



THE PHENOMENON OF DOOMSCROLLING BEHAVIOR AMONG STUDENTS OF SMAN 1 TUMPANG

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Abstract

Doomscrolling refers to the compulsive habit of endlessly scrolling through social media, particularly to access negative information, which can have detrimental effects on mental health. This study aims to describe the phenomenon of doomscrolling behavior among students at SMAN 1 Tumpang. Employing a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design, the data collection methods included in-depth interviews, non-participatory observation, and documentation of doomscrolling activities. Four students were selected as participants through purposive sampling aligned with the research objectives. The findings reveal that doomscrolling primarily occurs on Instagram, TikTok, and X, particularly at night before sleep, and occasionally during moments of boredom, even within the school environment. The behavior negatively impacts students' emotional states, leading to mood swings, anxiety, and mental fatigue after exposure to negative content. Although students are aware of its harmful effects and have attempted to reduce the habit, doomscrolling remains difficult to stop due to its addictive nature and the high engagement of digital content. These findings highlight the urgent need for intervention from various stakeholders, particularly school counselors, in designing preventive and curative strategies to help students manage social media use more healthily.

Keywords: doomscrolling, social media, adolescents, digital habits, mental health

1. Introduction

The rapid advancement of information technology has brought about significant transformations in human social and psychological life, particularly in the current digital era. Adolescents, as digital natives, represent the most active demographic in utilizing the internet—especially social media—to obtain information, socialize, and express themselves. However, alongside this ease of access to information, new negative phenomena have emerged that accompany internet usage habits. One such phenomenon gaining increasing attention from researchers and mental health practitioners is doomscrolling: the habitual act of continuously scrolling through screens to access negative news or content, which often triggers anxiety, worry, and stress (McGinty et al., 2020).

Doomscrolling is a form of excessive information consumption—also referred to as information overload—where individuals feel compelled to keep seeking information despite being aware of its adverse impact on their emotional well-being. This behavior is often driven by the fear of missing out (FoMO), excessive curiosity, and unregulated digital habits (Lopez et al., 2022). In essence, doomscrolling reflects the compulsive consumption of negative content, spurred by FoMO, curiosity, and poor digital self-regulation, a pattern especially common among adolescents, who are rarely separated from their smartphones and social media.

High school students are in a critical phase of identity development and are highly influenced by the social and digital environments they engage with. Adolescents tend to be highly sensitive to emotional and social content and exhibit a stronger inclination toward impulsive and addictive behaviors (Santrock, 2018). These conditions make them more vulnerable to the negative effects of doomscrolling, such as sleep disturbances, decreased

concentration and academic motivation, and symptoms of emotional exhaustion. Doomscrolling addiction is closely linked with the increased use of smartphones before sleep, which directly affects adolescents' sleep quality. Students entangled in this behavior frequently experience morning fatigue, difficulty concentrating in class, and a decline in academic performance. In the long term, sleep disturbances may contribute to broader mental health issues, including a heightened risk of depression and anxiety. Furthermore, excessive time spent passively scrolling through social media reduces opportunities for face-to-face interactions with peers or family, thereby limiting the development of empathy, constructive conflict resolution skills, and essential social competencies for adulthood.

This phenomenon is not limited to the global context but is also increasingly visible in local environments, including at SMAN 1 Tumpang. Preliminary observations revealed that many students excessively access social media. For instance, during classroom learning sessions, students were often found to be more focused on their phones than on the teacher. Common behaviors included playing online games and scrolling through TikTok, which resulted in students frequently failing to understand the lesson material. Informal interviews with several teachers and school counselors further revealed a tendency among students to access social media excessively, even late at night, often consuming content related to conflict, crime, accidents, and social issues—topics that induce anxiety. This has led to declining academic performance, sleep disturbances, and mild psychosomatic symptoms among some students.

Nonetheless, most existing studies on doomscrolling approach the phenomenon quantitatively, focusing on data generalizations, while in-depth understanding of students' subjective experiences—how they interpret their doomscrolling behavior, its underlying causes, and its psychological and social impacts—remains limited. Quantitative studies often emphasize statistical relationships between social media use and levels of stress or anxiety (Keles et al., 2020; Lopez et al., 2022), but few delve into the personal narratives of users, particularly adolescents. Therefore, a qualitative phenomenological approach is necessary to explore the lived experiences of students more deeply. As Creswell (2013) posits, phenomenology is effective in uncovering the meaning of individuals' lived experiences regarding specific phenomena.

In this study, the phenomenological approach is used to examine doomscrolling not merely as an observable behavior, but as a conscious and subjective experience. Through narrative exploration of students' lived experiences, the study aims to identify habitual patterns and psychological impacts of doomscrolling among students at SMAN 1 Tumpang. Theoretically and empirically, studies on doomscrolling among adolescents remain limited, particularly within the context of secondary education in Indonesia. Prior research has predominantly focused on adults or university students using quantitative approaches that highlight correlations between social media use and psychological symptoms such as stress or anxiety (Keles et al., 2020; Lopez et al., 2022). Studies specifically addressing the subjective meanings of doomscrolling behavior among high school students, especially in connection with guidance and counseling services, are rare, creating a gap in the existing literature.

This research is timely given the increasing need for guidance and counseling services that are responsive to digital challenges, particularly risky behaviors such as doomscrolling among high school students. Adolescents in this developmental stage are particularly vulnerable to digital environmental influences, including negative information and social pressure on social media. Therefore, a deeper understanding of their experiences in navigating doomscrolling is essential to enhance the capacity of school counselors in providing preventive, curative, and developmental interventions centered on digital well-being.

The outcomes of this study are expected to offer practical contributions to the advancement of school guidance and counseling services, including psychoeducational materials, individual and group counseling interventions, and promotional programs grounded in digital literacy. Furthermore, this research can serve as a reference for formulating school policies that are more attuned to the evolving landscape of adolescent mental health in the digital age.

2. Method

This study adopts a qualitative approach using a phenomenological research design aimed at exploring and understanding the subjective experiences of students who habitually engage in doomscrolling. The phenomenological approach was selected for its strength in capturing the personal meaning of a phenomenon as perceived by individuals who experience it directly (Creswell, 2015). Within this context, the researchers sought to understand how students at SMAN 1 Tumpang perceive doomscrolling behavior, the underlying factors behind it, and the psychological impacts they experience.

The participants in this study were students of SMAN 1 Tumpang who exhibited habitual doomscrolling behavior. Participant selection was conducted through purposive sampling, selecting individuals based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. The criteria included: students who actively use social media for a minimum of three hours per day, frequently access negative content (such as news about disasters, conflict, or anxiety-inducing social issues), experience psychological effects such as sleep disturbances or mood changes due to digital content consumption, and are willing to participate in in-depth interviews. The number of participants ranged from five to seven, following the principle of data saturation—data collection was concluded when the information obtained began to repeat and no new findings emerged (Moustakas, 1994).

Data were collected using three primary techniques. First, in-depth interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online, depending on the participants' circumstances, and were recorded with their consent. Second, non-participatory observation was conducted to examine students' general digital behavior within the school environment. Third, documentation was used to complement the data, including screenshots of doomscrolling activities and digital diary entries voluntarily shared by participants.

The data were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological thematic analysis method, which consists of seven steps: (1) reading all interview transcripts, (2) identifying significant statements, (3) formulating meanings from those statements, (4) clustering the meanings into major themes, (5) developing an exhaustive description of the participants' experiences, (6) formulating the essential structure of the doomscrolling phenomenon, and (7) validating the findings with participants through member checking.

To ensure the validity of the data, the study employed the four criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility (through triangulation and member checking), transferability (via detailed contextual descriptions), dependability (through systematic documentation of the research process), and confirmability (by maintaining objectivity through audit trails and researcher reflexivity). Through this methodological design, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of doomscrolling habits from the students' own perspectives and to serve as a foundation for formulating appropriate intervention strategies within the context of school education and counseling.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Result

After conducting research in schools with in-depth observations and interviews, the same core results were obtained that the students had a habit of constantly reading bad news or negative information on social media and the internet. This doomscrolling phenomenon shows that high school students are greatly affected by the rapid and easily

accessible flow of digital information. This habit is a form of unhealthy coping mechanism in dealing with today's uncertainty and anxiety.



Doomscrolling Habits Among Students

1. Habitual Behavior

The phenomenon of doomscrolling among adolescents, particularly students of SMAN 1 Tumpang, reflects a compulsive, repetitive, and difficult-to-control pattern of social media use. Based on in-depth interviews with four students, it was revealed that doomscrolling has become a routine habit, especially when individuals are in particular emotional states such as boredom, fatigue, or the need to escape the monotony of daily activities.

2. Social Media Platforms

All respondents indicated that their doomscrolling activities primarily occurred on Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter). These three platforms are characterized by features that enable users to access and scroll through various types of content indefinitely (infinite scroll), supported by algorithms that tailor content to user preferences. This finding aligns with research by Kross et al. (2013), which demonstrated that unlimited scrolling features on social media platforms encourage prolonged usage, often without a specific goal. From the students' perspective, these platforms offer a mix of current information, gossip, humor, and viral news, making them the primary sources for keeping up with the latest trends.

3. Peak Doomscrolling Times

Respondents reported that the most frequent time for doomscrolling is at night before bedtime, typically performed in bed as a way to conclude the day. However, some also admitted engaging in doomscrolling during study breaks, while waiting for teachers, or even during lessons. This indicates that doomscrolling is no longer a mere leisure activity but has become an inseparable part of students' daily routines, even within the school environment.

Psychological Impacts of Doomscrolling on Students

1. Emotional Effects

The emotional impact of doomscrolling is notably significant. All four respondents reported frequently feeling moody or experiencing shifts in emotional state after viewing negative content, such as news about crime, disasters, social conflict, or political debates. Despite the discomfort, they continued the activity due to being drawn in or "trapped" by the narratives presented. Affective responses such as anxiety, worry, or sadness were common, though not strong enough to stop the behavior.

Furthermore, all participants admitted to experiencing instances where they realized they had spent an excessive amount of time scrolling, yet were unable to stop. When probed further, they explained that content involving celebrity scandals, national politics, crime, and sensational news were key triggers for their continued scrolling. They

even described such content as “exciting” or “entertaining,” despite it ultimately leaving them emotionally unsettled. This illustrates the ambivalence inherent in doomscrolling, where rational awareness of the behavior’s harm conflicts with emotional impulses to persist.

2. Coping Strategies and Self-Reflection

From a standpoint of awareness and self-reflection, all respondents acknowledged that doomscrolling is an unhealthy habit. Some had attempted to limit their screen time by activating features like “digital wellbeing,” temporarily uninstalling social media apps, or diverting their attention to other activities. However, these efforts were short-lived. Participants often reverted to old habits out of boredom or due to triggers such as notifications and trending content.

3.2 Discussion

Observations and interviews revealed that doomscrolling among students can no longer be considered an occasional activity; rather, it has evolved into a compulsive digital habit. This behavior is carried out repetitively and often unconsciously, exhibiting characteristics similar to digital addiction. Social media engagement becomes a psychological escape from stressors such as boredom, mental fatigue, and emotional distress (Elhai et al., 2020).

From a neuropsychological perspective, excessive social media use may influence the brain's reward system, particularly through the role of dopamine. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter responsible for regulating movement, attention, learning, and emotions. When students are continuously exposed to digital content, dopamine levels in the brain can fluctuate significantly, decreasing sensitivity to natural stimuli and increasing the need for heightened digital stimulation (Volkow et al., 2011). This helps explain why doomscrolling may lead to a decline in life satisfaction, as the brain becomes conditioned to instant stimulation and less responsive to more stable and meaningful sources of happiness (Triandy, 2019). Therefore, doomscrolling is not merely a matter of excessive technology use, but also a reflection of poor emotional regulation—particularly among adolescents in a key stage of psychosocial development.

Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) serve as the primary mediums for doomscrolling among students. This can be attributed to the intentionally manipulative design of social media platforms, which employ features such as infinite scroll, autoplay, and personalized feeds. These features subtly encourage users to continuously consume content without pause (Mahmudah, 2020; Alter, 2017). Such algorithmic design reinforces looping behavior, where users feel compelled to seek out new content even in the absence of a clear goal.

Notably, most participants in this study reported engaging in doomscrolling primarily at night, before going to sleep. This suggests that doomscrolling has become integrated into their nightly routines. Exposure to negative content during this period disrupts sleep quality, increases anxiety, interferes with the relaxation process, and reduces both the duration and efficiency of sleep. Previous studies have shown that nighttime digital stimulation is associated with sleep disturbances and increased symptoms of psychological distress, including stress and depression (Salii et al., 2020; Lemola et al., 2015). Of greater concern, some students admitted to doomscrolling during class hours, indicating a shift in attentional control where digital engagement becomes more appealing than academic instruction. In this context, doomscrolling has surpassed the bounds of entertainment and is now significantly interfering with students’ academic and social functioning.

The emotional toll of doomscrolling is also evident. Respondents consistently reported negative psychological symptoms such as anxiety, mood fluctuations, worry, and sadness following exposure to distressing news or content. This aligns with the theory of emotional contagion, wherein users absorb and mimic the emotional expressions they

encounter on social media (Cahya et al., 2023; Kramer et al., 2014). Despite feeling discomfort, students continue to engage in doomscrolling, revealing a conflict between cognitive awareness of its harm and emotional impulses to persist. This dissonance highlights a gap between understanding and behavioral self-regulation.

Although some students have attempted to reduce doomscrolling by using coping strategies—such as enabling digital wellbeing features, uninstalling apps, or redirecting attention to other activities—these measures have generally been short-lived and ineffective over time. Boredom or social media notifications often lead them back to the same patterns. This condition points to the need for a more systematic approach to developing self-regulation skills and emphasizes the importance of continuous support from schools, especially from Guidance and Counseling (BK) teachers, in providing sustained interventions.

4. Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that doomscrolling behavior has become a deeply embedded habit in students' daily lives. This activity is most frequently carried out via platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and X, which offer unlimited and highly engaging content. Doomscrolling typically occurs at night before bed but also manifests at other times—especially during moments of boredom, including within the school environment.

This behavior has notable psychological consequences, including mood disturbances, increased anxiety, and mental fatigue following exposure to negative content. Although participants were aware of the harmful effects of doomscrolling on their mental health and had made efforts to reduce it, they still struggled to break free from the cycle. This reflects a tendency toward compulsive behavior and low self-regulation in managing digital media consumption.

Overall, the results of this study indicate that doomscrolling among students is not merely a sign of excessive engagement with social media, but also a marker of psychological vulnerability to negative content on digital platforms. While students demonstrate some awareness of the risks involved, low self-control and the influence of social media algorithms make this behavior difficult to discontinue. Therefore, the phenomenon of doomscrolling among adolescents warrants further attention—particularly in terms of educational initiatives, mental health reinforcement, and the regulation of healthier digital consumption patterns.

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