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Doomscrolling and Mental Health: The Mediating Role of Psychological Inflexibility

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Problem Statement

Doomscrolling, defined as the compulsive and prolonged engagement with distressing or negative news content on digital platforms, has become increasingly prevalent in recent years, particularly among younger populations who are continuously exposed to online information streams (Sharma et al., 2022). Recent surveys indicate that nearly half of millennials and more than half of Gen Z individuals report engaging in this behavior on a regular basis (Newsweek, 2024). Although individuals may initially engage in doomscrolling as an attempt to seek information or cope with uncertainty, accumulating evidence shows that it paradoxically intensifies distress rather than alleviating it. Specifically, doomscrolling has been consistently linked to lower levels of well-being, optimism, and life satisfaction, along with increased symptoms of anxiety, depression, stress, and physical health problems (Buchanan et al., 2021; Kaya & Griffiths, 2023).

Emerging research has started to uncover the psychological mechanisms that underlie these associations. Variables such as mindfulness, secondary traumatic stress, resilience, and intolerance of uncertainty have been found to mediate the relationship between doomscrolling and mental health outcomes (Taskin et al., 2024; Türk-Kurtça & Kocatürk, 2025). Among these, psychological inflexibility has recently gained particular attention as a central vulnerability factor. Rooted in the theoretical framework of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; Hayes et al., 2006), psychological inflexibility reflects rigid behavioral patterns characterized by experiential avoidance and cognitive fusion, which hinder adaptive functioning and engagement in value-driven actions. Prior findings indicate that this construct contributes to various forms of problematic digital media use, including smartphone and internet addiction, thereby increasing susceptibility to poor mental health outcomes (Chou et al., 2017; Kuru & Çelenk, 2021).

Drawing on prior evidence, the current study examines the association between doomscrolling and depression, anxiety, and stress, with the mediating role of psychological inflexibility, which has not yet been empirically explored among university students. Elucidating this mechanism may offer

important implications for mental health professionals by informing the design of preventive interventions and therapeutic practices grounded in ACT, to lessen the adverse effects of doomscrolling on young adults' mental health.

Method

The present study employed a convenience sampling method to recruit participants from the university students in Türkiye. The final sample comprised 349 undergraduate students after data cleaning and outlier check. Among these, 251 were female (71.9%), 97 were male (27.8%), and one participant preferred not to disclose their gender (0.3%). Participants' ages ranged from 17 to 57 years (M = 23.23, SD = 6.13). The largest proportion of the sample fell within the 20–22 age range (62.8%), representing the majority of respondents. A smaller proportion were 17–19 years old (10.9%) or 23–25 years old (13.2%), while 13.1% of the participants were aged 26 or older. Regarding daily social media use, most participants reported spending a moderate amount of time online. Specifically, 134 participants (38.4%) used social media for 1–3 hours per day, and 126 participants (36.1%) reported 3–5 hours per day. Additionally, 78 participants (22.3%) used social media for five hours or more, while 11 participants (3.2%) indicated spending less than one hour per day on social media. Four data collection instruments were utilized in the current study. These were Doomscrolling Scale (Satıcı et al., 2023), Acceptance and Action Questionnaire - II (Yavuz et al., 2016), Depression Anxiety Stress Scale - 21 (Sarıçam, 2018), and demographic information form. The study received ethical approval from the Trakya University Human Subjects Ethics Committee on February 10, 2025. Data were collected using the online platform METU Survey. In addition to classroom-based administration conducted with the permission of instructors, the survey link was also disseminated through online platforms to reach a broader group of participants. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided informed consent prior to participation. Completion of the survey required approximately seven minutes.

Prior to the main analysis, preliminary analyses were conducted, including data screening, missing values and outliers, and assumption checks to ensure suitability for mediation analysis. Confirmatory factor analysis was utilized to verify the factor structures of the measurement instruments, and Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated to assess internal consistency reliability. Subsequently, mediation analysis was conducted using PROCESS macro for SPSS to examine the mediating role of psychological inflexibility in the relationship between doomscrolling and depression, anxiety, and stress.

Expected/Temporary Results

To elucidate the potential mediating role of psychological inflexibility in the relationship between doomscrolling and mental health outcomes, three separate mediation analyses were conducted. The

results consistently pointed to a robust indirect pathway across all three models. Specifically, the findings revealed that doomscrolling was a significant positive predictor of psychological inflexibility (β = .10, 95% BootCI [.078, .12]). In turn, psychological inflexibility acted as a significant predictor of anxiety (β = .69, 95% BootCI [.61, .77]), depression (β = .73, 95% BootCI [.65, .81]), and stress (β = 0.64, 95% BootCI [.56, .71]).

Bootstrapping analyses confirmed that the indirect effects of doomscrolling on anxiety (indirect effect = 0.07, 95% BootCI [.052, .083]), depression (indirect effect = 0.07, 95% BootCI [.057, .088]), and stress (indirect effect = 0.06, 95% BootCI [.048, .078]) through psychological inflexibility were statistically significant. Furthermore, since the direct effects of doomscrolling on anxiety, depression, and stress remained significant, the results indicate that psychological inflexibility serves as a partial mediator in these relationships. In sum, these findings provide comprehensive and compelling evidence that doomscrolling affects adverse mental health outcomes not only directly but also indirectly by elevating individuals' levels of psychological inflexibility.

Keywords: doomscrolling, depression, anxiety, stress, psychological inflexibility, mediation analysis

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