals that accepts the continual anticipation of threats/existential withdrawal from life.

Research has shown that students acknowledge the negative impact that doomscrolling has on their life; however, they do not believe that they have the ability to discontinue doing so. This reinforces that behaviors are compulsive, as previously discussed (Punzalan et al., 2024). It would seem therefore that interventions must go above and beyond simply teaching individual self-regulation skills; they must also include addressing the psychological and structural factors that contribute to the continued practice of doomscrolling.

Implications for Well-Being and Meaning-Oriented Interventions

Application of an existential understanding of doomscrolling can have implications for the well-being of students. Interventions that solely reduce screen time or support digital detoxes will likely not be effective alone and should instead aim to create greater meaning-making and comfort with uncertainty.

Education institutions hold great responsibility in developing individuals. By implementing digital well-being in education, individuals gain knowledge and awareness of the impact information use has upon emotions, cognitive function and the development of critical thinking and reflective practices.

Creating environments that foster connection, creativity, and agency for individuals at a higher level is extremely important to individuals. Activities that promote social participation, community involvement, and engagement with nature have been shown consistently to

increase meaning and psychological well-being for individuals. These experiences provide for students a number of concrete ways to develop purposefulness as opposed to abstract and oftentimes conflicting forms of purposefulness created through digital source material.

Interventions in such cases would therefore focus on teaching them to tolerate the fact that they may not have all the answers (known as uncertainty), instead of relieving them of it since it gives them more ease with the unknown and allows them to think and evaluate their values when faced with decision situations. And therefore, the definition of resilience is the capacity to lead a meaningful life while also living with uncertainty/inconsistency in their lives.

Conclusion

Doomscrolling is a common feature of our digitally constructed existence and is perhaps the key term to describe how we relate to everything around us and how it affects our current feeling about everything through our computer-mediated communication and every other social influence around us. Many young adults enrolled in higher education face increased feelings of emotional instability from the constant presence of negativity through social media and the negative impact it has on their mental health, including feelings of lack of purpose or hopelessness and a loss of connection to their mental health.

There is an argument that the phenomenon of doomscrolling can be understood as an existential coping mechanism that is influenced by cultural context, uncertainty, and the loss of traditional sources of meaning. Resilience can provide a level of protection, but it will only serve its intended purpose effectively when it exists within larger systems of purpose, connection, and reflection. By reconsidering the concept of doomscrolling beyond its negative activity connotations, the present paper points to some of the essential elements that need to be considered for grasping its relevance towards student well-being, including the need to focus beyond present negative activities, that is, beyond a mere negative concept, towards further psychological resources that enable young adults to cope with a greatly uncertain world with increased clarity of thought.

Problem Statement

As there is evidence demonstrating a connection between doom scrolling and psychological suffering, its effects on existential nihilism and how undergraduates make sense of what it means to be Human, there is still a lack of clarity on these concepts and how they affect an

undergrad's understanding so there is not a clear picture of what the broader psychological development looks like because of this lack of clarity.

Research Objectives

1. Investigate the concept of "doomscrolling," a psychological behavior that is connected with self-existential threat among college undergraduates.
2. Investigate The Link Between Doomscrolling and Existential Nihilism as it Relates to The Way We Create Meaning in Life.
3. The study examined the way in which ongoing contact with online content, particularly negative media, affects college/university students' feelings of self-identity and connectedness.
4. Construct a theoretical foundation of your design, specifically developed to understand how current societal discussions and the way in which students perceive their health/wellbeing relates to 'Doomscrolling'.

Research Question

RQ1. In what ways does sustained engagement in doomscrolling affect undergraduate students' sense of meaning, purpose, and psychological resilience?

Review of Literature

Tuğba Türk-Kurtça and Metin Kocatürk (2025) analyzed how intolerance of uncertainty and psychological resilience as mediators, and trait anxiety, relate to doomscrolling. In an experiment involving 443 participants (80% females, mean age 23.49), using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) it was shown that increased trait anxiety was related to increased intolerance of uncertainty, reduced resilience, and increased doom scrolling. Intolerance of uncertainty was found to have a positive correlation with doomscrolling, whereas resilience was negatively related. The results indicate that interventions that decrease uncertainty sensitivity and increase resilience would be effective in reducing the effect of trait anxiety on doomscrolling behaviors.

Farshid Rafiee, Sarbijan Nasab et al. (2025) aimed to examine the relationship between existential anxiety, posttraumatic growth, and resilience in nurses working in COVID-19 units. The study was descriptive-analytical and involved 224 nurses from four hospitals in Kerman, Iran, using a census method. Data were collected through demographic questionnaires, the

Existential Anxiety Questionnaire, the Conner-Davidson Resilience Scale, and the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory. The results showed that there was a negative and significant correlation between posttraumatic growth and resilience, but no significant relationship was found between existential anxiety, resilience, and posttraumatic growth.

Reza Shabahang et al. (2024) examined the link between doomscrolling, existential anxiety, misanthropy, and belief in a just world among 800 university social media users in Iran and the U.S. Using online surveys and structural regression modelling, the study found a strong association between doomscrolling and existential anxiety in both cultures. Misanthropy was linked to doomscrolling in Iran but not significantly in the U.S., while no connection was found with belief in a just world. The study highlights the risks of excessive negative news exposure but lacks analysis of mediating factors like resilience, coping strategies, and personality traits.

Yaomei Ma et al. (2024) investigated the relationships between existential well-being (EWB), social support, resilience, and negative emotions in cervical cancer patients, and whether resilience mediates these associations. Using a sample of 150 patients from Tianjin Medical University Cancer Institute (2012–2019), the study assessed anxiety, depression, EWB, resilience, and social support via validated questionnaires and conducted mediation analyses. Results showed that EWB and social support were negatively associated with anxiety and depression, and positively linked to resilience. Resilience, in turn, was negatively related to negative emotions and partially mediated the effects of EWB and social support on depression and anxiety.

Larisa S. Levchenko et al. (2024) This study examined the relationship between Internet addiction and existential fulfillment in adults aged 30–55. A total of 64 participants were assessed using Chen’s Internet Addiction Test, the Existence Scale, and the Test of Life Orientations. Correlation analysis revealed significant negative relationships between Internet addiction symptoms (e.g., compulsive use, withdrawal, tolerance) and key aspects of existential fulfillment, including self-distancing, self-transcendence, and life control. Individuals with higher Internet addiction scores showed poorer understanding and emotional connection to personal values, reduced inner freedom, and greater indecision.

Zejun Hao et al. (2023) This cross-sectional study explored how resilience relates to problematic smartphone use (PSU) among 834 Chinese undergraduate students (aged 17–24), using stratified random cluster sampling. Participants completed self-report measures on

resilience, perceived social support, school belonging, habitual smartphone use, and PSU. Results revealed that resilience negatively predicted PSU both directly and indirectly through perceived social support and school belonging. Moreover, habitual smartphone use moderated these relationships, influencing how resilience affected perceived support and PSU.

Sergio Hidalgo-Fuentes, Manuel Martí-Vilar and Yolanda Ruiz-Ordoñez (2023) This meta-analysis examined the relationship between resilience and problematic Internet use (PIU), analyzing data from 19 studies with 93,859 participants. Results showed a significant negative correlation ($r = -0.27$), indicating that higher resilience is associated with lower PIU. No publication bias was found. The study highlights resilience as a protective factor against PIU and discusses practical implications and limitations.

Mehmet Dinc and Feyza Topcu (2021) This study aimed to examine the role of resilience in problematic internet use (PIU) among 220 Australian youth and how resilience scores differ across ethnicity, academic performance, and outside school activity. An online survey was conducted with high school students in Melbourne, using the Compulsive Internet Use Scale (CIUS) and the Child and Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM-28). The results revealed a significant negative relationship between PIU and resilience. Personal skills and context spiritual scores, sub-dimensions of resilience, also predicted PIU negatively. Black students had lower resilience scores than White students and those from multiple ethnicities. Students with below-average academic performance and limited outside-school activity also showed lower resilience scores.

References

- Asma Ghonchehpour, Farshid Rafiee Sarbijan Nasab, Fatemeh Maghsoudi, & Roghayeh Mehdipour-Rabori. (2025). Existential Anxiety of Nurses in the COVID-19-Virus Units and Its Relation With Resilience and Posttraumatic Growth. *Health Science Reports*, 8(3). <https://doi.org/10.1002/hsr2.70547>
- Dinc, M., & Topcu, F. (2021). The relation between resilience and problematic Internet use among youth. *Dusunen Adam Journal of Psychiatry and Neurological Sciences*, 34(4), 337-345. <https://doi.org/10.14744/DAJPNS.2021.00156>
- Greenberg, J., Pyszczynski, T., & Solomon, S. (1986). The causes and consequences of a need for self-esteem: A terror management theory. In R. F. Baumeister (Ed.), *Public self and private self* (pp. 189–212). Springer-Verlag. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4613-9564-5_10
- Hao, Z., Jin, L., Huang, J., Akram, H. R., & Cui, Q. (2023). Resilience and problematic Hidalgo-Fuentes, S., Martí-Vilar, M., & Ruiz-Ordoñez, Y. (2023). Problematic Internet Use and Resilience: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. *Nursing Reports*, 13(1), 337-350. <https://doi.org/10.3390/nursrep13010032>

- Kütük, H., Okur, S., & Satıcı, S. A. (2025). *Intolerance of uncertainty and psychological adjustment among college students: Doomscrolling and hopelessness as multiple mediators*. *Československá psychologie*, 69(4), 335–347. <https://doi.org/10.51561/cspych.69.4.335>
- Levchenko, L. S. (2024). *Correlation of Various Aspects of Internet Addiction with Characteristics of Existential Fulfillment*. 4, 2290–2293. <https://doi.org/10.1109/EDM61683.2024.10615205>.
- Ma, Y., Chen, S., Dong, H., Guo, R., Liu, R., Xie, J., Sun, Z. (2024). Relationship Between Resilience, Social Support, Existential Well-Being and Negative Emotions in Cervical Cancer Patients: a Mediation Analysis. *Journal of Cancer*, 15(11), 3418-3426. <https://doi.org/10.7150/jca.91260>.
- Mandelkow, L., & Hillesund, O. K. (2025). *Mental health and meaning in modern life among young adults in Norway*. *Discover Mental Health*, 5(1), 182. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44192-025-00317-z>
- Munir, M., & Taufiq, M. (2024). *Doomscrolling spirituality on the morality of Islamic students in Surabaya*. *Indonesian Journal of Islamic Psychology*, 6(2), 137–152. <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijip.v6i2.2209>
- Musiał, E. (2025). *Doomscrolling – A harmful trend on the web: Analysis of the phenomenon*. *Zeszyty Naukowe SGSP*, 93(2), 193–203. <https://doi.org/10.5604/01.3001.0055.0622>
- Ostafin, B. D., & Proulx, T. (2020). *Meaning in life and resilience to stressors*. *Anxiety, Stress, & Coping*, 33(6), 603–622. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10615806.2020.1800655>
- Price, M., Legrand, A. C., Brier, Z. M. F., van Stolk-Cooke, K., Peck, K., Dodds, P. S., Danforth, C. M., & Adams, Z. W. (2022). *Doomscrolling during COVID-19: The negative association between daily social and traditional media consumption and mental health symptoms during the COVID-19 pandemic*. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 14(8), 1338–1346. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0001202>
- Punzalan, M. J. P., Flores, N., Alviator, P. R., Villarubia, S., & Lazaro, B. L. G. (2024). *Lost in the feed: Exploring the lived experiences of students on doomscrolling*. *International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research and Studies*, 4(3), 378–385. <https://doi.org/10.62225/2583049X.2024.4.3.2796>
- Salsabila, E., & Qonitatin, N. (2025). *Navigating uncertainty in a digital age: Cognitive mechanisms behind doomscrolling in Indonesia*. *International Conference on Service Science*. <https://doi.org/10.59188/icss.v4i1.249>
- Shabahang, R., Hwang, H., Thomas, E. F., Aruguete, M. S., McCutcheon, L. E., Orosz, G., Hossein Khanzadeh, A. A., Mokhtari Chirani, B., & Zsila, Á. (2024). *Doomscrolling evokes existential anxiety and fosters pessimism about human nature? Evidence from Iran and the United States*. *Computers in Human Behavior Reports*, 15, 100438. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbr.2024.100438>
- Sharma, B., Lee, S. S., & Johnson, B. K. (2022). *The dark at the end of the tunnel: Doomscrolling on social media newsfeeds*. *Technology, Mind, and Behavior*, 3(2), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tmb0000059>
- smartphone use: a moderated mediation model. *BMC Psychiatry*, 23(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-023-04541-1>
- Türk-Kurtça, T., & Kocatürk, M. (2025). *Beyond the Scroll: Exploring How Intolerance of Uncertainty and Psychological Resilience Explain the Association Between Trait Anxiety and Doomscrolling*. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 233(112919), 112919. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2024.112919>