

Doomscrolling linked to existential anxiety, distrust, suspicion and despair, study finds

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Expert compares doomscrolling to being in a room where people are constantly yelling at you and says media needs to rethink news

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Does scrolling your phone give you an existential crisis? That's the question a team of international experts have sought to answer in a study published in the [Journal of Computers in Human Behavior Reports](#).

Researchers surveyed 800 university students from the US and Iran and found that [doomscrolling](#) – or spending excessive time consuming negative news – was linked to feelings of existential anxiety, distrust and suspicion of others, and despair.



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The lead author, Reza Shabahang, a researcher at Flinders University's college of education, psychology and social work, said constantly being exposed to negative news had become a "source of vicarious trauma", where people are detrimentally affected despite not experiencing the trauma first-hand.

"When we're constantly exposed to negative news and information online, it can threaten our beliefs when it comes to our own mortality and the control we have over our own lives," he said.

The researchers found that constant exposure to negative news was associated with thoughts such as "life being fragile and limited, humans fundamentally being alone, and individuals not having full control of their lives".

For Iranian students, doomscrolling was also associated with misanthropy, or a profound sense of hatred and distrust towards humankind.

The researchers hypothesised that constant exposure to negative news reinforced the idea that "humankind is imperfect, and there is no justice in the world". They found that such reminders challenged people's "fundamental assumptions about the fairness and benevolence of the world".

But they also noted that the students sampled were "convenient", meaning they were selected based on their accessibility to the research. They also wrote the sample size was "not appropriate to draw clear conclusions regarding the nature of this association".

Scientia Prof Helen Christensen, a professor of mental health at the University of New South Wales and board director of the Black Dog Institute, said the research was an interesting preliminary study but the results may be biased owing to the sample size.

She also added that doomscrolling may be associated with anxiety but this may only be while participants were doomscrolling.

She said it was impossible to tell whether doomscrolling caused existential anxiety or misanthropy, or whether "doomscrolling and anxiety are associated with each other for [another reason]".

But Dr Joanne Orlando, a digital behaviour expert at the University of Western Sydney, said the findings were “not surprising” and suggested they could be applicable to people of all ages.

The long-term [effect of doomscrolling on a person’s mental health](#) was comparable to being “in a room where people are continuously shouting at you”, Orlando said.

“It really impacts how you understand the world and your place in it.”

She said it was important for people to become aware of how social media and the news made them feel, and suggested delaying looking at the news or social media upon waking up.

She also said the media “needs to think about redefining what [they] see as news”.

The impacts of social media on the mental health of young Australians was raised in a [joint submission](#) this month from the mental health organisations ReachOut, Beyond Blue and the Black Dog Institute.



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The Beyond Blue chief executive, Georgie Harman, said social media could both harm and benefit the mental health of young people but the onus “can’t be on users alone”.

She called on social media companies to “step up and play their part”.

“People are telling us quite clearly they don’t like getting caught up doomscrolling and they want a say in what content is served up to them,” she said.

“So our question is, what are social media platforms going to do to address this?”