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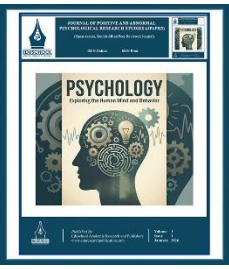

Doomscrolling Behavior: Psychological Mechanisms of Compulsive News Consumption

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Abstract

Doomscrolling, the compulsive consumption of negative online news, has emerged as a prevalent behavior pattern with significant psychological consequences. This paper examines the underlying psychological mechanisms that drive and maintain doomscrolling behavior through an integrative theoretical framework. Drawing on principles from behavioral psychology, cognitive neuroscience, and clinical psychology, we analyze how cognitive biases (negativity bias, confirmation bias), emotional processes (anxiety, fear of missing out), behavioral patterns (habit formation, reinforcement schedules), and social factors (collective trauma, social comparison) converge to create a self-perpetuating cycle of compulsive news consumption. We propose a comprehensive model incorporating negative reinforcement mechanisms, variable reward schedules, and anxiety-driven information seeking. The analysis reveals that doomscrolling represents a maladaptive coping strategy that paradoxically increases psychological distress while providing temporary relief. Implications for intervention strategies and digital wellbeing are discussed.

Keywords:- Doomscrolling, Compulsive Behavior, Negative Reinforcement, Anxiety, Information Seeking, Digital Wellbeing

I. INTRODUCTION

The digital age has fundamentally transformed how individuals access and consume information. Among the behavioral patterns that have emerged in this landscape, doomscrolling—the act of compulsively scrolling through negative news feeds despite experiencing psychological distress—has become increasingly prevalent (Sharma et al., 2022). Originally coined during the COVID-19 pandemic, the term captures a phenomenon that transcends any single crisis, reflecting deeper psychological mechanisms that govern human information-seeking behavior (Buchanan et al., 2021).

The significance of understanding doomscrolling extends beyond individual wellbeing to encompass broader societal mental health concerns. Research indicates that excessive consumption of negative news correlates with increased anxiety, depression, and stress symptoms (Price et al., 2022; Montag & Elhai, 2023). Yet, despite awareness of these negative consequences, individuals often find themselves unable to disengage from their digital feeds, suggesting the operation of powerful psychological mechanisms that override rational decision-making processes.

This paper seeks to provide a comprehensive psychological analysis of doomscrolling behavior by integrating insights from multiple theoretical perspectives.

Specifically, we examine:

- The cognitive mechanisms that predispose individuals to negative information consumption
- The emotional processes that drive and maintain the behavior
- The behavioral reinforcement patterns that create compulsive engagement
- The social contextual factors that amplify these effects.

Through this integrative approach, we aim to develop a unified theoretical framework that explains not only why doomscrolling occurs but also why it persists despite its detrimental effects.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Cognitive Factors in Negative Information Processing

The human cognitive system exhibits a fundamental bias toward negative information, a phenomenon extensively documented in the psychological literature (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). This negativity bias reflects evolutionary adaptations that prioritized threat detection for survival (Baumeister et al., 2001). In the digital context, algorithms exploit this bias by amplifying negative content, creating an environment where threatening information becomes disproportionately salient (Trussler & Soroka, 2014).

Confirmation bias further compounds this effect, as individuals selectively attend to information that confirms pre-existing anxieties and threat perceptions (Nickerson, 1998). Research by Thompson et al. (2021) demonstrated that individuals experiencing baseline anxiety show enhanced attention allocation to threat-related news content, creating a cognitive vulnerability to doomscrolling behavior. This cognitive pattern establishes a feed-forward mechanism where attention to negative information reinforces threat-based cognitive schemas.

2.2. Emotional and Motivational Processes

Anxiety serves as a primary emotional driver of doomscrolling behavior (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). According to information-seeking theories, anxiety generates a motivation to reduce uncertainty through information acquisition (Soroya et al., 2021). However, in the context of doomscrolling, this information-seeking becomes paradoxical: rather than resolving uncertainty, exposure to negative news often amplifies anxiety, creating a cycle of increasing distress and compensatory information-seeking.

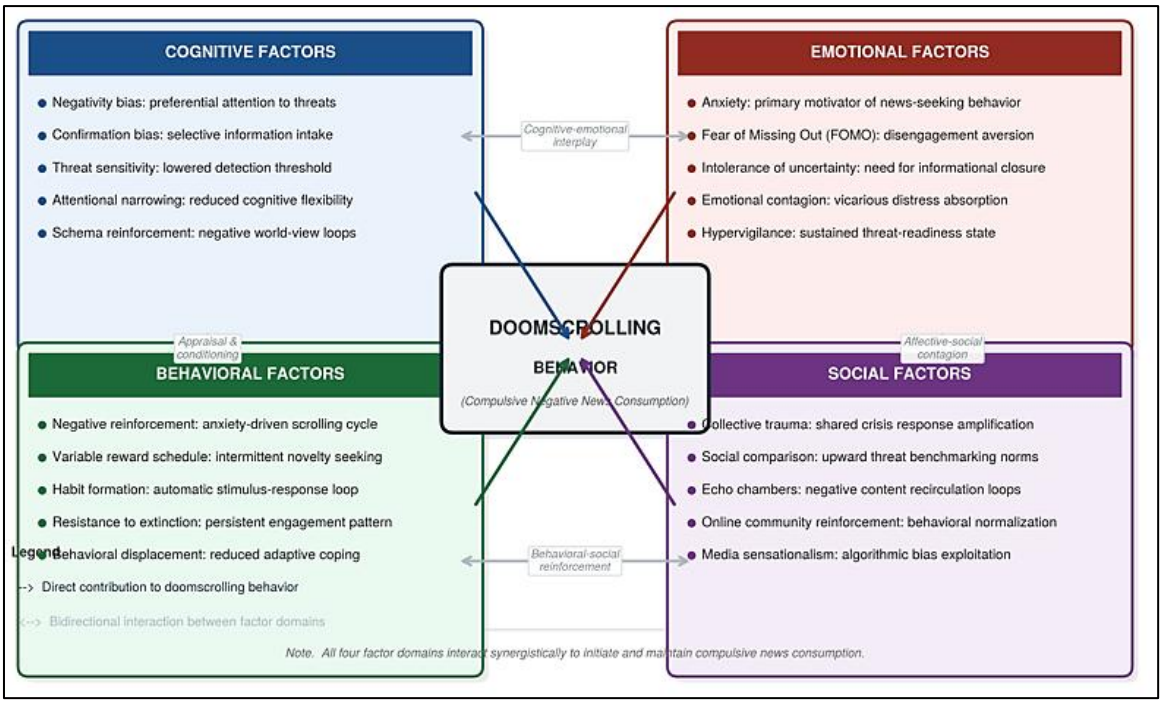
Fear of missing out (FOMO) represents another critical emotional factor. Przybylski et al. (2013) conceptualized FOMO as a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent. In the doomscrolling context, FOMO manifests as anxiety about missing critical information or being unprepared for potential threats (Niu et al., 2022). This creates a state of hypervigilance where disengagement from news feeds generates its own source of anxiety.

2.3. Behavioral Reinforcement Mechanisms

From a behavioral perspective, doomscrolling can be understood through principles of operant conditioning and reinforcement schedules (Montag et al., 2021). The behavior is maintained through negative reinforcement—the temporary reduction of anxiety and uncertainty following information consumption. This creates a powerful learning contingency where scrolling behavior is strengthened by its anxiety-reducing consequences, even though these effects are transient (Marciano et al., 2022).

Variable reinforcement schedules, characteristic of social media platforms, create particularly resistant behavior patterns (Bayer et al., 2020). The unpredictability of encountering novel or significant information maintains engagement through intermittent reinforcement, paralleling mechanisms observed in gambling behavior (Alter, 2017). This schedule produces high rates of responding and strong resistance to extinction, explaining the compulsive quality of doomscrolling.

Fig 1. Theoretical model of doomscrolling mechanisms showing the interplay between cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social factors.



2.4. Social and Contextual Factors

Social comparison processes amplify doomscrolling behavior through collective anxiety phenomena (Garfin et al., 2020). During periods of collective stress or crisis, social media becomes a venue for shared anxiety expression and validation

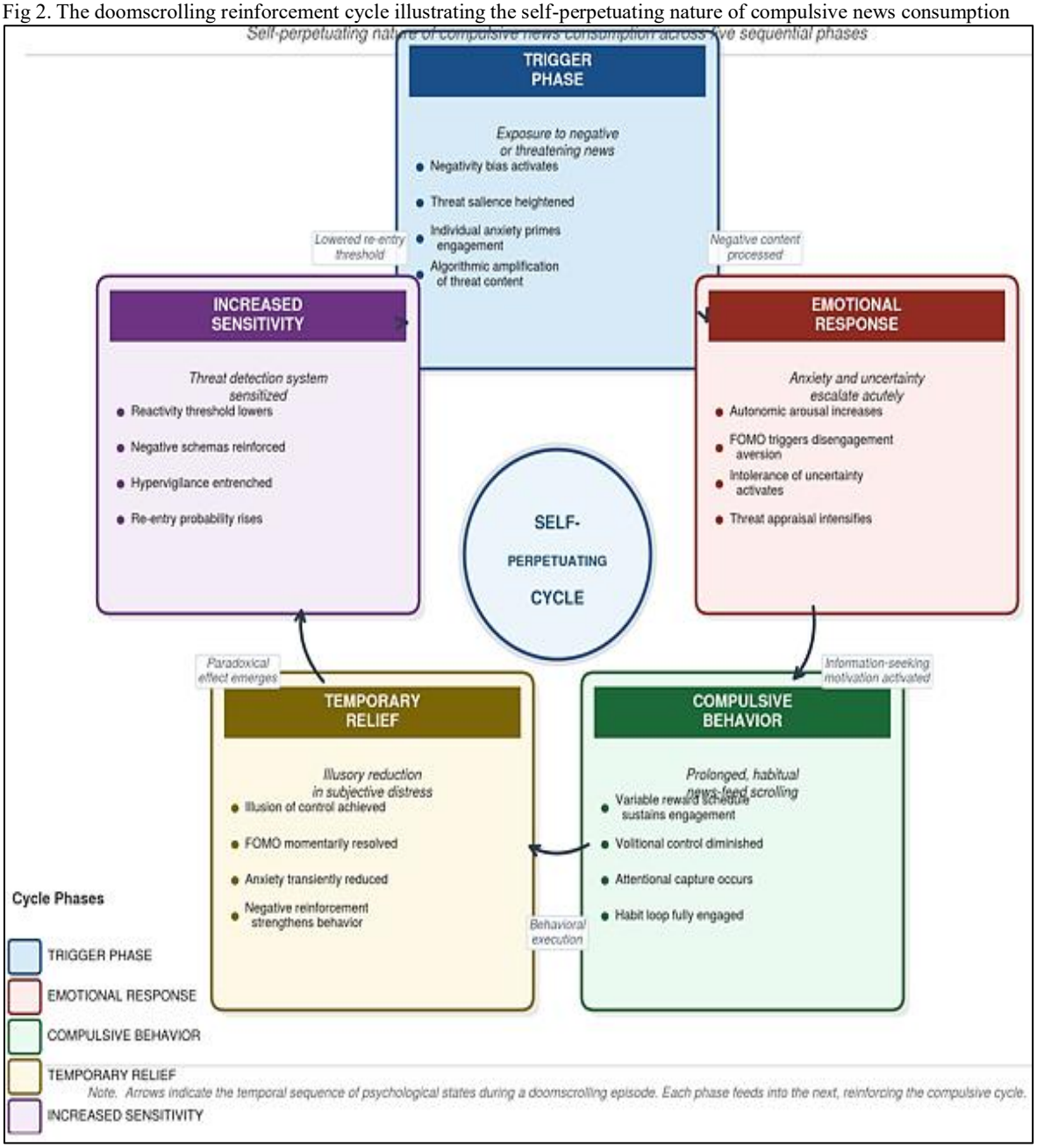
(Nekliudov et al., 2020). This creates echo chambers where negative information circulates and intensifies, promoting normalization of excessive news consumption.

The concept of collective trauma provides additional context for understanding doomscrolling. Hirschberger (2018) argues that shared threatening events create collective psychological responses that shape individual behavior. In this framework, doomscrolling represents not merely an individual dysfunction but a socially mediated coping response to collective uncertainty. The social reinforcement of news-checking behavior through online communities further normalizes and perpetuates the pattern.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: AN INTEGRATIVE MODEL

Building on the reviewed literature, we propose an integrative theoretical framework that conceptualizes doomscrolling as a self-perpetuating cycle involving multiple interacting psychological mechanisms (see Figure 2). This model synthesizes cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social factors into a coherent account of both the initiation and maintenance of compulsive news consumption.

Fig 2. The doomscrolling reinforcement cycle illustrating the self-perpetuating nature of compulsive news consumption



3.1. The Initiation Phase

Doomscrolling typically initiates through exposure to negative or threatening news content (Trigger Phase). Pre-existing cognitive biases, particularly negativity bias and threat sensitivity, increase the salience of such content. Individual differences in trait anxiety, intolerance of uncertainty, and baseline stress levels serve as vulnerability factors that lower the threshold for engagement with negative information (Oglesby et al., 2017).

3.2. The Maintenance Cycle

Following initial engagement, an emotional response is triggered, typically characterized by increased anxiety and

uncertainty (Emotional Response Phase). This emotional state generates a motivation to reduce discomfort through information seeking, based on the premise that additional information will resolve uncertainty or provide preparedness for potential threats.

This motivation drives compulsive scrolling behavior (Compulsive Behavior Phase), characterized by prolonged engagement with news feeds. The act of scrolling provides temporary relief through several mechanisms:

- The illusion of control through information acquisition
- Temporary distraction from emotional discomfort
- Satisfaction of FOMO-related concerns (Temporary Relief Phase).

However, this relief is transient and creates a paradoxical effect. Continued exposure to negative information sensitizes the individual's threat detection system, increasing reactivity to subsequent negative content (Increased Sensitivity Phase). This sensitization effect, combined with the negative reinforcement of anxiety reduction, strengthens the behavioral pattern and increases the likelihood of future doomscrolling episodes.

Table 1. Psychological Mechanisms Underlying Doomscrolling Behavior

Mechanism	Description	Clinical Implications
Negativity Bias	Preferential attention and processing of negative information over positive content	Cognitive restructuring to balance attention allocation; implementation of positive news exposure protocols
Negative Reinforcement	Temporary anxiety reduction following information consumption strengthens scrolling behavior	Exposure therapy to reduce anxiety without behavioral avoidance; development of alternative coping strategies
Variable Reinforcement	Unpredictable rewards from novel information create persistent engagement patterns	Behavioral scheduling interventions; implementation of fixed information-checking times to disrupt variable reinforcement
Threat Sensitization	Repeated exposure to threat content increases reactivity and lowers threshold for threat detection	Graded exposure protocols; relaxation training to counter physiological arousal; mindfulness practices to increase awareness

IV. PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF DOOMSCROLLING

The psychological consequences of doomscrolling extend across multiple domains of functioning. Empirical research has documented associations between excessive negative news consumption and increased symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress (Bendau et al., 2021). These effects appear to be mediated by both direct emotional contagion from negative content and indirect effects through disrupted sleep patterns and reduced engagement in positive activities (Riehm et al., 2020).

Cognitive consequences include attention deficits, reduced concentration capacity, and information overload. The constant switching between different news items fragments attention and impairs sustained focus (Mark et al., 2016). Additionally, exposure to conflicting information and rapidly changing narratives can produce epistemic confusion and decreased confidence in one's understanding of events (Roozenbeek & van der Linden, 2020).

At the behavioral level, doomscrolling can displace adaptive activities and coping strategies. Time spent scrolling reduces opportunities for positive experiences, social connection, and problem-focused coping. This displacement effect creates a secondary pathway through which doomscrolling contributes to psychological distress (Sewall et al., 2020).

V. CLINICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying doomscrolling has important implications for intervention development. Cognitive-behavioral approaches targeting specific maintaining factors show promise. These include:

- Psychoeducation about negativity bias and reinforcement mechanisms
- Cognitive restructuring to address catastrophic thinking and intolerance of uncertainty
- Behavioral experiments to test beliefs about the necessity of constant information monitoring
- Implementation of scheduled news checking to disrupt variable reinforcement patterns (Koller et al., 2022).

Mindfulness-based interventions may address the automatic, habitual quality of scrolling behavior. By increasing awareness of behavioral triggers and emotional states, mindfulness practices can create a pause between impulse and action, facilitating more intentional engagement with digital media (Shoham et al., 2023). Preliminary evidence suggests that brief mindfulness exercises can reduce automatic scrolling and increase awareness of its emotional consequences.

At the systems level, digital platform design plays a crucial role in enabling or mitigating doomscrolling behavior. Features such as infinite scrolling, autoplay, and algorithmic prioritization of engaging (often negative) content create an environment that facilitates compulsive engagement. Implementing design changes such as friction points, usage indicators, and neutral algorithmic curation could reduce the environmental factors that promote doomscrolling (Lyngs et al., 2020).

VI. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Several limitations warrant consideration. First, the majority of existing research relies on cross-sectional designs and self-report measures, limiting causal inference. Longitudinal studies employing objective measures of scrolling behavior and

mental health outcomes are needed to establish temporal relationships and test proposed mechanisms. Second, individual differences in vulnerability to doomscrolling remain poorly understood. Research examining how personality traits, cognitive styles, and baseline psychological functioning moderate doomscrolling patterns would inform targeted interventions.

Future research should also investigate protective factors that buffer against doomscrolling. Digital literacy, emotional regulation skills, and social support may moderate the relationship between negative news exposure and compulsive engagement. Understanding these protective factors could inform prevention strategies and resilience-building interventions. Finally, the broader societal context of doomscrolling requires attention. The phenomenon occurs within a media ecosystem characterized by sensationalism, polarization, and information overload. Addressing doomscrolling at the individual level, while important, must be complemented by systemic changes in media production, platform design, and digital literacy education.

VII. CONCLUSION

Doomscrolling represents a complex behavioral pattern arising from the interaction of cognitive biases, emotional processes, behavioral reinforcement mechanisms, and social contextual factors. The proposed integrative framework provides a comprehensive account of how these elements converge to create and maintain compulsive negative news consumption. Understanding doomscrolling through this multifaceted lens reveals it as a maladaptive coping strategy that paradoxically increases the distress it seeks to alleviate.

The psychological mechanisms identified in this analysis suggest multiple intervention points for both individual and systemic approaches. At the individual level, therapeutic interventions targeting cognitive biases, emotional regulation, and behavioral patterns show promise. At the systems level, changes to platform design and content curation could reduce environmental facilitators of compulsive engagement.

As digital media continues to evolve, understanding and addressing doomscrolling becomes increasingly important for psychological wellbeing and public mental health. Future research should prioritize longitudinal designs, objective behavioral measures, and intervention studies to build an empirical foundation for evidence-based approaches to this contemporary challenge. Through continued investigation and thoughtful intervention development, it may be possible to help individuals maintain informed engagement with current events while protecting psychological health.

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