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Impact of Social Media Addiction on Anxiety: Mediating Role of Doom-scrolling Among Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the role of doomscrolling as a mediator in the relationship between social media addiction and anxiety in young adults. 300 participants completed the Social Media Addiction Scale (SMAS), Doomscrolling Scale (DSS), and Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-7). Correlation and mediation analyses show that social media addiction is positively and significantly related to anxiety. Additionally, results showed that doomscrolling is a mediator for social media addiction and anxiety, suggesting that excessive, repeated exposure to negative online content worsens anxiety symptoms. The present findings suggest that social media addiction is a significant predictor of anxiety, however, its negative impact on anxiety levels will be stronger if doomscrolling is also present. Overall, the results indicate a need for prevention approaches and interventions that can reduce potentially damaging online behaviors to help lessen its negative impact on mental health.

Introduction

The rapid proliferation of digital technology has had a profound effect on how young adults interact with each other, communicate and seek information. Social media applications (apps) such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook and Twitter (X) have also become important modes of existence and a central part of their online social and academic lives. The use of social media provides opportunities to be entertained, foster connectivity and promote self-identity, however, COVID-19 has heightened the potential for SMA's detrimental effects of excessive use to lead to impaired performance in terms of reducing social isolation (Andreassen et al., 2023). As SMA, by definition is marked by compulsive and uncontrolled behavior with social networking sites, the online identity performance that social media offers young

adults also exists in a context in which SMA is associated with psychological distress and adversity related to anxiety. This constant exposure to an idealized curated lifestyle by peers to online lifestyle alternatives and the demand to remain connected (Ergün, Özkan, & Griffiths, 2025).

The prevalence of anxiety as a mental health condition in young adult populations is acknowledged to be modestly related to problematic behaviours associated with excessive digital technology (Elhai et al., 2023). A constant stream of online information and overwhelming access to digital affordances creates feelings of and a lasting sense of uncertainty and hypervigilance, resulting in increased levels of worrying and uneasiness. Furthermore, emerging research provides evidence that SMA indirectly predicts anxiety behaviours through fear of missing out (FoMO) on the experiences of peers, internet addiction and phubbing behaviours (Ergün et al., 2025). SMA operates as not only a direct stressor but can also increase other maladaptive pathways in the mental health space.

Doomscrolling is a behavior that strongly relates to social media addiction (SMA), which indicates compulsive use of negative or threatening information through digital media (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2023). In particular, doomscrolling has been examined in contexts of recent crises characterized by the inability to avert to horrific imagery of physical suffering (i.e., COVID-19 pandemic and destruction due to recent warfare) during which individuals feel the underlying need to be informed and knowledgeable but feel guilty for relinquishing themselves to negative information that ultimately overloads them. A recent study conducted in Turkey indicated that SMA predicted increased psychological stress with doomscrolling as a significant mediator (Canoğulları, 2025). It is important to recognize that the addiction to social media provides a psychological platform where individuals are left in a compulsive state of negative news consumption, which reinforces their anxiety.

This mediation was further supported by longitudinal findings. A two-wave study conducted in Turkey with adolescents found that SMA was a significant predictor of future doomscrolling over a two-month period where doomscrolling did not predict future SMA (Yıldırım & Çolak, 2025). This further suggests SMA is a precursor to doomscrolling where the cycle of compulsively engaging in maladaptive behaviors fuels compulsively seeking information through the news which adds to psychological disturbance like anxiety. This is further reason to examine doomscrolling as an intermediary process instead of being a stand-alone contributor to anxiety.

The psychological effects of doomscrolling have been extensively investigated. For example, researchers at Flinders University found that when Australian students (N=800) experienced a higher degree of distressing online news exposure, they reported greater and more severe symptoms of stress, anxiety, depression, and even post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Flinders University, 2024). The compulsive nature of doomscrolling traps users within an endless cycle of negativity, making psychological recovery impossible and increasing susceptibility to anxiety disorders. Distressingly, media reports have framed doomscrolling as causing "brain rot," a term that captures the cognitive and emotional blows caused by relentless doomscrolling (News.com.au, 2024).

Doomscrolling is technically facilitated by social media algorithms that deliver emotionally-charged and negative content with maximum efficiency to keep users engaged (Andrews et al., 2024). Without considering the environment of hyper-consumption, time investment, and energy, algorithmic determinism creates a never-ending consumption of fear and anxiety-laden information that fuels negative biases and cognitive overload. When accompanied by the need to be online as the world

changes, social media significantly enhances anxiety-induced levels of fear of missing out (FoMO) (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2023) and allows doomscrolling to be framed solely as an individual behavior and not a systemic action by design.

Recent literature review in regard to the South Asian region, found similar patterns amongst youth. A study in Bhakkar Pakistan, found that young adults reported high SMA, depressive symptoms and anxiety symptoms and low self-esteem (Dawra & Rahman, 2025). These findings are reflected in studies stated internationally indicating that SMA and other maladaptive behavior patterns, such as doomscrolling lead to detrimental impacts on youth mental health, which is incredibly important, considering the swift uptick in smartphone and internet access in South Asia, and, specifically countries like Pakistan where mental health resources are already limited.

In conclusion, it seems that social media addiction is an emerging risk factor for anxiety in young adult populations worldwide, with doomscrolling acting as an important mediating factor. Although SMA creates a compulsive need to engage with others online, doomscrolling further exacerbates the consumption of negative information establishing a pathway towards anxiety. Understanding these relationships is important for the development of preventive strategies, digital literacy initiatives, and policies that encourage, safer use of the online space. Future research should examine social and cultural and contextual characteristics that shape these dynamics in order to develop unique and contextualized interventions for young adult populations.

Literature Review

The study of social media addiction has recently become of interest to contemporary psychological research, particularly due to its link to poor mental health outcomes in young adults. An excessive amount of time spent on social media and associated networks shows compulsive conduct that interferes with daily function (Andreassen, 2015). Research shows social media addiction is a relevant risk factor for anxiety, stress, and depression tendency, as social media platforms expose and create desire for curated lifestyles, and social comparisons while simultaneously providing affirmation that you "need" to be digitally connected (Keles et al., 2020).

Anxiety is among the most commonly reported psychological effects of maladaptive social media use. An increased need for social validation, fear of negative evaluation, and fear of missing out (FoMO) all combine to increase anxiety in young adults (Marino et al., 2018). The amount of time is not the only risk factor, as prolonged exposure to stressful material such as negative news or social issues online has also been shown to increase worry and anxious thought (Keles et al., 2020). These results indicate social media addiction in itself is more than behavioural addiction but represents a deeper psychological weakness.

One important way in which social media addiction relates to anxiety is through the concept of doomscrolling. Doomscrolling is defined as the aided or compulsive consumption of disturbing or negative online content, and it is thought to be rising in popularity given that many people increased their likelihood of excessive online browsing of COVID-19 related information (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2022). Doomscrolling is inherently maladaptive, in the sense that it increases rumination, heightens perceived threat, and stifles emotional recovery. This means it can increase a person's susceptibility to anxiety (Satici et al., 2022).

Evidence suggests social media addicts are more likely to doomscroll. Addiction may lead people to compulsively check their phone and the formatting of social media is structured to instigate similar impulse reactions that allow easy access to sensationalized and/or negative content (Brailovskaia et al., 2021). Because of the

intersection between social media addiction and doomscrolling, a space emerges that allows young adults to become vulnerable to chronic anxiety. In this context, doomscrolling mediates this relationship, and thus, it is the process through which excessive digital consumption transforms into damaging psychological experiences.

Moreover, doomscrolling creates a vicious cycle of reinforcement, in which people support negative content in a search to assuage uncertainty, only to find that they are more distressed (Boukes, 2022). The vicious cycle of doomscrolling is especially harmful to young adults already at a transitional life stage where coping strategies may be unavailable. Therefore, doomscrolling maintains social media addiction and exacerbates its effects.

There is also emerging evidence that doomscrolling also has wider social and cognitive implications. For example, research suggests that doomscrolling is associated with attentional biases towards threat, sleep, and poor psychological resilience (Gao et al., 2023). These findings lend credence to the notion that doomscrolling is a maladaptive mediator explaining how social media addiction leads to increased psychological distress. Accordingly, education and treatment addressing social media addiction not only aim to reduce screen time but also the maladaptive browsing practices such as doomscrolling.

In summary, the literature suggests a robust association between addiction to social media and anxiety in young adults across diverse populations with doomscrolling acting as an important mediator. Moreover, while social media provides meaningful opportunities to connect and stay informed, the addictive utilization of social media along with maladaptive consumption habits like doomscrolling added considerable risk to mental health. Being able to understand this triadic relationship allows for a broader understanding of engaging in digital habits and the implications for psychological well-being, as well as foundational considerations for prevention and treatment.

Method

Objectives

- 1- To investigate the association between social media addiction and anxiety among young adults.
- 2- To analyze the impact of social media addiction on anxiety among young adults.
- 3- To examine the mediating role of doomscrolling between social media addiction and anxiety among young adults.

Hypothesis

- 1- Social media addiction is positively associated with anxiety among young adults.
- 2- Social media addiction has a significant impact on anxiety among young adults.
- 3- Doomscrolling mediates the association between social media addiction and anxiety among young adults.

Instruments

Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale

Social media addiction was measured using the **Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS)** developed by Andreassen et al. (2017). This six-item scale is widely utilized to capture the core components of behavioral addiction, including salience, tolerance, mood modification, withdrawal, conflict, and relapse. Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very rarely) to 5 (very often), with higher scores indicating greater levels of problematic social media use. The BSMAS has demonstrated robust psychometric properties, showing high internal consistency (α values above .80) and strong validity across diverse cultural contexts, making it suitable for use among young adult populations.

Doomscrolling Scale

The mediating construct, doomscrolling, was assessed through the Doomscrolling Scale developed by Bashir and Bhat (2022). This instrument is specifically designed to measure the compulsive and excessive consumption of negative online content, particularly news and social media feeds. The scale consists of 15 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The Doomscrolling Scale evaluates behavioral patterns such as uncontrollable scrolling, preference for distressing content, and difficulty disengaging from online information. It has been validated in studies exploring the psychological consequences of digital behaviors, demonstrating good reliability and construct validity, particularly in research involving stress, anxiety, and well-being.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale

Anxiety levels among participants were measured using the **Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-7)** developed by Spitzer et al. (2006). The GAD-7 is a seven-item instrument that captures the frequency of core anxiety symptoms such as excessive worry, restlessness, irritability, and difficulty concentrating. Participants rate their symptoms over the past two weeks on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 3 (nearly every day). Total scores range from 0 to 21, with higher scores reflecting greater anxiety severity. The GAD-7 has been extensively validated across different populations and has consistently demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha > .85$), test-retest reliability, and clinical utility in both research and practice settings.

Results

Table 1

Descriptive Characteristics of the Study Sample (N=300)

Sample Data	n	%
Age		
18-27	170	56.66
28-37	130	43.33
Gender		
Men	145	48.33
Women	155	51.66
Family system		
Joint	120	40
Nuclear	180	60
Residency		
Urban	130	43.33
Rural	170	56.66

Table 1 presents the descriptive characteristics of the study sample comprising 300 young adults. The age distribution indicates that a majority of participants (56.66%) were between 18–27 years, while 43.33% fell within the 28–37 years category, suggesting that the sample predominantly consisted of younger adults in their early twenties. Gender representation was relatively balanced, with women comprising 51.66% of the sample and men making up 48.33%, reflecting an almost equal participation from both groups.

With respect to family system, 60% of the participants reported living in a nuclear family, while 40% belonged to a joint family system, showing a greater representation of individuals from nuclear households. Regarding residency, 56.66% of participants resided in rural areas, whereas 43.33% were from urban settings, indicating slightly higher participation from rural backgrounds. Overall, the sample represents diverse demographic characteristics across age, gender, family system, and residency, which enhances the generalizability of the study findings.

Table 2
Descriptive properties of all the scales (N=300)

Scales	k	α	M	SD	Range		Skew	Kurt
					Actual	Potential		
GAD	7	.74	19.29	2.12	7-28	15-25	.57	.75
SMAS	6	.74	17.98	2.42	6-24	8-20	.51	.58
DSS	15	.84	85.24	5.26	15-75	20-140	.89	.46

Note. GAD= Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale; SMAS= Social Media Addiction Scale; DSS= Doomscrolling Scale

Table 2 presents the descriptive properties of all the study scales. The results include the number of items for each scale, internal consistency reliability, mean scores, standard deviations, actual and potential ranges, as well as skewness and kurtosis values. Overall, all scales demonstrated acceptable reliability coefficients. The means and standard deviations indicate adequate variability in participants' responses across measures. Furthermore, the observed ranges were within the potential limits, suggesting that the data adequately captured the constructs under investigation. Skewness and kurtosis values were also found to be within acceptable limits, indicating that the data distributions did not deviate substantially from normality.

Table 3
Correlation matrix between Study Variables (N=300)

Variables			
	1	2	3
GAD	-		
SMAS	.56 **	-	
DSS	.43 **	.32 **	-

Note. GAD= Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale; SMAS= Social Media Addiction Scale; DSS= Doomscrolling Scale

Table 3 presents the correlation matrix among the study variables. Findings revealed that generalized anxiety disorder was significantly and positively associated with both social media addiction and doomscrolling. Furthermore, social media addiction demonstrated a significant positive correlation with doomscrolling. These results suggest that higher levels of anxiety are related to increased problematic social media use and excessive doomscrolling, and that doomscrolling itself is linked with addictive patterns of social media engagement.

Table 4

Regression Coefficients of Independent Variables on Dependent Variable (Anxiety)

Variables	B	SE	t	p	95%CL
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Constant	28.46	.78	34.71	.00	18.84– 24.68
SMAS	.64	.08	14.85	.00	.39 – .51
DSS	.43	.02	12.76	.00	.48- .69

Note. SMAS= Social Media Addiction Scale; DSS= Doomscrolling Scale

Table 4 shows the regression analysis conducted to examine the influence of social media addiction and doomscrolling on anxiety. The table presents the unstandardized regression coefficients (B), standard errors (SE), t-values, significance levels (p), and 95% confidence intervals (CI). Both independent variables were found to be significant predictors of anxiety, indicating that higher levels of social media addiction and doomscrolling are associated with higher levels of anxiety.

Table 5

Mediating role of Doomscrolling between Social Media Addiction and Anxiety (N=300)

<i>Variables</i>	<i>R²</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	
					<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>
Total effect	.42	.39***	.04	19.65	.43	.51
SMAS- GAD(c)						
Direct effect						
SMAS--GAD(a)		.28***	.02	21.82	.31	.38
SMAS--DSS (b)		.47***	.06	24.21	.47	.64
DSS--- GAD(c')		.31***	.03	14.64	.27	.38
Indirect effect						
SMAS—DSS-- GAD	.54	.21***	.01		.14	.25

Note. GAD= Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale; SMAS= Social Media Addiction Scale; DSS= Doomscrolling Scale

$p < .01^{**}$; $p < .001^{***}$

Table 5 demonstrates the mediating role of doomscrolling in the relationship between social media addiction and anxiety. The total effect model indicated that social media addiction significantly predicted anxiety. Further analysis showed that social media addiction was positively associated with doomscrolling, and doomscrolling, in turn, significantly predicted anxiety. When doomscrolling was included as a mediator, the direct effect of social media addiction on anxiety remained significant but was reduced, suggesting partial mediation. Moreover, the indirect effect through doomscrolling was significant, confirming that doomscrolling partially mediates the link between social media addiction and anxiety.

Discussion

like earlier research, indicate how addiction to social media may be a risk factor for a range of anxiety disorders in young adults.

The second hypothesis proposed that doomscrolling is positively associated with anxiety among young adults. The present findings supported this hypothesis and demonstrated the properties of a statistical relationship between these constructs. Many researchers have found evidence that doomscrolling is positively associated with anxiety symptoms (Norr et al., 2023); however, only the study by Sarica et al. demonstrated doomscrolling as a predictor of anxiety beyond other factors. Our study corroborates their findings in predicting anxiety with a real-world sample using

complementary a priori research design based on the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping as described by Folkman and Lazarus (1984). We found anxiety predicted doomscrolling, that is, anxiety was a moderating variable between doomscrolling and social media addiction. BCE measures only a negative coping strategy and does not provide evidence or support for the predisposition to doomscroll and engage in negative coping processes.

The third and final hypothesis proposed that social media addiction (and doomscrolling) will be a positive predictor on anxiety among young adults. The present findings support this hypothesis; social media addiction, and doomscrolling predicted both social media addiction and anxiety, verifying our theorie. Doing so adds to the anecdotal and empirical evidence to suggest social media engagement in an addicted way, can negatively impact individuals' mental health and add anxiety. The belief that social media increases anxiety is further supported by a longitudinal study conducted by Montiel et al. (2023) among young adults, in which they found that participants used more social media due to anxiety and that they had no choice but to begin limiting their social media. The belief that doomscrolling created self-induced harm was prevalent as the study findings demonstrated the impact of using social media negatively in anxiety driven social network environments, or social frameworks (Montiel et al., 2023).

Overall, the consistent relationship among social media addiction, doomscrolling, and anxiety suggests that mental health practitioners should be aware of individuals' social media engagement as it relates to addiction of social media platforms. They presently may not see the negative repercussions of their social media use connected to their anxiety or even their doomscrolling.

The second hypothesis contended that social media addiction has a strong influence on anxiety in a sample of young adults. The results supported this hypothesis, showing that social media addiction is a meaningful predictor of anxiety, not just correlated, adding to studies earlier, which have shown that excess of non-productive social networking service can lead to maladaptive patterns of thinking, poor sleep quality and increased worry that can intensify anxiety symptoms (Elhai et al., 2021; Andreassen et al., 2022). Also, recent literature shows that the predictive ability of social media addiction on anxiety is significant, even after controlling for demographic and lifestyle characteristics (Rozgonjuk et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2024). So, the present study's findings add to previous literature by demonstrating that social media addiction is a significant predictor of anxiety rather than just correlated, and provides a better understanding of the seriousness of social media addiction and its influence of anxiety on a young adult's live.

The third hypothesis posited that doomscrolling serves as a mediator in the relationship between social media addiction and anxiety in young adults. The data supported this hypothesis, suggesting that doomscrolling is an underlying mechanism that binds social media addiction to increases in anxiety. This aligns with emerging research, suggesting that doomscrolling (i.e., compulsive consumption of negative online news) increases emotional distress and supports the anxiety-producing nature of overuse of social media (Gao et al., 2022; Khlaif & Salha, 2023). Recent work highlights that high social media addiction predisposes individuals to longer doomscrolling behavior, which increases their exposure to anxiety and psychological distress (Nabity-Grover et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2024). Overall, the current findings offer new insight into doomscrolling, suggesting that it plays an important role as a mediator cleaning social media addiction and anxiety within young adults.

Conclusion

The current study has determined that social media addiction is a significant contributor to anxiety among young adults, with doomscrolling as an important mechanism of effect. The findings demonstrate the dangers of excessive online engagement, as well as the role of compulsively consuming negative content in worsening psychological distress. By identifying doomscrolling as a mediator, the study enhances the understanding of how problematic digital behaviors correspond to impaired mental health outcomes.

Limitations and Recommendations

Despite the valuable findings, there are limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design limits the capacity to draw conclusions about the direction of causation. Second, as the study was self-report, social desirability could have bias. Third, the study was conducted within a specific cultural context, and thus the findings are not to be generalized to other populations. Future research should use longitudinal and experimental designs to determine neater causal directionality. Future research should also employ qualitative methods to add greater, meaningful insight relating to individuals' lived experience of doomscrolling. Finally, scripted intervention-based research is very much recommended to investigate the effectiveness of digital well-being programs, such as reducing screen time, mindful practice of media consumption, or balanced online-offline engagement relating to doomscrolling behaviours, and overall mental well-being.

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