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**Doomscrolling, Learned Helplessness and Existential Anxiety  
among Emerging Adults**Zainab<sup>1</sup>, Zafar Ahmad<sup>2\*</sup>**Abstract**

The present study investigated doomscrolling and existential anxiety, with a specific focus on the mediating role of learned helplessness. A cross-sectional survey research design was carried out on 323 participants (125 men, 198 women) aged 18–29 years. Participants completed the Doomscrolling Scale to assess compulsive engagement with negative news, the Learned Helplessness Scale to measure feelings of powerlessness, and the Existential Anxiety Questionnaire to evaluate concerns related to fate, death, and meaninglessness. Correlation analyses revealed a significant positive relationship among study variables. Mediation analyses further indicated that learned helplessness significantly mediated this relationship, suggesting that compulsive exposure to negative digital content increases feelings of helplessness, which in turn amplifies existential concerns. The findings highlight the critical role of learned helplessness as a psychological mechanism linking excessive engagement with negative online content and existential anxiety. These results underscore the potential mental health risks associated with digital overexposure, particularly among emerging adults who are highly active on social media. From a cultural perspective, the study provides insight into how these phenomena manifest in the Pakistani context, where societal and environmental factors may influence experiences of powerlessness and existential dread. Interventions aimed at reducing compulsive consumption of negative media, enhancing coping strategies, and fostering psychological resilience may help mitigate existential anxiety in this population. Future research should explore longitudinal designs to establish causal relationships.

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zafahmad@gmail.com**Introduction**

In the current digital era, the constant availability of information has changed how individuals engage with content, often at the cost of their mental well-being (Anor et al.,

2024). One concerning pattern is doomscrolling, defined as the compulsive consumption of negative news through endless scrolling. Social media platforms are designed to sustain user engagement, often prioritizing sensationalism to elicit strong emotional reactions (Tufekci, 2017). For emerging adults in Pakistan, this behavior is particularly relevant given the local context of socioeconomic instability and political turmoil (Huff, 2022).

Existential anxiety (Stephan, 2018), characterized by death fear, meaninglessness, and guilt was acknowledged. This anxiety leads to higher stress and lower quality of life (Yalom, 1980). Unlike situational anxiety, which stems from identifiable triggers, existential anxiety is more abstract and

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generalized, reflecting deep fears about the nature of existence itself (Heidenreich et al., 2021). This study proposes that doomscrolling triggers existential anxiety, which is a deep discomfort associated with confronting questions about mortality and life's meaning.

Central to this process is learned helplessness, a state where individuals feel they lack control over their circumstances due to repeated exposure to uncontrollable adverse events. Studies show that individuals distressed by uncontrollable events are more prone to worry about the future, intensifying their doomscrolling habits (Kartol et al., 2023; Pellens et al., 2022). Doomscrolling exacerbates this cycle by reinforcing feelings of futility and despair, mediating its impact on existential anxiety. Repeated exposure to negative news may foster feelings of powerlessness and lack of control, core components of learned helplessness (Satici et al., 2023).

Recent research from Pakistan highlights the growing psychological impact of excessive exposure to negative online content among young people. Studies have shown that doomscrolling is significantly associated with increased anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and reduced mental well-being among emerging adults, particularly university students (Usman et al., 2025). Further evidence suggests that doomscrolling acts as a mediating mechanism through which social media addiction intensifies anxiety symptoms, reinforcing feelings of powerlessness that resemble learned helplessness (Bibi et al., 2025). Together, these findings underscore how persistent engagement with distressing digital information can exacerbate existential anxiety, shaping young adults' perceptions of control, meaning, and future uncertainty during a critical developmental phase.

The compulsive consumption of negative news among emerging adults, with a focus on

existential anxiety and learned helplessness, is the research focus. Emerging adults are particularly vulnerable due to the convergence of developmental challenges, local socioeconomic instability, political unrest, and exposure to global crises, all of which are amplified by digital media. Despite growing recognition of doomscrolling's mental health effects globally, its implications within specific sociocultural and developmental contexts remain underexplored.

By examining how repeated exposure to distressing news fosters a sense of powerlessness and existential distress, this study integrates media psychology, existential theory, and cognitive-behavioral perspectives. Contextual relevance: Pakistan's volatile sociopolitical environment provides a critical lens for understanding media-related distress. Theoretical integration links compulsive digital behavior with psychological mechanisms, and Practical implications inform mental health interventions, digital literacy initiatives, and strategies to mitigate the negative effects of doomscrolling.

This investigation aims to advance scholarly understanding of digital well-being while offering culturally sensitive insights into the mental health challenges faced by emerging adults in high-stress environments.

### **Objective**

- To explore doomscrolling, learned helplessness, and existential anxiety among emerging adults.

### **Hypotheses**

1. Doomscrolling, learned helplessness, and existential anxiety are positively correlated.
2. Learned helplessness mediates the relationship between doomscrolling and existential anxiety (Fate and Death, Guilt and Condemnation, Emptiness and Meaninglessness).

### Participants

The sample was calculated through G-power, which comprised 323 emerging adults (125 men, 198 women) aged 18–29 years from Islamabad and Rawalpindi. through non-probability Convenience sampling.

### Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

The study included individuals aged 18–29 years who had sufficient proficiency in the English language to understand and complete the study questionnaires and who reported spending at least 30–60 minutes or more per day on social media. Individuals who were outside the specified age range (below 18 years or above 29 years) and those who lacked adequate English language proficiency to comprehend and complete the questionnaires were excluded from the study.

### Instruments

#### Doomscrolling Scale (Sharma et al., 2022)

The Doomscrolling Scale (Sharma et al., 2022) is a 15-item self-report measure using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree) to assess the tendency to engage in doomscrolling. The scale demonstrates excellent reliability ( $\alpha = .96$ ), with higher scores indicating greater levels of doomscrolling behavior.

#### Learned Helplessness Questionnaire (Olapegba, 2009)

The Learned Helplessness questionnaire was developed by Olapegba (2009) to assess an individual's belief in their lack of control over events and their tendency to resign to "fate." This scale measures the extent to which individuals feel helpless when faced with adverse circumstances. It is a 6-item scale. Cronbach's alpha calculation for it shows internal consistency  $\alpha = .69$  (Olapegba, 2009).

#### Existential Anxiety Questionnaire (EAQ) (Weems, 2024)

The Existential Anxiety Questionnaire (EAQ; Weems, 2024) is a 13-item binary (Yes/No) scale assessing existential anxiety in adults. It includes three subdomains: Fate and Death, Emptiness and Meaninglessness, and Guilt and Condemnation, with higher scores indicating greater anxiety. The scale demonstrates acceptable reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of .71, and allows examination of both total and subdomain-specific existential concerns.

#### Ethical Considerations

An informed consent form was given to participants before data collection. The purpose of the research was explained and was included in the research upon mutual consent, confidentiality and anonymity. All APA and ethical guidelines were followed.

## Results

### Table 1

*Bivariate Correlation Between Doomscrolling, Learned Helplessness, and Existential Anxiety (Fate and death, Emptiness and meaninglessness, and Guilt and condemnation) (N = 323)*

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Doomscrolling	73.83	26.48	-	.70**	.71**	.70**	.66**	.46**
2. Learned Helplessness	22.74	4.80		-	.65**	.66**	.61**	.39**
3. Existential Anxiety	9.40	3.61			-	.91**	.84**	.79**
4. Fate and Death	4.0	1.56				-	.76**	.56**
5. Emptiness and Meaninglessness	2.64	1.21					-	.44**
6. Guilt and Condemnation	2.75	1.44						-

\*\* $p < .01$

Results show that the study variables are positively correlated. Learned helplessness was significantly, positively correlated with existential anxiety and all its subscales. Furthermore, existential anxiety is

significantly positively correlated with its subscales, and the subscales showed strong, significant positive correlations among themselves.

**Table 2**

*Direct Effect of Mediation Analysis of Learned Helplessness for Doomscrolling and Fate and Death (N=323)*

Variables	Learned Helplessness		Fate and Death	
	$\beta$	SE	B	SE
Doomscrolling	.70***	.00	.45***	.02
Learned Helplessness			.34***	.01
R <sup>2</sup>	.49		.55	
F	312.65***		196.37***	

Note. \*\*\* $p < .001$

**Table 3**

*Indirect Effect of Mediation Analysis of Learned Helplessness for Doomscrolling and Fate and Death (N=323)*

Variable	Fate and Death		95% Boot CI	
	$\beta$	SE	Boot LL	Boot UL
Doomscrolling	.01	.00	.01	.02

Note.  $\beta$  = standardized beta, SE=standard error CI= confidence interval, LL=lower limit, UL=upper limit

Tables 2 and 3 investigate whether Learned Helplessness mediates the relationship between Doomscrolling and Fate and Death. Doomscrolling was found to be a significant predictor of Learned Helplessness ( $\beta = .70$ ,  $SE = .00$ ,  $p < .001$ ), explaining 49% of the variance in the mediator ( $R^2 = .49$ ,  $F = 312.65$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In the outcome model, both Doomscrolling ( $\beta = .45$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and Learned Helplessness ( $\beta = .34$ ,  $SE = .01$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were significant predictors of the Fate and Death subscale. The combined model accounted for 55% of the variance in

Fate and Death-related existential anxiety ( $R^2 = .55$ ,  $F = 196.37$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating a strong overall fit. The indirect effect of Doomscrolling on Fate and Death through Learned Helplessness was also statistically significant ( $\beta = .01$ ,  $SE = .00$ , 95% Boot CI = [.01, .02]). Since the bootstrapped confidence interval does not include zero, these findings indicate a significant partial mediation. This suggests that doomscrolling contributes to existential anxiety concerning fate and death both directly and indirectly by increasing individuals' sense of learned helplessness.

**Table 4**

*Direct Effect of Mediation Analysis of Learned Helplessness for Doomscrolling and Emptiness and Meaninglessness (N=323)*

Variables	Learned Helplessness		Emptiness and Meaninglessness	
	$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE
Doomscrolling	.70***	.00	.46***	.00
Learned Helplessness			.28***	.01
R <sup>2</sup>	.44		.48	
F	312.65***		148.89***	

Note. \*\*\* $p < .001$

**Table 5**

*Indirect Effect of Mediation Analysis of Learned Helplessness for Doomscrolling and Emptiness and Meaninglessness (N=323)*

Variable	Emptiness and Meaninglessness		95% Boot CI	
	$\beta$	SE	Boot LL	Boot UL
Doomscrolling	.00	.00	.00	.01

Note.  $\beta$  = standardized beta, SE=standard error CI= confidence interval, LL=lower limit, UL=upper limit

Tables 4 and 5 present Doomscrolling significantly predicted Learned Helplessness ( $\beta = .70$ ,  $SE = .00$ ,  $p < .001$ ), accounting for 44% of the variance in the mediator ( $R^2 = .44$ ,  $F = 312.65$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In the outcome model, both Doomscrolling ( $\beta = .46$ ,  $SE = .00$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and Learned Helplessness ( $\beta = .28$ ,  $SE = .01$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were significant predictors of Emptiness and Meaninglessness. The combined model accounted for 48% of the

variance in the outcome variable ( $R^2 = .48$ ,  $F = 148.89$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating strong explanatory power. Additionally, the indirect effect of Doomscrolling on Emptiness and Meaninglessness through Learned Helplessness was statistically significant ( $\beta = .00$ ,  $SE = .00$ , 95% Boot CI = [.00, .01]). Since the confidence interval did not include zero, this confirms that Learned Helplessness partially mediates the relationship.

**Table 6**

*Direct Effect of Mediation Analysis of Learned Helplessness for Doomscrolling and Guilt and Condemnation (N=323)*

Variables	Learned helplessness		Guilt and Condemnation	
	$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE
Doomscrolling	.70***	.00	.37***	.00
Learned Helplessness			.12	.02
R <sup>2</sup>	.49		.22	
F	312.65***		46.79***	

Note. \*\*\* $p < .001$

**Table 7**

*Indirect Effect of Mediation Analysis of Learned Helplessness for Doomscrolling and Guilt and Condemnation (N=323)*

Variable	Guilt and Condemnation		95% Boot CI	
	B	SE	Boot LL	Boot UL
Doomscrolling	.00	.00	-.00	.01

*Note.*  $\beta$  = standardized beta, SE=standard error CI= confidence interval, LL=lower limit, UL=upper limit

Tables 6 and 7 present Doomscrolling was a significant predictor of Learned Helplessness ( $\beta = .70$ ,  $SE = .00$ ,  $p < .001$ ), accounting for 49% of the variance in the mediator ( $R^2 = .49$ ,  $F = 312.65$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In the outcome model, both Doomscrolling ( $\beta = .37$ ,  $SE = .00$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and Learned Helplessness ( $\beta = .12$ ,  $SE = .02$ ) positively predicted Guilt and Condemnation. However, the 95% confidence interval for Learned Helplessness included zero ( $CI = [-.02, .07]$ ), indicating

that this path was not statistically significant. The overall model accounted for 22% of the variance in Guilt and Condemnation ( $R^2 = .22$ ,  $F = 46.79$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Additionally, the indirect effect of Doomscrolling on Guilt and Condemnation through Learned Helplessness was not significant ( $\beta = .00$ ,  $SE = .00$ , 95% Boot CI =  $[-.00, .01]$ ), as the confidence interval contained zero.

## Discussion

The present study focused on doomscrolling, learned helplessness, and existential anxiety among emerging adults. A positive correlation was found between study variables, with the emphasis that the adults who doomscroll more have more existential anxiety. Doomscrolling is cultivating learned helplessness and existential anxiety among adults. Exposure spur further existentialist anxieties, such as fears of death or an inability to find meaning in life. These results align with the findings of Shabahang et al. (2024), which indicated that prolonged exposure to negative news exacerbates existential distress. The Terror Management Theory (Pyszczynski et al., 2015), focuses on anxiety related to the meaning of life and the future orientation of an individual. Doomscrolling is linked with existential anxiety when an individual pointlessly pays attention to the negative news that leads to persistent anxiety. The subcomponents of existential anxiety that are guilt and condemnation, fate and death, and emptiness and meaninglessness all showed strong links with doomscrolling. This

suggests that the anxiety experienced is not just surface-level worry, but taps into deeper emotional concerns about existence, purpose, and personal responsibility.

Another important finding was the significant positive correlation between doomscrolling and learned helplessness. This relationship suggests that the more individuals engage in doomscrolling, the more likely they are to feel powerless or incapable of making meaningful change. This aligns with the theory proposed by Seligman (1975), which described learned helplessness as a psychological state where repeated exposure to uncontrollable negative events leads to passivity and a sense of futility. More recently, studies like those by Pellens et al. (2022) have shown that excessive media exposure can contribute to these feelings, particularly when the content focuses on crises that individuals can not do anything about.

Moreover, learned helplessness was also found to be significantly linked to existential anxiety. This makes sense when people feel helpless; they might start to question their

role in the world or their ability to influence their own life path, which naturally feeds into existential concerns. In this way, doomscrolling may be indirectly contributing to anxiety by eroding a person's sense of agency. It was hypothesized that learned helplessness mediate between Doomscrolling and Existential Anxiety. In the context of today's media-saturated world, such anxieties may be intensified by digital overexposure to distressing information that leads to feelings of helplessness, particularly through doomscrolling. This phenomenon has become increasingly prominent during periods of crisis, such as the recent Pakistan-India tensions and escalating cross-border conflict coverage, which dominate social media timelines and foster emotional exhaustion and helplessness among youth (Masood, 2020).

In Pakistan, digital exposure to images of violence, displacement, and political unrest has led many emerging adults to feel powerless and disconnected from a hopeful future. These findings align with recent research by Abdalla et al. (2021), who found that frequent social media exposure to conflict-related content significantly increases anxiety and feelings of helplessness.

The "fate and death" subscale results suggest that doomscrolling may activate subconscious fears of mortality, especially when individuals are repeatedly exposed to news about war, terrorism, or mass suffering. This is particularly relevant in South Asia, where the persistent presence of conflict, such as the Kashmir crisis and regional war threats, contributes to a collective sense of uncertainty (Mir, 2025). This is consistent with terror management theory, which posits that reminders of death increase existential fear when not buffered by personal meaning (Pyszczynski et al., 2015). Similarly, those reporting feelings of emptiness and meaninglessness may be struggling to

reconcile their individual purpose with a world that appears increasingly unstable and unjust. Studies have shown that doomscrolling during geopolitical events such as the 2022 floods in Pakistan or India's internal political unrest, leaves youth overwhelmed, emotionally numb, and disconnected (Khan et al., 2024). The cognitive fatigue induced by repeated exposure to crises without resolution may reduce one's motivation to find meaning, leading to existential emptiness. As Frankl (1985) theorized, individuals require a sense of meaning to endure suffering; without it, despair can dominate. Together, these findings highlight the psychological toll of living in a hyperconnected, conflict-prone environment, and suggest that digital overexposure, especially in politically fragile nations, can erode emotional resilience and intensify existential anxiety. Strengthening psychological support systems, promoting media literacy, and fostering meaning-making practices could be essential steps in addressing these challenges among young adults in the region.

Whereas for guilt and condemnation, the results showed that doomscrolling had a direct effect on both learned helplessness and feelings of guilt and condemnation. However, learned helplessness did not significantly explain the link between doomscrolling and guilt. This means that even though doomscrolling can make people feel helpless, helplessness is not the main reason why people feel guilty or self-condemning after seeing negative content online.

One possible reason for this is that research shows that Pakistani adults' experiences of guilt are strongly tied to religious beliefs and cultural expectation often more so than personality or control-related factors (Jadoon, 1990). For example, when people keep watching news about war, injustice, or crisis (like the situation in Gaza or political

issues in Pakistan). They may feel guilty not because they feel helpless, but because they think they should be doing something (moral guilt). God is testing them or they are failing spiritually (religious guilt). Alternatively, maybe they are not fulfilling their role in society or religion (cultural guilt).

This can lead to a sense of personal failure or moral burden, especially in South Asian cultures where collective responsibility and spiritual values are very important. The media also plays a role by repeatedly showing suffering, which makes people think, "Am I doing enough?" and that can lead to self-blame (Ahmad & Koncsol, 2022). These results support the idea that feelings of guilt in doomscrolling are not only caused by helplessness, but also by deeper moral and cultural factors. Therefore, in the Pakistani context, it might be helpful for future research to look at other possible mediators like religious coping, moral pressure, or social responsibility to fully understand how doomscrolling affects mental health.

### **Limitations**

This study has several limitations that should be considered. First, the reliance on self-reported measures may introduce bias, as participants might underreport or overreport their engagement in doomscrolling and associated psychological symptoms. Second, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causal relationships between doomscrolling, learned helplessness, and existential anxiety. Third, the sample may lack diversity in terms of geography, socioeconomic status, or cultural background, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Finally, external factors such as concurrent stressful events, social support, or pre-existing mental health conditions were not controlled, which may influence the observed relationships.

### **Implications**

The interplay of doomscrolling, learned helplessness, and existential anxiety has

significant consequences for emerging adults' mental health. Excessive engagement with negative online content can foster a persistent sense of powerlessness, reinforcing learned helplessness and diminishing perceived personal agency. This, in turn, heightens existential anxiety, prompting individuals to question life's meaning and their capacity to shape the future. Recognizing these dynamics is crucial for mental health practitioners, educators, and policymakers, as it underscores the need for interventions that promote digital literacy, resilience, and coping strategies to mitigate the psychological impact of continuous exposure to distressing information.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, doomscrolling serves as a significant predictor of existential anxiety, with learned helplessness acting as a vital mediator. The study emphasizes the importance of digital literacy and mental health support that specifically targets the sense of powerlessness induced by social media consumption. Addressing these psychological pathways is essential for improving the well-being of the youth in an increasingly connected yet distressing digital world.

### **Ethics Statement**

The study was conducted in accordance with the APA Ethical guidelines. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

### **Contribution of Authors**

Zainab: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft

Zafar Ahmad: Methodology, Supervision, Writing - Reviewing & Editing

### **Conflict of Interest**

There is no conflict of interest declared by the authors.

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**Data Availability Statement**

The datasets of the current study are not available publicly due to ethical reasons but are available from the corresponding author [Z.A.] upon the reasonable request.

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